

STORIES, SYMBOLS, AND SELVES:  
FEMALE CONVERSION EXPERIENCES IN CONTEMPORARY  
TIBETAN BUDDHIST MONASTICISM

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By

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## ABSTRACT

This research traces the experiences of sixteen persons as they go from modern lay women to Buddhist converts to Buddhist nuns, ending with their adjustments to the institutional world of Tibetan Buddhism. Situated in the social science field of cultural psychology, this study adopts a critical phenomenological approach to describing and interpreting the experiences, narratives and field observations of this diverse group of nuns. Representing nine different countries (Korea (4), Australia (4), Indonesia (2), Denmark (1), Germany (1), Holland (1), Southern Europe (1), United States (1), Venezuela (1)), these sixteen nuns were recruited during a five month period at Thosamling nunnery, in Sidhpur, India, in 2011. In tracing the narrative, symbolic, and identity-based elements of their experiences, the author shows that the changes undergone by these women are emplotted as three separate phases: conversion, ordination, and post-ordination adjustment, defined by distinct social, symbolic, and personal experiences, and marked by diverse thresholds of transition and transformation. Prior to their conversions these women were embedded in modern secular societies where they felt dissatisfied and disconnected. Their progressive involvement with Buddhism moves them away from those mundane worlds, and ordination enmeshes them fully into a sacred and enchanted lifeworld. Their adoption and application of Buddhist concepts, symbols, and discourses help to unify their private and public selves, imbuing them with greater meaning, purpose and authenticity. The author argues that conversion and ordination are not passive processes, uniformly experienced and resulting in consistent positions and personas. Instead, when the women in this study become Buddhist nuns they do so for reasons and in ways that are both shared and unique and which reflect agentic engagement and innovative appropriation. In occupying distinct positions along a continuum from the center to the periphery of the Tibetan Buddhism, these nuns' postures and positions inform ideological and utopian visions that intersect with forces within the Tibetan Buddhist world to create a spiral of growth and change that enables both Tibetan Buddhism itself and its female convert nuns to continue along paths of transformation and adaptation. Key findings are brought into dialogue with relevant areas of the literature (Buddhism and psychology, contemporary Buddhism, women in Buddhism, and religious conversion) and suggestions regarding future avenues of research are also included.

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## **DEDICATIONS**

This work is dedicated to the founder and head of Thosamling Nunnery and Institute. Without your vision, courage, and tireless dedication the fascinating and magical place of Thosamling would not be.

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## **PART I: INTRODUCTIONS**

### **1. Introductions**

This research is situated in the social science field of cultural psychology. Briefly put, and using the words of Richard Shweder, cultural psychology “is the study of the ways subject and object, self and other, psyche and culture, person and context, figure and ground, practitioner and practice live together, require each other, and dynamically, dialectically, and jointly make each other up” (1990, p. 1). Working from this definition means that in this study, themes of interconnection and mutual co-constitution recur often and inform a meaning-based approach to the lived realities and experiences of human life.

As the researcher who initiated and conducted this study, my own personal realities and experiences are included as well, among those of the participants, as constitutive elements involved in the dialectical 'making up' processes addressed in this work. In addition to being shaped by the particular theoretical frame and methodologies I adopted in this research, my personal background and who I am as a female, Canadian researcher, and fellow convert to Buddhism, undeniably influenced the process and outcomes of this research.

My interest in the Tibetan Buddhist monastic world was sparked during my first trip to India, in 2004, where I lived and taught in a Tibetan refugee community. I became fast friends with several of my students, who happened to be monks, and as I learned more about their language and culture I came to appreciate and value their religion (Tibetan Buddhism) as well. When I returned to the United States, where I was living at the time, I began studying and practicing at a Tibetan temple and continued my language studies through private classes. I did (and still do) find many of the teachings and practices of this tradition to be personally meaningful and helpful in my life. I also found the 'convert culture' of that temple and other Buddhist institutions in both the East and West to be quite interesting. I was intrigued by the behaviours and attitudes of Western Buddhists in India and the social dynamics that exist between them and native Tibetan practitioners. Along with my curiosity about the various mechanisms of translation and appropriation that define the global spread of Tibetan Buddhism, I have also long since been interested in the scale and role of monastic culture in Tibet.

These interests and experiences, combined with my own involvement with the philosophies and practices of Tibetan Buddhism are thus what drew me to this topic. In studying convert nuns I was able to explore these and other topics, gaining meaningful insights not only into the lives of the participants or the transformative processes of conversion and ordination that they experienced, but into myself and my own relationship to the Buddhist traditions of Tibet.

This study focuses on the lives and experiences of sixteen convert nuns, living or connected to an international Tibetan Buddhist nunnery in Northern India. The basis of this dissertation is the trajectories of transformation that define the women's lives as they experience conversion, ordination, and then adjustment to life both within and beyond the nunnery walls. The deep contextual analyses of these experiences answer many questions regarding the motivations and mechanisms of conversion, and what it is like to live as a Tibetan Buddhist nun in today's world. On the other hand, the chapters to follow also inspire questions related to the relationships between the secular and the sacred, the individual and society, the specific and the universal, as well as opening up conversations on the role and function of religion in contemporary times.

In asking why the women were drawn to the ancient and historical tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, and how they make sense of the emblematic role they come to occupy as Buddhist nuns, this study explores what happens when a group of non-Tibetan women devote their lives to the study, practice, and embodiment of Tibetan Buddhism. By tracing the narrative, symbolic, and identity-based elements of their trajectories, it will be shown that conversion and ordination are not passive processes, uniformly experienced and resulting in consistent positions and personas. Instead, when the women in this study become Buddhist nuns they do so for reasons and in ways that are both shared and unique and which reflect agentic engagement and innovative appropriation. In many ways, the plurality and diversity defining the women's journeys are reflected in Tibetan Buddhism as a whole, which is itself in a period of transition and transformation. Using the concepts of ideology and utopia (Ricoeur, 1986) to understand this intersectionality it will be argued that transformation in both cases is facilitated not by passivity and conformity, but rather by creative initiative, interactive plays of positioning and divergent expressions of both self and tradition.

In order to further situate this research and to highlight key issues relevant to the transformative experiences of the women in this study, the following section reviews literature on several pertinent topics. The core findings as well as gaps identified through that review help to

frame the central research questions addressed in this work and articulated in the sections to follow. The research approach, context, and structure of this thesis will also be described.

## 1.1 Literature Review

In order to get a sense of the type and range of work being done in areas relevant to this study, I have explored four central topics in the literature. The first section will consider the relationship and points of intersection between Western psychology and Buddhism. The second section addresses Buddhism itself, briefly sketching its historical emergence in Indian society and, then, in relation to both Tibetan society and contemporary (particularly Western) contexts. Because women/nuns are the major focus of this research, issues relating to the status and experiences of women in Buddhism will be explored in a third section, and the topic of religious conversion will be covered in the final section. This review will end with a summary of the major gaps and limitations exposed in the four topic areas.

**Psychology and Buddhism.** Literature concerning the relationship between Western psychology and Buddhism inevitably references the names of prominent psychologists and psychoanalysts, such as Carl Jung, Karen Horney, and Eric Fromm, as early pioneers in the linking of these two traditions (i.e. Segall, 2003; Rubin, 1996). In fact, connections between these fields were established much earlier with William James (1842-1910), the famed theorist working at the intersections of psychology and philosophy. James is said to have given up his lectern during a 1902 class at Harvard to a visiting Buddhist monk, concluding the lecture by stating: ““This is the psychology everybody will be studying twenty five years from now”” (quoted in Scott, 2000, p. 335). Indeed, just over ten years later, in 1914, Indologist Caroline Rhys Davids published *Buddhist psychology: An inquiry into the analysis and theory of mind of Pali literature*. From these early works and events, it is clear that for well over a hundred years Buddhism has not simply been an object of Western fascination and study, but has also long since existed as a tradition whose concepts, teachings, and techniques have been consulted and even integrated into the psychological traditions of the West. In the sections to follow, engagements with Buddhism will be considered in three different areas of psychology: social, positive, and clinical.

*Social psychology.* Maintaining a focus on relationships, behaviors, attitudes and motivations as they are influenced by social factors, social psychology is invested in explorations

of the social and emotional organization of human society (i.e. group behavior, social perception, conformity, attitudes, etc.). The tendency for authors in the field of social psychology to 'psychologize' various facets of Buddhist philosophy and society has been noted (Pederson, 2001; Metcalf, 2002, p. 348) and is evident in works such as Wallace and Shapiro's (2006) which identifies Buddhism as "the most psychological of all spiritual traditions" (p. 690). A more striking example comes from Daniel Goleman who states that "the greatest psychologist in recorded history was Gautama Buddha" (1976, quoted in Pederson, 2001, p.159). This area of psychological literature establishes a correspondence between Buddhist thought and social psychological theory, constructing the two traditions as compatible and complementary (i.e. Shupe & Bradley, 2011; Jones, 2003; Loy, 2003; McIntosh, 1997). Social psychological research studies pertaining specifically to Buddhism emerge in a range of topic areas including emotion (Kristjansson, 2003; De Silva, 1995), identity and personality (H'suo, 1995), coping and social adjustment and, finally, life quality and psycho-social development (Colzato et al., 2012). Often, these studies employ a comparative framework where Buddhism functions as a type of independent or extraneous variable that may be implicated in research findings, but which is not directly studied (i.e. Tsai, Miao & Seppal, 2007; Uchida, Norasakkunkit & Kitayama, 2004; Schimmack, Oishi & Diener, 2003).

In studies on emotion many sources articulate the usefulness and benefits of the Buddhist perspective (Michie, 2004; Goleman, 2004; Amodeo, 2001), suggesting that it offers a superior approach to human emotionality and is a "therapy, not just for the disturbed, but for all who seek to improve the quality of their lives" (Ekman, et al., 2005, p. 62). Social psychological research has also been conducted in monastic settings where Buddhism is psychologized and Buddhist monasticism is framed as "one of history's most ambitious and radical social and psychological experiments" (Goldstein and Tsarong, 1985, p. 17; Emavardhana & Tori, 1997; MacPhillamy, 1986).

Coping and social adjustment is a third area of social psychology that displays some level of research engagement with Buddhism (De Silva, 2006; Lundberg & Trichorb, 2001). Buddhist concepts and practices (such as interdependence and loving-kindness meditation) have been found to increase social connectedness (Colzato et al. 2012; Hutcherson, Seppala & Gross, 2008) and to "help us transcend outmoded dichotomies between the personal and the political... and mobilize for community development" (Macy, 1984, p. 117). In terms of psycho-social development,

research suggests that indigenous Buddhist values and practices are beneficial and adaptive for Buddhist communities (Halverson, 1978; Fazel & Young, 1988) as well as for non-indigenous communities (i.e. Brown & Ryan, 2003).

While social influence, perception, and interaction are the purview of social psychological research, such studies are extremely limited when it comes to the topic area of Buddhism. Additionally, there is very little critical work that addresses the apparent ease with which Buddhist concepts are equated and integrated into Western social psychology. Similar limitations arise in other fields of psychology as well, especially those that display similar constructions of Buddhism as an ‘ancient’ reservoir of practical techniques for improving the contemporary human condition.

*Positive Psychology.* Building on the approach and orientation of the humanist movement, positive psychology emerged in the late 1990s as an area of the field that centers on mental wellness and optimal human functioning (Seligman, 1998). With its focus on enhancing happiness and well-being through the cultivation of awareness, positive attitude and appreciation for the ordinariness of the every-day, positive psychology is considered by many within the field (Mikulas, 2007; Wallace & Shapiro, 2006; Levine, 2000) to be ideally complemented by the concepts and theories of Buddhism: “Buddhism and yoga are the quintessential positive psychologies. Indeed, they provide the intellectual framework for such a psychology” (Levine, 2000, p. xv). The central psychological processes addressed in research relating to Buddhism in this area clusters around three main themes: attention to the present (i.e. “mindfulness”), decreased attachments to the self (changes in self-construal), and the cultivation of calm emotion (Cassaniti, 2014). In positive psychological literature there is often an unproblematic application of Buddhist concepts and practices into Western socio-cultural and therapeutic contexts, whereby Buddhism is generally framed as a "broad program of psycho-spiritual development" and even 'enlightenment' is reframed as a "superlative state of happiness, equanimity and freedom" (Ivtzan, 2016, p.5). Further to this, a growing number of theorists (i.e. Sundararajan, 2008) are using Buddhist concepts and perspectives as a means of critiquing and reorienting Western psychology. One example is Neff who uses Buddhism to challenge the western psychological construct of self-esteem, advocating for its replacement by the Buddhist based concept of ‘self-compassion’ (2003, 2003b). Neff has more recently begun to examine the concept of ‘self-compassion’ through empirical investigation (Neff & Vonk, 2009; Neff, Rude

& Kirkpatrick, 2007), though these studies involve only quantitative instruments (questionnaires and online surveys) and exclusively Western participants (Dutch online recruits and American college students). This is typical of a substantial portion of positive psychological research on Buddhism which tends toward theoretical rather than empirical engagement and is conducted mostly among non-indigenous Buddhist participants (i.e. Kraus & Sears, 2009; Ryan & Brown, 2003). There are, of course, exceptions and examples of positive psychological research that contextualizes the beneficial practices of Buddhism within local, every-day experience (e.g. Cassaniti, 2014).

Overall, this research demonstrates a rather abstract study and application of Buddhism, where the assumed ‘essence’ of Buddhist concepts and theories are invoked as the core of an argument, theory, or application (Niemac, 2014) and where research and assessment is conducted in largely non-Buddhist contexts among non-native participants.

*Experimental Psychology.* A third branch of psychology that displays considerable engagement with Buddhism is experimental psychology, particularly in the area of neurological processes underlying human development and behavior. Generally speaking, in contexts of experimental psychology Buddhism is broken down into quantifiable components (attitudes, meditative skills, etc.), and may itself be used as an experimental variable. This is the case, for example, in Wu et al.’s (2010) study which used neuroimaging techniques to investigate differences between non-Buddhist Han and Buddhist Tibetan populations. While the authors link differences in brain function and cognitive patterning to divergent religious beliefs, there are no meaningful descriptions of the ‘beliefs’ offered in the article and no discussion or explanation as to what it is about Buddhism in particular, that leads to such cognitive and neurological differences. In experimental psychology extensive literature also exists on the topic of Buddhism’s compatibility not only with psychology, but with modern science in general (Hanson, 2009; Wallace, 2007; Ricard, Thuan & Trinh, 2001; Hayward, 1987).

There is a growing number of studies on the neurological implications of Buddhist concepts and practices (Allen, Edwards, & McCullough, 2015; Hanson, 2009; Carter et al., 2005; Barinaga, 2003), concentrating largely on the ‘quieting’ effects of meditation on neurological activity (Pagnoni, 2012; Cahn & Polich, 2006). Moreover, Buddhism is often constructed not only as a compatible complement to contemporary science, but as a form of science itself: “Buddhism, like science, presents itself as a body of systematic knowledge about the natural world, and it posits a

wide array of testable hypotheses and theories concerning the nature of the mind and its relation to the physical environment” (Wallace, 2003, p. 8). In experimental psychological literature, Western science is often used to legitimize or, in the words of Wallace and Shapiro (2006, p. 695), “corroborate”, the teachings and practices of Buddhism. These legitimation techniques are rarely critiqued despite the fact that they rely on assumptions that the value and utility of Buddhism is dependent upon it being scientifically verifiable. Needless to say, such assumptions completely overlook the less than empirical beliefs and traditions that define Buddhism as it is practiced and experienced in a number of Western and non-Western contexts.

In other research areas of empirical psychology, Buddhism is addressed in studies which apply Western psychological concepts and psychiatric disorders to members of Buddhist communities. Considerable research has been devoted to the experiences of Tibetan refugees, for example, with a number of studies focusing on the effects of stress and traumatic experience (Bernstorff & von Welck, 2003; Conway, 1975). The Western mental health category of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) has been evaluated in exiled Tibetans by a number of researchers (Mills et al., 2005; Crescenzi et al., 2002; Holtz, 1998). Overall, the literature arrives at the conclusion that Tibetan refugees are faring well, displaying “low levels of psychological distress [which] are particularly striking” and exhibiting an “unusual degree of resilience” (Sachs et al., 2008, p.206). Thus, while Buddhism per se is not the focus of such studies, its principles and the behavioural norms it shapes are framed in causal and quantifiable terms and constructed as ‘protective factors’ (Servan-Schreiber, Lin and Birmaher, 1998). In this sense, empirical psychology renders elements of Buddhism measureable or quantifiable. Once again, this approach begs questions regarding the non-empirical aspects of Buddhism and the uncritical cross-cultural application of Western psychological constructs.

*Clinical Psychology.* The integration of Buddhist concepts and theories into Western clinical psychology is evident across a diverse range of clinical literature and research. Indeed clinical terms, such as Buddhist Derived Interventions (BDIs) (Shonin, Gordon, & Griffiths, 2014) or Mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) (Chiesa & Serretti, 2011; Fjorback et al., 2011) have proliferated in this field and have been used to support the effectiveness of treatments for a broad range of psychological disorders and somatic illnesses. One area of clinical psychology that displays a notable engagement with Buddhism is addictions and addiction therapy (i.e. Shonin,



Gordon, & Griffiths, 2013; Batchelor, 2007; Griffin & Boorstein, 2004; Taranatha, 2006; Lucas, 2004; Mountain, 2003; Kissman & Maurer, 2002; Barrett, 1997). In these research contexts, Buddhism is constructed as a useful system of mind and body training providing widely applicable therapeutic techniques (e.g. Littlejohn, 2009). Clinical literature on coping engages with Buddhism in much the same way, integrating Western psychology and Buddhism in seemingly unproblematic ways (e.g. Johns, 2004; Phillips, et al., 2009). In psychotherapeutic literature, ideas, theories and techniques relating to selfhood take precedence. Many studies in this area are premised on a contemporary Western ethos characterized by emptiness, alienation, and a ‘crisis of meaning’ (McMahan, 2008, p. 13; De Silva, 2001, p. 10; Rubin, 1996). Buddhism is then framed as a fitting solution or antidote to such crises.

Since the 1960s, theorists such as Erich Fromm have connected psychoanalysis and Buddhism, suggesting that both function as attempts to resolve “Western man’s spiritual crisis” (Fromm, Suzuki & Martino, 1960, p. 80). In fact, Buddhism’s unique approach to self is often described as complementary (if not superior, according to some) to the therapeutic methods that have been developed within western psychological traditions. Prominent psychotherapist Dr. Jeffrey Rubin (1996) suggests, for example, that “In pointing to a psychological life ‘beyond ego’ Buddhism is positing a level of self-development and health that is omitted from and thus foreign to the psychoanalytic diagnostic spectrum” (p. 61).

Because Western psychotherapy also works at alleviating human suffering and establishing healthy patterns of thought and action, the application of Buddhist approaches is an attractive option for many therapists and patients. Jon Kabat-Zinn (2005) is professor of Medicine emeritus at the University of Massachusetts and founder of the Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program. He built a successful career around the integration of Buddhist meditation practices and Western medicine. He suggests that “Although at this time mindfulness meditation is most commonly taught and practiced within the context of Buddhism, its essence is universal. Mindfulness is basically just a particular way of paying attention” (Kabat-Zinn, 2005, p. 12). Downplaying the esoteric and ritualistic aspects of Buddhism in order to establish its more ‘secular’ and universal appeal is an approach evident in much of the literature and research emerging from clinical psychology. Johnson et al. (2009), for example, have suggested that Buddhist inspired meditation (loving-kindness) is an effective means of enhancing recovery from

the negative symptoms of schizophrenia, and Teasdale, Segal, and Williams (1995) proposed that the skills of attentional control taught in Buddhist mindfulness meditation could be helpful in preventing relapses of major depressive episodes. Integrating Buddhism into Western clinical settings is also proposed by Toneatto (2002), who recommends incorporating Buddhist meditative techniques into metacognitive treatments of anxiety disorders (see also: Hofmann et al. 2010; Roemer, Orsillo, & Salters-Pedneault, 2008), and by Wada & Park (2009), who encourage its integration into grief counseling. While the move to integrate Buddhist concepts and techniques into Western clinical psychology is highly popular and generally supported in most of the literature (e.g. Bishop, et al., 2004; Baer, 2003), I did come across one study which cautioned against the ease with which many engage in such theoretical and applied integrations. Christopher, et al. (2009) did a comparative study of mindfulness in college students from Thailand and the United States and found that while certain aspects and applications of mindfulness were shared between the two groups, differences were also evident. They conclude that while the integration of mindfulness into Western psychology appears to hold great promise, it also “requires an understanding of the cultural context from which mindfulness originated” (Christopher, et al, 2009, p. 207). The critical perspective represented in this article and the questions it raises regarding the easy integration of Buddhism into psychology are notably rare, not just in the clinical field, but throughout much Western psychological literature.

While research on Buddhism appears to be extremely rich and abundant in the field of psychology, upon closer investigation it is clear that there are definite limitations in terms of research that takes Buddhism proper as an object of study. The bulk of research at the cross-roads of Buddhism and psychology is theoretical (Epstein, 2007; Falkenstrom, 2003; Brazier, 2003) and often premised on the assumption that Buddhism is not only compatible with psychology, but in certain instances *superior* to Western theories and approaches (Coleman, 2001, p. 213). Discourses furthering the construction of Buddhism as an ancient reservoir of wisdom, insight and healing are only strengthened when they are juxtaposed with constructions of the modern West as an indulgent, rationalized society in desperate need of spiritual guidance. Thus, when considering the literature on Buddhism and psychology it is evident that theoretically, the connections between these two traditions are very well addressed, however, the assumptions that underlie such connections are rarely critically evaluated. Moreover, the literature displays an obvious lack of work on Buddhism in practice, especially in regards to the ways that Buddhist teachings and

techniques are meaningfully appropriated into the everyday experiences of Buddhist practitioners, ‘native’ and ‘convert’ alike. Having considered in detail the status of Buddhism in the field of psychology, the following sections provide a general overview of Buddhism itself, beginning with historical Indian Buddhism, and then moving through Tibetan and Western Buddhist forms.

**Buddhism: Indian Origins.** Buddhism is founded on the teachings of the Buddha Shakyamuni (Siddhartha Gautama), a prince turned ascetic born in 567 BCE. The first of the Buddha’s teachings was the 'Four Noble Truths' which became the foundation of Buddhadharma<sup>1</sup> (Gyatso, 2001, p. 10). Building on his discovery that everything depends on the mind (Gyatso, 1999, p.11), the Four Noble Truths explain that life is defined by suffering (first truth), and that suffering is caused by delusion, craving, and attachment (second truth), which can, however, be overcome (third truth), by following the 'Eightfold Path'<sup>2</sup> (fourth truth) (Powers, 2007). This path outlines the way to develop a deeper understanding of the true nature of reality so that we can eradicate delusion, hatred, and suffering for ourselves and others. These are the fundamental teachings of Buddhism, which are supported by a commitment to compassionate non-violence (*ahimsa*) (Anand, 1996, p. 20).

The inclusive and non-violent approach adopted by the Buddha and his followers spread quickly through India and has lead certain historians to assert that “Buddha was more a social reformer than a religious leader” (Anand, 1996, p. 21). An additional factor contributing to the social relevance of Buddhism was its emphasis on generosity, and the related belief that one of the most effective means of cultivating generosity and the positive merit that it generates, is through the support (material, financial, moral) of the sangha<sup>3</sup> (Gethin, 1998). Another element of social reform marking early Buddhism was the Buddha's decision to allow women to become ordained renunciants. Despite the cultural norms of Indian Brahmanism’s religious and social caste system, which clearly set women as inferior to men, the Buddha established the first recognized order of female practitioners (*bhiksunnis*) (Willis, 1985).

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<sup>1</sup> *Dharma* is a Sanskrit term variously translated as ‘to support’, ‘to hold’, or ‘to protect’. It is used to refer collectively to the Buddha Shakyamuni’s teachings.

<sup>2</sup> The 'Noble Eightfold Path' is based on: 1. Right understanding: Understanding that the Four Noble Truths are noble and true; 2. Right thought: Determining and resolving to practice Buddhist faith; 3. Right speech: Avoiding slander, gossip, lying, and all forms of untrue and abusive speech; 4. Right conduct: Adhering to the idea of nonviolence (*ahimsa*), as well as refraining from any form of stealing or sexual impropriety; 5. Right means of making a living: Not slaughtering animals or working at jobs that force you to violate others; 6. Right mental attitude or effort: Avoiding negative thoughts and emotions, such as anger and jealousy; 7. Right mindfulness: Having a clear sense of one’s mental state and bodily health and feelings; 8. Right concentration: Using meditation to reach the highest level of enlightenment (Bodhi, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> *Sanga* is a Sanskrit term for the Buddhist community - including nuns, monks, laity and novices.

As Buddhism continued to grow in the centuries following the Buddha's death, so too did internal conflicts, resulting in several sectarian divides. Around the beginning of the Common Era the greatest change marking Buddhism occurred: the emergence of two distinct schools- the Hinayana (the 'Lesser Way'), so named by the second, self-proclaimed 'Great Way', the Mahayana (Snellgrove & Richardson, 1980, p. 67-68). Both Buddhist forms moved across Asia, contributing to further changes as Buddhism expanded from Afghanistan in the west to Japan in the east (Gethin, 1998, p. 8). It actually moved south first, into Ceylon in the third century BCE, before moving northeast across the Hindu Kush and Pamir mountains into China (first century CE), Korea (fourth century CE), and Japan (sixth century CE). Buddhism had also made early eastward moves into Burma (first century CE), Thailand (third century CE), Cambodia (fourth century CE), and Indonesia (third century CE). By the eighth century CE, Buddhism had become firmly established in the northern areas of Tibet (7<sup>th</sup> century CE) and later Mongolia (thirteenth century CE) (Berry, 1992, p. 119).

**Buddhism: The Tibetan Tradition.** Tibetan Buddhism has emerged as one of the most distinctive forms of the religion and has been the official state religion of Tibet since 791CE (Robinson & Johnson, 1982, p. 139). Scholar and mystic Padmasambhava is credited with merging Buddhist doctrine with the local pre-Buddhist religion, Bön, as well as building Tibet's first monastery (Samye, c. 776) and founding the first of the four sects of Tibetan Buddhism: Nyingma, which was then followed by Kagyu, Sakya and Gelug (Sangharakshita, 1996). By the 11<sup>th</sup> century Tibet was shaped into an 'ecclesiastical state' in which "Buddhism was transformed from a religion of court into a social force which eventually engulfed the whole of Tibet" (Choedon & Norbu, 1998, p. 49). Buddhist monasteries grew as former royal families acted out their lasting rivalries by patronizing certain lineages and sects in an effort to regain power and prestige, concentrating considerable political, economic and social authority in monastic institutions (Choedon & Norbu, 1998). This effectively created a bureaucracy out of the monastic system; a bureaucracy that would become founded and maintained through the institution of reincarnation (Michael, 1982). As Buddhists, Tibetans believe in the concept of reincarnation and lineages of reincarnating lamas became the foundation of a socio-political system which "bound together the entire social and political fabric of Tibet, which it continues to do so today even in conditions of exile" (Bishop, 1993, p. 62-3). Systematized reincarnation and the complex monastic structure connected to it, became fundamental to the stability and development of Tibetan society at large.

The exile period of Tibetan Buddhist history is ongoing, since diplomatic relations between Tibetan leadership and Beijing have yet to achieve mutual agreement as to the status of Tibet, the rights of its people, or a reasonable solution that would allow the Dalai Lama and the rest of the exiled community to return. Thus, the Tibetan diaspora continues to grow and the institutional and governmental developments that emerged in exile continue to diversify and strengthen what has come to be known as a particularly resilient and successful diasporic community (Hussain & Bhushan, 2011; Sachs et al., 2008). The Tibetan refugee community remained largely in India and Nepal until the 1960s and 70s when financial support, initially from universities and organizations such as the Rockefeller Foundation, brought mostly elite monks and lamas to the United States (Hess, 2009). The academic auspices of these early encounters supported the Tibetan exile community's chief goal of cultural preservation given academia's interest in protecting artifacts and preserving and translating texts that were considered by both parties to be under imminent threat given Chinese policies (Seager, 2000, p.141). As these early immigrant lamas became established in the United States, setting up temples and centres and attracting growing numbers of followers, public awareness of Tibetan Buddhism and the political situation in Tibet increased. There was no systematic organization or process by which these centres were founded and no central agency, office, or association overseeing their proliferation. What emerged was a "patchwork of small sub-communities often quite separate from each other, but all maintaining living links through their teachers to the broader Tibetan community in exile" (Seager, 2000, p. 146). In addition to decentralization, some other characteristics of Tibetan Buddhism in exile include the heightened role of democratic processes and the growing institutionalization of gender equality and women's rights<sup>4</sup> (McConnell, 2013; Sangay, 2003; Bernstorff & von Welk, 2003).

**Globalization of Buddhism.** According to most sources, the immigration patterns of Asian Buddhist groups towards the end of the nineteenth century and then later after the Second World War (Gethin, 1998, p.275; Prebish, 1999, p. 4), were essential to the eventual establishment of Buddhism in many European and North American countries. However, contact and exchange (predominantly in the form of trade) between Europe and Asia from ancient times had facilitated

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<sup>4</sup> The ongoing transformation of Tibetan Buddhism will be discussed in greater detail in the conclusion chapter.

exposure and Western awareness of Asian Buddhist traditions (Pomplun, 2010). The complexity of the early history of Buddhism in the West is related then, to immigration patterns as well to various strategies of religious appropriation and proselytization (Baumann, 2002; Obadia, 2001).

Stephen Batchelor (1994) suggests that the West's historical relationship with Buddhism has been marked by five fundamental attitudes: blind indifference, self-righteous rejection; rational knowledge; romantic fantasy; and existential engagement (p. xi). According to Batchelor it was not until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that Westerners began to "engage with Buddhist traditions as forms of practice that addressed the dilemma of their existence" (p. xii). It appears that Buddhism's growth in the West (Mitchell, 2016; Cox, 2013; McMahan, 2012) has coincided with the rise of several modern critical perspectives<sup>5</sup>, the re-evaluation of dominant Western values and norms, and the so-called crises of identity and meaning felt by many in Western societies (Lomas et al., 2014; Frosh, 1991). Coleman writes that as men and women "struggle with the anxieties attendant upon the project of self construction... Buddhism's radical rejection of the independent reality of the self offers a kind of ultimate solution to this endless, all-consuming struggle" (2001, p. 21-22). It appears therefore, that Buddhist theories and techniques of self are a main draw for those struggling to make sense of their modern lives. As a postulation or assumption that is used to account for the interest of Westerners in Buddhism, this idea requires substantiation and further investigation.

Literature documenting the status and development of Buddhism in the West is produced largely by Americans and remains centered on the United States (Prebish, 1999; Seager, 2000). There are, however, abundant sources on many other regions including: Canada (Harding, Sogen Hori, & Soucy, 2014; Matthews, 2002; McLellan, 1999); Australia (Rocha & Barker, 2011; Spuler, 2000); Britain (Kay, 2004); South Africa (Clasquin, 2002); Brazil (Usarski, 2002); Israel (Obadia, 2002); France (Obadia, 2001); and Europe in general (Baumann, 1995). These diverse sources point to variations between Western nations in terms of their appropriation and engagement with Buddhism, however there are also cross-national similarities (Obadia, 2001).

According to Coleman, the evolution and current state of Buddhism in the West has gone through three main phases, conceived as wave cycles, aligned with the specific Buddhist form being appropriated: first, in the 1950s was Zen, followed by Tibetan Buddhism in the 1960s and 70s, and currently Vipassana or Theravadan traditions (Coleman, 2001). While several authors

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<sup>5</sup> 'Critical perspectives' is used inclusively to refer to a variety of theoretical perspectives including the deconstructionism of Derrida and Levinas (Critchley, 1992), and the critical theory of Michel Foucault (2006).

describe the processual incorporation of Buddhism into Western social and cultural systems in phases and terms similar to Coleman, others focus on classifications built around 'Immigrant' versus 'Convert' dichotomies (Baumann, 2002; Prebish, 1993) wherein "the most prominent feature of American Buddhism for the last three or so decades has been the gulf between immigrants and converts" (Seager, 2000, p. 233). The 'immigrant/convert' dichotomy was coined in the literature as the 'Two Buddhisms' model (Prebish, 1993; 1979). In addition to Prebish's (1993) model, other dualistic typologies are used in the area of contemporary Buddhist studies, including Tweed's 'adherents' and 'sympathizers' model (1999), Coleman's 'New' versus 'Ethnic' Buddhism (2001), and Baumann's (2002) 'traditionalist' versus 'modernist' Buddhist categories. Despite ongoing differences and debates over conceptualizations of Buddhism in contemporary contexts, certain distinctive features of these emergent forms of Buddhism have been identified.

Most sources addressing the emergence and development of this 'New' or 'Western' strain of Buddhism describe a similar range of key characteristics<sup>6</sup>:

An erosion of the distinction between professional and lay Buddhists; a decentralization of doctrinal authority; a diminished role for Buddhist monastics; and increasing spirit of egalitarianism; greater leadership roles for women; greater social activism; and, in many cases, and increasing emphasis on the psychological, as opposed to the purely religious, nature of practice. (Wallace, 2002, p. 35)

By extension, Queen lists political activism and social service as the "salient features of the globalization of the Buddhist tradition" (2002, p. 324). According to Oldmeadow (2001), the differences between what he terms Western and Asian Buddhism boil down to three main factors: in Western Buddhism the laity has a more central role, and monks and nuns have become less important; women are more involved as practitioners and teachers; and finally, there is a greater orientation toward issues of social justice and change.

Overall, contemporary Buddhist forms demonstrate a significant move towards equalizing the status of its participating members (Bodhi, 2008). As Coleman (2001) notes: "In the new Buddhism, this fundamental distinction between monk and layperson is almost wiped

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<sup>6</sup> Literature concentrating on Western contexts is the focus of this review, however there have been some important contributions to modern Buddhism in Eastern contexts, namely Gombrich and Obeyesekere's work on the Sinhala Buddhists of Sri Lanka, which outlines the innovations and transformations that mark the Theravada Buddhism practiced in the area, linking such changes to the response and resistance of the Sinhala people to British colonization and Protestant Christian missionary pressures and introducing the term 'Protestant Buddhism' (1988).

away” (p. 11). Whereas in most traditional Asian contexts teachers are almost exclusively ordained males, “In the West this has changed with the majority of practitioners and a high proportion of Buddhist teachers being laity” (Oldmeadow, 2001, p. 270). The equalizing principles of democracy, individual freedoms, and egalitarianism that inform the social dynamics of Western modernity are thus effecting considerable change on contemporary Buddhist structures and systems.

A second overarching characteristic of contemporary Buddhism in the West is that, at this stage in its development, it remains a rather elite movement, involving a “relatively small slice of the public, but it is nonetheless a slice that is likely to wield a disproportionate influence on the evolution of Western culture in the years ahead” (Coleman, 2001, p. 20). The influence and status of Western Buddhist communities has been tied to the fact they are overwhelmingly white, mid-to upper-middle class, politically liberal, socially engaged, and very well educated (Coleman, 2001, p. 20).

Western Buddhism is also defined by a movement away from formal and ritualized religious practice. Described as ‘demythologization’ (Bechert, 1984) or ‘detraditionalization’ (McMahan, 2008), this shift is marked by an “orientation from external to internal authority and the associated reorientation from institutional to privatized religion” (McMahan, 2008, p. 42). McMahan also documents a ‘psychologization’ process in contemporary Buddhism, which involves the reframing of core teachings and concepts drawn from classic Buddhist texts in light of contemporary attitudes and ideals and psychological concepts (2008, p. 42). In terms of institutional shifts, contemporary Buddhism is significantly decentralized, and is comprised of largely independent Buddhist institutions, usually in the form of ‘Dharma’ or ‘Meditation Centres’, which are sometimes affiliated (to varying degrees) with accomplished Asian Buddhist teachers or set up in loose connection to traditional Asian Buddhist institutions, but which often eschew customary architectural, compartment and organizational norms. Some examples may include charging a fee for teachings, access to meditation halls or membership, democratic decision making and shared or collective administrative arrangements (Bodhi, 2008, p. 17).

An additional characteristic of contemporary Western Buddhism is the increased status and visibility of female practitioners, both lay and ordained. Coleman suggests that “no other transformation is more critical to the creation of Western Buddhism than the way it is redefining gender” (2001, p. 15). Indeed, the emergence of women as key players in the Western Buddhist



scene is framed as a great advancement by many who consider it a reflection of women having “finally found their voice” and being important “shapers of new Buddhism for the modern world” (Barnes, 1996, p. 138).

Despite the consensus that surrounds these descriptions of what is variously referred to as ‘Western’, ‘New’, ‘convert,’ or ‘modernist’ Buddhism, it is important to recognize the plurality and internal diversity of these contemporary or ‘New’ Buddhist forms. It is also necessary to acknowledge the recent and ongoing modernist adaptations that ‘traditional’ or ‘native’ Buddhists have initiated within their own traditions (For example Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh’s (1993, 1987) development of a socially conscious and activism oriented ‘Engaged Buddhism’). Furthermore, it is important to avoid over-simplified frameworks and essentializing or homogenizing theories that postulate a unilinear development of modern Buddhism.

**Women in Buddhism.** The Buddha’s decision to establish a women’s order more than 2500 years ago has been referred to as a “radical experiment for its time” (Murcott, 1991, p. 16). However, the radical nature of this inclusionary act was tempered by social conventions that prompted him to require all nuns joining the Buddhist order to submit to ‘Eight Chief Rules’ (*garudhamma*)<sup>7</sup> which made them subservient to the male order of monks (Gross, 1993). The literature unanimously testifies to the Buddha’s assertion that women are equally capable of spiritual achievements, including full enlightenment, and most justify his inclusion of such gendered restrictions on a number of counts- as a consequence of historical social norms, apprehension over the challenge that including both sexes in the order would pose to maintaining celibacy and focused practice; and concern that the responsibility of educating and protecting the nuns would overburden and distract the monks (Ueki, 2001, p. 8; Bodhi, 2010, p. 109). Changchub and Nyingpo (1999) note that the Buddha’s choice to “locate a group of unattached women within an outer masculine framework may well have been a measure necessary to ensure that the order of nuns would be intelligible and acceptable to the society at that time” (p. xxviii-xxx).

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<sup>7</sup> The eight rules include: 1. A nun, however senior, must always bow down in front of a monk, however junior.; 2. A nun is not to spend the rainy season in a district in which there are no monks.; 3. After keeping the rainy season, the nun must hold the ceremony of repentance of their offences before monk and nun saṅghas.; 4. A nun who has committed a serious offence must be disciplined by both saṅghas.; 5. A nun must not admonish a monk, whereas a monk can admonish a nun.; 6. A nun must receive the upasampada ordination from both monk and nun saṅghas after two years of studying the Precepts.; 7. Every half month the nun must ask the monk saṅgha to give exhortation. 8. A nun must not in any way abuse or revile a monk. (Chen, 2011, p. 20)

When Buddhism was brought to Tibet, the existing cultural context allowed for the emergence of what has been called “the form of Buddhism that most radically includes women and the feminine” (Gross, 1993, p. 11). While women were reluctantly admitted into the Buddhist order during its early years in India, Tibetans emphasize that “women have always had the opportunity to participate in religious life in the history of Buddhism in Tibet” (Dechen, 2010, p.207). With that being said, the intertwining of secular and religious structures in Tibetan society, within which the authority of reincarnated lamas emerged as supreme, is also said to have relegated women (and female Buddhist practitioners in particular) to 'token' positions (Campbell, 2003, p. 73; Klein, 1987). The status of women practitioners was further challenged by the fact that the female ordination lineage was never successfully transferred to Tibet from India.

The ordination of women in Buddhism continues to be a major factor determining the status, acceptance, and power available to female practitioners. In current Buddhist contexts women are able to receive full ordination (i.e. the equivalent of the ordination available to men) in only a handful of traditions. It is only China, Taiwan, Vietnam and Korea<sup>8</sup> that have maintained the female ordination lineages which enable their Buddhist communities to perform full ordination rites and to confer on women the complete set of monastic vows (Barnes, 1996). It is widely acknowledged that in the Tibetan tradition, the impetus for change in regards to establishing full ordination for nuns has "come from Westerners" (Oldmeadow, 2001, p. 271). This issue will be elaborated in the conclusion chapter, but suffice to say that the values and motivations underlying the push for full ordination by some Western nuns may or may not be shared by their non-Western counterparts. Regardless of the motivations or key actors involved, Tibetan Buddhist institutional change around this issue is occurring. Within the past few decades a number of new nunneries have been built in India and more public support for the advancement of women within its institutional hierarchy has been expressed by Tibetan elites (Oldmeadow, 2001). Moreover, such increases are not relegated to numbers or material circumstances alone, but reflect major changes in sponsorship opportunities and education, as well as in the general attitudes of respect and recognition given to nuns in the Tibetan tradition. The Dalai Lama's emphasis on education and study, as well as on egalitarianism, have translated into higher education and degree programs for

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<sup>8</sup> Revival of a nuns lineage has been occurring over the last few decades in Sri Lanka, with full ordination of women being afforded to Buddhist nuns on a limited scale since 1996 (DeSilva, 2004).

Tibetan nuns (Dechen, 2010, p. 208) and are helping to shift attitudes towards women in the Tibetan tradition.

Another important development relevant to women in Buddhism is their role and involvement in New Buddhist contexts. Buddhist nuns are a relatively new phenomenon in Western society, appearing only as recently as the late 1960s (Tsomo, 2002, p. 260). Thus, whereas Buddhism originally emerged within contexts defined by stark inequalities of gender and class, contemporary Western Buddhism is “taking shape in an age of feminism and radical rethinking of gender” (Coleman, 2001, p. 15). This has created a situation where “women and men practice together as equals, sharing the same roles and the same responsibilities in ways unheard-of in most of Asia” (Coleman, 2001, p. 15). Indeed, the equalizing of male and female in the context of Buddhist practice and institutional structures is a defining feature of contemporary Western Buddhism (Simmer-Brown, 2002, p. 312). In lay populations especially, women in Western Buddhism have accomplished a great deal and as a result, the status of the ordained female population has also been positively impacted. Nonetheless, challenges remain for the ordained women of Western Buddhist communities, including “gaining acceptance for their monastic lifestyle, obtaining material support, obtaining Buddhist education and training, establishing suitable monastic communities, and gender discrimination” (Tsomo, 2002, p. 261).

While literature on women in Buddhism continues to expand (Huong, 2006; Farrer-Halls, 2002; Masatoshi, 2001; Barnes, 1996; Gross, 1986), it remains substantially focused on the analysis of ancient or traditional texts from the Buddhist cannon (i.e. Blackstone, 2013, 1998; Collett, 2013; Ueki, 2001; Paul, 1981). Despite this trend, however, there are a number of insightful works offering social analyses of the issues impacting the role and status of women in Buddhism (i.e. Dixit, 2008; Willis, 1985), as well as a growing range of feminist (Klein, 1995) and even critical work (Salgado, 2013), including Gross’ 1993 text which offers a feminist history, analysis and reconstruction of Buddhism. Overall, experience-centered research on women in Buddhism (particularly ordained women and even more specifically, non-indigenous, convert nuns) remains limited, leaving nuns significantly underrepresented in literature. Research has also largely failed to address the implications and systemic ramifications that the rise of women in contemporary Western Buddhism is having on Buddhism generally, and specifically on the status and experience of native Buddhist women in more traditional or conservative Asian Buddhist

contexts. Thus, while work grounded in texts and doctrine is an important component of this area of study, more social and experiential research is needed to balance these contributions and to root the former's findings in the lived realities of female Buddhist practitioners.

**Religious Conversion.** The continuing global growth of Buddhism has been noted across numerous countries and contexts (Yu, 2013; Office for National Statistics, 2012; Rocha & Barker, 2011; Kulananda, 1997). Implicit in any discussion of the 'growth' of a religion is conversion, a topic well studied in various disciplines. Despite the broad theoretical and disciplinary approaches involved in the study of conversion, the focus of this study, as well as limitations in space, dictate that this section of the literature review will consider theories emerging chiefly from two pertinent fields: religious studies and psychology.

Perhaps the most cited work when it comes to religious conversion is William James' *Varieties of Religious Experience*, first published in 1902. In considering religion outside of its formal, organized structures and institutions, James (1902/2002) concluded that conversion is "the process, gradual or sudden, by which a self-hitherto divided or consciously wrong, inferior and unhappy becomes unified and consciously right, superior and happy, by consequence of its firmer hold on religious realities" (1902/2002, p. 160). This definition reflects a typical psychological focus on the individual and introduced the notion of spiritual or existential crisis as a motivating factor in conversion. This approach to conversion was maintained into the 1920s and 1930s by theorists who contended that "The field of action of religious psychology must be internal experience considered in relation to the behaviour (to which it is correlative) of the individual or of the religious group" (De Sanctis & Augur, 1927/2003, p. 23). Early theological approaches to conversion were compatible with James' theory (which emphasized the positive outcomes of religious conversion) in that they deemed conversion to a major world religion a universally positive indicator of social, as well as moral, 'progress' (Hefner, 1993, p. 6).

Later approaches, namely those championed by Sigmund Freud and defining the 1950s, linked conversion to internal, psychological distress. Within his wider psychoanalytic framework, Freud (1927/1953) furthered the idea that religion is a type of universal neurosis and so equated religious conversion with the "regressive attempt to resolve early oedipal hatred of the father by complete submission to a higher power" (Pargament, 1997, p. 247). Needless to say, Freud's position was challenged. Carl Jung, for one, took a more positive approach and spurred the archetypal theory of conversion wherein "conversion takes place when a person is captivated by a powerful religious

symbol or experience that meets profound needs within that person's psyche" (Rambo, 1999, p. 266). By the 1960s and 1970s religious conversion had been clearly distanced from psychopathology (Stark, 1971) and began to be considered more in terms of identity and social participation. Seggar and Kunz's (1972) study of Mormon conversion for example, highlighted self-identifying as a member of a religious group to be a key component of spiritual conversion. The influential intellectual conversion theory postulated by Horton (1975) also underscored social elements of conversion. Focused on the conversion of African communities to the foreign religions of colonizers and missionaries, Horton suggested that conversion is tied to the adoption of the religious system which provides the most coherent explanatory cosmological model. In Horton's view religions provide the means of coherently ordering reality by meaningfully structuring the micro- and macrocosm (1975). Similarly, Barnhart and Barnhart (1981) argue, from a naturalistic humanist perspective, that "religious conversion is not a supernatural – divine or demonic – inroad into human life or history," but is instead a cumulative process involving three major dimensions: the psychological; the social, and the cultural (p.19).

Moving into the 1990s, approaches to conversion shifted again as empiricism and controlled studies gained prominence. Ullman (1989), for example, studied the emotional aspects of conversion by comparing conversion experience across religious groups with matched controls. Her findings suggest that converts from a variety of groups (including Orthodox Jew, Roman Catholic, Hare Krishna, and Baha'i) share a basic motivation to convert based on emotional issues, namely problematic relationships with their father, unhappy childhoods, and difficult personal relationships (Ullman, 1989). In addition to identifying widespread motivating factors, Ullman's (1989) work highlighted the importance of close personal relationships with important authoritative figures in the conversion context (i.e. gurus, rabbis, priests, etc.). Evidently, there are limitations to quantitative methodologies that rely on self-report measures and also with cross-cultural comparisons that isolate certain aspects of experience from the wider social and historical contexts in which they are embedded.

Such limitations have been addressed in the literature however, by theorists such as Lewis Rambo, a professor of psychology and religion. Rambo (1999, 1993) has furthered a multidisciplinary approach to conversion that is rooted in psychology and considers conversion to be a dynamic process of change with personal, cultural, social, and religious implications. He has

identified seven stages in the conversion process (context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment, and consequences), within each of which “relationships, rituals, rhetoric, and roles interact and reinforce one another” (Rambo, 1993, p. 101). While interdisciplinary approaches may address certain limitations revealed in the literature, by the late 1990s there was a slight backlash against such interdisciplinarity on the grounds that such methods lost sight of the essential role played by religion. Calling for a theoretical distinction between ‘ideological’ and ‘secular’ conversion (1998, p. 165), Zinnbauer and Pargament argue that “in the case of religious conversion, the change in the self is of a particular kind...What one considers to be the sacred takes a central place in the convert’s life and consciousness” (p.165). Yet, while the authors argue that notions of the sacred give a new purpose to the life of the convert, shaping their identity, and occupying a central place in their lives (Zinnbauer & Pargament, 1998, p.165), this approach exhibits its own limitations, namely its reliance on essentialized notions of both religion and ‘the sacred,’ and a failure to recognize the great diversity and important nuances that underlie various religious traditions. Generally speaking, further limitations evident in the psychological literature include a focus on the individual, as separate or disconnected from their social environments; a concern for replication and representation in research studies (many of which are already focused on ‘typical’ cases); and a tendency to extract and extend universal theories from particular or specific research contexts. A number of additional limitations or research gaps have been identified throughout this literature review and are summarized below.

In the area of psychology, various sub-fields’ engagements with Buddhism reveal a number of limitations. In the area of popular psychology, Buddhism is expanded into a diffuse universal spirituality and the ritual, iconographic, cosmological, and institutional aspects of Buddhism as it is lived and experienced in both Western and non-Western contexts, are underemphasized. Somewhat ironically, in the realm of social psychology the social aspects of lived Buddhist experience are neglected in favor of psychologized aspects of theory and practice that are considered almost exclusively, within Western socio-cultural contexts. Additionally, when social aspects of Buddhism are addressed, there is a clear deficit of research located in Mahayana Buddhist contexts (i.e. Tibet, China, Japan, and Korea). Literature from positive psychology demonstrates a neglect of social and lived experiences in Buddhism as well, disengaging certain theories or ideas from within Buddhism and applying them outside Buddhist social and cultural

contexts. Empirical psychological literature tends to legitimize Buddhist theories and techniques and the West's contemporary engagement with them; an approach that limits the value of Buddhism to its degree of rationality and scientifically valid application, ignoring many of the core, non-empirical elements of Buddhism. Research from clinical psychology generally suggests that the growing Western interest in Buddhism is rooted in the pragmatic 'solutions' it offers in regards to modern existential crises. However, very little research actually considers the transformations of self that Western converts to Buddhism experience let alone the meanings that individuals ascribe to their motivations or to the changes they may experience. Overall, then, the area of psychology and Buddhism displays a number of research gaps, many of which remain unexamined due in large part to the lack of critical work emerging from within this field<sup>9</sup>.

The literature on Buddhism displays a significant historical focus and in terms of contemporary or 'New' Buddhism, generalized concepts, commonly established as dichotomies-East/West; Ethnic/Convert, etc.- are broadly applied, compromising the rich diversity of Buddhist communities. Few studies use qualitative methods or experience-based approaches to explain specific motivations or explicit reasons behind the global rise of Buddhism. My project responds to several of these limitations by maintaining a focus on individuals in context and by employing qualitative methods that produce rich narratives around a variety of issues.

The final body of literature reviewed was religious conversion which displayed a substantial lack of research relating to women and also to non-Christian religious experience. Buddhism poses particular challenges to models of religious conversion given the four separate categories of practitioners (nuns, monks, laywomen, laymen) and the tendency of many modern converts to 'secularize' Buddhism defining it not as a traditional religion, but constructing it instead as a system of mind training or ethical living. Additionally, the range of degrees of involvement and the variable engagement with certain aspects of the tradition (i.e. meditation) and not others (i.e. vows, dedicated studies, etc.), both complicate a straight forward application of many standard

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<sup>9</sup> The results of multiple database and journal searches (in 2011) produced only one reference to a critical article on the subject of psychology and Buddhism. A database search using Academic Search Complete of the keywords 'Psychology and Buddhism' returned 275 results. The top 50 results of this database included the only critical article that I came across. Entitled 'Meditation as medicine: A critique', the article expresses concern over what the author deems a commodification of mindfulness practice and the methods used in contemporary Western psychology to evaluate therapeutic interventions (especially those adapted from Buddhist traditions)(Hickey, 2010, p. 170).

conversion theories. Furthermore, the nontheistic character of Buddhism and the detraditionalized form it is taking in the West also challenge many established theories of conversion. On the whole, while studies on Christian conversion experiences abound, studies on the conversion of Westerners to non-Western religions are notably rare (Moran, 2004; Brekke, 2002). Literature undoubtedly exists on non-Christian religious experience (Shulman & Stroumsa, 2002; Beit-Hallahmi & Argyle, 1997; McGuire, 1992; Banton, 1966) but aspects of conversion are often neglected. In Buddhist literature it is personal memoirs and autobiographical works that address most specifically themes of conversion by relaying the personal experiences of non-Buddhists who convert to Buddhism (e.g. Grozni, 2008; Sangharakshita 2007; Adiele, 2005); Levine, 2004; Dreyfus, 2003). Given the individualist focus of these works, they do not necessarily advance theoretical understandings of conversion in Buddhist contexts. Thus, while many works have been published on Buddhist religious experience, these are largely non-theoretical and often do not specifically address the details and processes of religious conversion. There are a very limited number of authors who have addressed conversion in Buddhist contexts, and among those that do, the context considered is often historical (i.e. Brekke, 2002). No doubt, Brekke's contention that "the paradigmatic Buddhist conversion consists of the overwhelming realization that life is suffering followed by a dramatic break with life in the world to seek salvation" (2002, p.45) needs to be re-evaluated within various contemporary contexts.

One final gap that is usefully identified within conversion literature, especially as it relates to Buddhism, is the role of missionary work. Buddhism is generally presented as a non-proselytizing tradition that avoids converting non-Buddhists and denies Buddhism as the one true Way for all. The Dalai Lama himself has spoken out against intentional conversion, saying that in Buddhism "unless someone approaches a teacher and requests specific teachings, it is not right for a teacher to impose his or her views and doctrines onto another person" (Gyatso, 1996, p. 98). Despite the popularity of such non-proselytizing rhetoric, some assert that "the major impetus of the spread of Buddhism can be explained according to the "missionary" dimension of universal religions" (Obadia, 2001, p. 96). Indeed, more and more authors appear to be engaging with the missionary aspects of Buddhism (e.g. Learman, 2005), especially as it continues to grow worldwide. Nattier (1998) for example, added 'export' or 'evangelical' Buddhism to her previously used categories of 'elite' and 'ethnic', to represent the types of American Buddhism practiced by those



seeking to convert others. Overall then, missionary aspects of Buddhism are being explored, but this is only a recent development in the literature, and one whose contributions to our collective understanding of conversion, especially in contemporary Buddhist contexts, has yet to be realized.

This review of literature, and the main research gaps that it reveals, provide a comprehensive overview of many of the pertinent issues involved in this study. While literary, conceptual, and ideological elements underlying the global rise of Buddhism are increasingly being elucidated (i.e. McMahan, 2008), there remains a marked absence of social science research that explores such issues as they impact, influence and play out in the lives of ordained members (and particularly non-native converts) of this tradition. Considerations of the developmental and/or transformative aspects of appropriating Buddhism are notably lacking in the literature, to say nothing of the potential elements of resistance or subversion, which are almost completely absent. These research limitations are further exacerbated when considered in combination with another significant deficiency of contemporary Buddhist literature: its failure to adequately address the role and position of the largest segment of its population: women.

For these, among other, reasons, I have chosen to situate my study in the realm of contemporary Buddhism and to focus on the lived experiences of converted Tibetan Buddhist nuns. The relevance of this work will be laid out in the conclusion chapter, after the stories, analysis, and interpretation of the participants' experience have been presented. The sixteen participant nuns will be introduced at the end of this chapter, along with the chief setting of the study. The following section will outline the research questions and theoretical framework informing this study.

## **1.2. Research Approach**

This section of the introduction will outline the key research questions pursued as well as the theoretical framework, methodological approach, research techniques, and analytic strategies used in this study.

**Research Questions.** In this project, the central research question is broad: What are the experiences of ordained non-Tibetan females living in a Tibetan Buddhist institution in India? However, it is supported by a number of related sub-questions which explore specific facets of those experiences: How do these women make sense of their conversion to Buddhism in general and to Tibetan monasticism in particular? How do these descriptions relate to known

theories of religious conversion? How have their notions of self been impacted by their ordination? How do these women position themselves in the local and global Buddhist worlds? How have various dimensions of their experiences (relationships, activities, self, body, emotion, life goals, worldview, etc.) changed or remained consistent throughout their conversion/ordination process, and how have these affected their current social positioning?

**Theoretical Framework.** The theoretical approach I employ in this study builds on the general assumptions articulated in the definition of cultural psychology quoted above, and takes social constructionism as its epistemological base. The social constructionist perspective furthers the view that “all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their worlds, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context” (Crotty, 1998, p. 42). Consequently, it does not assume that there is a singular or objective truth waiting to be revealed or discovered. Rather, meaning is constructed and continually negotiated and maintained through social interaction and by the use and development of particular socio-cultural systems and symbolic forms. The elements of sociality and mutual-constitution that underlie both cultural psychology and social constructionism are paramount in determining my research approach and have contributed to the interpretive and critical orientation of my theoretical perspective.

In the context of this study I was guided by a theoretical perspective that emphasizes meaning-based descriptions informed by critical as well as interpretative approaches, which is labeled by Byron Good (1994) as critical phenomenology. This meaning-centered perspective involves investigations into “how meaning and interpretive practices interact with social, psychological, and physiological processes” (p.54) to shape trajectories of experience. The interpretive aspect supports a focus on language and representation and the use of ‘experience-near’ accounts to link networks of meaning to cultural values, categories, and processes (Good, 1994, p.55). In this way, the interpreter, informed by her particular, socially determined ‘horizons’, constructs meaning by relating any specific part of experience to the larger ‘whole’. This interpretive approach may be combined with critical perspectives that question hegemonic structures, oppressive systems and the power dynamics underlying meaning systems and social experience (Good, 1994). Interpretations may thus be situated among the wider social, political

and economic forces at play and can be used to question whether meaning systems may potentially be mystifications which serve the interests of certain groups (Good, 1994, p.57). The notion of mystification introduces issues of power into the research and demands a “critical unmasking of the dominant interests, an exposing of the mechanisms by which they are supported by authorized discourse” (Good, 1994, p. 58). This in turn raises possibilities of resistance or subversion, both of which may be telling components of a given experience<sup>10</sup>.

Bringing both interpretive and critical perspectives to bear on the exploration and description of the lives of converted Buddhist nuns, my research is oriented to their experiences of transition and transformation as they move from non-Buddhist secular worlds into the Buddhist world of a Tibetan nunnery in India. The basis of the theoretical framework relies, then, on a theory of moral experience (Kleinman, 1999, 1999b, 1995), which acts as the conceptual starting point and provides the overarching theoretical orientation for this study.

According to Kleinman (1995), experience is “the intersubjective medium of social transactions in local moral worlds” (p. 97). Experience, then, is fluid and dynamic, at once social and individual, and is determined above all by what individuals and societies deem valuable, meaningful, and important. This definition introduces the four key concepts I will use from Kleinman’s theory as the foundation of my theoretical frame: experiential flow (the fluid, dynamic nature of experience), intersubjectivity, morality, and local worlds. Given that experience is embedded in particular social contexts and processes, Kleinman considers that human beings live in the flow of situated interpersonal interactions:

We are born into the flow of palpable experience. Within its symbolic meanings and social interactions our senses form into a patterned sensibility, our movements meet resistance and find directions, and our subjectivity emerges, takes shape, and reflexively shapes our local world. (1999, p. 359)

Thus, as we orient and position ourselves in the complex and dynamic flux of everyday life we are at once shaping and shaped by that continual flow.

The second key concept addressed in Kleinman’s theory, intersubjectivity, further clarifies the relational dynamics inherent in this experiential flow. According to Kleinman, all

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<sup>10</sup> The notion of mystification along with the role and function of the social imaginary (Ricoeur, 1986) will be addressed further in the conclusion chapter as part of the final interpretation of the nuns' transformative journeys and their relationship to the changes exhibited by Tibetan Buddhism itself.

experience is intersubjective given that it “involves practices, negotiations, contestations among others with whom we are connected. It is a medium in which collective and subjective processes interfuse” (1999, p. 458). The relational dialectic that connects the individual to the social, the private to the public, is thus a fundamental characteristic of human experience. The concept of intersubjectivity, then, provides a framework for considering experience as “both part of the intersubjective stream of cultural practices and social engagements *and* part of our inner being” (Kleinman, 1999, p. 378, emphasis mine). This theme is picked up in the third and fourth key concepts of Kleinman’s theory which correspond to the local and moral aspects of lived experience.

The moral element of experience is defined by Kleinman as that which is at stake for individuals of a local social group, which may include status, resources, relationships, survival, or identity, to name a few (1999b, p. 71). In this sense, morality, as conceived by Kleinman, does not refer to abstract universals or fixed ethical standards, but relates instead to issues, concerns, relationships, and acts that absorb the attention of local actors and reflect the “important things” that engaged stake-holders stand “to lose, to gain, and to preserve” (Kleinman, 1999, p. 363). The fourth and final concept of Kleinman’s theory of moral experience that will be used in my theoretical framework is local worlds, which refer to social and familial networks, dominant institutions and the activities and structures that have developed within the confines of one’s local environment (1999)<sup>11</sup>. It is the local, Kleinman suggests, that endures as “the grounds of social life” despite its permeable boundaries and continual flux, and despite the fact that globalization facilitates movement and exchange as well as simultaneous membership in numerous different networks (1999, p. 458-459). Thus, it is local processes which determine above all, the values and stakes which are realized and enacted in ordinary living (Kleinman, 1999b, p. 72).

Moral experience is “always about practical engagements in a particular local world, a social space that carries cultural, political, and economic specificity, it is about positioned views and practices: a view from somewhere and an action that becomes partisan” (Kleinman, 1999, p.364). This is precisely what I was interested in understanding through this study – the experience

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<sup>11</sup> Concepts similar to Kleinman’s ‘local world’ may be found in the work of Byron Good (1994), who, following Husserl (1936), Shutz & Luckmann (1973) and Habermas (1981), uses the concept of the ‘lifeworld’, defined as an intersubjective realm constituted by the “rhythms and disruptions of experience” (p. 123). Both terms will be used throughout this dissertation.

of being a Buddhist nun from the perspective of international women in the early twenty-first century. I am interested in learning what their ‘view from somewhere’ suggests, not only about their personal experiences, but about the status and function of Buddhism today, about the role of women in Buddhist contexts, and the meanings they ascribe to their experiences as Buddhist nuns. In this way, I consider how they envision these experiences from a moral perspective and explore the ways that these experiences have transformed their moral worlds and identities, and how they articulate what is most at stake for them in choosing to live as a Tibetan Buddhist nun. The added value of Kleinman’s theory is that it not only provides a focus for the research (morality/stakes) but sets up a means of relating these personal and private stakes to the shared stakes of the community and to Tibetan Buddhism itself.

In the sections to follow, I will introduce the supplemental theories comprising my theoretical framework. Together, these theories will guide and inform my interpretation of three core elements of experience which structure this work: narrative, symbols, and self. In affirming, along with Kleinman, the interrelationships between multiple layers and realms of moral experience, these theories provide a more targeted focus on the transformations and change that mark the nuns’ experiences and expressions across a range of experiential realms.

*Narrative.* The narrative quality of human experience has been established and explored by theorists across diverse fields (Bruner, 1986; Linde, 1993; MacIntyre 1981; Mattingly, 2000, 1998; Ricoeur, 1991, 1991b; Taylor, 1989; Turner, 1986), establishing a general consensus around the notion that narrative is one of the chief means by which human beings construct order, continuity, coherence and meaning in their lives. Bruner suggests that “we create units of experience and meaning from the continuity of life” using shared, structured forms, such as stories or dramas, which are socially constructed units of meaning that enable us to shape and tell stories in ways familiar and understandable to those around us (1986, p. 7).

Building on these ideas, Good has proposed that narrative provides a means of emplotting ‘an experience’ so that meaning and coherence may be expressed. Such emplotments become especially meaningful when they are used to make sense of crises or disruptions, which Good describes as ‘unmaking’ our local moral worlds. Similar to Kleinman’s notion of ‘local moral world’, Good suggests that lifeworlds, as “distinctive reality systems” (Good, 1994, p.71), are made by ongoing participation in particular social circumstances and that they may become

‘unmade’ when disruptions significantly interrupt, challenge, or change the normal circumstances supporting that world. The whole process is mediated by social structures and aesthetic forms which are implicated in both the ‘unmaking’ and ‘remaking’ of our meaningful social realities (Good, 1994, p. 118). Linde contributes parallel insights in her narrative theory which defines life stories as socially constructed units which are constantly created and recreated in dialogue with others in order to support a coherent sense of identity over time (1993). Thus, in the context of this study, multiple narrative concepts will be used to make sense of the unmaking of the women’s ‘pre-Buddhist’ and ‘pre-nun’ lives and the consequent remakings and recreations that mark their transition and adaptation into Tibetan Buddhist institutional systems. Specifically, these complementary narrative theories (i.e. Todorov, 1981; Good, 1984; Ricoeur, 1991; Linde, 1993), provide a frame for considering how the nuns construct and express their life experiences through storied forms - the key shifts and transitions they identify, the way they position themselves among other characters and events, the temporal sequencing, as well as the imagined and desired futures they articulate. Indeed, in considering how these women emplot their experiences of conversion and ordination, the intentions and aspirations they frame for the future will emerge not only as distant dreams or potential goals, but as moral expressions of what is most at stake for them as human beings.

*Symbols.* The second theoretical component of this work relates to symbols and symbolic aspects of experience. While each of the symbolic chapters in this dissertation incorporate different theories, they all reflect the basic premise articulated by Turner that symbols are "storage units" of cultural information that "connect the unknown with the known," shaping or transforming attitudes, emotions, and behavior (1967, p. 48). As these chapters will demonstrate, symbols are a category not only of objects, but of words, images, actions, and practices as well. While symbols themselves will be the focus of these chapters (i.e. The Path', the robes, ritual interactions), the processes of interpretation and appropriation, wherein symbolic interpretations are connected to reflexive self-interpretation, will also be explored (Ricoeur, 1981, 1991). Additionally, theories that address the symbolic aspects of embodied experience (Mauss, 1973, 1966), performance, and social interaction (Goffman, 1967; Collins, 2004, 2010) will also be used to interpret the nuns' experiences of life as a Buddhist nun.

*Identity and Selfhood.* Given the overarching theory of moral experience that defines this study, the theories used to explore and describe transformations connected to selfhood and identity have been drawn from theorists who likewise emphasize themes of morality and dialectics of interconnection. Charles Taylor (1989) is one such theorist, who links notions of self to the operant moral frameworks of particular social groups in particular historical contexts. He contends that

Identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done, or what I endorse or oppose. In other words, it is the horizon within which I am capable of taking a stand. (1982, p. 27)

In this sense, self is defined, in large part, by the moral commitments one makes based on the frameworks they construct as members of particular communities or traditions (i.e. as a Catholic, Buddhist, a German or a feminist, etc.). Taylor's theory will be described in greater detail in future chapters (see pages 76-79), but overall, the insights offered by his concept of moral frameworks will be useful in considering how the women's identities as Buddhist nuns shape their 'moral horizons' and in so doing shape their senses of self. It will also be instructive in exploring the ways in which they may blend, alternate, or simultaneously draw from divergent moral sources. The second chief component of the theoretical framework related to self is drawn from the work of Victor Turner (1967, 1974, 1979). Turner's work on rites of passage provides an overarching structure for the transformations I consider, allowing the conversion, ordination and adjustment phases described by the women to be considered from a ritualistic and symbolic perspective that connects individual experience to larger social processes.

This concludes the overview of my theoretical framework, which will orient my exploration of the nuns' lived experiences, primarily within the three related areas of narrative, symbols, and self. This theoretical framework provides a coherent and detailed approach to the exploration of participants' lives and informs the choice of methodology, research techniques, and analytic strategy outlined below.

**Methodological Approach & Research Techniques.** In order to address the research questions articulated above (namely: What is the experience of women who have converted to Buddhism and ordained as nuns in the Tibetan tradition?) and to engage in research that is in line with the assumptions underlying my theoretical framework, this project employs an ethnographic

methodology involving three key techniques: participant observation, life history interview, and semi-structured interview.

*Ethnography.* As was explained above, the conceptual starting point of this research project is moral experience, as described by Arthur Kleinman (1999, 1995). Kleinman notes the relevance and utility of ethnographic approaches, suggesting that “the interpretation of what is at stake for particular participants in particular situations” leads ethnographers to “collective (both local and societal) and individual (both public and intimate) levels of analysis of experience-near interests” (1995, p. 98). In keeping with this orientation, I rely on Clifford Geertz’s (1973) ethnographic approach of ‘thick description’ to articulate my observations and interpretations.

The firsthand involvement that ethnographic methods demand means that the researcher “becomes the primary research instrument through which information is collected and recorded” (Murchison, 2010, p. 13)- which applies as much to the data gathered through interviews as through participant observation. As an ethnographer, then, my observations and experiences of “the manifestations of society and culture in action” (Murchinson, 2010, p. 14) were collected through my active and embodied engagement in the world I came to share with participants. As a Buddhist practitioner, I prayed alongside them in the temple and walked among them on nightly kora (circumambulation of the temple). As an invested member of the Thosamling community I shared in the nuns' concern and frustration at having no water on occasion, rejoiced along with them when the first, beautiful, oyster mushrooms were harvested from our experimental greenhouse. I huddled among them in line for the kettle to fill our hot water bottles- the sole source of heat in the cold, damp winter, and shared their shock and sadness when the nunnery cook died, followed by his son some months later. There is no way then, in the field, or now as a write, to “bracket” myself off or lay out the “biases” that have shaped my interactions and relationships with participants, the co-constructed meanings that were produced, or my interpretations of their lives. Working from a social constructionist epistemology, I am not intending to reveal a single, verifiable truth because I believe that reality, experience, and expression are multiple, dynamic, and informed by various changing and co-constructed factors. As such, who I am and whatever biases I have have shifted over the course of the research process and have additionally been shaped, constrained, and illuminated by the theoretical framework I constructed and applied in this work.



Instead of being concerned with bias or reliability, in the common sense of replicability, which is not a goal of this type of qualitative research (Morse, 2015), I have focused on rigour and depth. Through an ethnographic approach, I have attempted always to respect the words and perspectives of the participants, to ensure that their voices were heard, and to provide strong evidence for any of the conclusions or interpretations I present. This approach reflects a meeting of horizons, where, in a dynamic and ongoing manner, meaning is created through dialogue between parts and the whole, between conceptual or theoretical horizons and the data, and finally, between my interpretations and those of others (as represented in the literature) (see Morse, 2015; Ricoeur, 2007). Moreover, all along the analytic and interpretive process, I confronted and critically evaluated my data classifications, analyses and interpretations with my supervisor, who does not share my biases or experiences. In order to facilitate such meaning-making processes, I relied on three central techniques: participant observation, life history and semi structured interviews.

*Participant Observation.* The style of participant observation I engaged in was also derived from the work of Geertz (1973) wherein the focus of observation becomes one of social semantics (p. 448). In this approach, cultural forms and symbolic structures are metaphorically conceived as texts, that is, as “imaginative works built out of social materials” (Geertz, 1973, p. 449). Thus, the actions and events of daily life are “not merely reflections of a pre-existing sensibility analogically represented; they are positive agents in the creation and maintenance of such a sensibility” (Geertz, 1973, p. 451). My readings of the ‘cultural texts’ in the field were oriented by issues of time and space (how typical and atypical days are scheduled; movement within and beyond the nunnery), relationships (what types of relationships exist between fellow nuns, nuns and staff, nuns and teachers, etc.), and activity (what types of actions take place, where and by whom), in addition to the specific themes and concepts included in my theoretical framework. While in the field I took three forms of notes as a means of recording my observations: running notes - a collection of interspersed thoughts, impressions, specific descriptions, verbatim accounts, notes to return to later, etc.; field Diary – the daily recaps and fuller detail descriptions written at the end of each day, or each specific observation event; chronolog- the record of events and activities as they occur in order each day (including daily schedule; weekly/monthly routines; etc.) (Rothe, 2000, p. 88-89).

*Interviews*<sup>12</sup>. As outlined above, narrative is a primary means of expressing human experience (Good, 1994; Linde, 1993; Ricoeur, 1989). Many theorists suggest that as social beings we further our knowledge and understanding of ourselves, others and the world through narrative processes and “stories are one means of organizing and interpreting experience, of projecting idealized and anticipated experiences, ... of formulating reality and idealized ways of interacting with it” (Good, 1994, p. 80). Life-history interviews build on this assumption, and in this case, allowed participants to tell their story of becoming a Buddhist nun in their own words and according to a structure and style of their choosing. Linde (1993) has suggested that

Life stories are of interest both for their own sake and because they can serve as a model for a unified linguistic analysis - one that moves from the level of the individual construction of sentences, through the form of narratives and the social negotiation of narratives, up to the social level of belief systems and their history, and finally to their effect on the construction of narratives. (p. 3)

Life history interviews are thus well suited to developing a contextualized understanding of the transitions that have marked the nuns’ lives and the broader social systems involved. Moreover, because life stories “express our sense of self” (Linde, 1993, p. 3) and are at once social and personal, they also help to illuminate what is most at stake for the women, in terms of how they position themselves in the Buddhist world and life in general, and how they envision their past, present and future.

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<sup>12</sup> Scripts for both the life-history and semi-structured interviews along with the Demographic Questionnaire are included as Appendixes 1-3. It should be noted that the semi-structured interview schedule included here was formulated as an inclusive guide more than a literal script. It was conceived prior to arriving in the field and was then reduced, through the first rounds of interviews, with many questions being abandoned once appropriateness, relevance, and flow were ascertained. There were many factors that influenced the scope and length of the interviews: English comprehension, availability (time), length of ordination, personality, rapport, etc.. I tried to maintain consistency so that comparison would be possible, but also maintained flexibility in terms of following different threads/topics raised by individual nuns in the interview context. One particular topic area that I intended to explore with the nuns and which I assumed would be an important part of my final thesis was gender and sexuality. Some of my early interviews did address these topics and I did ask several of the questions from the interview schedule, however multiple nuns retracted or drastically reduced their answers during the participant review process where they were given copies of the interview transcripts to review/alter. Thus, a substantial amount of data on these topics was rendered unusable. Additionally, I was directly told that some of my questions were inappropriate to ask an ordained practitioner. In Buddhist contexts there are behavioural norms regarding contact and speech with ordained sangha, wherein lay people are not supposed to broach certain topics - including sex, marriage or relationship issues. Out of respect, I did not typically ask questions regarding sex, sexual orientation, etc., but did address various aspects of gender and gender relations. Some of the data related to this and other topics unaddressed in the thesis will be used for journal articles.

Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with the nuns. While my intention was to follow up the life history interview with a semi-structured interview 1 week later, this approach proved ineffective - given how busy the nuns were, and the fact that I conducted interviews with nuns living outside of Thosamling at the time, and also with visiting nuns who were not staying in the nunnery long-term. Instead, for the majority of the interviews (12 out of 16), both interviews were conducted within a single session (beginning with the life-history and transitioning into the semi-structured, and lasting between 45 minutes and two and a quarter hours). The semi-structured portion of the interviews allowed me to clarify and further explore elements from the life-history interview, or conversely, to raise questions and explore areas/themes that were absent or minimally addressed. The structured aspect of the interview allowed me to focus more closely on particular aspects of the nuns' experiences, while the flexibility supplied by this instrument provided an opportunity for unscripted topics and questions to emerge while also encouraging the nuns to shape the interview process and to address topics or issues meaningful to them personally. In providing allowances for interviewees to expand or clarify ideas, responses were able to be expressed according to the "totality of which they are part" and as such, to provide insight into underlying ideologies and interests (Rothe, 2000, p. 98), or as Kleinman would put it, the underlying stakes involved in the local worlds of the nuns.

**Analytic Approach.** The analytical perspective adopted for this project is rooted in critical and interpretive processes that coincide with three levels of interpretation as outlined by Ricoeur (1981). In conceptualizing of the relationship between explaining and understanding, Ricoeur describes a 'hermeneutic arc' where movement back and forth between the text itself and the broader context in which it is rooted is mediated by the researchers own personal horizons (1981). The first level of analysis applied here was thus focused on the internal structure of the text and involved a narrative analysis approach based both in syntax and semantics. Syntactic analysis is a specific type of narrative analysis derived from the structural poetics of Todorov (1981), which was done exclusively on the life history narratives. The plot structure, temporal and spatial ordering, and key transitions of the narratives were analyzed, to create a structural outline of each woman's story. This analysis allowed crucial agents of change and stability to be identified at the level of propositions (the minimal units of a narrative), sequences (higher level units describing shifts from equilibrium to disequilibrium), and the narrative as a whole (Todorov, 1981). The

identification of these elements exposed important life events and provided points of comparison between various narratives. Semantic analysis was also done on the life histories as well as on semi-structured interview data. This analysis involved a progressive thematic coding process (Flick, 2009; Braun & Clarke, 2006) which was done after several readings/re-readings of each text. The first step was 'open coding' wherein specific ideas, concerns, experiences, actions, relationships, and events were identified. These codes were then thematically grouped and then further refined into themes and sub-themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). At this point, a thematic map was created to visually represent the hierarchies and relationships between themes and sub-themes, which were considered across participants, providing a comprehensive overview of congruencies, contradictions, and general patterns within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2004).

The second level of analysis involved conceptual analysis, which broadens the analytic scope beyond the text to the key theories and concepts of the theoretical framework. This type of analysis involves a dialogical exchange between the horizon of the text and the horizon of the researcher as data are considered through the lens of the theoretical framework. The initial framework may be expanded through this process given that unanticipated insights and ideas may emerge when the individual lives and experiences of participants are brought into dialogue with abstract theories and concepts.

The final level of analysis is broader still as it takes into consideration wider contexts (socio-political, economic, etc.) and involves a dialogue between key findings and the literature. This analysis involves all forms of collected data and considers how the results generated in the two previous levels of analysis compare or contrast, and variously support or challenge the perspectives and interpretations articulated in relevant areas of the literature. As such, the results of this analysis are presented chiefly in the conclusion chapter.

This analytic strategy, as an elaborated and systematic method, is congruent with the assumptions underlying the research approach and meets established criteria for quality and rigour (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Reicher & Taylor, 2005). Moreover, returning to Ricoeur's conceptual model, this approach bridges mere explanation with interpretation to generate deeper understandings and new meanings in regards to these women's experiences in particular and psychological processes of transformation in general. Having outlined the research approach, the following section will describe the research context.

#### **1.4. Thosamling: The Research Site and Participants**

This study is based on field work (from January to June, 2011) conducted at Thosamling Nunnery in Sidhpur, located in the state of Himachal Pradesh in northern India. The nunnery's location places it in the vicinity of major Tibetan teachers (the Dalai Lama, Gyalwa Karmapa, Khamtrul Rinpoche, Tai Situ Rinpoche and Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche) and institutions (Dzongsar Khyentse Chökyi Lödrö Institute, Dolma Ling Nunnery, Namgyal monastery, Norbulingka Institute) from all four Tibetan Buddhist sects. Thosamling is a non-sectarian nunnery (accepting nuns and practitioners from each of the four schools of Tibetan Buddhism) and is one of the only places in the world where nuns from a variety of international backgrounds live and practice together.

**Thosamling: The Nunnery.** Thosamling first opened in 2006. It is a complex of buildings nestled into the rice paddy fields at the foot of the Dhauladar mountain range. Inaccessible by car, the nunnery is joined to the small town of Sidhpur, by a series of cobbled and dirt paths, accommodating only single-wide foot traffic and becoming quite treacherous during the rainy season. The nunnery website describes its function, purpose, and goals as follows:

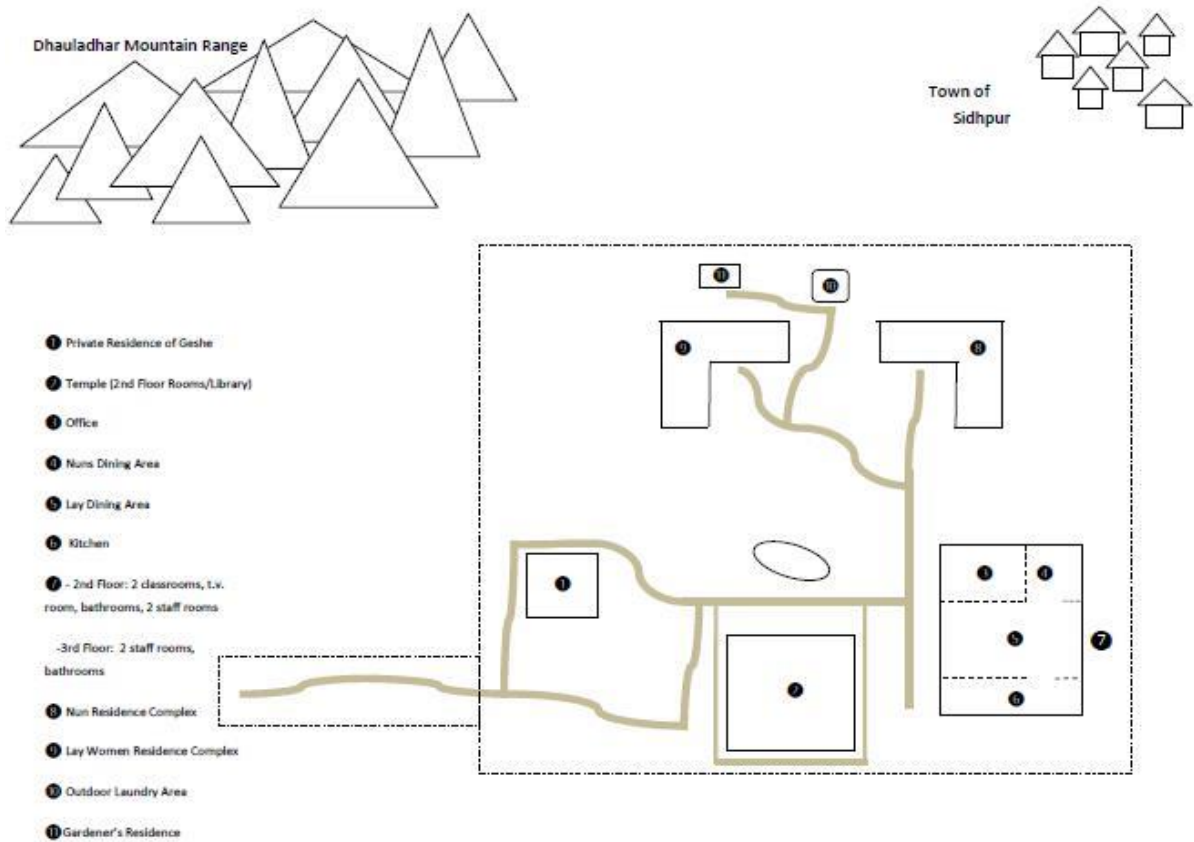
Our main focus is to support the growth and flourishing of Dharma throughout the world by providing opportunities to listen to, reflect on and study the teachings of the Buddha in a non – sectarian way. By providing a place of refuge for newly ordained nuns we give them the firm grounding in the study and practice they need. By nurturing and supporting the Sangha jewel we in turn create a community that inspires others to practice Dharma for the benefit of all. (Thosamling Institute for International Buddhist Nuns, 2010)

As a full residential facility, Thosamling offers meals in a shared kitchen/dining space, a temple and library, as well as private and shared rooms for residence. The dining hall has a separated area for ordained residents only – though once a week the lay community is invited to join the geshe for lunch in this space. There are two separate residential buildings – one exclusively for nuns and one for lay women. There is generally one person per room, which comes furnished with a bed, a desk and chair, and simple shelving unit. In the lay building there are room options with a private attached bathroom, but in the nuns building there are no rooms with private bathrooms, so the nuns

have shared shower and toilet facilities on each level. Men are not allowed to stay at the nunnery or to visit for extended periods (though several male staff, as well as the resident geshe, live on the premises). The geshe has a separate, free standing house near the entrance of the nunnery grounds, with its own bathroom and a limited kitchen. The gardener (an older Indian male, at the time of my visit) also has a small separate residence, located on the edge of the property in a garden area behind the main residence halls.

Thosamling offers a full program of study including formal Buddhist philosophy courses taught by accomplished Tibetan geshe (monk teacher) Tsewang Nyima, and an introduction and advanced class in Tibetan-style debate. There is also a two-year Tibetan language program which is a prerequisite for more advanced coursework. The language and philosophy courses are open to both lay and ordained practitioners, including male students, who are able to attend classes and share afternoon meals on site.

Several factors dictate the number of nuns who live at the nunnery, including visa status, program enrollment, and language proficiency. Typically, between 5 and 20 nuns live at the nunnery at any one time, along with roughly an equal number of lay women. The head nun (along with certain staff members- gardener, office manager, cook) is the only one to maintain permanent residence (with the exception of the months she is required to spend outside of the country in between her visa issuances). Since opening in 2006 the nunnery has hosted nuns from a range of countries: Holland, Greece, Venezuela, England, Japan, Germany, Philippines, USA, Taiwan, Korea, Vietnam, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Australia. The name Thosamling was given to the community and institution by the Dalai Lama and means a place of hearing, study and reflection. The Dalai Lama has also officially endorsed the nunnery offering public support as well as financial endowments, and since he personally visited the nunnery in 2009, he recommends it as a the primary residence for all of the non-affiliated international nuns he locally ordains.



*Figure 1: Map of Thosamling Nunnery Complex*

**Participants.** While at Thosamling I invited every one of the nuns that either lived or visited the nunnery to participate in this study. In the end 16 nuns agreed to participate (consent, debriefing, and data release forms are included as Appendices 4-6). The resident geshe, was also interviewed with the help of a translator. The participants in this study are diverse not only in terms of national or cultural heritage but also in terms of age, time since ordination, and position occupied- at Thosamling and also in the Buddhist institutional world in general<sup>13</sup>. The average age was 41.5 years, and the nuns came from 9 different countries: Korea (4), Australia (4), Indonesia (2), Denmark (1), Germany (1), Holland (1), Southern Europe (1)<sup>14</sup>, United States (1), and Venezuela (1). Beyond demographics, the nuns also represent immensely diverse personalities and perspectives, as well as attitudes and intentions related to being an ordained Buddhist nun.

<sup>13</sup> This section will provide a general introduction to the 16 nuns who participated in this study. For easier reference, charts summarizing key demographics have been included as Appendix 8. Pseudonyms have been used for all participants. Three of the four nuns from Korea have Korean pseudonyms- since they ordained in Korea and were never given Tibetan names, but the fourth (Thubten) ordained in India and goes by her Tibetan dharma name.

<sup>14</sup>This participant, Yeshe, did not want her specific country of origin named because she wanted to remain anonymous and, as far as she knew, she was the only woman from that country who was living as a Tibetan Buddhist nun.

When conceiving of this study, my previous experience living in and visiting Tibetan Buddhist monasteries and nunneries lead me to assume that I would be moving into an established community with a stable membership and a well-developed institutional culture. This did not, however, turn out to be the case. Thosamling is an intensely dynamic place and after nearly half a year of calling it home, I realized that one of the few consistent things about it was its founder, and head nun, Lhamo (age 52). Originally from Holland, Lhamo had gotten ordained by the Dalai Lama in 1997 and when she was unable to gain admittance to the Tibetan nunnery of choice, she settled near Dharamsala. A large donation from a European sponsor led to her establishing Thosamling. The one word that best describes Lhamo is tireless. She never stops moving and always has a hundred things on the go. She is tenacious and tough, courageous and driven. She is also humble, almost shy, and has a fabulous sense of humor. I would describe her as somewhat guarded: it takes some time to earn her trust and to earn your way into her circle, a fact which I attribute to the number and constant flow of residents (both lay and ordained) that she deals with coupled with the immense responsibilities she bears as the head of Thosamling. I got to know her best in the kitchen, often early in the morning or late at night, helping her make bread and cakes which she sells to provide extra revenue for the nunnery.

When I first arrived at the nunnery, Dawa (age 51) was the only Western nun besides Lhamo living there. She was friendly and kind, enthusiastically offering to participate in the study before I could even finish telling her about it. She is from the United States, intelligent and strong and much focused on her Tibetan language studies (the reason she had come to live at Thosamling). We became fast friends, owing partially to the fact that we arrived at Thosamling around the same time and also because we shared mutual friends (two American laywomen). We often travelled up to McLeod Gang together to enjoy a restaurant meal or made day trips for shopping or site-seeing. Dawa was funny, but she also had a serious side, correcting both nuns and lay people in regards to appropriate behavior, and keeping always to a strict schedule of study and practice. Nyingma (age 38) was another nun I met early on. She arrived a few weeks after I did but stayed for only one week (though she had previously lived in Thosamling for the period of one year). She had the most welcoming face with bright clear eyes that exuded warmth and kindness. Though I did not have the chance get to know her well, she was generous with her time and was very honest and open in our interviews.



The Indonesian women arrived together- Pema (age 51) and Tenzin (age 27). Pema was a motherly type, warm and helpful with strong opinions and a calm demeanor. Tenzin was younger-eager and attentive, smart and articulate. I got to know them as laywomen as they lived at the nunnery for several months before getting ordained. They were obviously close to one another, almost always sitting, traveling, and working together as a group. They were helpful and engaged around the nunnery, and were dedicated students. Thubten (age 31) had gotten ordained by the Dalai Lama on the same day as Tenzin and Pema and also moved into Thosamling at the same time as the others. She was from Korea, and was a quiet presence at Thosamling. Composed, shy, and deeply kind, she was a strong student and appeared eager to learn as much as she could about all aspects of monastic life. The Korean nun that I came to know best was Jiyul (age 28). Her kindness, compassion and playfulness were evidenced in her interactions with the nunnery dogs, whom she obviously loved and was constantly grooming and caring for. Her bond with the dogs established a strong connection between her and Lhamo, who was likewise deeply invested in the resident pets. Songheo (age 43) was one of the senior-most Korean nuns- she was small with an infectious laugh and a beaming smile. She seemed to be happy all of the time and loved joking around. Chin-sun (age 41) spoke the least English of the Korean nuns and was more serious and reserved than the others. Even though I did not speak often with her, she was extremely friendly and seemed to get along well with everyone.

Rinzen (age 26) did not live in Thosamling at the time of my visit, but was often around, attending the advanced philosophy courses offered by the Geshe and eating lunch most days at the nunnery. She had a strong, powerful, and somewhat intimidating presence and did not seem to have close relationships with most of the other nuns though she was very good friends with another Western nun and former resident, Yeshe. There was a subtle tension between Rinzen and the head nun, Lhamo, and it took me several weeks to build up the courage to actually speak with her. She was extremely intelligent and dedicated to her Buddhist studies. She had a fairly serious and almost sharp demeanor, though when I spoke with her together with Yeshe (age 48), she was more talkative and happy than I had seen her before. Yeshe was also living outside of Thosamling and the two were obviously good friends. She was not around the nunnery as much, since she had not mastered the Tibetan language as Rinzen had and so did not attend any of the advanced (non-translated) classes. Yeshe had been an artist before becoming a nun and she retained that sort of

free-spirit, non-conformist attitude. She exuded a type of 'joie-de-vivre' and always seemed relaxed and happy.

Several other nuns in this study were also past, but not present, residents of Thosamling. Palden (age 30), an Australian nun, would sometimes visit and clearly had a great relationship with Lhamo. She was very charismatic- talkative with an inviting personality. Though she was young, she seemed very experienced and confident, and was clearly driven by specific future-focused goals. She was open and interesting, and above all enthusiastic: she seemed energized by her studies and experiences and appeared to thrive in her life as a Buddhist nun. Dolma (21) was another young Australian nun whom I met and interviewed in the Tibetan nunnery she currently lived in. She was more reserved than Palden, with a quieter and more serious demeanor. Choden (age 52) was a Danish nun who stayed at Thosamling for about a week as she received ritual trainings from a lama at a nearby monastery. She had a quiet confidence about her and was a stable and assured character that easily got along with those around her. Dechen (age 34) was another nun that I met during her brief stay at Thosamling (she had, however, lived there for 3 years previously). Though I did not have the chance to get to know her well, Dechen was very candid in our conversations, drawing on a wealth of life and monastic experience that reflected significant challenges and struggles. It was clear that her confidence and strength were hard won and she asserted herself with a sense of assurance that was sometimes underlain by subtle expressions of anger and pain. She was a complex woman and I wished I had the chance to get to know her better. Finally, Sherab (age 61) was a nun from Germany who I also encountered during her brief visit, though she had spent many months in Thosamling over the years. She was the oldest and most experienced nun that I met. She was very close with Lhamo and had intentions of staying long term to help with the training of nuns and the ritual practices at Thosamling. She had a strong, no-nonsense type of attitude and I was admittedly quite intimidated by her. She was open and reflective during our interview and was obviously invested in supporting and improving Thosamling.

Given that the forthcoming chapters describe each of the nuns' lives and experiences in great detail, these introductions are simply brief sketches of the women meant to impart a very general sense of who they are and to indicate the types of relationships and rapport we had. Evidently, I came to know some of the nuns better than others, forming bonds and close friendships with some, while hardly speaking with others. With that being said, each one contributed greatly

to this project and I am ever grateful for their willingness to share their stories as well as their ideas and opinions on the wide variety of topics addressed in this research.

### **1.5. Dissertation Structure**

The three phases of conversion, ordination, and adjustment form the global plot structure of all of the women's narratives and will, accordingly, be used as the organizing frame for this dissertation. Three chapters will be presented in each phase, beginning with a narrative chapter (describing that phase as told principally through the life histories), followed by a chapter exploring a symbolic element relevant in that phase (based on both interviews as well as participant observation), and ending with a chapter on identity and selfhood (which also relies on a combination of interview and participant observation data).

The narrative chapters at the start of each section will present an integrated description and analysis of the nuns' life-history narratives based on syntactic (the narrative structure, including plotment and causality), thematic (the key themes informing variations in the trajectories), and conceptual (theoretical) analysis.

The symbolic chapters include an analysis of the metaphor of the "Path" in the conversion phase, an exploration of the symbolic functions of the monastic robes in the ordination phase, and a consideration of performance and interaction rituals in the adjustment phase. Each of these chapters are unique, drawing on diverse theories to investigate the role of symbolic forms in the daily experiences of these convert nuns.

The selfhood chapters chart transformations related to identity and self, focusing on the core moral bases that act as the foundation of selfhood, as articulated by the women. The transitions experienced by the women will also be considered, in these chapters, from the perspective of rites of passage, which will allow the implications of social positionings on selfhood to be further explored.

This dissertation ends with a conclusion chapter that provides an overall synthesis of the women's personal experiences. Here, their experiences will be connected back to the broader, macro-level context of modern Tibetan Buddhism, and the social imaginary forms of ideology and utopia will be used to consider the relationship between these levels and positions as well as their implications for the future. The literature will also be revisited in the conclusion, as key findings of this study are brought into dialogue with the perspectives and interpretations identified in the preceding review.

## **PHASE 1: CONVERSION**

### **2. Conversion: Becoming Buddhist**

In the life-history narrative interviews, the women were asked to describe how they became Buddhist nuns, starting with before they were ordained, moving through to their current lives, and ending with how they imagine their futures. In this sense, these interviews and stories were not general life stories, but were focused, through my question, around ordination. As Linde (1993) suggests, life stories are crucially defined by coherence, which is tied both to social demands (stories are created between speakers and listeners and reflect the need to produce and share stories that are intelligible to others) and personal demands (life stories correspond to internal, private experience that is related to our desire to understand our life as coherent) (p. 17-18). In the case of each of the women who participated in this study, coherence was achieved by framing their stories around three key stages or phases: conversion, ordination, and post-ordination adjustment. The first narrative phase that emerged from these interviews corresponds to a period of conversion, where the women describe, however briefly, their non-Buddhist pasts before explaining their early encounters with Buddhism. From there, the women narrate the circumstances as well as motivations behind their attraction to Buddhism, ending the phase with their conversion and dedicated adoption of Buddhism as a primary worldview.

The structure of this chapter is derived from a narrative analysis of these life history narratives, where, using the syntactic approach of Tzvetan Todorov (1981), four distinct prototypical plot-forms were identified among the women's stories, each characterized by particular linguistic emphases or languages: loss, distress, investigation, and choice. In the first part of the chapter, Todorov's (1981) syntactic theory of narrative analysis will be presented. Following that, the four variations in plot will be described in detail before moving on to an interpretation of the structure and distinctive languages used in the women's stories of conversion.

This interpretation supports the argument that many similarities exist in the women's experiences and stories of becoming Buddhist and that across all, Buddhism is constructed as the chief 'counter-force' that allows them to overcome the general suffering they experienced in their secular, pre-conversion lives. Additionally, while they all rely on a mythological structure, defined by a sequential ordering of events and a direct, linear causal pattern (Todorov, 1981), the four

distinctive plot-forms are characterized by languages that emphasize varying aspects of conversion experience. In the end, regardless of the particulars of the plot or the language used to tell their stories, all of women convert to Buddhism because it provides them with a worldview, conception of self, and teleological course that they find both empowering and deeply meaningful.

### **2.1. Todorov's Syntactic Analytic Model**

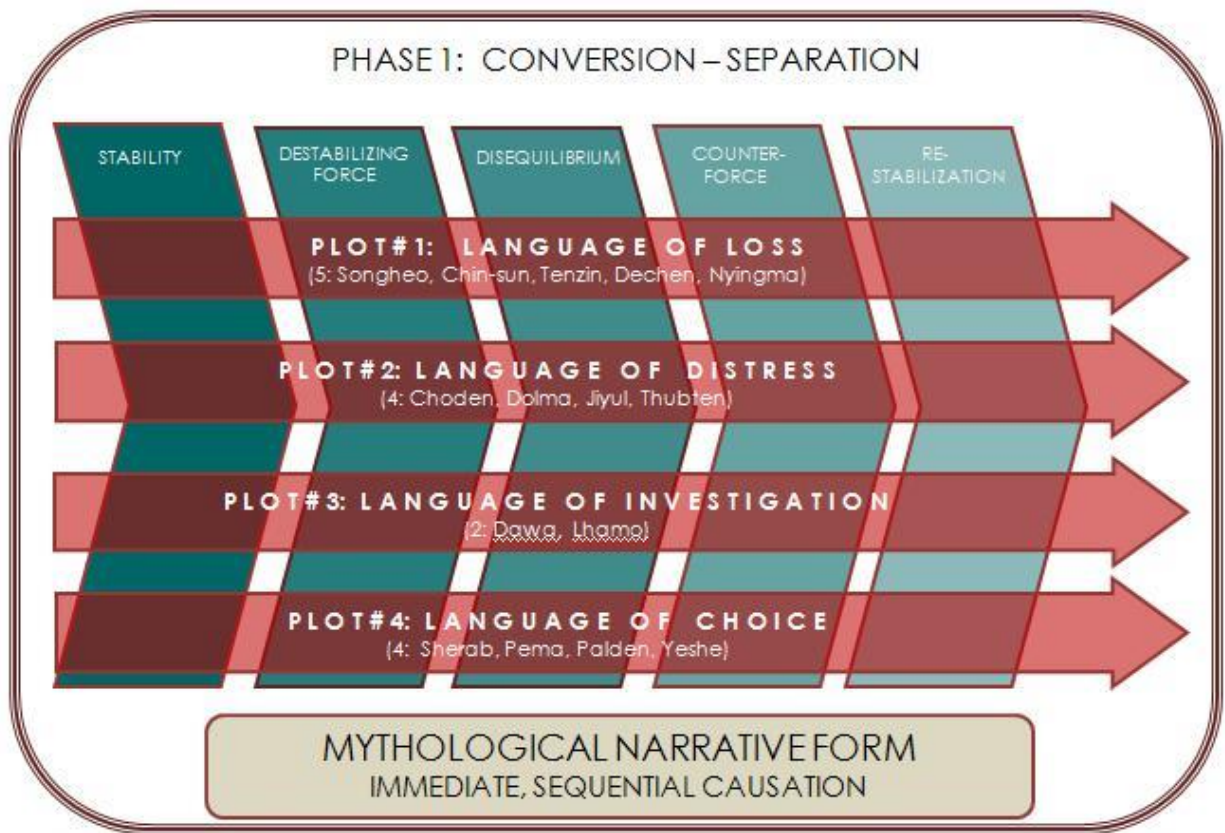
Tzvetan Todorov is a literary theorist who furthered a structuralist approach to literary analysis which he named poetics. The goal of poetics, according to Todorov, is “no longer the description of the particular work, the designation of its meaning, but the establishment of general laws of which this particular text is the product” (1981, p. 6). In considering the syntactic aspects of texts, Todorov asserts a core difference between a story (or narrative) and a plot. The distinction is tied to causal and temporal order, with stories/narratives being defined by simple temporality (i.e. what comes after what) and plot by causality (i.e. what is caused by what) (Todorov, 1981, p. 41-2).

Concentrating on causality, Todorov goes on to identify two types: immediate (where minimal units of causality are directly and immediately related) and intermediary (where the causal relationship between units illustrates a general law or principle) (1981, p. 43). Narratives relying on the former type of causality are labeled mythological, whereas ideological narratives display the intermediary causal structure (p. 43). In telling their stories of conversion, all of the women's narratives fit within the mythological type, displaying immediate causal relations that linked sequential chains of events into plots that culminate in their conversion to Buddhism. In addition to sharing a general mythological structure, all of the women's narratives also include the patterns of action or transition identified by Todorov as a narrative sequence (1981). He suggests that mythological stories are made up of cycles of transformation (sequences) that involve five distinct steps or phases: 1. stability, 2. destabilizing force, 3. disequilibrium, 4. counter-force, and 5. re-stabilization (1981, p. 51). When analyzing the women's conversion stories, there were numerous instances where the ‘destabilizing forces’ at the center of the sequences shared important characteristics. Moreover, the centrality of these destabilizing forces was represented in the tone, words, and images they used to tell their stories, reflecting distinctive types of voice or language<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> For more on the relationship between language (semantic constructs) and culturally-specific cognitive frameworks (including emotions) see Shweder, 1991, 2003.

The major force of destabilization and the related language used to tell the stories thus became the basis for grouping the narratives into four prototypical plots: loss, distress, investigation, and choice. In a sense, all of the women experience varying degrees of each of the core destabilizing forces, since they are considerably interrelated and represent an entangled cluster of components of existential suffering. However, what distinguishes the plots is the way that the women talk about and describe these experiences- the different languages that they employ.



*Figure 2. Narrative Structure in the Conversion Phase*

## 2.2. Prototypical Plot #1: The Language of Loss

The first prototypical plot-form discernible in the conversion phase of the women’s life histories centers on the loss or collapse of social and/or religious networks. When these support systems fail, the women experience various forms of confusion and doubt, distancing them from pre-existing relationships and/or faiths, and compelling them to search elsewhere for answers,

solutions, and support. In this plot-form a language of loss is used by five of the fifteen women<sup>16</sup> to connect their conversion to the collapse of important social or religious support systems. Those who employ this language of loss include two Koreans, both of whom ordained in Korean Zen traditions before becoming involved in Tibetan Buddhism (Songheo, aged 43 and Chin-sun aged 41), one 27-year old woman from Indonesia (Tenzin), and two Australian women, Dechen, aged 34 and Nyingma, 38.

All of these women's narratives begin with a brief description of happy, stable lives or childhoods, with three of the five mentioning religious upbringings (Protestant, Catholic, Buddhist). Songheo opened her story by stating: "All of my family are Protestant." She describes being heavily involved in the Protestant church (attending weekly services, etc.) all through her childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood. Dechen described her "normal, suburban upbringing" as a religious one as well: "We were catholic, and we were devout you could say, and I think it gave me a good preparation in morality and basic ethics." Chin-sun's family in Korea were Buddhists and so she grew up around Buddhism but was not overly involved with the local temple or sangha, and was not taught much about the tradition. Tenzin grew up in Indonesia and describes her parents as "totally in the Chinese tradition, worshipping some gods" and following local customs. Despite her family's involvement with traditional Chinese practices, Tenzin was sent to Christian school, and so from a young age was involved with the Catholic and wider Christian communities in her area. Nyingma did not describe her childhood in great detail, though it was clear that she had strong relationships with her parents and was very close to her sister. When she was first exposed to Buddhism in her late teens, coming across a popular book ('The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying' by Sogyal Rinpoche, 1994), Nyingma recalls, thinking to herself: "Ahh! This is great, there's a lot of amazing stuff in here, but my life is really fine, you know- it's nice that there's Buddhism, but I don't need it." Similarly, in each of these women's narratives, there is a sense that these early periods in their lives were sufficiently gratifying and generally "fine." However, these happy states were significantly interrupted by what the women describe as a collapse or sudden estrangement from the social and/or religious systems defining their early lives.

In Chin-sun's story, for example, the onset of an acute illness during her adolescence represented a major disruption and the loss, while temporary, of her ability to participate in the

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<sup>16</sup> Because Rinzen did not complete a formal life history interview, she is not included in these narrative analyses.

theretofore typical activities of her life. She explains: “I was sick and that was my problem. I knew that I wanted to study, but I couldn’t.” She was confined because of her illness and was unable to participate in life as she used to, unable even to complete her studies. Chin-sun’s illness caused a great deal of frustration and pain and forced her to re-evaluate the meaning and purpose of her life. Similarly, the other women were also thrown into periods of deep self-reflection following major shifts in their own lives. For Nyingma, this period began when she was around 22 years old. “Basically,” she says, “all of the elements in my life that I had kind of taken worldly refuge in had just collapsed, one by one.” She describes this time as one of the darkest and most difficult in her life:

Everything, all the systems of support that I had, failed me, you know, even my own resources within myself failed me; and I just found myself really desperate and thinking: ‘My god, what is the point of life? What have I got to live for?’ You know, ‘What shall I do?’ I wouldn’t say I was suicidal, but I was heading in that direction... It was just like there was no meaning and nothing to get me going.

The thoughts and emotions that Nyingma experienced during this period of collapse were mirrored in other narratives in this group as well.

In Dechen’s case, such feelings emerged after the death of her father which happened when she was only a teenager:

My father died when I was fourteen. And that kind of ripped apart my normal, suburban upbringing and I just thought: ‘What is the meaning of life?’ And I became very depressed and suicidal.... I lost faith in God when my father died. I just thought if there is a God, He is not so kind.

Experiencing the loss of her father and then a loss of faith in the religion and belief system that had been a support and comfort to her for her whole life plunged Dechen into a desperate and confused state, similar to the one described by Nyingma. Songheo, along with Dechen and Nyingma, is the third woman to mention suicidal feelings during this period. In her case, despite a longstanding involvement and family connections to Protestantism, as she entered young adulthood she felt an acute sense of disconnection and disinterest in the religion. She stated directly that during this early period (late teens early twenties) she “was not interested in Protestant religion,” and she began experiencing growing anxiety and unhappiness to the point that she even



considered suicide. During this time, she describes herself as having “many, many mental problems”, which she connects to her inability to understand why she “existed in the world.” Her increasing dissatisfaction with Protestantism, along with her general unhappiness and existential uncertainties, came to a head one day during a sermon given by her minister, when he told the congregation: “If you believe in Buddhism you will go to hell.” She remembers being enraged by this statement: “From then on, I never went to church, it was completely finished”. So, at the age of 25, having lived her entire life in a Protestant world, Songheo defied her family’s wishes and expectations and left the church forever. After leaving, Songheo remembers coming to a distinct realization: “I don’t want to waste my life anymore.” With that motivation in mind, she began visiting a Zen Buddhist nunnery near her home in Korea and soon after converted to Buddhism. As she explains, converting to Buddhism instilled a sense of freedom within her, and she relished the opportunity to take control of her life, adopting a worldview that emphasized personal accountability and reflected a more generous and positive outlook:

Whenever I didn’t go to church I felt very uneasy because maybe God will punish me. But after I studied Buddhism, I understood that God doesn’t exist, that everything is empty. That made me released from God.... So Buddhist philosophy made me released from that bad emotion, that kind of bad emotion.

Feeling released from the guilt and pressure she experienced as a Protestant, Songheo converted to Buddhism and fully embraced the idea that "we can learn how to change our karma and how to make ourselves happy." A parallel scenario was recounted by Tenzin, who similarly admitted experiencing a sudden and abrupt end to her Christian faith. She had become involved with Christianity because, she says, “at that time I felt that I needed something, what that is called? an inner-need, so I went to Christianity.” She acknowledged, however, that she “didn’t find anything” and left the church for good after hearing her priest speak negatively about Buddhism. Tenzin’s strong negative reaction to her church leader’s words led her to Buddhism and she “started to go to the temple and take some courses.” While her early engagements with the religion were at a fairly basic level, she says that after studying the simple teachings of Buddhism she “got a lot of joy.” Her interest in Buddhism grew as she entered university and started studying Tibetan Buddhist teachings: “From that time I said to myself: ‘I will never leave Buddhism.’” This assured

commitment marks Tenzin's conversion to Buddhism and from then on she deepened her studies and became involved in a local Tibetan Buddhist centre.

Unlike the other women in this group, after the major disruption she experienced (her father's death and breaking with her church), Dechen did not immediately turn to Buddhism. Instead, she experienced a prolonged disequilibrium phase (Todorov, 1981), where, still reeling from the collapse of her previous world, she was searching for something to help recover the meaning, support, and stability she had lost. She experimented with a variety of lifestyles and spiritual traditions, trying to make sense of what happened and of where she should go from there. She says that during this period she "became a hippie - did yoga and tried all kinds of different things- drugs and whatever else, but I always knew I was looking for the meaning of life. I wasn't just wasting time." Basically, she says, "I needed to find myself and find out why I was here and find happiness and figure out how to overcome suffering." Only a teenager at the time, Dechen's struggle to find happiness and "the meaning of life" brought her to India and Nepal. It was at this point, after leaving home at 17, that Dechen first encountered Buddhism, when she attended a Buddhist retreat in Nepal:

I did a retreat for 10 days at Kopan monastery and I just totally was in love- love at first site - it just all made sense... I just immediately knew that Buddhism was the path for me... Buddhism really gave me the answers – and not just out of blind faith - like you should believe and don't ask questions, but yes, ask any question you want and we have the answers, and test your own experience, like a goldsmith tests gold, and make a decision for yourself.

Buddhism was thus a powerful counterforce that seemingly provided Dechen with everything she was looking for – peace, happiness, love, and an intellectually engaging worldview that addressed her 'own experience' and allowed her to 'make her own decisions.' While on this trip Dechen converted to Tibetan Buddhism and she went on pilgrimages to important Buddhist sites, deepening her practice through study and retreat. When she returned to Australia, she immediately joined a local Tibetan Buddhist centre.

Across all five of these women's narratives, the prototypical plot-form of collapse is articulated through a language of loss. The tone and vocabulary used to describe the major and abrupt disruptions that they experienced express a deep sense of loss and a resulting disorientation. Thus, their early encounters with Buddhism and even the very elementary understandings of Buddhist philosophy that result from these first encounters, strongly affect the women in many

ways and replace or at least fill the void left by the collapsed and disappeared systems that once ordered and supported their lives. For them, conversion to Buddhism represents a means of healing the loss they have experienced and of rebuilding a meaningful life.

### **2.3. Prototypical Plot #2: The Language of Distress**

The second group of narratives are defined by a prototypical plot-form where the women's lives are destabilized by pervasive feelings of suffering, dissatisfaction, and meaninglessness. These women (four of 15) use a language of distress to articulate their pre-conversion experiences, relying on highly affective terms and vocabularies to emphasize the deeply emotional nature of this period. In their stories, conversion is likewise emotionalized and is described as a transformation of suffering into hope, happiness, and meaning. The four stories in this group come from Choden, a 51 year old nun from Denmark, Dolma, 21 from Australia, and Jiyul, 28, and Thubten, 31, from Korea, with each one using a distinctive language of distress that centers around mood and emotional state.

What emerged as a defining characteristic of the early part of these women's stories was a pervasive sense of unhappiness due to the stresses of secular life and their inability to find meaning in the activities and relationships they were engaged with at the time. Thubten, for example, recalled that by the time she got to high school and university, she felt as though she was "really suffering":

I didn't do anything meaningful, everything just had no meaning- any action, whatever-so meeting friends, watching movie, drinking alcohol. So, after that I don't feel much happiness. I did not feel happy: "What did I do today? Nothing." I feel like nihilism, you know, like nothing. I feel nothing.

Thubten emphasizes her feelings and the emotional toll of not being able to "find meaning in life - everything is going on the same way and it's not very meaningful." The other women's stories share many of the same themes and expressions, detailing lives defined by feelings of confusion, dissatisfaction, and sadness.

In each of the women's stories, emotion-based language is pervasive and the turning point, where they connect to or discover Buddhism, is likewise couched in affective terms. Jiyul, for one, described a shift in her negative mood and feelings once she made friends with some Buddhist monks and nuns and visited their temple and monastery for the first time. "If I stay outside in a lay

village," she said, "my body is very comfortable, but my mind is not comfortable, it's uncomfortable. But, when I go to the temple my body is sometimes so tired, but my mind is very comfortable." The feelings of psychological and emotional comfort that Jiyul describes after visiting the Buddhist temple inspired an interest in Buddhist teachings and practices, and led directly to her conversion and deeper engagement with Buddhism.

Similarly, in Thubten's case Buddhism would also emerge as a counter to the suffering and meaninglessness she experienced as an adolescent. Despite the exasperating sense of meaninglessness she was experiencing, Thubten felt hopeful: "I thought that there is something meaningful [out there], but I don't know what." It was only once she encountered Tibetan Buddhism that she found what she was looking for. She says that "usually my face is not smiling, it looks very serious" but when she met some Tibetans and began learning about Buddhism, she felt uplifted and says it made her "very smiley." After attending some initial teachings, Thubten realized that Buddhism is "is a very good way and the right way." She began to study Buddhism in earnest and says that her "mind" became "more comfortable" and the unhappiness she had been accustomed to dissipated, being replaced by positive feelings and a sense of purpose: "Before I don't care much about other people, only myself and I wasn't much happy, but now I can think about other people, not me, but about another person." The altruism and compassion at the heart of Buddhist teachings were central to the shift that Thubten experienced within. Thus, she became progressively involved in study and practice, attending Buddhist philosophy classes at the Tibetan library. In this manner, Thubten entered into the Tibetan Buddhist world, formally converting in 2006 at the age of 26.

The other women's stories narrate similar experiences, embedded in an affective language that highlights the positive psychological and emotional changes that accompany their conversion to Buddhism. Choden, for instance, said that the growth and change that came from her initial study and practice of Buddhism were "helpful for my sanity." And Dolma, who described herself as "very sad" before finding Buddhism, said that after reading the fundamentals of Buddhism in a book by the Dalai Lama, she knew "instantly" that "Yep, this is it! It answered all the questions I ever had, and never had."

Each of these four women then, rely on emotive language to describe a movement from a state of distress defined by meaninglessness and unhappiness, to a state where they are both comforted and enlivened by their newfound understanding and involvement with Buddhism.

Conversion to Buddhism provides them with the inspiration, meaning, and fulfilment they had been missing. In the next prototypical plot form, the women also end up committing themselves to Tibetan Buddhism, though their path is defined by a dedicated, and often prolonged, search.

### **2.4 Prototypical Plot #3: The Language of Investigation**

The third prototypical plot-form in the conversion stories is driven by spiritual, and philosophical seeking. In these stories, belonging to Dawa and Lhamo, a language of investigation is used to tell the story of stable periods of work and religious involvement that are interrupted by experiences which open the women up to a broader range of spiritual traditions. This exposure initiates a type of search, or spiritual quest, wherein they investigate and evaluate various options, eventually determining that Tibetan Buddhism is the tradition that best fits their personal needs and desires. The tone of these stories is investigative in that they describe a journey and process with language related to exploration and experimentation. In these stories, then, conversion is framed as the culmination of a prolonged spiritual search.

Dawa, the 51 year old American, begins her narrative by describing an upbringing in the Midwest United States where her family was Presbyterian and she was “very active in that church growing up.” She mentions as well that she had “always felt” a “strong spiritual identity” yet, despite being very active in the Presbyterian Church, as she grew up Dawa realized that “Christianity didn’t quite seem that it was the perfect fit.” This feeling only intensified when she left home for college and was exposed to a host of different religions and spiritual paths. This exposure to a wider world of spiritual traditions was a major turning point in Dawa’s life, marking a time when her spiritual search began in earnest:

So once I graduated from high school and went off to college I started to get a feel for what the rest of the world, well you know, other things out there in the world, I started looking into other forms of spirituality. So I first tried different forms of Christianity. I went to the Episcopalian church and I liked that quite a lot because of all the ritual, and the incense and the priests. Uh, the Catholic Church, and the synagogue and this and that. I tried New Age things and then I went to see, well, one of my friends had found this woman who did channeling, so she would channel these spirits and so I went to see her. And feeling, not too long, it seemed like pretty much like an empty activity, like what was the real point of doing that? So I was just looking, looking around, trying out different things.

The first important turning point in Lhamo's (52, Holland) life also centers on this type of "looking around" and "trying out different things." She begins her story when she was a young adult, busy with work and other responsibilities. While she was strongly entrenched in the secular world, she had been experiencing a strong pull from her spiritual side and says: "actually, I was looking for a little bit longer time, for something that makes a little bit of sense of your life." She was able to commit herself more fully to this search after she experienced a "burn out" and was forced to take a one year leave from her job. The dissatisfaction and spiritual emptiness that she felt leading up to this time inspired her to start investigating "New Age kinds of things." Yet, within the 'New Age' realm Lhamo remained dissatisfied because she "could not find things that were really fitting, because it was all a little of this, a little of that, but it doesn't give you the deeper meaning of stuff."

Thus, her search continued and when she noticed an advertisement in her hometown for a performance of chanting and lama dancing by Buddhist monks, she figured she would check it out. She was "really touched" by the performance because while she did not understand at the time the actual meaning of their chants, she "had the feeling that they were praying for us and we have everything and they have nothing!" This inspired her to "look into their life more" and so she began reading about Buddhism and particularly about Tibetan Buddhist monasticism. She says that when she "started to get books from His Holiness...I was really like: 'Ok, this is what I was looking for.' I was really like [snaps fingers] this is what I need." She adds that from that point forward "there was no doubt anymore" about how she was going to live her life. In recognizing Buddhism as the thing that she 'needed' and a system capable of answering her broadest existential questions, Lhamo had finally found what she had been 'searching for.' Because she was on stress leave from her job, she had time to investigate the philosophies behind the monastic performance that had so impressed her. She gathered all the books she could find by the Dalai Lama and on Buddhist teachings and "just studied the dharma" at home. "That was actually the best time, almost, of my life," she says, laughing, "I had a burnout, but I was actually so happy!" Having the time to read, study, and explore this newfound tradition lead Lhamo to convert to Tibetan Buddhism and formally enter the Buddhist path: "I found a teacher in my country and I started the teachings." In this way, a sense of stability and purpose are reintroduced into Lhamo's life through conversion. A similar process may be observed in Dawa's story, which also describes a path initiated by an advertisement, this time for a meditation course.

After finishing college Dawa found a good job and while the professional side of her life was coming together, she was still searching for something to satisfy the questions and desires emerging from her spiritual side. One day, she came across an ad for ‘meditation for stress relief’ in her local newspaper. She was intrigued because she had tried some meditation on her own previously but felt that it was “a big waste of time” and didn’t seem to be “working.” So she attended the class: “I went to this meditation class and I don’t remember what we meditated on, but whatever it was, that was it, that was just it!” Since she was unfamiliar with Buddhism, Dawa did not recognize the meditation as being part of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. Nonetheless, her connection and attraction to this Buddhist method was undeniable and, as was the case with Lhamo, it was instantly recognized as the thing that she had been searching for. Finally having found something that ‘worked for her’, Dawa "kept coming to the meditations every week and before I knew it, I was actually one of the main people that helped her start this Buddhist centre.”

Thus, the women whose narratives include a quest plot-form describe their conversion or adoption of Buddhism as the result of a long journey through different religions and spiritual traditions. When they were finally exposed to Buddhism and were presented with the opportunity to study and practice in earnest, they had no reservations or doubts that this was the path for them and they committed themselves wholeheartedly. Dawa and Lhamo both recognized Buddhism as a religion capable of answering their deepest questions, and of providing them with a framework for being which fit precisely with what they had long been searching for. In addition to answering long held questions and providing a type of moral and spiritual framework, Buddhism also functioned as a type of social framework as it connected the women to wider Buddhist communities and became a major determinant of where, how, and with whom they spent their time and energy. In this sense, conversion represents an end to their spiritual investigations and Buddhism becomes a primary force in their lives.

## **2.5. Prototypical Plot #4: The Language of Choice**

The prototypical plot-form used by this final group is characterized by turning points where the women come to a ‘crossroads’ and must make a choice whether to continue along their existing paths or to move towards Buddhism. Their stories are thus defined by languages of choice, which display frequent use of path or road metaphors and concentrate on the decision-making processes that move them closer to Buddhism. Conversion is presented in these stories as a decisive means

for the women to redirect their lives towards a more authentic and inspiring path – the Buddhist Way. As with all of the other narratives, the stories of the four women in this group (Sherab, 61, Germany; Pema, 51, Indonesia; Palden, 30, Australia; and Yeshe, 48, Southern Europe) begin by establishing a state of stability and normalcy.

The early and stable phases of the women's lives, in this group, generally revolve around families and careers. Sherab, for instance, found herself facing an unexpected pregnancy which led to a marriage and career of convenience. She was thirty at the time, and for the next seven years she worked in her husband's medical shop and concentrated on raising her son. In Pema's story, this stability phase revolved around studies and career: "I went to school, finished my studies and was busy working." She lived some distance from the rest of her family in Indonesia's capital city and was very focused on her career. Pema's brothers who lived near her mother in their hometown were Buddhists and when she would return home to visit, they often encouraged her to read some books on the topic. She always refused, thinking it was "useless to read them" and telling her brothers: "it's better if you read books that could help to improve your work." Thus, at this stage of Pema's life, she was living independently, spending most of her time and energy on her work and advancing her career. Yeshe's story also begins with a stable period focused on her work and career. She had become a successful artist and describes herself at this stage as "just going around and thinking like an artist and trying to perceive and live in the world in an artist's kind of way." From her perspective this meant "seeing the world in a less conventional way, in a more abstract... way." Thus, while the life she led was not completely 'conventional,' she was an independent woman living in a thoroughly secular world and engaged very strongly in her career.

In fact, in all of the women's narratives from this group, the early sections of their stories hint at subtle dissatisfaction or unease, yet they were each engaged in lives that offered enough stability, or at least distraction, to keep them from making any drastic changes or exploring alternative systems of thought and action.

Eventually, however, the women's frustration and dissatisfaction with their lives reached intolerable levels and when they encountered Buddhism, they recognized it as a meaningful alternative, as an option and choice that would move them in a different direction. As a case in point, take Pema who, at the age of 40, gave up her career in the city to return to her village to care for her aging mother. In an effort to bring some order and meaning to her new life, Pema starting



a baking business and also became seriously involved in Reiki (a healing system emerging from Japan that focuses on energy and relaxation). During this period, several of her family members who were Buddhists told her repeatedly that by doing Reiki she “went in the wrong direction” and warned of the negative consequences of going “the wrong way.” This brought her to a crossroads where a clear choice arose between Reiki and the Buddhist tradition followed by her family. Because of the sincerity of her family’s concern she began reading some of the Buddhist texts they recommended. She admits that she spent “two years in that confusion period,” uncertain of which tradition to follow. Pema remained at the crossroads of these two spiritual paths for some time, before she eventually made the choice to visit the Buddhist centre which her brothers frequented: “So I went there and I saw my teacher.... and then after that I never missed a teaching! So then I left the Reiki.” The decision to give up Reiki and pursue the Buddhist path was a major turning point in Pema’s life. After learning more about Buddhism and studying its teachings on suffering and attachment, Pema realized that Buddhism “is the way I have to go. And that was it.” After converting to Tibetan Buddhism, Pema became increasingly involved in a local Tibetan Buddhist centre, visiting almost daily, and becoming a dedicated student of the resident teacher.

Palden also eventually came to realize that she had a choice to make in her life: continue along a conventional path that she felt was hollow and lacking in meaning, or seek out an alternative path and way of being. When she was 16 or 17 years old a friend of hers became interested in Buddhism and though she found it interesting, she says that “like a normal teenager, I didn’t really follow it up and other life circumstances you know, just came along, and I just kind of forgot about it.” But a few years later, when she was working in a menial job she says that “just watching people and seeing their faces and just the stories that adults have” she realized, “I have a choice now. I could either go that way, or I can see how far I can go this other way [the Buddhist way]. Because I don’t want to be at the end of my life saying: ‘Oh, I should have done that.’” This fear of regret combined with a nagging sense of dissatisfaction and that resonance that she initially felt for Buddhism, led her “to search, you know for happiness outside of materialism.” It was that, she says, that “pushed her.” Thus, “pushed” by her desire to live a life defined by more than materialistic pursuits and also to understand suffering in a more clear and meaningful sense, Palden read a book by the Dalai Lama and immediately knew that she had found the correct path: “I was reading, reading, reading and: ‘Wow! This stuff just makes so much sense, but I just don’t do it -

you know it's no wonder that I have to keep suffering.”” After this experience she found a Tibetan Buddhist centre near her home, began learning more about Buddhist philosophy and practice, and soon converted.

In the stories of these women, Buddhism emerges as a clear option – a choice and a path that the women feel compelled and committed to following. Their lives take on new meaning, joy, and purpose through their conversion and, empowered by their decision to embrace Buddhism, they embrace lifestyles centered on Buddhist practice and study. In the section to follow, the significance of all of the women's decisions to convert and commit to Buddhism will be explored further by unpacking the languages and plots defining the conversion period of their life stories.

## **2.6. Interpreting the Immediate Causal Order of the Prototypical Plot-Forms**

Using Todorov's syntactic analytic approach to narrative analysis, the prototypical plots and core languages used by the women in the conversion phase were identified. We can now move into an interpretive analysis, for as the introduction to Todorov's book makes clear, syntactic analysis “does not offer a tool for interpretation, but rather a grounds for organizing the interpretable” (1981, p. xviii).

The terminology chosen by Todorov to describe the source of transformation that turns a state of disequilibrium into one of equilibrium is ‘counter-force’ (1981). This term is quite literally represented in the women's stories since Buddhism is constructed as an antidote to their troubles and is imbued with the power to reverse (i.e. counter) their negative emotions, fears, and pain. In this first plot type a language of loss was used by five of the fifteen nuns to articulate the destabilizing effects of the collapse of theretofore crucial social or religious networks. In these stories Buddhism becomes a way of healing, rebuilding, and filling the void left by these collapsed or disappeared systems. The shift in perspective that Buddhism initiated within these women reintroduced meaning and provided a framework for understanding themselves and their situations, empowering them to determine their own destinies. As Dechen said, Buddhism acted as a guide for 'testing your own experience' and to 'make a decision for yourself.' Nyingma suggested that it helped to 'demystify' her suffering and Songheo used the Buddhist notion of karma to explain how she came to understand that she alone was in control of her life. Overall then, a central theme running through these stories is self-empowerment and conversion to Buddhism is experienced as reorientation to meaning, purpose, and self-realization.

The second group of stories was defined by a language of distress and had plots structured around pervasive and ongoing emotional struggles. The four women in this group had framed their stories around the persistent dissatisfaction, unhappiness, and general unease that they experienced in their pre-conversion lives. Connecting with the philosophies and practices of the Buddhist tradition countered the women's emotional distress and provided comfort and relief. The happiness and fulfillment that they experienced after initial encounters with Buddhism and Buddhist practitioners re-stabilized the women's lives and inspired a sense of hope and purpose that garnered their deep and immediate commitment.

A language of investigation is used in the third plot group to tell stories of a quest for a meaningful worldview and way of life. The two women in this group, Lhamo and Dawa, told stories centered around an experience that exposed them to a range of spiritual traditions, allowing them to investigate various options and explore the potential benefits of different systems and approaches. In Lhamo's case it was a work-related burn-out, and for Dawa it was moving away to attend university. In both cases the women described their conversion process using vocabularies related to searching, trying out options, and finding the best fit. In the end Buddhism was the religious tradition that resonated most, offering the women a cohesive framework that was experienced as deeply meaningful and personally relevant.

The final prototypical plot-form displayed a language of choice, which permeated the women's stories of changing life courses, uncertainty, and lack of direction. The four women in this group described coming to an important crossroads, and by framing their stories with a tone and vocabulary relating to orientation, direction, and choice, the women articulate a desire for a clearer purpose and path for their lives. In choosing to convert to Buddhism the women are enacting intention and introducing a clear direction and meaningful purpose into their lives.

Despite the differences marking the languages and plots in women's stories, their narratives express a shared sense that in providing answers to their questions, clarity to their confusion, and relief from their suffering, Buddhism empowers them by providing a new perspective on life and a framework for understanding reality, self, and suffering.

## **2.7. Conclusion**

The conversion phase of the women's narratives is defined by a direct or immediate causal structure that sequentially connects actions and events across a five stage cycle of transformation (1. stability, 2. destabilizing force, 3. disequilibrium, 4. counter-force, and 5. re-stabilization

(Todorov, 1981, p. 51)). Four prototypical plot-forms were identified, each characterized by a particular language: loss, distress, investigation, and choice. Across all plot-forms Buddhism functions as the chief ‘counter-force’ – as the system and means of reversing and transforming the negative (meaninglessness, suffering, unhappiness, confusion, etc.) into the positive (meaning, peace, happiness, purpose, etc.). Thus, despite the different emphases represented by the varying languages used in the stories, there are important aspects of the conversion experience that are shared by all of the women. These include a sense of empowerment, wherein Buddhism comforts and revitalizes the women, working to strengthen their resolve to resist the conventional paths, values and roles defining the secular lives they were formerly engaged in. In this sense, converting to Buddhism provides a comprehensive worldview and (as will be discussed in the self chapter of this phase) a moral framework that enables them to gain control and mastery of their lives. For all of them, Buddhist philosophy and practice also facilitate deeper levels of self-understanding, which increasingly become the foundation for a compassion-based, integrated, and authentic way of life.

In the following chapter, the meaning and functions of Buddhism will be explored further as the particular contexts and means of conversion are analyzed from the women's perspectives. Building upon the syntactic analysis presented here, that chapter will focus on the symbolization processes involved in these conversion experiences.

### **3. Following ‘The Path’: Discursive Appropriation and Symbolic Reversal in the Conversion Phase**

The preceding narrative chapter outlined the four plots that define the women’s stories of the major turning point in their lives, that is, their conversion to Buddhism. In highlighting the immediate causal order that characterizes each of these plots, that chapter established Buddhism as the primary “counter-force” (Todorov, 1981, p. 51) that, at least from the women’s perspectives, re-stabilized their lives. In addition to being a source of stability, Buddhism is constructed by the women as the answer to their existential questions and as the thing they had been looking for. This chapter will highlight the discursive nature of the women's early contact with Buddhism as well as the appropriation processes involved in their interpretations and adoption of Buddhism.

Overall, it is argued that converting to Buddhism is not simply a way of connecting to a worldview and moral framework that allows for the expression of their inner identity as spiritual seekers, but is also a chief means for the women to both understand and communicate where they have come from and where they are headed. Indeed, the women use the metaphor of the Buddhist path to symbolize their suffering and dissatisfaction with modern secular ways of living and as a means of ‘enchanted’ their lives by enabling a perpetual flow towards enlightenment. Achieving this enchanted status allows the women to relate to the world of the secular majority, but at a level and with a purpose that sets them apart from others and transforms their outsider status into a meaningful position and opportunity, as much for personal spiritual advancement as collective good.

#### **3.1. Revelatory Turning Points**

Conversion is popularly conceived as a progressive change, involving increasing commitment to the ritual and moral obligations of membership in a new religious community (Rambo, 1993). It is also widely suggested that conversion processes are typically initiated by some form of crisis followed by a meaningful encounter with a new religious or moral system (Pargament, 1997; Rambo, 1993; Allport, 1960). These perspectives are broadly confirmed in this study, as Buddhism is framed by the women as a particularly resonant and effective 'counter' to the various crises or challenges they were facing. Rinzen, for example, says that when she was

first introduced to Buddhism it was “a revelation”- “like ‘This is so clear! This is what I’ve been looking for!’” Likewise, as outlined in the previous chapter, several others had similar reactions, immediately recognizing Buddhism as the “thing” they had been missing and searching for. When the specific contexts of those revelations are considered, there are five primary mediums through which the women connect to Buddhism: books and literature; Tibetan cultural events or public performances; meditation and religious practices; anti-Buddhist speeches, and finally, illness experience.

*Books and Literature.* A significant number of the women (6 of 16) mentioned books and literature (especially Sogyal Rinpoche’s *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* (1994) and popular works by the Dalai Lama) as the chief means by which they were initially exposed to and captured by Buddhism. Because these texts were translated into English and often written specifically for Western audiences, they were highly accessible and spoke directly to the women’s quests for meaning.

Sogyal Rinpoche’s book was mentioned specifically by both Nyingma and Choden as their initial introduction to Tibetan Buddhism. While Nyingma had come across this text years before, it was only after a type of life crisis, during a difficult period of her life, that she seriously engaged with the philosophy it outlined, finding that it gave her “some understanding for my suffering and some resources to cope, like meditation.” Choden connected immediately with the ideas described in that same text, signing up for a retreat offered by the author (a popular Tibetan lama) straight away. Books also factor significantly into Pema, Dolma, Jiyul, Rinzen, and Dechen’s conversion stories. Rinzen, for example, had been studying “literature and philosophy” but found that “any religion or philosophy that I studied about didn’t have all the answers to my questions.” However, when she began reading Buddhist texts she says that she “found *really, really*, the answers I was looking for” and so she converted and focused her efforts on Buddhism alone. In Dechen’s case the book that initiated her conversion was “about how Tibetan lamas were being reborn in the West.” She says that because she “always felt that [she] didn’t belong in Western society,” the book “really inspired” her and made her think that “maybe [she] was Tibetan and was born here [Australia] for this reason.” She did a retreat in a Tibetan Buddhist monastery in Nepal and said: “I just immediately knew that Buddhism was the path for me.”

*Tibetan cultural events and public performances.* For a second group of women (5 of 16), conversion was instigated and inspired by encounters with Tibetan Buddhist cultural performances. As outlined in the previous chapter, Lhamo's first encounter with Buddhism at a Buddhist monks performance. She admits that she “actually found it quite boring” at first, but then was “really touched” and inspired by the selflessness and altruism expressed in the monks' performance. This inspired her to “look into their life more” and so she started reading books by the Dalai Lama and was immediately convinced that she had found what she was “looking for.” The Dalai Lama featured prominently in Palden's conversion story as well, for her primary introduction to Tibetan Buddhism came from attending one of his large public teachings in Australia. The event “got her interested” and turned her towards books, leading to a deeper understanding of Buddhist philosophies, and insight into her own personal suffering. In Sherab's case it was a Tibetan Uprising Day march that she attended in Germany that initiated her conversion. She felt such a strong connection for the people and Buddhist tradition of Tibet, that she sought out a centre and “from there,” she says, “I started the study.” Thubten and Yeshe described similar feelings of connection and inspiration when they were exposed to Tibetan culture and Buddhist traditions on trips to Tibet and India. Thubten said that in speaking and visiting with local Tibetans, she became “very interested in the tradition, and at that time I felt very happy with them” and Yeshe too described feeling “lots of inspiration.” Both decided to move to India to convert and pursue their interest in Tibetan culture and its Buddhist tradition.

*Meditation and religious practices.* The third key context of conversion involves Buddhist practices. Dawa was one who highlighted meditation practice as the initial point of entry into the Buddhist world. She had been dabbling in various religious and New Age spiritual traditions when she decided to try out a meditation class lead by an American convert to Tibetan Buddhism. She says that she instantly knew that that “was it” and from there she began to study Tibetan Buddhism more seriously and became progressively involved in establishing a Tibetan Buddhist centre. While Dawa was the only woman to describe this practice as the ‘turning point’ in her conversion experience, numerous others spoke to the importance of meditation in their introduction and immersion in Buddhism (see discussion below on discursive networks).

*Anti-Buddhist speech.* For two of the seven women with Christian backgrounds (Tenzin and Songheo), anti-Buddhist speech on the part of church leaders was identified as a primary factor leading to conversion. As described in the previous chapter, both Tenzin and Songheo had strong

reactions to the negative words spoken by their priests about Buddhism, inspiring both to further investigate Buddhist philosophies and practices. This led each of them to local Buddhist institutions, where they formally converted, ending their associations to Christianity and immersing themselves in a Buddhist lifeworld.

*Illness experiences.* The final conversion context is based on personal experiences related to illness and is represented most directly in Chin-sun's story, but is also a factor in Sherab's conversion. Chin-sun's limited knowledge of Buddhism was brought more sharply into focus when she fell seriously ill at the age of 17. When she was sick, she says that she realized "what Buddha said was real, was true." This personal experience had lasting effects and the words and teachings of the Buddha inspired her to deepen her knowledge and practice of Buddhism and instilled in her, from that point on, a strong desire to become a Buddhist nun. In the same vein, while illness was not the dominant focus in the conversion story of Sherab, she does mention having cancer, noting that that illness experience was "actually a big part to push me, to make really the decision" not only to convert to Buddhism, but to eventually ordain as a Buddhist nun.

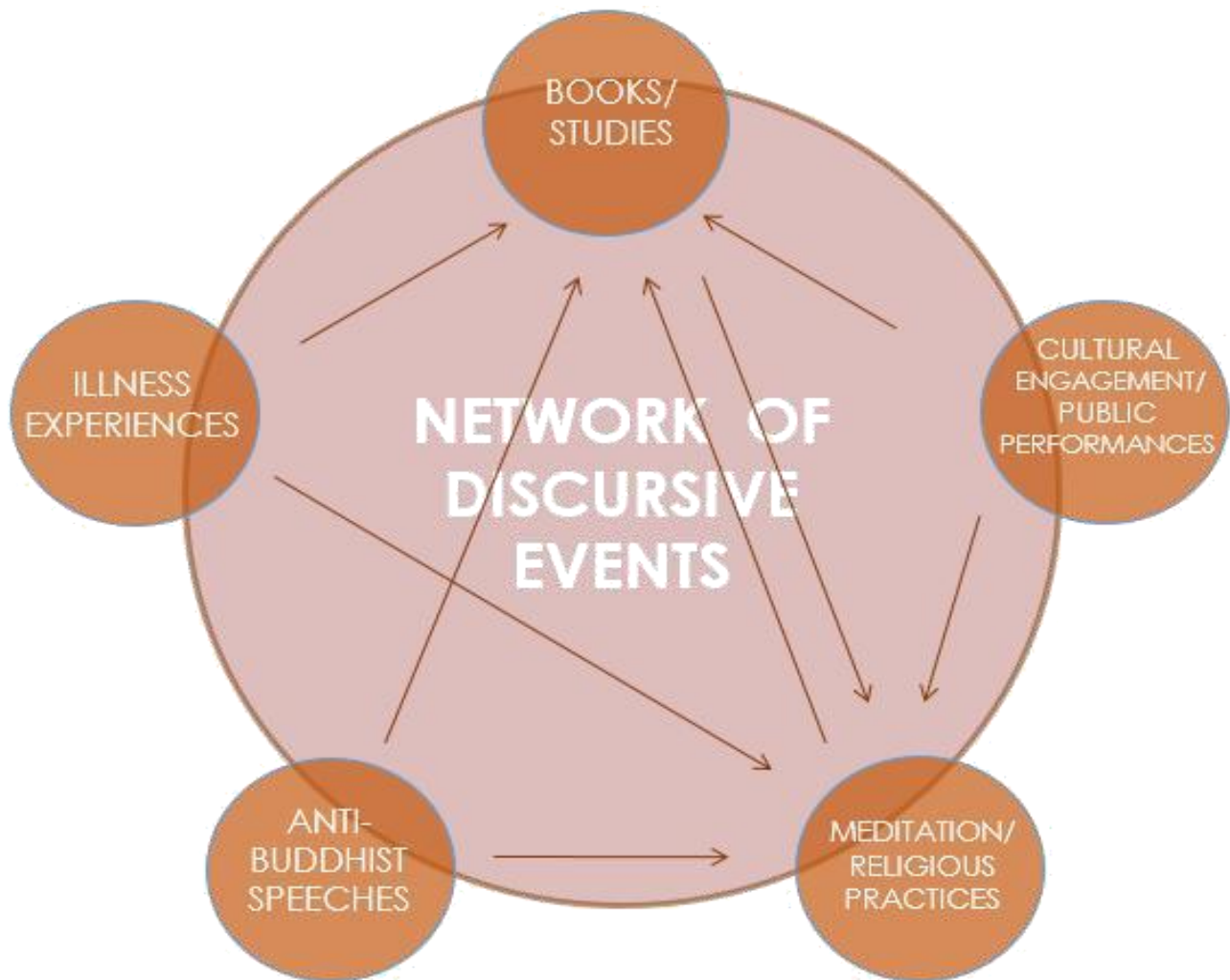
### **3.2. Analyzing the Discursive Turning Points in the Women's Narratives of Conversion**

When the various contexts of contact and exposure to Buddhism presented above are considered as a whole, there is a clear commonality that emerges: they are each a form of discourse, involving an exchange of either spoken or written words or ideas. Following Ricoeur (1981), discourse is distinct from language in that it is akin to an event – it is realized in time by specific speakers embedded in particular contexts, and unlike language (which pre-exists as an internally referential system), discourse involves an active exchange which describes and expresses a world (p. 133). Represented by the initial discursive events outlined above, the world of Buddhism is brought into even stronger expression by the linking of multiple discursive realms.

Though five varieties of 'turning points' or initial contexts of conversion were clearly distinguishable in the women's narratives, it is apparent that they are not isolated or completely distinct from each other, but rather, lead directly one to the next, linking and reinforcing one another so as to create a distinctive and complex- that is, multifaceted and multilayered - lifeworld. The women typically experienced multiple discursive events, though the number and order in which they were occur varies for each woman. On the whole, the various forms of discourse and



discursive performances they experienced worked in combination to support their access and conversion, enmeshing them in progressively elaborated Buddhist world.



*Figure 3: Conversion Contexts as a Network of Discursive Events*

As “temporal phenomenon of exchange” (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 133), the discursive events (and related symbolic and institutional systems) that facilitated the women’s conversions required a certain amount of desire and initiative on their part. Previous discussions clearly establish the women’s dissatisfaction with their modern, secular, pre-Buddhist lives. They did not fit into those worlds and had long desired an alternative way of life. They had tried different religions, sought connections through travel and study, but, until finding Buddhism, their quests for meaning and cohesion had been unrealized. In engaging with networks of written and oral Buddhist discourses and with diverse Buddhist communities and institutions, these women finally found a system and

worldview of great personal promise. The potential that Buddhism represented for satisfying desires, providing answers, and offering a cohesive framework for their lives, motivated the women to deepen their interests and engagements and to further pursue Buddhism. In other words, these turning points and early stages of conversion initiated what may be termed processes of appropriation. In the section to follow it will be shown that the women interpreted the Tibetan Buddhist discourses they encountered according to their own personal desires and situations, appropriating this religious tradition's worldview in similar, yet subtly unique ways.

### **3.3. 'The Path': Discursive Appropriation and Symbolization**

As introduced above, discourse and related symbolic systems are dialogic processes whereby information and meaning are exchanged. Ricoeur suggests that "there is no self-understanding that is not mediated by signs, symbols, and texts; in the final analysis self-understanding coincides with the interpretation given to these mediating terms" (1986/1991, p. 15). Ricoeur's insistence on the connection between interpretation and self-understanding is a result of the hermeneutic view that when a reader or listener interprets a symbol or a text they appropriate the text and its meaning to themselves by making it their own, relating it to their own experience, and generating personalized understandings. "The act of appropriation," he notes, "does not seek to rejoin the original intentions of the author, but rather to expand the conscious horizons of the reader by actualizing the meaning of the text" (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 18). In this sense, reading texts, observing performances, and engaging in institutionalized practices partially transform the content of those texts/performances/practices into discursive events where original intentions and implications are supplanted by new configurations of meanings which emerge from the dialogues of each convert with these symbolic religious forms. Prior to conversion, the women were each engaged in various journeys of self-understanding and their individual interpretations of Buddhism, as they encountered it, were thus colored by the particular contexts and contents of their personal lives. Ricoeur suggests that through appropriation, "the interpretation of a text culminates in the self-interpretation of a subject who thenceforth understands himself better, understands himself differently, or simply begins to understand himself" (1981, p. 158). The women's drives and desires to understand themselves, to find meaning in the world, and a purpose and order to their lives are thus achieved by their reflexive appropriation of Buddhist symbols and discourse.

Gadamer's notion of a 'surplus' or 'surfeit of being' complements Ricoeur's position and suggests that "through art a being becomes more than itself" (quoted in Grondin, 2003, p. 36), meaning that, through the interpretive process, both the original symbolic form and the interpreter are to some degree transformed:

Gadamer's thesis is that art is a game, that is, that it has no being apart from its presentation, which means a surfeit of being for what is being represented since what appears is there rediscovered in its truth. In the end, this rediscovered truth is always a confrontation with ourselves. (Grondin, 2003, p. 49)

In this sense, the various elements in the discursive network of Buddhism (texts, performance, practices, etc.) encountered by the women were replete with meanings and possibilities of being that were made available and interpreted by them as particularly relevant and applicable to the existential dilemmas and personal contexts of their individual lives.

It follows that this group of women displayed a variety of perspectives in their 'readings' of the Buddhist discourses they encountered. For instance, self-transformation was highlighted as central to the appropriation processes of several of the women: Nyingma and Songheo (for whom Buddhism was appropriated as a means of self-empowerment and as enabling self-reliance); Yeshe (who read it as a method of keeping the ego in check); and, Tenzin, Sherab, and Pema (who appropriated Buddhism as a definitive path and structure for self-development). For others, however, horizons beyond the self were implicated in their appropriations - for Rinzen Buddhism was a complete theory of reality that allowed for a deeper and fuller understanding of existence; for Dechen it was the relational implications of Buddhism and the fact that it explicated and facilitated altruistic love in the truest sense that she had experienced; for Chin-sun it was a verifiable understanding of human suffering; still others (Dolma, Lhamo, Palden, Tenzin, Dechen) appropriated Buddhism as a method of social realignment, as both a theory- and practice-based system of renunciation and as a means of revaluing non-materialistic values. We can see therefore, that while issues of the self were central to many of the women's appropriations of Buddhism, they represent only one among many of the aspects of life which were expanded in the process.

Moreover, it is not just the women, individually, along with their personal horizons which are transformed, but Buddhism itself, as the text or symbol, that is also transformed in the dialogical and dialectical exchanges of the appropriation process<sup>17</sup>. Thus, shaped by personal interpretations of the discourses of Buddhism, these examples of appropriation demonstrate both unique and shared qualities, which may be further explored by considering them in terms of another expressive process: symbolization (Good, 1994). The following discussion will introduce the process of symbolization as essential in the transformational experience of conversion. It will also demonstrate how the women employ narrative devices to 'remake' their unmade worlds and to inject meaning and purpose into the symbols and experiences of religious conversion.

*Symbolization.* In his studies of illness and healing, Byron Good demonstrates the ways in which healers and patients inhabit distinctive worlds defined by unique objects, symbolic forms, social practices, and modes of experience (1994, p. 122). He describes how illness can “systematically deconstruct or subvert the lifeworld” and how efforts must then be made to ‘remake’ these worlds (p. 128). These efforts, or “restitutive practices,” as Good calls them, involve two primary “interpretive practices”: symbolization and narrative (1994). Narrative plots allow us to place our illness, pain, or disruption in relation to other life experiences, and symbolization provides the central images around which these narratives can take shape (p. 128-133). When applied to the experiences of the women in this study, it can be said that the women’s pre-conversion lives, embedded as they were in modern secular worlds, were unmade by the increasing disjunction and conflict between their values, goals and identities, and those prescribed by society. The women’s inability to reconcile their selves with the worlds around them lead to painful experiences rife with suffering, conflict, confusion, and dissatisfaction. In an effort to remake a world that is meaningful and fulfilling, they appropriated the discourses, symbols, and practices of Buddhism.

As Good suggests, this ‘remaking’ process involves symbolization, whereby the women attach a name and image to the source of pain and separation of the unmade world as well as to

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<sup>17</sup> Tibetan Buddhism, along with many of its key symbols and texts are being changed in myriad ways by converts such as these women: overall, the ‘face’ of Tibetan Buddhism is changing as it incorporates growing numbers of non-Tibetan converts into its lay and ordained communities; its core texts and messages are now being shaped through public teachings and published resources (books, blogs, etc.) authored by these converted members (see Restrepo, 2013; Lopez, 2012; Cozort, 2003); expanding applications of Buddhist concepts and practices outside of traditional contexts (Wilson, 2014); the commodification of traditional items and symbols is another growing issue (see McKenzie, 2015), and institutional changes also have an impact, as ‘dharma centres’ and non-traditional institutions, including Thosamling itself, proliferate around the world.

the emancipation and life plan associated to the world being remade. Symbolization - which is achieved, as underlined by Good (1994), through processes of appropriation - is not a passive process, but involves instead, the active and engaged borrowing, restructuring, and molding of public discourses, symbols, and practices. Symbolization is an active and intentional process because the naming and imagining that it involves are unique to each individual and reflect particular resonances that exist between the image/name and the distinct ideas, emotions, conceptions, self-images, and overall stakes, that each person is experiencing or pursuing (even intuitively or subconsciously). In the case of these women, the Buddhist path becomes the primary symbol used in the conversion process, to symbolize both their past experiences and their future intentions.

*The "Path": A Guiding Symbol.* Buddhism is often referred to as a "path" or "way" (i.e. Gyatso, 1990), terminology which is reflected in many of its foundational teachings and texts: for example, the 'Eightfold Path,' which outlines the eight parts of the path to liberation and freedom from suffering, or Lamrim, the treatise by Je Tsongkhapa that offers a comprehensive overview of the process of individual enlightenment (Yangsi, 2003). In general, the step-wise and component-based approach used in most Buddhist practices form a comprehensive and complete framework for developing realization (Gyatso, 1990, p.3), and for this reason the terms and symbols of the 'path' or the 'way' are fitting descriptors. Each of the women in this study included the path metaphor in their narratives either directly or through inference.

The "Buddhist path" became the means by which the women symbolized both their suffering and dissatisfaction, as well as their hopes and intentions. It also symbolized their movement away from modern secular society in general. Interpreting and appropriating Buddhism as 'the path' allowed the women to develop a narrative understanding of their lives and of their conversion as a movement away from a chaotic, directionless, and meaningless life to one of peace, purpose, and above all else, meaning. As previously presented, many of the women "immediately knew that Buddhism was the path" for them (Dechen), but others took some time to gain the "confidence to just give the Buddhist path a go" (Nyingma). Eventually, once they gained some understanding of the teachings and some experience with the practices of Buddhism, each of the women realized, like Pema, that "this is the way I have to go." Employing 'the path' as the core

symbol for their conversion and separation from a dissatisfying modern secular world was effective in symbolizing the women's desires for a meaningful and purposeful existence.

As Tenzin says of Tibetan Buddhism, "it is so systematic...in presentation it is very easy." Dechen concurs, describing the "Tibetan teachings" as "so rich and so compelling," emphasizing how "each step on the path is so clearly defined, it's so clearly laid out." For some then, the systematic presentation of the path in Buddhist literature represents an accessible and clear guide for moving from a chaotic to an ordered world. Additionally, Dechen suggests that Tibetan Buddhism, or vajrayana, is a "more wide path" (compared to other Buddhist traditions, namely Hinayana or Theravada) because it is "more elaborate, very artistic, more esoteric." Thus, while the Buddhist path is constructed as ordered and systematic, it is also considered, by Dechen and others, to provide a satisfying array of choice and to accommodate a degree of flexibility. In this sense, the path is conceived as a unified, strong, and reliable framework which supports spiritual development, while also accommodating diverse preferences and skills. Several of the women used the metaphor of 'tools' to describe the methods of this 'wide path.' Rinzen, for example, says that "Buddhism gives me the tools to perceive reality," and Nyingma uses the same metaphor to describe the techniques and "resources to cope" offered by the Buddhist path: "Buddhism really gave me practical tools or insights into understanding my own mind." Thus, while some, like Rinzen, were attracted by the logical and almost objective understanding of reality that the path facilitates, others (like Nyingma) appreciate the fact that it is also intensely personal and applicable to the minutiae of each unique life, providing empowering methods for effectively managing life's personal challenges. Moreover, the women add, the path not only offers clear guidance and systematic means for developing wisdom, controlling emotions, and understanding reality, but it also provides a detailed program that organizes time and a definitive end goal: enlightenment. Pema says that in presenting the "stages to the path of enlightenment," Buddhism "really guides us from the beginning until enlightenment." Nyingma concurs by adding that the Buddhist path "has the potential to lead one to enlightenment, if not in this life then the next."

Buddhism as path thus represents an organized system that includes a series of successive thresholds which guide you through existence, locate you precisely in the world, and provide a clear guide on how to progress through this developmental path, in this life and beyond. In this sense, the comfort and meaning achieved by having a defined purpose and goal (which extends

through lifetimes) reinforces the coherence and expansive meaning provided by the path symbol. The path becomes not only a means of integrating Buddhism into all aspects of daily life, but a teleological frame and expression of an ultimate goal - to transition from a mundane human existence conditioned by suffering to a divine, enchanted existence of peace and freedom.

### **3.4. The Path as an Enchanted Means of Achieving Flow**

Two concepts- flow (Csíkszentmihályi, 1990; Turner, 1982) and enchantment (Weber, 1920/2002)- will be used to explore the Path symbol and metaphor and to develop further insights into what the women sought and achieved through their symbolization of the path and ultimately, their conversion to Buddhism.

We saw that the women connected the metaphor of ‘the path’ to their desire for a comprehensive framework that would help them make sense of their suffering, give them a holistic understanding of reality, a different means of relating to others, and provide an ultimate life goal. These desires may be considered as reactions to what Weber termed disenchantment. In his writings on modernity, Weber borrowed the concept of disenchantment from Friedrich Schiller to describe the loss of mystery and the general ‘desacralization’ that came to define the modern state (1922/1993). From Weber’s perspective, the rise of rational, scientific thought, capitalism, bureaucracy, and secularity instigated major paradigm shifts that threatened and destroyed social structures and institutions that promoted collective identities and worldviews informed by magic, myths, and gods (1922/1993; 1920/2002). In this sense, argues Weber, the modern world has become disenchanted. For the women in this study, their preliminary experiences with Buddhism convinced each of them that its comprehensive teachings along with the structured guidance provided along the path make it an ideal method of re-enchanting both their lives and human experience in general.

In affirming the enchanting potential of the Buddhist path the women are attesting to the fact that they are not interested or satisfied with what they considered to be the limited forms of enchantment offered by New Age mystical traditions or established faith-based religions. Their narratives express that they are seeking, instead, direct experiences, verifiable philosophies, engaged practices, and a path that will change their very being and the ways in which they live in the world. In brief, they did not want simply to fit into modern society, but were seeking instead a means of transcending it – moving beyond the confines and limitations it imposed. Some examples

of this have or will be mentioned in different chapters, but they include Dechen's decision to forsake marriage in favor of a religious life that would allow her to extend her love much further and also Palden's realization that even those occupying the highest and most powerful positions in modern secular societies (e.g. "President Obama") are limited in the number of people they can help and support, while Buddhahood offers the potential to lessen the suffering of every living thing. Stated otherwise, the women underlined that they were not attracted to Buddhism because they enjoyed occasionally reading its esoteric philosophies or because its meditation techniques provided temporary relaxation or escape from their busy lives: they were seeking something that would completely redefine who they were, how they understood themselves, how they related to others, and what meaning could be found in the mundane world around them. In a popular text introducing the philosophies and practices of Tibetan Buddhism, the authors write: "we find enlightenment in and through daily life. This is the true essence of Buddhism, and it is found in all activities" (Simpkins and Simpkins, 2001, p. 6). This quote summarizes the women's chief aim in converting to Buddhism: they wanted to redefine their lives and the world from an enlightened perspective, through what they considered to be a clear, systematic, dependable and authentic spiritual tradition. Buddhism thus becomes a method for reintegrating enchanted time, that is, a way of imbuing mundane existence with a higher purpose, and a more sacred, divine quality.

From a parallel perspective, it could be argued that the women's efforts to re-enchant their lives and immerse themselves in the philosophies of Buddhism reflect a desire for 'flow,' a psychological concept describing an optimal state of total focus and absolute involvement. The concept of 'flow' was developed and popularized by Hungarian psychologist Mihaly Csíkszentmihályi (1990) to describe a state of complete absorption or concentration. As quoted by Turner, flow denotes "the holistic sensation present when we act with total involvement," and is experienced as "a unified flowing from one moment to the next, in which we feel in control of our actions, and in which there is little distinction between self and environment; between stimulus and response; or between past, present, and future" (1982, p. 55-56). This concept, and the core characteristics or qualities of flow, as summarized by Turner, are useful in operationalizing the notion of re-enchantment and in clarifying the motivation and goals that the women pursue through conversion to Buddhism.



In outlining the six main characteristics of flow as proposed by Csíkszentmihályi, Turner identifies the essential characteristic as the experience of action and awareness as one (1982, p.56). The merging of these two means that “there is no dualism in ‘flow’” (p. 56). There are obvious parallels to Buddhism, given that recognizing non-duality is a key goal, especially in the Tibetan Buddhist Dzogchen tradition, where “the path is remaining in the experience of nonduality”: “When we develop confidence in view and learn to relax into direct recognition of nonduality, our speech, thought, sensation, emotion, and ideation become of the nature of meditation. The energy of our being *is* spiritual practice” (Nor’dzin, 2009, p. 55 (original italics)).

Secondly, in flow attention is centered on a limited stimulus field: “Rules, motivations, rewards, the will to participate are seen as framing devices, necessary limitations for the centering of attention” (Turner, 1979, p. 487). The idea that flow centers attention is reflected in the path metaphor as the singular way chosen and followed by the women. Moreover, the path is lived and practiced according to various rules of comportment and belief - such as the Five Precepts, Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, and underlain by the “motivational means” of bodhichitta, the altruistic wish to attain enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings. Encouraging flow experiences through limitation by rules and motive (Turner, 1982, p. 56) is indeed what the Buddhist path achieves for the converts in this study.

A third characteristic of flow is a loss of ego: “the ‘self’ which is normally the ‘broker’ between one person’s actions and another’s, simply becomes irrelevant” (Turner, 1982, p. 56). ‘Loss of ego’ and ‘no-self’ are concepts that are mirrored in Buddhist philosophy as is the related view that, in flow “all men, even all things, are felt to be one” (Turner, 1982, p. 56).

Control and capability are the key elements of the fourth characteristic of flow, which Turner suggests are difficult to achieve outside of flow because of the “the multiplicity of stimuli and cultural tasks – especially...in industrial societies, with their complex social and technical division of labor” (1982, p. 57). In other words, within the “ritualized limits” of flow a person may attain a subjective sense of control by exercising relevant skill and tact. In the context of the Buddhist path, control is chiefly associated with the mind and is developed through meditative techniques. Gaining control of one’s mind is an important goal in Buddhism because the ability to focus and sustain attention, disengaged from perceptual or conceptual stimulation, creates an ideal

state of balance, calm, and joy where the nature of reality and of consciousness itself may be revealed (Wallace, 2001, p. 83, 95).

The fifth characteristic of flow is that it “contains coherent, non-contradictory demands for action, and provides clear, unambiguous feedback to a person’s actions” (Turner, 1982, p. 57). This quality is somewhat akin to karma in Buddhism. Karma is essentially action and is governed by the principle that every action has a corresponding effect (Powers, 2007, p. 64). With that being said, Buddhists do not assume a simple or straightforward link between one specific action and one specific result. Instead, karma functions as a type of complex feedback loop wherein the present moment is shaped both by present and past actions and intentions.

One final aspect of flow is that it is autotelic – “it seems to need no goals or rewards outside itself. To flow is its own reward” (Turner, 1979, p. 488). Csíkszentmihályi (1997) describes the autotelic person as someone who

needs few material possessions and little entertainment, comfort, power, or fame because so much of what he or she does is already rewarding... they are less dependent on the external rewards that keep others motivated to go on with a life composed of routines.... They cannot be as easily manipulated with threats or rewards from the outside. At the same time, they are more involved with everything around them because they are fully immersed in the current of life (p. 117).

This description applies as well to the Buddhist practitioner and the type of person the women aspire towards: nonmaterialistic, seeking escape from the routines of modern life, and fully immersed in the here and now.

Each of these core characteristics of flow are thus perceptible in Buddhism as expressed through the women’s narratives. Indeed, as Turner notes, flow is imbued with the meanings of the symbols it either generates or is channeled by (1982, p. 59), and the path symbol, as employed by the women, does in fact demonstrate a desire to establish and live a life in flow. Turner suggests that people deliberately manufacture cultural situations which release flow, if their statuses, roles, or experiences are “flow-resistant,” that is, “conducive to boredom or anxiety” (1979, p. 487-8). In contemporary contexts, ‘manufactured situations’ typically relate to leisure activities which temporarily release individuals from complex social and technical structures (e.g. golf, painting, choir practice, yoga, etc.) (Turner, 1982, p. 57). The women’s narratives establish that from their

perspectives, their pre-conversion lives certainly were ‘flow-resistant,’ and that by converting to Buddhism they were deliberately adopting a moral frame, social position, and worldview that would release flow and enable them to lead lives of higher meaning and purpose. In essence, they were looking to lead a way of life where flow was not limited to leisure time or constrained by demarcated activities and places, but rather was constantly cultivated and continually experienced. In that sense, we can say that they converted to Buddhism in order to gain access to an experience of flow that is not confined to extraordinary life moments but which is constant, absolute and total, in every moment of existence.

### **3.5. Conclusion**

This chapter has connected the participants’ conversion to Buddhism with symbolization processes and a deep desire to adhere to an enchanted world where flow is experienced on a daily basis instead of during only rituals or leisure time. In their interpretation and appropriation of Buddhism, the women in this study use the metaphor of the path to symbolize their suffering, as well as the dissatisfaction they felt for the normative values, goals, and life courses (i.e. materialism, marriage, self-sufficiency, etc.) typical of modern secular society. The women’s engagement with the public and generic discourses of Buddhism and their subsequent interpretations and adoption of it demonstrate the ways in which it was uniquely appropriated according to their personal experiences, frustrations, desires, and intentions. In each their own way, the women were seeking a mode not just of being in the world but of accessing a ‘surplus of being.’ This was achieved by embodying and applying Buddhist teachings to everyday interactions and experiences in order to achieve an enlightened and permanent enchanted flow. As converts, the women remain in roles, jobs, and relationships within the structures of secular modernity, however, Buddhism, as symbolized by the path, allows them to exist among others while at the same time occupying an enchanted position: they have committed themselves to the higher cause of purifying humanity of suffering and in so doing have transcended the common way of being a human in the modern world. In the chapter to follow, the implications of these appropriation processes and of the desire to live in a perpetual enchanted flow will be considered in relation to the identities and selves of these convert women.

#### **4. Selfhood and Separation in the Conversion Phase**

As a study exploring personal transformation through religious conversion and ordination, this work is crucially concerned with notions of selfhood and identity. As outlined in the theoretical section of the introduction, this work is informed by theories that hold the self to be a social and moral construct that is developed and articulated through symbolic and narrative processes. While Charles Taylor's (1989, 1995) theories on modern selfhood provide the fundamental concepts with which issues of identity are explored in this study, Victor Turner's (1967, 1974, 1979) work on rites of passage provides an overarching structure for these explorations, allowing the conversion, ordination and adjustment phases described by the women to also be considered from a ritualistic and symbolic perspective. In combination, these theories offer a comprehensive means of investigating how the women's relationships to the worlds around them and their sense of who they are change over the course of this transformative experience.

Each of the identity chapters included in this dissertation chart developments of personal and social identity (Gelech & Desjardins, 2011), and explore the women's relationships to the social and symbolic worlds among which they move during their transitions into the ordained life of a Tibetan Buddhist nun. Being the first chapter of this kind, an initial section will outline the core theoretical constructs that will form the foundation for all of the identity chapters (namely Taylor's notions of cultural change, modern identity, and moral frameworks). Complementing the theory of self derived from Taylor, Victor Turner's work on rites of passage (1977, 1979) will be used to contextualize the changes observed in the women's identities and selves, providing a model for studying the mechanisms of transmutation and personal transformation that characterize their conversion and ordination experiences. Overall, this chapter furthers the argument that the women's selves prior to conversion were based on ideals and orientations (i.e. goods) that caused disjunction and set them outside of majority culture in modern society. This experience of otherness contributed to existential concerns and an identity crisis that motivated the women to search for a worldview and social environment that better reflected their private notions of the good. Their quests lead them to Buddhism, which was adopted as a primary moral framework given that it resonated and aligned with their long-held views and dispositions, and furnished them

with a meaningful symbolic system that supported aspects of selfhood and identity that had previously alienated them from modern secular culture.

#### **4.1. Understanding Cultural Changes in Self and Society**

As a contemporary philosopher, Charles Taylor has devoted much of his time and energy to understanding the social and moral processes that define and inform our modern age. His communitarian approach emphasizes the roles that social institutions play in shaping personal identities and in generating meaning and instigating cultural change. Taylor's perspective hinges on the importance of social contexts and on the recognition that "one is a self only among other selves. A self can never be described without reference to those who surround it" (1989, p. 35). In this acclaimed work, *Sources of the Self* (1989) Taylor contributes to our understanding of the social nature of existence by tracing historical sources in order to describe the genesis of the modern self. He also defines moral valuations as crucial determinants of identity and selfhood. Taylor's approach is particularly useful for the explorations of self pursued in this study given that selfhood, as it relates to the convert nuns, has been shaped within modern systems and contexts, and because the interconnection between self and morality that Taylor posits dominates the women's stories of transformation and movement between different moral orders.

Taylor's phenomenological perspective informs a theory which emphasizes human moral experiences which are rooted in the qualitative distinctions- that is, our definitions of what is right, wrong, valuable, or worth preserving. These distinctions arise, Taylor contends, because humans exist within a "space of questions" (1989, p. 29, 32, 45), where we are constantly faced with moral inquiries: who are we? what is good or bad? what is worth doing and what not? what has meaning and importance for us? what is trivial and secondary? (p. 28). Day to day experiences and human life in general bring us face to face with conundrums of meaning and value, creating a "moral space" within which we must orient ourselves and find our way (1989, p. 29). The answers to questions arising within this space thus provide us with "the horizon within which we know where we stand, and what meanings things have for us" (1989, p. 29). Qualitative distinctions are thus "definitions of the good" articulating our "ethical choices, leanings, intuitions" (p. 77) and "setting out the point of our moral actions" (p.80). The collection of answers and distinctions that we articulate thus become orienting frameworks: "To think, feel, judge within such a framework is to

function with the sense that some action, or mode of life, or mode of feeling is incomparably higher than the others” (p. 19).

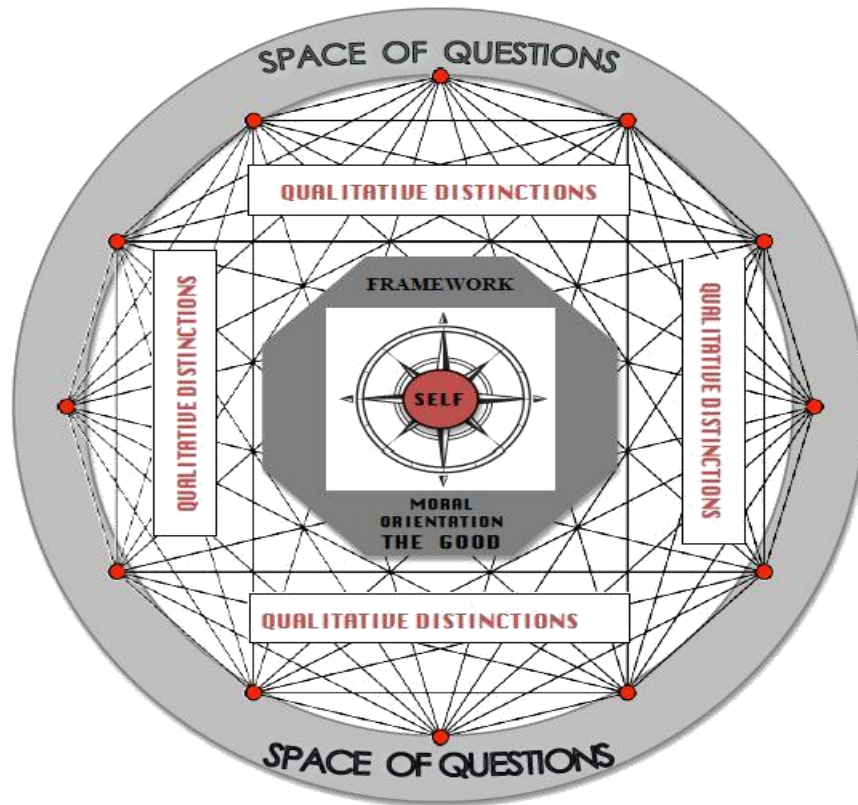


Figure 4: Taylor, 1989 – Core Concepts in the Definition of Self

Taylor suggests that frameworks are “not an optional extra, something we might just as well do without, but that they provide a kind of orientation essential to our identity” (p. 78). The essential nature of frameworks is something that Taylor argues strongly:

the horizons within which we live our lives and which make sense of them have to include these strong qualitative discriminations...living within such strongly qualified horizons is constitutive of human agency, that stepping outside these limits would be tantamount to stepping outside what we would recognize as integral, that is, undamaged human personhood. (1989, p. 27)

Here, Taylor’s theory of self begins to take shape, and draws on the supporting concepts of qualitative distinctions and moral frameworks to explain how it is that we come to ask (and answer) the fundamental question ‘Who am I?’ Taylor explains that the answer to this question comes only

from “an understanding of what is of crucial importance to us. To know what I am is a species of knowing where I stand” (p. 27). To summarize, the questions that arise within the moral space of human experience necessitate answers regarding what we feel is important, worthwhile, and good. The network formed by such answers becomes a framework or horizon that thereby orients us in space and articulates a notion of the good which becomes the foundation for our identity and self, and accordingly for our patterns of behavior and our life plan, since it establishes who we are and where we stand in relation to all that is. Further to this, Taylor maintains that it is “only through a language of interpretation” that we are able to articulate these distinctions and orientations (p. 34). In other words, because the moral spaces and the spaces of questions in which we move are necessarily social spaces, our qualitative distinctions and the resulting frameworks that come to define who we are, are fundamentally social constructs borne of, maintained by, and constantly refashioned through shared cultural processes:

I define who I am by defining where I speak from, in the family tree, in social space, in the geography of social statuses and functions, in my intimate relations to the one I love, and also crucially in the space of moral and spiritual orientation within which my most important defining relations are lived out. (Taylor, 1989, p. 35)

Given the centrality of language to the social and relational experiences so crucial to identity and selfhood, Taylor states that selves only exist within “webs of interlocution” where conversations with others allow us to achieve self-definition (p. 36). “In this sense,” he emphasizes, “one cannot be a self on one’s own” (p. 36).

In sum, Taylor offers a theory in which the subjective processes of identity are intertwined with objective realities by way of qualitative evaluations, wherein our assessments of what is worthwhile and good, and our efforts to orient our lives towards those goods become the chief determinants of human experience and selfhood. Given that this study and the stories provided by the women address a particular experience of transition, an additional layer of analysis – one concentrated on the phases of this transition, may help to further elucidate issues of identity and self. To this end, the theoretical background provided by Taylor’s notions of context and the moral aspects of selfhood can be focused through Turner’s ritual lens by considering the conversion, ordination and adjustment described by the women as examples of the three phases of rites of passage: separation, liminality, and reaggregation or permanent liminality (1979).

As ritual events marking a transition from one social status to another, rites of passage are cultural expressions of transformation. These transformative rites begin with a phase of separation where the detachment of an individual or group, from either a point in the social structure or a recognized cultural position, is symbolized through ritualized signs and behaviors (1969). This phase of separation corresponds to the conversion phase in the women's narratives where they effectively separate from the modern secular societies in which they were embedded, and move, progressively, into a new and different Buddhist world (occupying, eventually, the altered status of an ordained nun). This transition, away from one world and into another, is reflected in the women's understandings and expressions of self, which are likewise transformed during this process. In the sections to follow, the impacts that such transformational experiences have on the women's identities and sense of self will be considered, first by exploring selfhood in pre-conversion contexts, then in relation to Turner's separation phase.

#### **4.2. Selfhood in the Pre-Conversion Period: Existential Predicaments & Fundamental Goods**

When considering religious conversion, it is important to explore the impetus or motivation for change, which acts as a sort of starting point for the transformation process. In trying to better understand who these women were before they got involved with Buddhism and what it was about their pre-conversion lives that led them to seek and eventually follow the Buddhist path, I was confronted with a range of stories that articulated similar identity-based themes connected to a resulting dissatisfaction, meaninglessness, and even, for some, disillusionment and despair. When the qualitative evaluations articulated in the women's narratives are considered, it becomes evident that their assessments of what is worthwhile and good, and therefore the foundations of who they are as individuals, cluster around three common themes: spiritual inclination, altruism, and non-materialism. What also becomes evident is that not seeing themselves reflected or in alignment with their majority cultures created a sense of disorientation that was experienced as a type of identity crisis. The following sections will address both of these topics.

Being spiritually inclined - in the sense of being interested in philosophical and existential quandaries, and strongly invested in self-development and attaining a deeper understanding of reality- was the first characteristic central to the pre-conversion identities of all of the women in this study. Dawa, for instance, described herself as always having a "strong spiritual identity" and Thubten expressed that she had known since she was "a very young child" that she wanted to



become a Buddhist nun. Others (Dechen, Sherab) also indicated a long-term interest in monastic life and still others were deeply involved in various religions and religious studies since a young age (Dechen, Songheo, Tenzin). By and large, the women consider their selves in spiritual terms, defined by interests in spiritual development and pursuing, as Tenzin says, a deep "inner-need," or in Dechen's words "looking for the meaning of life." For some of the women, spiritual and philosophical interests were channeled into educational pursuits (high school, university programs) (Rinzen, Jiyul) or the arts (Nyingma, Choden, Yeshe). Rinzen, for instance, stated that since she was a "little girl" she felt that there was something "wrong with this world": it is "such a mess and everywhere is full of suffering." These impressions led her to study literature, philosophy and religion, in hopes of better understanding existence and her place in the world. None of the doctrines or traditions she studied, however, had "all the answers" to her questions, and she was left searching for "what is reality." Thus, the women overwhelmingly describe themselves in spiritual terms - as people actively engaged with existential thoughts and theories, and as deeply concerned with self-development and spiritual advancement. In tying many of these qualities to desires and predilections emerging early in their lives, and to their persistent efforts to orient themselves towards spiritual or religious aims, the women firmly establish their identities as spiritual seekers.

Altruism is second theme defining the moral goods and bases of self described by the women in regards to their pre-conversion lives. As was the case with spiritual inclinations, altruism- the desire to aid, support, and love others- was also articulated as a long-standing and crucial determinant of identity. Sherab connects her altruistic nature to her parents' divorce, which she says created a strong desire, evident since childhood, to "make people happy." Diminishing others' suffering and "taking care of people" have always been "very important" to her and thus represents a core good that has shaped her sense of self throughout her entire life. Dechen associates her experiences growing up and working in a society (Australia) where "everybody's just kind of functioning in a stressful kind of money-oriented kind of way" to her orientation towards altruism, social justice and compassion. In her words, she found it challenging to live in a society where "no one has time to drink tea together, to look into each other's eyes and ask 'How are you really?'" Others (9/16) also directly expressed a desire to help others and to develop an

understanding of suffering in order that they could reduce the pain it caused in their own as well as others' lives.

One final dominant feature of all of the women's pre-conversion selves is connected to non-materialist attitudes and behaviours. From their perspectives, materialism and its related social structures and values prioritize financial and material gain above social connection and personal relationships, which is something they viewed as especially problematic in contemporary society. Palden, for example, says that she “always questioned Western materialism,” adding that while some may find meaning and happiness in “going to work, paying off your mortgage and looking after your 5 or 4 or 3 children,” she definitely felt that this was “not the meaning” of her life. Dolma expressed a similar perspective, identifying having a career and children as the “template life,” a type of life that she had “never been interested in” and that just “didn’t make much sense” to her. She says that “from the very outset I never wanted those things... I was never attracted to that... I never even had that idea.” Tenzin insisted that expressing disinterest in regards to material things goes against dominant social norms, so it requires courage and strength: “You can see your friends, they bring a car and have a luxury house and you, you are alone ... so you must be strong.” Choden, also highlighted a longstanding orientation away from materialism, saying that she “always lived quite simply” and had “never been a big collector” of material things. In varying degrees, each of the women's narratives establish non-attachment to money or objects as both an important component of who they are, and also as one of the things that sets them apart from others. Thus, materialistic pursuits were central aspects of the women’s modern social worlds that they rejected as empty and meaningless. Selfhood, for them, was not rooted in personal achievement or amassing material wealth, but was instead defined by non-attachment and efforts geared towards internal, rather than external, development.

Overall, it is clear that the women's prioritization of spirituality, altruism, and non-materialism as core components of their identities, creates a disjunction between them and the lifestyles of their respective societies. The 'otherness' that they felt as a result was expressed through the labels that many of them identified with: “rebel,” “non-conformist,” etc. (Dechen, Dolma, Palden, Yeshe, Sherab, Choden, Rinzen). As an illustration, Dolma admitted that she was never interested in modern secular conventions (i.e. having a family, career, etc.) and, given her “rebellious attitude,” she says it never “bothered me not to conform.” While not all of the women

overtly define themselves as outsiders, they do describe themselves as holding beliefs and life goals which put them at odds with the majority culture.

Taylor suggests that the “problem of the meaning of life” and the “existential predicament” that many people struggle with are defining characteristics of the modern age (1989, p. 18). He explains this in terms of frameworks (defined and described earlier), suggesting that in times past the frameworks defining our lives went unquestioned; they were established through universal terms and were consistent and “unchallengeable” (p 18), helping to provide a stable orientation to our lives and a solid sense of self. While “existential predicaments” were also experienced by people during these earlier times, the questions they faced and the fears that threatened them were related more to adequacy and fulfilling prescribed expectations, rather than questions, fears and doubts about a given framework itself<sup>18</sup>. Contrarily, in modern times, pluralism and the fact that previously powerful and all-encompassing frameworks have been “discredited or downgraded to the status of personal predilection,” have created a situation where no one framework “forms the horizon of the whole society” (p. 17). When a framework is no longer taken for granted as unquestionably and incomparably true, but is viewed instead as simply one among many, meaning and hence identity, become far less stable and no longer exist as ‘givens’ in society. Individuals in the modern age are thus tasked with a new type of meaning-making challenge where, faced with a plethora of choices and any range of changeable combinations, they must cobble together a framework which articulates a moral position and hence a meaningful identity and basis for self. This challenge, while not felt equally by all people, can lead some to experience a crisis of identity, which Taylor defines as

an acute form of disorientation, which people often express in terms of not knowing who they are, but which can also be seen as a radical uncertainty of where they stand. They lack a frame or horizon within which things can take on a stable significance within which some life possibilities can be seen as good or meaningful, others as bad or trivial. The meaning of all these possibilities is unfixed, labile, or undetermined. This is a painful and frightening experience. (1989, p. 27-38)

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<sup>18</sup> Good (1994) addresses these issues in a similar way, speaking specifically to the notion of belief.

The pain and fright inherent in identity crises are powerful because, as discussed above, meaninglessness is not simply a personal mental or emotional experience; it is connected as well to our place in society and to the social and symbolic systems that define our experiences.

For the women in this study, their progressive alienation from the ideas, as well as the social roles and goals dominant in secular society caused them to experience various forms of disorientation (losing touch with social groups, questioning the meaning of life, struggling with a sense of "nihilism" (Thubten) and feeling that all activities and experiences were meaningless, etc.) and they began to question their own significance as individuals. Taylor suggests that "we naturally tend to talk of our fundamental orientation in terms of who we are" and so "to lose this orientation, or not to have found it, is not to know who one is" (1989, p. 29). Thus, feeling alienated from the dominant frameworks of one's society has important implications for being able to understand and express selfhood. In the women's stories, such crises of identity led them to make deliberate and concerted efforts to improve their situations, applying themselves wholeheartedly to understanding the deeper reasons behind the discord they were experiencing and to answering the 'Who am I?' and 'Why am I here?' questions. In this sense, adopting Buddhism facilitated a more full and decisive separation from modern secular society, imbuing the women's previous disjunction and marginalization with a meaning and purpose that provided not only a sense of clarity but also a sense of belonging and intent that shored up their formerly ostracized and uncertain sense of self.

Generally speaking, the women's experiences of suffering, meaningless and confusion are common, and even typical, of many living in the contemporary world (Giddens, 1991; Taylor, 1989, 1995). As several authors have noted, the type of existential and identity crises theorized by Taylor are widely applicable and are, in fact, generally characteristic of modern societies (McMahan, 2008, p.13; De Silva, 2001, p.10; Rubin, 1996; Fromm, Suzuki & Martino, 1960, p. 80)<sup>19</sup>. As mentioned above, regardless of age, nationality, or the style or focus of their conversion narratives, every one of the women in this study expressed some type of struggle around meaning, identity, and their purpose in the world prior to converting. The modern 'existential predicament' felt by women in America, Germany, and Australia was thus similarly experienced by those from Korea and Indonesia, and from other countries in between. Evidently, there are important

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<sup>19</sup> Most authors emphasize modern crises as particularly relevant to Western societies, but clearly acknowledge their widespread effect, which is not limited to Western cultures alone.

distinctions between the social contexts and personal experiences shaping each woman's life, however, there is a striking correspondence between the core elements of self they describe and the main motivating factors that led this diverse group of women to convert to Buddhism.

While converting to Buddhism (or at least integrating some of its practices and philosophies into one's life) is a growing trend that may be considered a somewhat typical response to meaninglessness in contemporary times, these women's intentions and inclinations towards ordination is not. By using Taylor's notions of moral framework and defining goods to investigate the identities and selves of these women, it may be possible to gain insight into the various factors that inspire them along the atypical course towards ordination in a foreign tradition. At this preliminary stage, the women have only just begun this journey, removing themselves, through conversion, from the confining and disenchanting world of the secular, modern majority.

#### **4.3. Selfhood and Separation: The Quest for Meaning**

Taylor suggests that we “inescapably understand our lives in narrative form, as a ‘quest’” (1989, p. 51-52); and, indeed, the four prototypical plots identified and described in the preceding narrative chapter (1. Loss, 2. Distress, 3. Investigation, and 4. Choice) represent variations of quest narratives where the women experience and narrate searches for more meaning and spiritual fulfillment. “Not to have a framework,” Taylor goes on to say, “is to fall into a life which is spiritually senseless. The quest is thus always a quest for sense” (1989, p. 17-18). The women's narratives attest to this, for many of them frame their life experiences and the conversion processes they went through in terms of just such a ‘quest for sense.’ Their narratives also highlight the connection between meaninglessness of the world and meaninglessness of the self, as they addressed personal existential crises by first describing wider patterns of meaninglessness at social or global levels. Regardless of the specific tropes or plot structures used by the women in this phase of their narratives, all of them tell stories that establish conversion as a quest for meaning. Because this quest is essentially a structured transformation, conversion (and eventually, ordination) may be seen as a rite of passage- not in the traditional, ritualistic sense of ancient or pre-modern societies, but as a contemporary rite initiated not by the collective, but by the individual (Turner, 1982). In this case, Turner's theoretical insights prove useful in making sense of the women's transformations, framing them as rites which effectively begin as a solitary journey but which

reflect an attempt to identify and connect with an appropriate collectivity, and to a shared and established moral framework that will effectively guide them towards a meaningful existence.

In detailing the transformational processes marked by rites of passage, Turner labeled the first phase 'separation' (1967, 1979). He suggests that the phase of separation "comprises symbolic behaviour signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure or a set of cultural conditions, or both" (1967, p. 34). He uses the words of Robert Merton to define structure as "the patterned arrangements of role-sets, status-sets, and status-sequences consciously recognized and regularly operative in a given society" (Turner, 1974, p. 237). These 'sets' and 'sequences' are connected to legal, political, and social institutions and act as the "frame of social order" (p. 237). As discussed above, the women felt disconnected from the underlying structures and ideals of the modern social order, and as a consequence, were alienated and dissatisfied with the roles they played and the positions they occupied (or were expected to occupy) within the social arena. Thus, as they progressed in their quests for sense and place, moving ever closer to Buddhism, the women's lives were marked by significant forms of separation as they increasingly distanced themselves from modern secular society. Moreover, the period of separation is qualified not only by detachment, but by symbolic reversals as well.

Turner notes that "symbols of reversal or inversion of secular things, relationships, and process" are essential during this period to mark the detachment of ritual subjects from "previous social structures" (1979, p. 16). In many ways, the separation stage involved in the women's conversions parallels that which defines the early stages of a rite of passage where, according to Turner, separation serves to clearly demarcate "sacred space and time from profane or secular space and time" (1979, p. 16). In keeping with Turner's description, the separation and reversal achieved through the women's quests for meaning and their move away from modern society towards Buddhism represents an intentional movement from a secular to a sacred realm, that is, from the center of society to its periphery or margin (Leach, 1976).

The movement characterizing this initial phase in the women's transformation processes is in fact a double-movement - both away from secular society and towards the sacred Buddhist world. By progressively dissociating themselves from secular modernity, the women adopt new symbols and ideas to replace and transform those defining their previous lives. While conversion in the Buddhist context is an essentially internal process connected to motivation and intention,

there is a formal rite – called the refuge ceremony - that publically and formally conveys one’s adoption and commitment to the Buddhist way.

Several of the women mentioned ‘taking refuge’ or participating in a refuge ceremony when discussing their conversion, but none described it any detail. Nevertheless, as Buddhist converts they each would have taken refuge, whether privately or publically, since this is what distinguishes one as a Buddhist. From the Buddhist perspective, taking refuge is “the act of aligning oneself with the path by placing a reasoned trust in the principles of Buddhism” (Khyentse, 1999, p.7). These principles are symbolized by the “Three Jewels”- the Buddha, the dharma, and the sangha, where “Buddha is the teacher, the Dharma is the path, and the Sangha are companions on the path” (p. 7). During a refuge ceremony, neophytes make three prostrations towards the altar, kneel and repeat the refuge prayer three times after the teacher: “I take refuge in the Buddha, the dharma and the sangha until I become enlightened. I am doing this for the benefit of all sentient beings” (Situpa, 2005, p. 117). At the close of the ceremony, each student receives a dharma name (indicating the lineage of the presiding teacher) and a little piece of their hair is cut off. The piece of hair is an offering that “indicates the change from being an ordinary person to being a member of the Buddhist sangha” (Sherab & Dongyal, 2010, p. 25). Here we can see how the refuge ceremony includes symbolic elements - a new name and an oath - that separates the women from their former identities and initiates them into their new status within a sacred community. Given the existential and identity crises they had been faced with as outsiders within their modern secular societies, these symbolic acts serve to stabilize, comfort, and ground them in a strong, established, and enduring social symbolic system. The adoption of a new name<sup>20</sup>, bestowed by a revered member of the Buddhist tradition provides the women with a concrete marker for identity, locating them in a specific place and social network (i.e. student of a particular teacher, within a particular lineage, and member of a particular community).

The symbols and symbolic acts associated to the refuge ceremony enable the women to enter a new status and state where they willfully and actively embed themselves in a new, more

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<sup>20</sup> While the conversion (refuge) ceremony involves the presiding teacher cutting a lock of hair and suggesting a Buddhist name for the initiand, these typically function primarily as symbolic acts, meaning that the initiand's physical appearance is unchanged and s/he often does not publically or officially adopt the new name. In the ordination ceremony (which will be described in future chapters), the whole head is shaved and the given name is almost always formally adopted and used in place of the new nun/monk's birth name. In this sense, the refuge/conversion ceremony is experienced more as a personal and internal transformation, whereas ordination is a much more public event with more overt and lasting consequences.

fitting and sacred 'web of significance.' This Buddhist framework facilitates a connection to their teacher and membership in a supportive, like-minded community (the sangha) which situates them in the world, allowing them to engage with doctrines and teachings that help them to meaningfully orient themselves in space and time. This, in turn, allows them to define their selves in a way that fits and is reflected in the social, symbolic, and doctrinal world of Buddhism. Additionally, because the refuge ceremony is part of a tradition and lineage, which has "continued for the past 2500 years uncontaminated, unbroken and uninterrupted" (Situpa, 2005, p. 117), and because the refuge prayer and intention involve a commitment spanning into the infinite future, it also works to change the quality of time and define a cultural realm clearly distinct from typical secular reality. In this sense, the women are provided with a framework that not only helps them to make sense of their current lives, but offers a comprehensive and all-encompassing framework that guides their actions, emotions, and intentions, both within and beyond this current life.

The refuge ceremony expresses, therefore, a formal detachment from former religious, symbolic, and social systems, demonstrating that while the women have abandoned (or at least are in the process of abandoning) previous symbolic and meaning systems, these are being replaced by new Buddhist versions which, from the women's perspectives, improve the quality of their lives and their sense of personal self-esteem. As was presented in the preceding narrative chapter, the women framed Buddhism as the chief 'counter-force' (Todorov, 1981) in their conversion narratives, constructing it as a force of reversal and as an antidote to their troubles and pain. Buddhism, once formally adopted by the women, replaced the various belief systems they previously held - from well-developed and comprehensive Christian systems (Songheo, Dechen, Dawa, Choden, Tenzin, Sherab), to more unformed systems that loosely combined aspects of various traditions (Lhamo, Nyingma, Rinzen, Pema, Palden), or an unarticulated, absence of a meaningful system (Thubten, Jiyul, Yeshe, Chin-sun, Dolma). For several of those coming from Christian backgrounds (7 of 16), Buddhism was constructed as a reversal of many of the key characteristics of the religion: Choden, for example said that while Christianity is "very condemning – like you have to feel guilt and shame, and it's not very uplifting," Buddhism is "a more positive, flexible system that offers multiple methods to help you "become master of your mind." In Songheo's case, she was "uneasy in God," feeling that God was "punishing" her and recalls that as a Christian, "I just couldn't understand myself." However, she says that "after I



studied Buddhism I understand that God doesn't exist, that everything is empty. That made me released from God."

Other women likewise addressed the shift towards self that Buddhist conversion facilitates (where working with personal emotions and mental patterns are emphasized in order to better understand one's relationship to others and the world). Thubten, for instance, set up a clear dichotomy between her pre- and post- conversion self noting that "before I could not control my emotions, now I can control them. Before I am going here, my mind is going there, but now I can control it a little bit more." Nyingma, who shared that before finding Buddhism she faced some serious psychological and emotional challenges, said that she "didn't know how to understand the suffering I was facing." In Buddhism, however, she found the "practical tools or insights into understanding my own mind." She goes on to say that Buddhism "really made me see much more that the answer or solution that I was seeking, which was an end to suffering, lay in *my own* perceptions of situations or my own mind training." Continuing this focus on self, Nyingma says that Buddhism "demystified suffering" and "empowered" her to "have the skills to deal with it myself." Similarly, Rinzen said that

Everything that I have studied about the self [in Buddhist texts] is very useful and has helped me, especially in difficult situations.. you come to know that what is positive and negative is just what you *think* is positive and negative regarding yourself. So...then suffering is much less.

These examples articulate themes of reversal, where the outward orientations of modern life (towards material objects, physical appearance, and God in Christian contexts) are replaced by Buddhist symbols and approaches which emphasize an inward turn. Buddhism focuses largely on the mind, locating suffering, confusion, and delusion within the individual's own mental and emotional processes. This approach offers the women a fitting moral orientation that provides both a broad framework for understanding reality and an empowering focus on self- two needs that both Christianity and secular modern doctrines were unable to satisfy. Moreover, the altruistic focus of Buddhism also aligns with the women's desires to meaningfully relate to and beneficially support others. Thus, for the women in this study, conversion was experienced as empowering and by adopting the Buddhist path, they repositioned and reoriented themselves along a defined teleological course that resulted in a greater sense of self-esteem, meaning, and purpose.

#### **4.4. Conclusion**

While modern secular life offers many means of establishing identity and shoring up a sense of self— through career, family, possessions, etc., none of these resonated with the women in this study and the resulting distance between them and the ideas, expectations and roles of society, left them feeling dissatisfied, powerless, and out of control. When they encountered Buddhism, however, their sense of self was strengthened and became more solid, stable and inserted within a teleological pursuit that reflected their core identities, beliefs, and valued goods.

Using the combined theoretical insights of Taylor and Turner we can see how the women embarked upon quests for meaning and spiritual connection which separated them from the roles, relationships, and ideas of secular modernity, leading each of them to the world of Buddhism. In Taylor's terms, the Buddhist world became the "certain space of questions" within which they were able to "find an orientation to the good" and hence arrive at a meaningful definition of themselves (1989, p. 34). Taylor says that "our identity is what allows us to define what is important to us and what is not" (1989, p. 30), and this is precisely what converting to Buddhism allowed these women to do- to articulate (within themselves, but increasingly to others) a vision of the world that is not aligned with monotheistic, creationist views and that rejects materialistic pursuits in favor of what they considered to be a deeper understanding of suffering and a more meaningful, altruistic, and reflective lifestyle. For the women in this study then, Buddhism represents a compassionate perspective that re-evaluates many of the fundamental, taken for granted tenets of modern secular life and encourages an inward turn where the ultimate basis for happiness and meaning is found within.

Overall, Buddhism becomes an empowering framework within which the women find the space and the means of disentangling themselves from the oppression and alienation they experienced in modern secular life. Apparently, the women are seeking a way of being that reflects an alignment or correspondence between internal and external realities, where the activities and relationships of their public lives reflect the beliefs and values they hold within. Conversion is the first step in this process, allowing the women to focus largely on internal transformations, to regain confidence and control of their inner lives, and to ground and stabilize their previously lost or errant selves. As the chapters relating to ordination will show, becoming a nun will allow these women to advance this transformative process, and to realize an even greater correspondence between their internal (private) and external (public) selves.

## **PHASE 2: ORDINATION**

### **5. Ordination: Becoming a Buddhist Nun**

The conversion phase of the women's narratives established that, for these women, Buddhism provided the answers that they had been searching for and a framework for understanding reality and their place within it. At the start of this second narrative phase, they are dedicating more time and effort to the study and practice of Buddhism, and as their knowledge and experience grow so too does their desire to become a Buddhist nun. This desire is variably tied by the women to particular elements of the Buddhist world, including the sangha, karma, dharma, renunciation, and lama. Exposure and engagement with these core elements facilitate epiphanic realizations among the women, solidifying a conviction to pursue ordination. In contrast to the immediate, sequential structure that defined the women's conversion narratives, their stories of ordination are less linear, displaying instead, a kind of correlative, structural causality (Ricoeur, 1981). This narrative form is defined by an embedded structural configuration where actions and changes are connected to various elements of an overarching, cohesive system. Thus, instead of displaying an 'onwards and upwards' movement where a series of transitions and events build towards a climactic transformation (conversion, in the first phase), these trajectories display a complex interconnected structure which culminates in a secondary transformation more akin to an anti-climax (ordination).

In exploring these themes and ideas, this chapter will demonstrate that ordination is sought by the women as a means of fully immersing themselves in a Buddhist world. This immersion is reflected in the correlative structure of their narratives which construct the five core elements of the Buddhist system as 'gateways' facilitating their realization or confirmation of the desire to become a Buddhist nun. The first section of this chapter will outline the theoretical position based on the work of Ricoeur (1981) and, in keeping with the structure of the women's narratives, successive sections will focus not on chronological sequences, but rather on individual portraits of the core Buddhist elements as presented across different stories. A description and analysis of the actual ordination ceremony will also be presented. Geertz's (1973) concept of models 'of' and 'for' the world will be used to interpret the overall meanings of this narrative phase, supporting the argument that what is truly at stake in becoming ordained as a Buddhist nun is not simply full

immersion into a Buddhist lifeworld. Rather, through their ordination the women confirm their adherence to the Buddhist worldview as the only frame necessary for understanding reality and, more importantly, as the definitive template guiding their actions, emotions, and motivations across all realms of life.

### **5.1. Correlative Causation in the Ordination Narratives**

Human beings rely on narrative to organize and understand their experience in time and to create "meaningful totalities out of scattered events" (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 278). Narratives are created then, through processes of selection and synthesis (emplotment), where the narrator constructs causal connections that may condense and ignore, or highlight and extend specific events or occurrences. In this sense, the meaning of a given story is directly tied to the structure of that story, and the ways in which the narrator frames and interrelates events and characters in particular ways. In the context of the transformative phase of ordination, each of the women relies on a correlative structural form to tell their story and to emplot their experiences leading up to this important event.

Ricoeur notes that classical causal models, which are sequential, are very different from structural models which imply "correlative rather than sequential or consecutive" relations (1981, p. 219). While sequential (logico-temporal) causation is loosely employed early in the women's stories of this phase (when they describe encountering the various elements of the Buddhist world), the defining structure of their narratives is correlative in that it ties the major action and progression of their stories to core elements of a single cohesive system (Buddhism). Once they identify particular elements as inspiring or confirming their wish to become a Buddhist nun, their stories become essentially plot-less, and atemporal. The period between their decision to ordain and the actual ordination ceremony does not follow any sequential, logico-temporal order. Causality is split from ordinary time and rooted instead in the Buddhist meaning system, as represented by these five interconnected components. The way that the women structure their stories, then, reflects the fact that causal temporality was not an important or defining feature of their experiences leading up to ordination. Accordingly, the order in which the elements appear are not consistent across all stories, nor is the emphasis placed upon particular elements. Indeed, while all five of the elements appear in some form within all of their narratives, each of the women articulate unique configurations - highlighting variable elements (some focus on only two, while others address all five) and orderings for their encounters. In the following section the Buddhist elements

that form the basis of the women's narratives will be described and their role as important 'gateways' to ordination will be explored.

## 5.2. Gateways to Ordination: Five Core Elements of the Buddhist System

As detailed above, narratives allow for temporal and causal re-orderings of experience, where the teller is able to selectively configure a story into a coherent, intelligible, and meaningful account. In this narrative phase, the women's stories reflect a correlative structure comprised of five core elements of the Buddhist system: sangha, karma, dharma, renunciation, and lamas.



*Figure 5. Five Elements in the Correlative Structure of the Ordination Narratives*

Evidently, there is both conceptual and practical overlap between these elements, but as the following discussion will demonstrate, the women frame them as separate, though interrelated, realms which together represent the multifaceted and multidimensional nature of their experience within the Buddhist world.

*The Sangha.* ‘Sangha’ is the Sanskrit/Pali term meaning ordained community – the collectivity of Buddhist monks and nuns. As one of the ‘Three Jewels’, or the ‘Three Refuges,’

the sangha (along with the Buddha and the dharma), is one of the foundational symbols and elements of Buddhism. Not only is the sangha responsible for the protection and promulgation of ‘pure Buddhist teachings’, but as one of the ‘Three Jewels’, monks and nuns represent a source of inspiration and spiritual guidance for all Buddhists; they are considered to have “stepped out of the confusion, are now on the way toward enlightenment, and have the ability to help others along the path” (Rinpoche, 1992, p. 58). The centrality of the sangha in the world of Buddhism is reflected in all of the women's stories, but for six of the nuns (Jiyul, Palden, Choden, Dolma, Nyingma, and Dawa) being exposed to individual monks and nuns leads to the realization that the monastic lifestyle is a fitting and viable option for them.

After their conversion, each of the women in this study became increasingly involved in the world of Buddhism – through dharma centre activities, retreats, reading, attending public teachings, etc., and for these six women, their stories of this period emphasize early contact and connection with sangha members. These connections are described as triggering their awareness of nunhood as a lifestyle option, and bringing to the surface the women's desires to become a Buddhist nun. Dawa, for instance, says that she increasingly found herself "gravitating more toward the sangha than the lay people" in her Buddhist community, and Choden says that it was a Western Buddhist nun from her centre that "planted the seed in me about becoming a nun" herself. For Dolma, the nuns she encountered at her centre helped her to "realize that you could live your life this way." Across the narratives of all six of these women, members of the sangha act as exemplars of the Buddhist tradition, community, and monastic lifestyle. As concrete and embodied representations of the Buddhist monastic path, the nuns and monks encountered by these women enable them to imagine themselves in that role and to gain definitive insights into what adopting a similar lifestyle might be like. As such, the sangha functions as a gateway towards ordination, affirming the women's connection to the Buddhist tradition and validating ordination as a viable life path.

*Karma.* According to Tibetan Buddhists, “one’s present life is only one in a beginningless series of incarnations, and each of these is determined by one’s action in previous lives” (Powers, 2007, p. 63). The collection of such actions is what is referred to as karma- often taken as a sort of ‘natural law’ in Buddhist contexts, where “whatever we do, with our body, speech, or mind, will have a corresponding result” and “each action, even the smallest, is pregnant with its consequences” (Rinpoche, 2002, p. 96). Karma is a foundational concept in Buddhism and, despite

its oversimplified usage in contemporary mainstream discourse, it is in fact very complicated with multiple levels of meaning and application. In the women's narratives, three key expressions of karma are used to frame their attraction to Tibetan Buddhism and their commitment to pursuing it as a full-time endeavor through ordination.

Firstly, karma is used in the common or general sense as a variation of destiny and as an explanation for underlying habits, connections, or predispositions. Buddhists believe that the mind does not end with the physical death of our bodies, but rather that "it will continue by taking rebirth with a different body and identity according to the chain of our past habitual tendencies" (Thondup, 2006, p. 18). Rooted in this belief, the Buddhist notion of karma asserts that these tendencies, or actions, along with the intentions that underlie them "place impressions upon our mindstreams, and that these impressions carry on after death" (Wallace, 1993, p. 34). In this way, actions and their imprints "become a subconscious predisposition towards acting in that same manner again" (Coberly, 2010, p. 39). This understanding of karma is reflected in the ways that many (6 of 16: Sherab, Dechen, Dolma, Jiyul, Palden, and Choden) of the women frame their connection to Tibetan Buddhism and the ordained life. Karma was used to explain the resonance they felt with the Tibetan Buddhist tradition (e.g. "it's probably our karma"- Yeshe; "it is my destiny or my karma"- Jiyul) and also as the reason why ordination "is such an easy decision....because we were involved in it in a previous life" (Dolma)). Karma is thus not just an abstract religious concept, but rather an element of the Buddhist worldview and an applicable explanatory model that these women adopt to explain and make sense of their attraction to this religion and to confirm their desire to live as Tibetan Buddhist nuns.

Secondly, and building on the notion of karma as habitual actions and emotions resulting from latent mental imprints, Tibetan Buddhism also asserts that karma not only manifests in the experiences and interactions of our daily lives, but in our dreams as well. Chögyal Namkhai Norbu, a renowned author and teacher in the Dzogchen tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, explains that we often experience 'karmic dreams' where "unfamiliar things may appear which the person has not experienced in this life" but reflect instead "a very strong habit from a past life which has left a karmic trace in the individual" (p. 45). In two of the nuns' stories (Nyingma and Palden), dreams and serendipitous meetings or events are used to frame the larger context of their ordinations, reflecting the adoption of this enchanted explanatory model to interpret and legitimate their

decision to become nuns. For Nyingma, a particular dream she recounted was used to interpret and explain a special, other-worldly connection to Tibetan Buddhism and to affirm for her, as well as her audience, that choosing to become a nun in the Tibetan tradition was not only a logical and legitimate life choice, but part of an inspired, and in some ways predestined, path. In Palden's case, she described in great detail a dream she had of her Tibetan teacher days before she first met him. These stories show the degree to which both of these women have internalized, appropriated, and applied elements from Buddhism to make sense of their entry into a new Buddhist lifeworld.

A third usage of karma relates to the Buddhist notion of 'precious human rebirth,' where human life is highly regarded (i.e. 'precious') because of the opportunity it affords for spiritual growth and compassionate action (Yansi, 2003; Harvey, 2012, p.39; Guenther, 1971). A 'precious human rebirth' is "the human condition endowed with the freedoms and qualifications necessary to practice Dharma" (Tondrup, 1997, p. 197) and is understood as resulting from good karma- past virtuous action and compassionate habits (Yangsi, 2003, p. 158). As an expression of positive karma, a human rebirth is not something to be taken for granted or wasted. Indeed, as the Dalai Lama warns "if we do not use this human birth for meaningful purposes now we should understand that there is little possibility of our attaining a human form again in the future" (Gyatso, 1995, p. 78). In five of the women's narratives (Palden, Songheo, Thubten, Dolma, and Nyingma), karma and the idea of life as an 'opportunity not to be wasted' are similarly used to explain their decisions to become nuns. Thubten, for instance, mentioned in our interview that "this life is not easy to get." When I asked her to explain, she said that "human life and also meeting the Buddha, Buddha's teachings, and also to meet my lama. It's very, very difficult. To get success it is very difficult, it is not easy." This realization is what inspired her to become a nun. Similarly, Nyingma also decided to pursue Buddhist ordination in part because, as she says: "I don't want to waste the fortune I have... I keep going because I'm afraid of wasting this opportunity. Because I really think it is very precious." The words and ideas she uses and the logic displayed in this segment of her narrative mirror Tibetan institutional discourse and reflect, quite literally, the view articulated below by the Dalai Lama:

It is by a stroke of good karma that we have not been reborn in the lower realms or in a time or place where the teachings of an enlightened being cannot be found, or in a black aeon when the practice of Dharma is not possible....when we reflect upon these...



we experience thought of appreciation for our auspicious situation and its rarity. What should one do when one has such a valuable opportunity? Practice dharma and take the essence of life, the attainment of enlightenment. (Gyatso, 1995, p.77)

The consonance between the Dalai Lama's words and those used by the women throughout their stories demonstrates how completely the women have adopted the official perspective of Tibetan Buddhism and how they have come to interpret their migration into the Buddhist world from that perspective.

*The Dharma.* Another key element of Buddhism evident in the women's stories is 'dharma.' As the second 'jewel of refuge', dharma is a broad term which has two related meanings and applications – it refers both to the reality that the Buddha experienced and also to his conceptual verbal expression of that experience (his teachings) (Sangharakshita, 1998, p. 6). Literally, 'dharma' means 'to be held' and when related to our own reality it means "the reality that holds us in freedom from suffering, holds us apart from suffering, holds us in a state of bliss" (Thurman, 2005, p. 32). In this sense, the dharma includes the methods and teachings that enable deeper analysis and understanding of our lived realities.

Eight of the women connected their desire to become a nun directly with the benefits, insights or inspirations they gleaned from Buddhist dharma (Tenzin, Chin-sun, Choden, Rinzen, Palden, Songheo, Dechen, and Lhamo). Tenzin says that the systematic presentation of core concepts and methods of practice in traditional texts inspired her "never to leave Buddhism" and it was through her studies that she "began to get the interest to enter into the monastic life."

Songheo was inspired to expand her study and practice beyond the Zen style of Korean Buddhism to the Vajrayana style of Tibetan Buddhism because its approach to dharma is done "slowly and step-by-step with a lot of reasoning." Chin-sun is another Korean who found inspiration in the texts and teachings of the Tibetan tradition, literally taking refuge in them after the death of her lama- "Without a lama, where can I go? And then I think, to the sutras and shastras<sup>21</sup>. So I think they are very important." The systematic nature of Tibetan Buddhist dharma was also what drew Dechen to this tradition. She says that compared to other Buddhist traditions, the "Tibetan teachings appeal to me more" in part, she explains, because "each step on the path is so clearly defined, it's so clearly laid out and the Tibetan masters are so impressive." For Choden, becoming

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<sup>21</sup> <sup>22</sup> Sutras are the texts based on the words and teachings of the Buddha, shustras are the commentaries written by accomplished Buddhist masters explaining the sutras.

a nun “was like an extension of the practice which I already had seen was working quite well and had been helpful for my life [chuckling], my sanity.” In Rinzen’s case, through “enthusiastic study and practice,” she “started to see that if I really put in effort, then I can really start to get good results,” and so she decided that she wanted to get ordained so that she could “get full-time only to study and practice the dharma.” After converting to Buddhism and seeing the benefits and effectiveness of her own practice, Lhamo too decided that ordination was the way to go: “after some time, I really felt that if I wanted to go deeper in the dharma I should have more time, and if I wanted more time for that and really dedicate my life, then I should become a nun.”

Thus, these women recognized Buddhist dharma as a system capable of providing them the means of understanding themselves and their realities in a way that nothing else had been able to, and for that reason they were willing to devote their lives to its study and practice by becoming Buddhist nuns. This discussion also demonstrates that, increasingly, the women use Buddhism as their main frame of reference, adopting it as the chief means of structuring their ethical aims, life plans, and selves, and using it to interpret Buddhism itself as well as their relationship to it.

*Renunciation.* A fourth element of the Buddhist world highlighted as a source of resonance and a gateway towards ordination is renunciation- a Buddhist concept used by the women to construct ordination as an ideal means of expressing their efforts to better their lives by abandoning the trappings of modern life. For them, this commitment represents a way to develop greater self-awareness and spiritual fulfillment. In the Tibetan Buddhist context, renunciation refers to the intention and practice of “decreasing our attachment to the external affairs of this brief life... and replacing these with more meaningful priorities” (Wallace, 1993, p. 168). Novick describes it as “authentic becoming,” and points out that in Buddhism, renunciation “does not necessarily mean living in isolation from the world. What one renounces are the delusions that keep one from becoming one’s authentic self and from attaining Nirvana” (1999, p. 36). Both of these understandings of Buddhist renunciation are reflected in the women’s narratives, making it a key element used to describe the paths to ordination in ten of their stories.

Seven of the women (Pema, Dolma, Dechen, Choden, Nyingma, Palden, and Tenzin) explain their choice to become a nun by framing lay life and the responsibilities that go along with it, as a distraction from what they now see as their true purpose and desired path – to study and practice Buddhism. As a Buddhist convert, Pema came to realize that to “get rid of samsara and to be able to help others... the real method is to deal with yourself, your mind.” She felt that she

“could not do that as a lay person,” explaining that “there are so many activities that are against the dharma, that I cannot avoid.” Similarly, Dolma said that being a nun “just felt like a very appropriate lifestyle for practicing Buddhism - completely conducive to practice.” She said that “to take yourself out of society, and that way of living, of pursuing different things - money, a career, whatever- to get rid of all that, renounce these things, and completely focus on Buddhism” was an ultimate goal of hers. The opportunity that the monastic life offers for a more focused, undistracted engagement with Buddhism is what drew Dechen to monasticism as well. She says that ordained women and men “have more time than people with families, responsibilities, mortgages...They can practice the dharma full time.” Nyingma agrees, describing familial responsibilities and romantic relationships as “just a lot of distraction on the path.” She goes on to say, “You know, there’s a lot of suffering and time put into negotiating relationships, so I feel fortunate not to be in a relationship, but”, she adds, “sometimes I still miss it.” Thus in her case, renunciation is not a simple or easy process, but something she has to reason through and sometimes struggles with. Choden, on the other hand, doesn’t appear to struggle as much with abandoning the ways and relationships of lay life: “I see all their [lay peoples'] worries and all the things they have to do, to keep up this life of being a layperson, and this kind of being free of that is really, really kind of great!” This perspective on ordination, shared by so many of the women, is actually well established in the institutional discourse of Tibetan Buddhism.

Speaking at a 1996 conference for Buddhist nuns, the Dalai Lama had this to say about Buddhist monastic life:

The advantage of being a monk or nun is that you do not have to be entrapped in too many worldly engagements or activities...Becoming a monk or nun, without family, is very good for the practice of the Buddhadharma because the basic aim of Dharma practice is Nirvana, not just day-to-day happiness. (Chodron, 1999, p. 192)

There is an obvious, and in some cases nearly literal, correspondence between how the Dalai Lama presents ordained life and how the women presented it to me in our interviews. In the same speech quoted above, the Dalai Lama went on to say that “the main purpose of being a monastic is to reduce attachment: we work on no longer being attached to family, no longer being attached to sexual pleasure, no longer being attached to other worldly facilities. That is the main purpose”

(quoted in Chodron, 1999, p. 192). Likewise, several of the women came to understand nunhood not only as a way to be free from the obligations of lay life, but as a chance to really embrace and practice the Buddhist ideal of non-attachment. When Tenzin was trying to decide if the ordained life was right for her, she thought a lot about her parents, whom she said had great expectations that she graduate from a reputable university, get a good paying job, start a family, live in a nice home, etc. When she thought deeply about trying to fulfil their wishes for her, and applied the Buddhist knowledge she had acquired, she realized that “it is not just this life, but we will have another and another, so if I just fulfil my parents’ wish, it is not wise in the long term.” From her perspective, pursuing material comforts, accolades, and financial success would only lead her and her family to “become more attached” to money and fleeting, inconsequential things. Thus, for her, she “wanted to get ordained because it is the only way for me to be free” – free, she explained, from these attachments and the suffering and endless cycles of rebirth which they perpetuate.

Dolma presents a variation of this view in her narrative, when she addresses problems with contemporary Western society. Rather than speaking of ‘being free’ from secular life, Dolma equates the ordained life with ‘throwing away’ all of the problems and difficulties of secular life given that they have “no real essence”:

Well, I mean look at Western society, how dysfunctional it is. I mean, it’s insane. I mean everybody’s getting diagnosed with depression, or bi-polar or these ridiculous things. So I mean obviously something is fundamentally wrong with the way we are thinking, and people are starting to recognize this and so, you know, and it’s extreme, yeah? Something is *really* wrong. Something’s wrong with what we’re doing, and so people are going to make big decisions to throw that away, just throw that away, which is what getting ordained is, just throwing that all away... And it’s very easy to see, it’s a lot easier to see that there’s no essence in worldly things when you’re so involved in it and you can really see the suffering in it. It’s so obvious and right in your face then. Once you identify it, you can throw it away.

Speaking from the perspective of a Buddhist, Dolma is not talking about simply denying, removing, or not engaging with different aspects of lay life. Rather, when she refers to “throwing it away,” she means getting rid of our attachments to these worldly things and recognizing that they have “no real essence” and are actually the source of our suffering. Rinzen’s discussion and

framing of the freedom offered by Buddhist monasticism also reflects this deeper understanding of attachment and renunciation. When reflecting on what she has learned since converting to Buddhism, she says: “the more self-grasping you have the more aversion and attachment you can have” and this is the “cause of suffering.” She explains that if we can “manage to lose this self-grasping or this mind that cherishes the self as really existing, then the more freedom we can have to live life as it really is without our superimpositions or what we think we are.” And to her, the most effective way of gaining this understanding and the discipline and techniques required to apply it, is to become a nun so that “you can focus on what you’re doing without concerning yourself with everything else.” The idea that ordination allows for a greater focus on Buddhist teachings and practices is a common thread in the narratives dealing with renunciation, and the notions of ‘distraction’ and ‘wasting’ that are used by the women connect these sections of their stories to those addressing the other Buddhist elements of karma and the dharma.

Becoming ordained as a Buddhist nun is clearly established in these narratives as an alternative to the more typical secular life path, an alternative which reflects the women’s newfound understanding of authenticity and purpose. To them, practicing Buddhism in order to gain insight into the nature of reality, suffering, and selfhood, is the main goal and the mark of an authentic life. Therefore, anything that distracts from or impedes this goal is seen as a waste of time contributing to an inauthentic existence where one is unable to see the ‘true essence’ of reality.

*The Lama.* In all Buddhist traditions the relationship between teacher and student is considered essential to spiritual advancement and realization, and in Tibetan Buddhism, attaining Buddhahood is said to be impossible without relying on a qualified teacher (Garry, 1999, p. 27). Lamas, or spiritual teachers, act as role models, giving instructions, vows and empowerments, and maintaining teaching lineages that trace back to the Buddha (Berzin, 2000). Generally, a student chooses a particular teacher (often referred to as a ‘root guru’) based on a felt connection and on the ‘qualities of the teacher’ which students are encouraged to evaluate before making their choice (Hodge, 1999, p. 32). An authentic teacher is said to be “well versed in the three trainings of moral discipline, meditative stabilization, and wisdom and to teach out of kindness” (Wallace, 1993, p. 86). The relationship between student and teacher in Buddhist contexts is thus one of extreme importance. This idea was clearly expressed in the women’s narratives, with several of the nuns

speaking directly to their relationship with their teacher and the role this played in both their decision and ability to ordain within the Buddhist tradition.

Pema, for example, joined a Tibetan Buddhist centre in Indonesia on the advice of her brothers and decided to become a nun in part because she was inspired by the passion and dedication of her teacher. She describes him as a “fighter” and a “very dedicated teacher,” and recalls that he “gave teachings six days a week and meditation and never left us.” Under his guidance and instruction, she says that she came to realize that following the Buddhist path and becoming a nun was “the way I have to go.” In Palden’s case, she ties her wish to ordain directly to her encounters with her teacher. As she told it, a series of serendipitous events allowed her to meet and attend some teachings by a Tibetan lama. At one of these early teachings Palden recalls,

I was really close to him and I felt his bodhichitta<sup>22</sup>- this intense happiness that I had never felt before - so I said ‘I want to be like that!’ So, ok, well, if I want to be like him then I have to wear clothes like him, think and talk like him, so that’s how I developed the wish to become a nun.

The importance and impact of the student-teacher relationship on these women and their paths towards ordination are therefore significant and reflect the popular and institutional discourses on the essential value of these relationships. Beyond establishing connections with students and offering guidance and instruction, teachers in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition also act as ‘gate-keepers’ of the monastic community since interested individuals must request and receive formal permission to become ordained as Buddhist monks and nuns.

Requesting permission from one’s teacher to get ordained is standard practice in Tibetan Buddhism (for both monks and nuns, Tibetans and non-Tibetans), and in cases where one’s teacher does not perform ordination rites, students will also have to request permission from the teacher/lama who will act as the preceptor in the ordination ceremony. The Buddhist perspective contends that lamas “provide the foundation for the monastic life, and will understand when we are ready to take on the commitment required for the monastic vows of ordination” (FPMT, 2015).

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<sup>22</sup> *Bodichitta* is the “spirit of awakening that arises from a compassionate concern for all beings, expressing itself in the aspiration to be of the greatest possible benefit to all beings through the achievement of the complete spiritual awakening of a Buddha” (Wallace, 1993, p. 165). The notion of *bodhichitta* is unique to Mahayana Buddhism and reflects a desire to attain enlightenment not for the sake of self, but for the good of all. Beings who have realized *bodhichitta* are called *bodhisattvas*.

Stories of delayed or withheld permission were common among the nuns I interviewed (8 of 16), however, four women had their requests for ordination granted immediately by their teachers (Dolma, Palden, Yeshe, and Thubten) and two (Lhamo and Rinzen) were actually asked or invited to ordain by their teachers. None of the women, regardless of which group they fell into, or how long the process actually took, had anything negative to say about this period of their journeys. They unanimously expressed faith and respect for their teachers' methods, and were more than willing to comply in order to reach their goal of ordination.

The dynamics of the teacher-student relationship are complex and strongly impacted not only by historically-based cultural conventions but also by the modern inter-cultural Buddhist landscape wherein Buddhism is being adopted by and adapted to various traditionally non-Tibetan Buddhist contexts. The lama represents one of the key elements of the Buddhist system and in using it to structure their stories, the women highlight the various functions of the lama - to guide and instruct, but also to inspire and initiate the women into the monastic world. As detailed above, for some he directly inspires their decision to ordain and for others he is a key means of moving towards that goal which had already been established through interactions with other elements in the Buddhist world. In other words, for some the lama acts as a crucial gateway, while for others he plays a more functional role, formally facilitating their entry into the monastic world.

This discussion and analysis of the key elements involved in the move towards ordination and of the correlative narrative form of this phase, demonstrate that while all of the women encountered and explored each of these elements, particular combinations, unique to each woman acted as the gateway towards nunhood. In the following section, the central focus of this phase, the actual ordination, will be presented. An interpretive discussion will follow.

### **5.3. Ordination: Anti-climactic Endings in the Transition towards Nunhood**

Since ordination is the core event around which I asked the women to tell their stories, one would assume, perhaps, that the actual ordination ceremony would be a focal point in the narratives, and become the apex or pinnacle to which their tellings build. This, however, was not the case in any of the stories I collected. As will be discussed in the following pages, only one of the nuns described her ordination ceremony in any elaborate detail, while the rest hardly offered any unsolicited comments on the ceremony at all. This finding raised questions about the potential secrecy or expectations of concealing details relating to ordination that may exist in Buddhist

worlds, and in Tibetan contexts in particular. Yet, when I explored this as a possibility for explaining the women's silence or avoidance of the ordination ritual, it did not seem to hold as a reasonable explanation. Texts and treatises describing the various levels and traditions surrounding monastic vows are abundant and easily accessible, and there are even YouTube videos of ordination ceremonies for both monks and nuns in various Buddhist traditions available online. Tibetan ordination rites are documented in photos on the Dalai Lama's own website (<http://www.dalailama.com/gallery/album/3/91#ad-image-4>), and described in precise detail in an appendix to Western Tibetan Buddhist nun, Thubten Chodron's book *Preparing for ordination: Monastic Ordination in the Tibetan Buddhist Tradition* – both of which are also publically available and easily accessible (<http://www.thubtenchodron.org/Publications/PreparingForOrdination/index.html>). Thus, it does not appear that there are institutional pressures to conceal ordination rituals, yet other scholars have also noted the lack of “thick description on the ordination rite” in Tibetan Buddhism (Gutschow, 2004, p. 180). While Gutschow suggests that the lack of “first-hand accounts of these rites” (p. 108) may be due to the fact that lay observers are generally excluded, the structure of the women's narratives during this phase – that is, their lack of emphasis on any logico-temporal order and their insistence instead on their alignment and integration of the key elements of the Buddhist faith - may point to a more nuanced explanation. After presenting the narrative details surrounding ordination from the women's stories, Ricoeur's theory of systemic, correlative causality (1981, 1984) will be used to interpret the way they have described their experiences of ordination and to inform further understandings behind the lack of description surrounding this ceremony.

Interestingly, Dawa, the 51 year-old American, is the only woman of all of those interviewed to describe the ordination ceremony and process in any significant detail. Her richest descriptions were of the preliminary ceremony where she received the novice getsulma/sramanerika vows. In the Tibetan tradition, ordination occurs in multiple phases- before becoming fully ordained as a gelongma, the neophytes go through the preliminary getsulma (getsul for monks) ceremony which is where they get the robes and shave their heads for the first time. Dawa described feeling rather unprepared and uncertain of what the ceremony entailed, especially because the only advice or information she was given was that it “would take around two hours.” Despite not being able to understand what the lama was saying during the ceremony, it was an



incredibly powerful experience for her. She has vivid memories of the ceremony and her retelling of the event was filled with emotion:

I remember that we kneeled before Rinpoche and he said some prayers and he had some blessed rice. And then at one point he just tossed it! Right at us! I remember at one point these grains of rice just hitting my face and there was some kind of power in it and it knocked me back! The first time I was shocked. It was like ‘Oh my God’; it felt like.... it didn’t feel like being hit in the face with rice, it was, there was something ..else. So then I saw him grab another handful, and I thought ‘This time I’m really gunna brace myself cause I know it’s coming’ and Boom! it kind of knocked me back again. ‘What IS THIS??’ And then I think the third time, ‘Holy cow!’ And then, I think, and then shortly after that, that was it. So we said a few little vows that we had to repeat, in Tibetan, I don’t even know what they were. ‘Ok, now, now I’ve got the vows.’ And I felt a bit disoriented- you know, very happy and relieved, finally...I actually got the vows. But...you know, gosh, *I’ve got the vows. What is this?*

The dramatic recounting of this preliminary ordination rite offered by Dawa is indeed unique among all of the life-histories I collected. She effectively conveys the powerful and enchanted nature of the experience of entering the sacred Buddhist realm, highlighting, with tone as much as word choice, the bewildering mystery and potent sensory effects involved in this ceremony. Interestingly, the compelling and almost transcendent, supernatural qualities she evokes in this segment of her story are starkly contrasted by her telling of the full ordination (gelungma) ceremony which took place a few weeks later:

We each had a monk to help us, cause during the ceremony you had to know, ok at this point you kneel, and you have to repeat ‘blah, blah, blah, blah’ and ‘la la la’ and then ‘Yeah, ok, at this time prostrate, now kneel, now you put on the yellow robe, the ‘cheru’ at this point go up to the lama and he blesses the robes and explains different things and ... then, when it was finished, we just, we had a big lunch, you know, sort of festive...So, yeah, I finished lunch, after ordination and then I got in the car and drove back [home].

The difference in style, tone, and language is evident; here, there is a more formal and almost detached quality that was actually quite common and even typical among the ordination stories of the other women.

Choden, for example traveled to Nepal with two other Westerners to get ordained by the head lama of their lineage. In her words, they “went in in jeans and came out in robes.” She described the experience as follows:

We got there and they shaved off our hair, except for a little-little bit that the ordination master cut. And we got there and we had jeans on and we had to undress and just sit there in a little skirt and a shirt like this [she indicates the vest part of the upper robes]. And then after we were ordained they literally put the robes on us, the monks were dressing us.

As in the second portion of Dawa’s story, Choden’s explanation of the ordination ceremony is defined by passive obedience and a sense of trust in just going along with the process. In terms of the ceremony, all she said was: “and then we got ordained, and... yeah, we went back to the centre.” Choden didn’t talk about what it meant for her to be in Nepal getting ordained as a Tibetan nun, and didn’t elaborate on the ceremony or the immediate effects it had on her before or after returning to her centre in France. Nyingma’s story shares many of the same key details as Choden – in that they both belonged to Tibetan Buddhist centres in France and both traveled to Nepal to get ordained.

After following the advice of her teacher and praying and preparing for one year, Nyingma’s teacher agreed that she was ready to ordain. Along with an American woman and a French man from her centre, Nyingma traveled to Nepal to receive the vows from a high lama. This is how she described the experience:

So after another few months we went to Nepal and we just waited in Boudanath until he [lama] told us ‘This is the auspicious day, come to the monastery’. And so we ordained... Uhm, we were ordained. Ah.... what else happened then? That itself just seemed like a very natural sort of thing.

When she didn’t offer any other details I asked Nyingma about the ceremony, how it was, if she understood what was going on, and so on. To the latter question she said “no, no not really” and explained how the other woman getting ordained had asked their translator (a Western Buddhist monk) for his advice before the ceremony and he just said ‘Be good, do good’ and that, she said, “was it. And yeah, we went back to France and just continued on.” Thus, even when asked directly and given opportunities to elaborate and explain, Nyingma’s description of her ordination remained short and vague. The tone and feeling of the interview at this stage was not tense or

pressured in any way -there was no sense of wanting to hurry things along or any sort of calculated avoidance or uncomfortable apprehension. Nyingma seemed as if she simply had nothing more to say on the topic. The same sort of tone and level of description defined most of the other nuns' narratives as well (Jiyul, Lhamo, Pema, Tenzin, Thubten, Chin-sun, Palden, Sherab, Dolma). Ordination is banalized in the nuns' stories and the focus is often on the build-up and decision making process leading to ordination rather than on the actual ceremony and event itself. Even for those nuns (Tenzin, Pema, Thubten) who had only recently been ordained (approximately 2 weeks prior to our interviews), they hardly mentioned anything about the process or actual ceremony, even when I asked specifically about it. Though these women had only just experienced this long anticipated ceremony, none of them spoke directly of it, in any significant sense. Moreover, the nuns, overall, said almost nothing of the personal significance of this milestone or how it impacted them emotionally, psychologically, or practically.

There are, however, two exceptions to this trend: Yeshe and Dechen, who did address some of the emotional and psychological consequences of the ordination ceremony and process. Yeshe is the accomplished artist who left everything behind in Europe when she converted to Buddhism and decided to become a nun. When Yeshe asked her lama for permission to ordain he gave her the rabjung vows -which involve shaving one's head and donning robes for the first time- the very next day. She describes being "very nervous" during this first ceremony, but she was happy for the chance to "get used to the robes" before her actual ordination ceremony, which was performed by the Dalai Lama one year later. In this second ceremony – the actual getsulma ordination, Yeshe says that she was "horrified," because in the pre-ordination preparation course she had taken she had been told that if you miss the part of the ceremony when the lama (in this case, His Holiness the Dalai Lama) does a specific *mudra*<sup>23</sup> and snaps his fingers, then "you don't get the vows, so we were horrified." While the ceremony went fine and Yeshe successfully got ordained, she admits: "It was not easy; it's still not easy, I must say. Because it's such a deep kind of changing and you observe yourself and the steps that you go through, you observe your mind." While Yeshe did not describe the particulars of the ordination ceremony, she was one of the few nuns to include such reflexive comments in this section of her story. Her emphasis on the 'deep kind of changing' that accompanies ordination is thus quite distinctive among the nuns' narratives, most of which

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<sup>23</sup> Sanskrit term for the symbolic hand gestures used in Buddhist (and Hindu) ceremonies.

connect such emotional and psychological changes with conversion rather than ordination. However, in keeping with the other stories, Yeshe underemphasizes the actual ordination ceremony by focusing instead on the year she spent as a novice and the continuing challenges and changes that define her life as a nun.

The only other woman to acknowledge the emotional and psychological impacts of the ordination ceremony was Dechen. In her story, she does not describe anything about the process of asking for permission, or preparations at all, but she did have this to say: “So, I became a nun when I was 23 and I was completely unprepared, completely unprepared. It was such a shock and such a violent change.” Dechen's discussion of her feelings and the emotional impact of the ordination ceremony is novel among the stories I collected, and even more so because the words and tone of her discussion are quite negative and dark. None of the other women in this study come anywhere near describing their ordinations as shocking or as instigating anything resembling a “violent change.” As we will see in the third phase of Dechen's narrative, she encountered significant difficulties after getting ordained, which may, in part, color her retrospective telling of her ordination experience. Becoming a nun in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition and undergoing the ordination rite are thus deeply impactful events, experienced in a variety of ways by each of the women. With that being said, the universal downplaying of the ritual and events surrounding ordination, as well as the general absence of words describing the personal and emotional changes that accompanied this experience, create an interesting tension.

When considered from the Tibetan Buddhist perspective, it appears that one reason for this banalization may be related to the fact that some of the transformations and impacts experienced during an ordination ceremony are highly personal and reflect internal realizations not easily articulated and shared with others. What is highlighted and emphasized as 'the point' in Buddhist ritual is not the outward signs, or shifts in status or position, but rather internal experiences<sup>24</sup>. Additional explanations for the banalization of the ordination ceremony may be that it is, in point of fact, only one stage in a multi-phase ordination process. On the way to becoming a Buddhist nun, the women would have experienced a refuge ceremony (genyenma vows), another ceremony marking their initiation into the monastic life (rabjung vows), and then finally, the ordination ceremony (novice ordination in the Tibetan tradition- getsulma vows). The Korean nuns and some

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<sup>25</sup> See Gyatso, 2002, p. 16, for a Tibetan perspective on the internal changes involved in the Refuge Ceremony.

of the others who took full-ordination vows in Taiwan, would have gone through a final bhikshuni (gelongma) ordination ceremony as well.<sup>25</sup> In this way, the relational structure of the women's narratives mirrors that defining ordination in Tibetan Buddhist contexts where it is not a stand-alone event and where it does not mark an abrupt or complete transition, but rather represents a progressive deepening of commitment and integration. In other words, the narrative structure of this phase emphasizes experience within a complex and cohesive system and generally speaking, constructs ordination not as a sudden, total change, but more as a symbolic achievement of full and true membership in a complex Buddhist world.

#### **5.4. Interpreting the Correlative Form of the Ordination Phase**

In this phase, the women do not narrate their paths to ordination according to a succession of events driven by logical-temporal progressions (where time and linear causality are emphasized, as in the conversion phase). Instead, the developments, actions, and transitions in their stories are imbued with a type of paradigmatic, correlative logic where key elements of the Buddhist system are referred to in no particular order and in no consistent temporal sequence, that is, without being emplotted (Good, 1994; Ricoeur, 1981, 1984). This type of logic creates a consonance between the events, relationships, and happenings of their lives and the logic of the whole Buddhist system which they have adopted as their predominate worldview. The narrative theory of Linde (1993) is also relevant here, since it postulates that as structurally and interpretively open stories, life narratives are shaped by continual reinterpretations determined by the context of their tellings. She notes that "higher levels of beliefs and practices affect the detailed structure of narratives" (Linde, 1993, p. 218), which is evident here in the ways that the nuns use Buddhist elements to frame their ordination stories.

This consonance and interrelationship between personal experience and religious meaning systems is additionally reflected in Geertz's theory of religion (1973) where religious systems are described as functioning not only as 'models of' reality (where they provide cohesive explanations of the way things are), but also as 'models for' reality given the ways that they come to shape dispositions, moods, and motivations (p. 93-94). This theory helps to reveal the fact that what is at stake in the women's ordination is not simply full immersion or adherence to the tenets of Buddhism, but also the application of those tenets and the system as a whole in their

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<sup>25</sup>A chart summarizing the stages involved in the ordination process is included as Appendix 9.

reinterpretation of all aspects of their lives. Geertz ascribes a double function to religion, suggesting that religious systems "give meaning, that is, objective conceptual form, to social and psychological reality both by shaping themselves to it and by shaping it to themselves" (Geertz, 1973, p. 93). In the case of these women, once they were initiated into the Buddhist world through conversion, ordination became the only path they could envision because they had not only integrated Buddhist ideas and practices into their lives, but had adopted the Buddhist worldview as the singular means of framing reality and their place within it. During this phase then, mundane secular frames of reference, understanding, and morality no longer define the meaning and progression of the women's lives, as they draw instead on elements of the enchanted Buddhist model as a template, not only to tell their stories, but to orient and motivate their entire life course.

## **5.5. Conclusion**

In the narratives of the women in this study, the transition from conversion to ordination is told from the perspective of Buddhist patterns 'of' and 'for' the world (Geertz, 1973). These patterns are comprised of five key elements (sangha, karma, dharma, renunciation, and lamas) and form the basis of the correlative causal structure that defines their stories. In highlighting the interconnected components of Buddhist networks of meaning, and in using them to structure their narratives, the women downplay the actual rite of ordination, emphasizing instead their progressive and complete immersion, adherence, and application of the Buddhist system. They have both adopted and adapted to this new framework and use the symbols and language of the new sacred world they are entering to explain their very migration towards that world. In so doing, they abandon and deny modern secular explanatory models, affirming Buddhism as a more comprehensive and cohesive framework for being. Moreover, Buddhism, as a compelling and cohesive worldview, is asserted as most salient when it is experienced in this complex, relational manner, and when it meaningfully addresses all aspects (social, emotional, cognitive, psychological, etc.) of the women's lived experience, acting as a template guiding their actions, decisions, and aspirations within each of these realms.

The implications of this full immersion into Buddhism will be explored further in the chapters to follow - first in relation to the monastic robes and finally in terms of identity and selfhood. Additionally, the chapters on the final phase of post-ordination adjustment will consider how institutional forces and actually living the long sought monastic lifestyle may impact the women's absolute adherence and application of the Buddhist world.

## **6. Razors & Robes: Transitions into Ordained Life**

As an interpretive device, Victor Turner's theoretical insights on symbols and rituals (1967, 1968, 1977) prove useful in considering the varied meanings, resonances, and functions of an essential ritual symbol relevant in this study: the monastic robes. His theories related to rites of passage are a central component of this dissertation, helping to frame the women's transitions into the monastic life and, in this chapter, his work on the meanings and functions of ritual symbols will be used to structure a presentation and analysis of the monastic robes.

From Turner's perspective, rituals act as storehouses for densely meaningful and authority-charged symbols (1968, p. 2), and in the case of Buddhist monasticism, the robes are chief among such symbols. In the sections to follow, Turner's elaboration on the meanings and functions of ritual symbols will first be outlined, concentrating on the three "fields of meaning" that he identifies: the exegetical, operational, and positional (1967, p. 50-52). These three fields will provide the general structure of this chapter, inspiring related analyses concentrating on the meanings (exegetical field) and uses (operational field) of monastic robes within and beyond (positional field) Tibetan Buddhist contexts. Additional theoretical concepts will be integrated throughout the chapter to further illuminate the function of the robe symbol, namely Marcel Mauss' 'total social fact' (1966) and 'body techniques' (1973), and Paul Veyne's 'programmes of truth' (1988). The chief argument of this chapter is that, as polysemic symbols implicated in the personal, social, and political lives of the nuns, the robes function as important reminders that encourage and facilitate full and continuous immersion in a Buddhist lifeworld.

### **6.1. Theoretical Framework: Turner's Symbolic Theory**

Turner defined ritual as "a stereotyped sequence of activities involving gestures, words, and objects, performed in a sequestered place, and designed to influence preternatural entities or forces on behalf of the actors' goals and interests" (1977, p.83). This approach is predicated on the assumption that as such, rituals are a type of performance- a social act which makes certain elements of culture "visible and accessible to purposive public action" (Turner, 1967, p. 50).

Turner also notes that the process of ritual symbolization is not only to "make visible, audible, and tangible beliefs, ideas, values, sentiments, and psychological dispositions that cannot directly be perceived," but to make "public what is private or make social what is personal" (1967, p. 50). Thus, rituals are fundamentally communicative acts, allowing a society to speak back to itself by

way of meaning- and value-laden symbols. In several instances, Turner has characterized the meanings of these symbols according to three distinct fields: the exegetical, operational, and positional (1967, p. 50-52; 1968, p.81-82; 1969, p.11-13). Exegetical meanings are rooted in the intersubjective experiences of those directly involved with ritual performances and represent, therefore, insider or indigenous interpretations. Operational meanings are generated from a more pragmatic and outside perspective as they are based on observation and determined by the practical uses of symbols in particular contexts at particular times. Lastly, positional meanings address the interconnected significance of symbols. Such meanings are developed by considering the relationship between symbols and the symbolic network as a whole. These three fields of meaning will be used as inspiration for the discussion to follow, which concentrates on the Tibetan Buddhist robes as a central symbol, not only of the ordination ritual, but, more generally, of the monastic lives of this diverse group of convert nuns.

## **6.2. Indigenous Meanings of the Robe Symbol**

In Turner's framework, the exegetical meanings of symbols are accessed at the doctrinal level through books and official teachings and also through indigenous informants (1967, p. 51). In this chapter, the exegetical meanings of the Buddhist robes will first be described from the doctrinal perspective of official Buddhist sources and then by the nuns themselves.

Buddhist texts tell us that after leaving his royal station and becoming a wondering ascetic, the Buddha dressed in mendicant robes typical for the time, called *pāmsūda* or *pāmsūla* in Sanskrit. These robes are described as being made from discarded cloth that had been burned by fire, munched by oxen, gnawed by mice, or worn by the dead (Karuna, 2006). As such, these early forms of monastic dress embodied a moral stance communicating humility, modesty, and a renouncement of worldly goods. Texts also explain how the Buddhist robes were systematized at the request of King Bimbisara (ruler of the Indian Magadha Empire from 542 BC to 492 BCE and patron of Buddhism) who is said to have asked the Buddha to create a distinctive robe for his monks so that they could be more easily identified. The Buddha complied with this request, instructing his attendant Ananda to design a robe inspired by the rows of rice fields (Karuna, 2006). These original robes were unisex (worn similarly by women and men) and made up of three separate elements, and were thus referred to as *tricīvara*, or 'triple robe' (Chaudhary & Vyas, 2013, p. 83). As Buddhism spread, over the centuries to countries beyond India, the monastic robes were



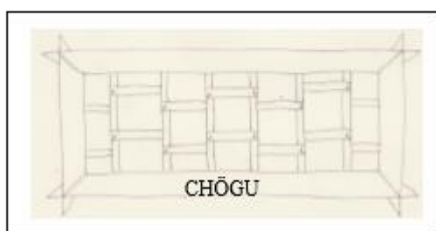
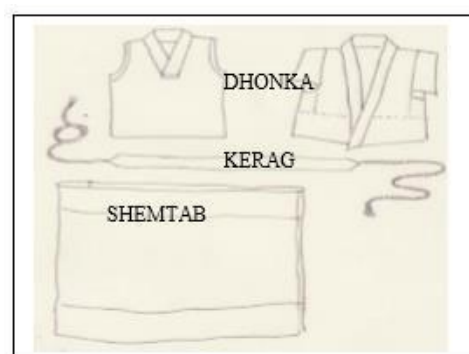
adapted to the climates, material resources, and cultural norms of the different regions. In Tibet, these adaptations are traced to the 14<sup>th</sup> century, when it is said that the *dhonka* (the sleeveless vest worn as an upper garment) was introduced, largely because of the cold climate (Sopa, 2007, p. 48). In keeping with the Indian tradition and the moral symbolism of early Buddhist dress, Tibetan robes were a deep red color because red is considered a ‘poor’ color in Tibet and because this type of dye was the cheapest available. In the Tibetan context the red-maroon color also symbolizes “deflecting attention from oneself and focusing on compassion and kindness towards other beings” (Chaudhary & Vyas, 2013, p. 83). The images below were created by a Thosamling nun to help describe the components of the Tibetan monastic uniform.



In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition the monastic robes are the same for monks and nuns, with the exception of a light yellow skirt (meyog) and undershirt (ngullen) worn by nuns underneath the robes. While the robes are emblematic of a status and life project that is shared among both male and female monastics, the obstacles and constraints faced by nuns set them notably apart (and generally below) their male counterparts (Gutschow, 2004, p. 7). Following the Indian tradition, the Tibetan robes are comprised of three central components - a vest, a 'shawl,' and a long, skirt-like, lower robe. The *dhonka* is the sleeveless vest, with capped shoulder pieces and a wrapped design which can be in maroon or yellow. The two shoulder pieces represent a lion’s mane and the fearless, relaxed demeanor of this ‘king of beasts’ which is extended to anyone following the *vinaya* (monastic code), reminding them that “they do not need to fear being born in suffering rebirths; they are on the path of emancipation” (Sopa, 2007, p. 48). The vest is typically edged with blue piping which has historical and social significance since it was derived from the blue robes of two Chinese monks who helped continue the ordination line of Tibetan monks when they were nearly wiped out during the ninth century (Sopa, 2007, p. 48). The *shemtab*, which is the skirt-like lower robe, is always in maroon, and was traditionally made of patches of fabric, but today it is generally made of a single piece cloth with stitching and seams representing the patchwork. The way it is worn has symbolic significance as well- the back or outwards facing folds on

the right side symbolize that the monk or nun has left behind worldly concerns and activities, and negative actions; the front or inwards facing folds on the left, symbolize following the Buddhist path and virtuous activities, always moving

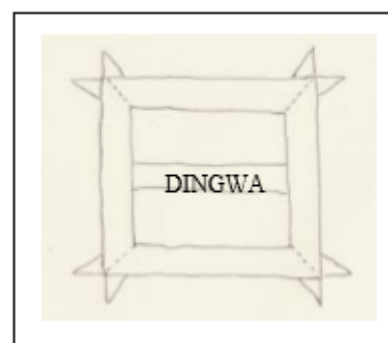
towards those goals (Sopa, 2007, p. 48). The kerag is the yellow woven belt that cinches the shamtab around the waist. The zen is the upper, shawl-type piece, made in different weights of fabric to accommodate changing weather, but is always in maroon. It can be drawn up over the head as a cloak or is often worn with one side thrown up over the opposite shoulder (Hume, 2013, p. 113).



The chögu is a patchwork garment, made in bright yellow, worn over or in place of the zen during confession ceremonies and teachings. For special ritual occasions, the zen or chögu is replaced by a larger yellow robe with additional patches, historical

Shakyamuni Buddha). Sewn together, these two pieces symbolize that “there is no gap in the time between the destruction of the first and the

rising of the second for those who continue their practices from one era to the next" (Rabten, 2000, p.45). The dingwa is a sort of extension of the robe. It is the woolen mat, thin, patched and always in maroon, that is used to mark a monk or nun's place and to protect their cushion or seat. Each monastic has their own dingwa and carries it with him/her.



Geshe Rabten, a monk and scholar of Tibetan Buddhism notes that when a monastic has “the proper motivation and understanding of the significance of his garments, they constantly remind him and act as his teachers” (2000, p. 24). He goes on,

What is most important is that his attitude, mindfulness, and way of life be in accordance with the meaning of the symbols. When a monk takes notice of these clothes, he is reminded of his monkhood and the teachings of the Buddha. (p. 24)

Another doctrinal source suggests that both lay and ordained members of the Buddhist tradition

“see the robes of ordination as symbolic of the Buddha himself” (Gyalpo, 1996, p. 23). From the doctrinal exegetical perspective, then, the robes are emphasized in terms of emulation and historical connection, reflecting social, moral, and attitudinal postures that involve metaphoric and metonymic plays which position the robes as a substitution for core elements (i.e. teachings, concepts, lifestyle, the Buddha himself) of the Buddhist system. Metaphor and metonymy are two fundamental modes of language, and both act as "figures of equivalence" in that they "characteristically propose a different entity as having ‘equivalent’ status to the one that forms the main subject of the figure" (Hawkes, 2003, p. 59). These linguistic modes are also evident in the exegetical meanings derived from indigenous participants, which in this case, includes the nuns in this study. The following paragraphs will demonstrate that in keeping with doctrinal sources, the nuns' perspectives on the robes similarly employ metaphoric and metonymic associations, "bringing into association a larger context" (Fernandez, 1974, p. 126) and establishing equivalencies that tie the symbolism of the robes to foundational Buddhist principles and figures.

Representing the point of view of ‘ritual specialists,’ the nuns' exegetical perspectives align in many ways with those represented in classic Buddhist doctrines and texts. The meanings ascribed by Tibetan Buddhist institutional discourse and traditional doctrinal perspectives (outlined above) are generally communicated to the nuns via monastic training and ordination preparation, or acquired through personal reading and research. The metaphoric/metonymic descriptions of the robes in official doctrinal sources are thus reflected in the nuns' stories and perspectives, as a crucial element of their lives, confirming their connection to core Buddhist teachings and communities, as well as to the Buddha himself. Choden, for example, says that being a nun is "about just following the path of the Buddha" and though, she goes on to say, she is “not exactly wearing the same robes, cause they’re [Tibetan robes] a little bit different...I am in some sense wearing the same robes as he [the Buddha] did.” In this case, Choden uses the symbol of the robes to establish a metonymic relationship of equivalence between her and the Buddha, expressing a connection she experiences as deeply meaningful. In a related vein, Nyingma says:

When you have a figure like His Holiness the Dalai Lama wearing the same robes, and you, you catch out of the corner of your eye that actually you’re wearing the same robes, it’s very inspiring. And also to think of all of the monks and nuns through the centuries wearing the same robes.

Nyingma's sense of connection and inspiration are thus tied to the lineage of dedicated practitioners that the robes symbolize, her membership in this elite community and her investment in the shared intentions and goals of the monastic path. Evidently, doctrinal exegesis establishes historical links through the robes, and these quotes indicate that the nuns experience the robes as a symbol that also transcends history and time; they associate wearing the robes with personal development and with entrance into a sacred, timeless realm that is eternal and relevant across time.

Exegetical meanings of the robes were further established by the nuns through their emphasis of the social meanings and functions of the monastic dress. Palden, for example, says that a “big part of being a nun” for her is that she wants “to be someone who people can look to and say ‘OK, I want to learn from that person, they seem to have done some hard mental transformation’.” In this sense, the robes function as an index of social positioning which communicates to others the status and related mission or life purpose pursued by the wearer.

Dechen’s perspective builds on this idea, stating that ordained sangha “represent an ideal that there is another way of living. They represent a spiritual ideal...and show that enlightenment is possible, and if you are confused and suffering, then there is another way.” Thus, as wearers of the robes, ordained men and women become themselves metonymies of Buddhism: each of them represents the whole world of Buddhism through one of its parts, that is, the monastic uniform. In this way, the robes serve both transformational and representative functions, symbolizing the monastic's sacred status while also changing them into embodied emblems of the Buddhist (and specifically Tibetan Buddhist) faith, lifestyle, and world. The emblematic function of the robes also speaks to the public selves adopted and adapted by the women once they become nuns and don the Buddhist robes. As the following quote by Palden suggests, as 'emblems' of the faith, the nuns develop a public self that embodies and reflects their roles as representatives of the Buddhist community and institution:

[The robes are] a reminder that I have to be more conscious of my body and speech, the actions of my body and speech. And of course my mind, but that’s my business. But the actions of my body and speech is what other people can see directly, so they are a constant reminder that I have to be good.

This quote speaks to the fact that the robes are not simply ritual objects that the nuns possess, objects which they can leave at home or engage with privately; the robes are their interface with

the world – shaping their thoughts and behaviours, and constraining their ways of being. Palden's words also speak to the existence of a private self, separate and distinct from the public persona engendered through the robes, but simultaneously related to that persona in the sense that it must also be disciplined (in parallel to the discipline of body, speech and action) to ensure a correspondence and authentic equivalence with the public monastic persona.

The idea that donning the robes transforms the nuns into embodied emblems, is an outward function of this symbol, but, as several of the nuns note, there are important internal changes triggered by the robes as well. Yeshe describes the robes as “a tool” and as a “kind of mindfulness.” She says, “of course it’s good for my body, but it’s not just that. It’s the inner process. That’s the point where we have to concentrate.” In equating the robes with specific practices of Buddhism (mindfulness), Yeshe establishes a metonymic relationship which highlights the ways in which the physical and external features of the robe act as reminders and facilitators of the deeper, internal meanings connected to them. Because the robes are worn exclusively and constantly by the nuns, and are governed by strict rules, they serve as perpetual reminders of the Buddhist life that the women have adopted and, in the case of the convert nuns in this study, of the secular, non-Tibetan lives that they have left behind. Moreover, in addition to reminding the women of their vows and emblematic roles, the robes also transport them to, and allow them to constantly occupy, the sacred space associated to the Buddhist world.

Nyingma says that with the robes she is “reminded much more of what I’m trying to do on the path.” These words emphasize personal agency and intentionality and attest to the expressive and reflective functions of the robes which both communicate a purpose (spiritual plan) and cultivate harmony and correspondence between the women's inner and outer (public) selves. Additionally, Nyingma’s words speak to the ways in which the robes help to keep the nuns constantly aware and engaged in the Buddhist teleological aim of reaching enlightenment and working for the benefit of others. Tenzin suggests that “you are very powerful when you use them [robes]” because “you can remind yourself, yes, I am different now.” Again, the robes consolidate and confirm a sacred inner identity which was once in conflict with modern secular society, but is now embraced and empowered through this effective public symbol. Along these lines, in an anecdote about her first time in the robes, Jiyul alludes to the way that the robes shift focus and meaning from the physical to the non-physical realm:

I am a little bit so tall compared to other young Korean women, so my first Korean robe was so short and maybe the other person look at me and make fun, but I am very proud of myself for becoming a nun: I didn't know to feel shame or shy. So after becoming a nun, I concentrated on myself and have more confidence in myself.

Thus, instead of being concerned with her physical appearance, the robes helped to shift Jiyul's focus to internal matters and gave her the confidence to relinquish attachments to physical appearance and to concentrate on internal development instead. Sources of self-esteem are thereby displaced from one realm of reality to another and Jiyul is empowered by this displacement to focus inwards. A related function of the robes pertains to the Buddhist ideal of non-attachment, which many of the nuns addressed when discussing their monastic uniform.

When speaking of the robes, Sherab says they “remind me to give away all these kinds of attachments” (referring to material possessions and also her clothing, make-up and hair). Dawa also described what it was like to lose her hair in preparation for ordination. She says it was “a bit traumatic,” and adds jokingly, “I was always rather attached to my hair, thank you very much.” But after her hair was shaved and she was in the robes, she realized, “I'm gunna have to just get used to it, you know, renounce all these things, cause really, what difference does it make anyway?” In creating a rupture and separation from the past self, status, and existence, the robes allow the women to rid themselves of their concern for things they now recognize as superficial distractions and to concentrate on internal experiences facilitated by their immersion into the sacred realm of Buddhism. Tenzin says that when she first put on the robes she felt “very happy” because “when you have so many burdens and you just put it [the robes], it's like... pfff” [gesturing a sense of release/relief; ‘weight off of shoulders’]. Once again, it is shown that in transforming the women into emblems of a tradition that stands in stark contrast to the fast-paced, materialistic culture of secular modernity, the robes perform a distancing function, literally and symbolically removing the women from their previous worlds and transporting them to a Buddhist one defined by selflessness and non-attachment. Rinzen explains that

If you have to wear always the same color, you will not even think of buying things in another color, and if you have only two pairs of robes, then all the energy, all the mental time, that you spend thinking about these little things, you don't waste it anymore.

In suggesting that the robes free up mental time and energy, Rinzen points as well to their role in maintaining a separation or dissociation from secular life and time. By limiting the amount of thought and energy required for menial, material things, the robes enable the nuns to concentrate on deeper internal psychological and spiritual matters. Tenzin concurs, describing the robes as important elements in creating a life that is “simple” and focused: “Before, when I need to buy this or that, and do I need to change my earrings, and oh, I need to wash my hair, and all that - when you are a nun it all becomes very simple.” Interestingly, this raises a paradox where the nuns in essence become attached to the robes in order to successfully *detach* themselves from the objects and worlds of the secular life and to realize the Buddhist notion of non-attachment. Nevertheless, as Yeshe says, wearing the robes, and the distancing function they represent, are “good because it’s a kind of renunciation and for me the robes are freedom- they give me a kind of freedom.” It is clear, therefore, that many of the women experience the separation facilitated by the robes both as freeing and empowering.

In sum, exegetical perspectives (derived from both formal doctrines and indigenous sources) tie the symbolism of the robes to events and developments in Buddhist cultural history as well as to the internal spiritual dimensions of the here and now. Constructions and explanations of the robes are framed largely in metaphoric and metonymic terms wherein an abstract realm is represented by a concrete one and where an “incorporeal or intangible state” is conveyed “in terms of the corporeal or tangible” (Burke, 1969, p. 506). In this context then, the robes, as tangible objects originally created through metaphoric processes, have become institutionalized as a symbol of Buddhism and conceptualized and lived as a metonymy of that realm: to wear them connects you with the whole, both in terms of identity and experiencing the world through the lens of Buddhism. Clearly, the symbolic meanings of the robes, even from only the exegetical perspective, are varied and implicate many dimensions of lived experience. The following sections will build upon these findings.

### **6.3. Observed Meanings and Functions of the Robe Symbol in Buddhist Contexts**

Despite their richness and complexity, exegetical meanings represent only a limited range of a symbol’s meanings, and Turner suggests that “much light may be shed on the role of the ritual symbol by equating its meaning with its use” (1967, p. 51). By observing not only what is said about a symbol, but what is done with it, operational meanings can be developed, offering additional insights into the “problems of social dynamics” related to a given symbol or ritual

(Turner, 1967, p. 51). Operational meanings are connected to the structure and composition of the group using the symbol, as well as to the affective qualities of their performative acts, and to the processes of social inclusion and exclusion they engender (Turner, 1967, p. 51). This field of meaning generally looks at the functional meanings of a symbol in various contexts, but here, Turner's notion of the 'operational' field will inspire an analysis of the pragmatics and uses of the robes within specific socio-cultural context of Thosamling. Accordingly, the meanings associated to the robes in this section will be established both through ethnographic observations and narrative accounts.

In both my observations and conversations with the nuns at Thosamling, the robes emerged as important symbols in daily life, but also of ritual initiation and transformation. Given the experience of most of the nuns with waiting (often several years) before being granted permission to ordain, many dwelled in a space of anticipation for quite a while before actually being able to don the monastic robes. When discussing her ordination, Yeshe said that she had been “thinking about this moment for at least 10 years,” adding that there was “just *something* about the robes.” She says that she “had all this mythology in mind” and “had this imagination concerning the robes.” It was not easy for her to articulate, but she said “there was something etheric about these robes,” noting that “when you are outside of the robes you don’t really know what the process is that is going on.” Once she ordained and moved into Thosamling, she was finally able to experience this anticipated initiation- to wear the robes and experience firsthand what she had so longed dreamed of. Her dreams, in fact, turned literally to nightmares, as she admits that after getting ordained she “had quite a few nightmares” and would often “wake up in the middle of the night, asking myself: ‘What are you doing?!’” It was “really quite an experience to go through,” she says, comparing it to being “like an acrobatic... I mean because everything is changing.” Yeshe's articulations of the robes as agents of transformation evoke a strong and powerful sense not simply of change, but more along the lines of a metamorphosis or transfiguration. As Yeshe says, wearing the robes “changes everything” and signals, both to others and to the wearer herself, that she is a full and true member of the sacred order of the Buddhist sangha. This transformation, or transfiguration, from lay person to ordained nun, essentially changes the women from mundane to sacred beings, and as demonstrated in Yeshe's comments, this is not always a seamless transformation, but one which requires significant adaptation and adjustment.



Several of the nuns described their first experiences with the robes, highlighting the learning and initiation processes involved in these transformation processes. Dolma recalls that on the day of her ordination she required assistance to “first put on her robes properly”:

One nun she tied my belt - she put the robes on for me and she tied my belt extremely tight, like ridiculously tight, and I thought I'd have to live like this for the rest of my life. [chuckling] So, I really hated it straight away... not a very nice introduction to the robes; but, of course, later on I figured out you could loosen your belt!

Dawa recounts a similar introduction to the robes, recalling that when she first got ordained she was so worried about the lower robes falling down that she used to cinch the waist belt very tight. She laughed at the memory, saying that she now realizes this isn't necessary and actually finds the robes quite comfortable. Along with Yeshe's comments, Dolma and Dawa's stories point to the extreme importance of this costume and to the power and respect afforded the robes, as well as to the fear and uncertainty that the women felt regarding appropriate ways of demonstrating this respect and of properly wearing, handling, and relating to this key Buddhist symbol. Their reticence to make adjustments or alter it in any way (at least initially) highlight as well the limits of their insights and preparation for the extremely important initiation act of receiving and donning the highly symbolic robes. Their collective experiences also demonstrate that with time, they learn and adapt, relaxing their initially rigid and formal approach to the robes and mastering a natural way of wearing them that connects the nuns to their profound symbolism.

While most of the nuns had gotten ordained years, or decades before our meeting, a small group of nuns (Tenzin, Palden, and Thubten among them) were ordained while we were living at Thosamling, so I had a chance to know and observe the women as lay people and then as nuns. I attended the morning meditation on the nuns' first day back at Thosamling after they underwent the ordination ceremony. The new nuns were the last to arrive to the temple that morning and their anxiety and self-consciousness was palpable. Despite the fact that a majority of the other nuns and lay participants already in the temple had their eyes closed and were concentrating on meditative practice, the latecomers seemed keenly aware of the fact that they were being observed. They touched and adjusted their robes much more than the elder nuns do and moved with a type of self-conscious apprehension as they prepared for the customary three prostrations that all are expected to perform upon entering the temple.

Generally, a nun will stand straight up and then lean a little forward, hunching slightly at the shoulders to ensure that the zen (upper robe) does not slide down or off her back. She typically grabs the left and right sides of the zen, near the ends and pulls it tight across her back, evening it out so that there is an equal length hanging on both sides. Once the zen hangs evenly, she prostrates: her hands are brought up into a prayer position (the heels of the hand and tips of the fingers pressed together but cupped slightly, leaving a small hollow space between the palms) and then raised first to the forehead or top of head; then dropped secondly to the mouth or under the chin, and thirdly to the heart (center of chest); then she moves down, dropping her hands to the floor and getting onto her knees before leaning to touch her forehead to the ground. She stands back up and repeats the sequence. It is evident that while prostrations involve a stereotyped sequence of specific movements, the manner, style, and intricate details with which they are performed vary among nuns. It is also evident that these variations are developed over time and are a function of repetition, familiarity, and acquired skill. Thus, while the elder nuns prostrate and maneuver in their robes with a sort of automatic ease, the new nuns, especially on this first day in the temple, were somewhat awkward as their nerves and self-consciousness expressed themselves in uncertain gazes, slower, more tentative movements, and repeated adjustments. Prostrations are an important practice in Tibetan Buddhism and are conceived of as effective means of purifying delusion and overcoming negative karma (Powers, 2009, p. 87-88). Physically debasing oneself in front of high masters or symbols of deities is useful, according to Tibetan Buddhism, for counteracting pride, recognizing the superior wisdom and compassion of the buddhas and bodhisattvas, and expressing the desire and intention of attaining a similar level of actualization (Powers, 2009, p. 87).

Thus, there are many implicit and symbolic meanings embedded in the choreographed prostrations, which, like the robes, come to embody some of the basic principles of the Buddhist Path. When observing more seasoned monastics perform prostrations, their movements are almost effortless and they move with a natural ease that somehow minimizes the physicality of the act and provides the observer with a sense of these symbolic meanings and the intentions and symbolism behind the movements. The self-consciousness which marked these new nuns' use of the robes during their first time in the temple, however, drew attention to the physical act as it was evident that rather than focusing their thoughts and intentions on the symbolism of the prostrations (as is customary for more advanced practitioners), they were preoccupied with maneuvering within

the robes and seemed to be concentrating most on their physical movements. As with the other nuns discussed above, the type of apprehension and unease which colored the nuns' movements were only temporary and dissipated as they became progressively more comfortable and attuned to life in the robes.

This discussion establishes some connections between the robes and what Marcel Mauss refers to as 'body techniques' (1973). Such techniques represent the ways in which "from society to society," people "know how to use their bodies" (1973, p. 70). Sociological, psychological, and biological attributes influence the manner in which individuals acquire and develop physical ways of being and doing, such that techniques of the body are a form of "social idiosyncrasy" (p. 78). In relation to the monastic robes, the ways that the nuns learn to wear this symbolic dress are indicative of particular body techniques, some of them being associated to the traditions of their country of origin. The Korean nuns, for example, had a shared and distinctive way of prostrating when compared to the other nuns. Though they followed the same sequence, they were more composed and exact in their movements, keeping their knees together as they entered and exited the kneeling position. Evidently, the way that the different women, and groups of women, perform their prostrations and manipulate their robes were learned and perfected over time, being shaped and determined by processes of "prestigious imitation":

The child, the adult, imitates actions which have succeeded and which he has seen successfully performed by people in whom he has confidence and who have authority over him.... It is precisely this notion of the prestige of the person who performs the ordered, authorized, test action vis-à-vis the imitating individual that contains all the social element. (Mauss, 1973, p. 73)

The aspect of prestige is an important one, for as Mauss notes, imitation is inspired by success and authority, and as attested to in the preceding discussion, the robes function as reminders and connectors to the prestigious history of Buddhism and to great leaders of the tradition. Thus, in acquiring body techniques related to the robes, the nuns are integrated into the Buddhist monastic world through their imitation and emulation of prestigious leaders.

At Thosamling, the central 'prestigious leader' was the resident geshe (teacher/lama), an elderly Tibetan monk with extensive knowledge and expertise in Tibetan Buddhism, having obtained the highest scholarly degree and having previously acted as abbot and advisor to a number of monastic institutions. When I first arrived at Thosamling it was winter, and the resident geshe -

or Geshe-la, as he is called - was away until spring. The winters are cold and damp in this northern region and to protect themselves from the weather the nuns added additional layers to their monastic uniform- long sleeved shirts, sweaters, fleeces and vests in addition to knitted toques or caps. These pieces were often worn in place of the traditional vest and were various shades of red and maroon, in keeping (as much as possible) with the typical color of the robes. While I originally did not make much of the nuns' winter dress, considering the additions as appropriate and even necessary given the climate, one of the nuns told me that things would change once Geshe-la returned. She was correct- once Geshe-la moved back into the nunnery, the nuns' attire changed – while the toques and hats remained, most of the non-traditional additions (long-sleeved shirts, jackets, etc.) disappeared, being offset by thicker (woolen) versions of the zen and more subtle layers worn under (instead of over or in place of) the traditional dhonka (vest). The adherence to traditional and prescribed monastic dress that Geshe-la inspired among the nuns speaks to his power and prestige and to the nuns' desire to conform to the expectations of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. The change in the nunnery's atmosphere upon Geshe-la's return, as expressed in the shift from a lax to a more formal mode of dressing, is indicative of the power dynamics inherent in the Tibetan tradition and in Thosamling as an institution of that tradition. It was somewhat akin to children being on their best behaviour when a parent is present, or the ways employees might act in the presence of their boss. In this manner, the robes became a vehicle through which deference, respect, and a desire to belong were all expressed, in ways particular to Thosamling as a non-traditional institution where, contrary to traditional monastic sites, prestigious leaders are not always present. In this context, then, the robes also represent reliance or dependence on a 'prestigious leader' - a figure of both authority and authenticity - to restore formal order and to ensure that the nuns do not lose track of, or wander too far from, the Path.

In this way, Geshe-la fulfills a role similar and parallel to that of the robes, reminding the nuns of their commitments and of the appropriate ways of operating with the sacred world of Tibetan Buddhism. In other words, prestigious leaders, Geshe-la in this case, operate as symbols as much as the robes do, reflecting and reinforcing the order of the Buddhist world (or cosmos) and displaying the complex social, emotional, and psychological functions of symbols at the operational level. In a related vein, the type of social control represented and enforced by Geshe-la, and also the robes themselves, speak to processes of acquiring new habitus.

Habitus, according to Marcel Mauss (1973), is the customary, socially transferred habits of bodily action and being that are acquired through imitation and learning within a specific socio-cultural environment, and individualized through practice and reason. As converts to Buddhism, ordaining only as adults, the nuns in this study have not completely internalized the habitus associated to the monastic lifestyle and so rely significantly upon authentic and prestigious leaders such as Geshe-la to guide and shape them along their monastic paths. An interesting point of comparison for such ideas and symbolic meanings is Lhamo - the founder and head nun of Thosamling- who is likewise a leader in the nunnery but who represents and embodies quite different operational meanings than the resident geshe.

While Geshe-la represents traditional Tibetan Buddhist perspectives and functions directly and through the robes, as a symbol of this tradition, Lhamo is a different kind of leader, representing a different kind of symbolic meaning. She is well-respected and her dedication and work ethic were admired by nuns and lay residents alike. She was single-handedly responsible for running the nunnery, overseeing every aspect of its operations, including water and power supplies, food and meals, room rentals, staffing, ritual observances, language courses, gardening and grounds, website and email correspondence, and countless other major and minor duties. Whether by choice or necessity, Lhamo had never mastered the Tibetan language and she had not completed any long-term, formal Buddhist studies as a nun. Additionally, because she had spent all of her time at Thosamling, she had never belonged to any traditional Tibetan institution, and so has received limited formal instruction or mentoring in regards to Tibetan philosophy and ritual practices. Not having developed sufficient expertise in the most valued and important fields of Buddhism (philosophy and practice), yet having achieved the impressive feat of establishing one of the only international Tibetan Buddhist nunneries in the world, Lhamo occupied a somewhat ambiguous position in regards to status and symbolic function. She did not inspire the same sort of disciplined respect and reverence that Geshe-la did: no one lowered their head when she entered a room nor did they prostrate at her feet as they did for him. As indicated, there are many different reasons for this power and prestige differential<sup>26</sup>, and the robes, along with their representative functions, also play a role.

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<sup>26</sup> Gender differences may play a role, however they are not, on their own, a major factor in these power/prestige differentials. Many female monastics (even Western nuns, and particularly those acting as abbesses in traditional nunneries or occupying prominent positions within a lineage or school, or recognized reincarnations) are highly respected in Tibetan Buddhism-both in general society and monastic institutional contexts, receiving treatment comparable to that of a man of similar status/position/title.

Returning to Geshe-la for comparison, it is clear that the operational meanings he expressed and embodied were connected to his status and authority within the traditional hierarchies and institutional systems of Tibetan Buddhism: he was a Tibetan male who had completed long-term formal studies, had occupied several positions within various traditional organizations, and embodied a traditional and recognizable habitus. His presence in the nunnery authenticated both the institution and its members, and encouraged strict adherence to established doctrine and comportment. This contrasts with Lhamo's background and symbolic function within the nunnery since she did not stand for formal tradition but symbolized instead its complete opposite, that is, alterity and innovation. Much like with Geshe-la, these symbolic associations were expressed through the symbol of the robes.

As mentioned above, the responsibilities that Lhamo fulfils at Thosamling are nearly endless and range from administrative to hard-labor jobs. She was always doing three things at once but when moments opened up between tasks or when she slowed enough to sit for a few minutes, she was always surrounded by the nunnery's three resident dogs. Those dogs had been with Lhamo since construction first started on Thosamling and the bond she had with these animals was undeniable. She was always petting and playing with the white dogs and their hair often covered Lhamo's lower robes and zen. In Tibetan Buddhism, monastic robes are highly respected by all -lay and ordained: it is taboo to step over them or to touch or even point at them with your feet, and they must be kept clean and neat and worn properly at all times (Tsono, 1996). Needless to say, when combined with the flour dust from baking bread and the other smudges and marks from her various maintenance duties, the dog hair, white and particularly visible against the maroon fabric, compromised the cleanliness (and hence purity) of Lhamo's monastic robes. I had witnessed a few of the nuns gently brushing the hair from her robes as they sat beside her or lovingly shaking their heads when they witnessed her lay out on the dirty kitchen floor so that she could light the gas oven. The responses and reactions that her less than pristine robes elicited among the nuns were publically expressed in a joking and playful manner (if at all), and seemed to communicate affection and tolerance rather than deference and prestigious respect, as in Geshe-la's case.

Clearly, Lhamo's use of the robes expresses a far different meaning than Geshe-la's: she is not insisting on formality and tradition, but is rather transgressing tradition through the operational meanings she communicates with the robes. I observed an additional instance where Lhamo's

treatment and usage of the robes communicated transgressive meanings when, returning to the nunnery one afternoon, I came upon a truck unloading large plastic pipes to be used in the electrical upgrades happening at the nunnery. A small group of Thosamling residents were there, including Lhamo and several of the Korean and Indonesian nuns. Because there is no road access directly to the nunnery, the team was faced with the challenge of transporting the eight foot pipes through the fields along the narrow path to the nunnery grounds. In an effort to devise ways to expedite the process and to enable multiple pipes to be carried at once, Lhamo suggested that the nuns use their zens (monastic shawls) to bundle several pipes together, which would allow one person at each end to lift and carry multiple pipes. Lhamo removed her zen, placed it in the dust on the ground and wrapped it around the dirty plastic pipes. The group stood by, silently watching and then Lhamo asked Jiyul to do the same. Jiyul paused, the shock and uncertainty clearly evident in her expression, but, she went ahead, and following Lhamo's instructions, she too removed her zen and wrapped it around a small pile of pipes. The nuns who were present happened to all be from Eastern backgrounds, and for the Koreans in particular, who had always displayed the most traditional reverence for the sanctity of the robes and the monastic code, there was a definite sense of unease in using parts of their robes in this manner. In this instance, there was obviously more at stake than following monastic rules of comportment. In initiating a transgression of the standardized norms, associated habitus, and symbolic meanings connected to the robes, it appeared that Lhamo was violating the sacred nature of the robes and communicating disregard for the symbolic associations it represents. In this sense, the meanings of the robes as shaped by Lhamo express essentially the opposite of the meanings communicated by and through Geshe-la: Lhamo's use of the robes symbolizes secular utilitarianism and improvisation rather than sanctity and rigid formalism. Thus, while the operational meanings of the robes associated to Geshe-la serve to remind the nuns of traditional meanings, structures, and institutions in Tibetan Buddhism, bringing them back to the historical core of the tradition, Lhamo's use of the robes symbolizes movement away from tradition and her non-conformist approach signals alterity and the potential for change and innovation within the tradition.

Reflecting on these observations it is evident that multiple and divergent symbolic meanings are operationalized through individual nuns' and leaders' approaches and usage of the robes. As habitus, the robes also indicate the ways that abstract Buddhist philosophical and cultural

principles are variously embodied and ingrained, from the unconscious to the most conscious levels of existence. In regards to authenticity, habitus plays a crucial role, acting as an index or marker for foundational Buddhist principles and revealing one's mastery and embodiment of that sacred world. In terms of the operational meanings embodied by institution leaders, it was shown that divergent, and even antithetic meanings were communicated, ranging from representations of tradition, hierarchy, and authority, to non-conformity and innovation resulting in affection. It follows that the opposition of meaning and symbolic representation that the leaders of the community embody has implications for the institutional status and nature, as well as the authenticity, of Thosamling- an issue that will be considered further in the symbolic chapter of the final, adjustment phase. In the remainder of this chapter, additional networks of meanings, inspired by the positional field, will be explored, creating a fuller understanding of the stakes involved with the powerful symbol of the monastic robes.

#### **6.4. Meanings of the Robes in Western Public Spaces**

The final field of meaning defined by Turner is the positional one, wherein symbolic meanings are derived from their “relationship to other symbols in a totality, a *Gestalt*, whose elements acquire their significance from the system as a whole” (1967, p. 51). In addition to revealing relational meanings, symbols, from the perspective of this field, also demonstrate the property of ‘polysemy,’ where “the same symbol may be reckoned to have different senses at different phases in a ritual performance, or rather, different senses become paramount at different times” (Turner, 1967, p. 51). Turner's theoretical work thus elaborates the 'semantic structure' of symbols which acquire multiple and sometimes divergent meanings depending on the specific network of symbols with which they are related. While this section does not directly employ the type of semantic analysis typically associated with this third field of meaning, it will use Turner's insights on the polysemy and contextualized meanings to frame a pragmatic, functional analysis (similar to that taken in the previous section) to explore the social constructions and meanings of the Buddhist monastic robes in distinctly non-Buddhist and non-Tibetan contexts (namely, Western public spaces). Due to the fact that the women in this study are all converts from non-Tibetan backgrounds, and given that many of them move between Tibetan sacred spaces and non-Tibetan secular spaces, positional polarity emerged as a key factor determining the meanings and



functions ascribed to the symbol of the robes<sup>27</sup>. This section, then, focuses on the contradictory and even antithetic meanings of the robes which emerge in Tibetan Buddhist institutional spaces versus non-Tibetan public spaces in the West.

The robes play an essential role in the ways that the nuns adapt their non-Tibetan identities to the monastic world and their Buddhist selves to their native, non-Tibetan worlds. On one hand, the monastic robes facilitate social bonding and integration, moving the nuns further into the Tibetan Buddhist world, while on the other hand, the robes alienate the nuns, distancing them from their native traditions and the social worlds from which they came. In their sociological research on uniforms, Joseph and Alex (1972) argued that uniforms exert a powerful influence on their wearers suggesting that

Since no other statuses, or any touch of individuality, are recognized in the uniformed individual by others, he is encouraged to act primarily as an occupant of his uniformed status... For his peers...the uniform underscores a common membership, allegiance to the same set of rules, and the probability of similar life experiences. If he is an outsider, the uniform stresses the differences in status, norms, and way of life. It serves, then, to bind the wearer to his peers and to separate him from outsiders. (p. 726)

These types of ‘binding’ and ‘separating’ functions were evident in the women's narratives, demonstrating the highly context-dependent nature of the monastic uniform. Choden for instance, says that “the idea of wearing robes is that you are the same as everybody else when living in a monastic community.” That all changes, of course, when you live in the West: “but if you live in the West, that is not the case: you are often living alone and you are actually wearing something that no one else is wearing, so you are actually standing out constantly, wherever you go.” Nyingma made a similar observation, addressing the implications of occupying the conspicuous position indicated by the robes in non-Buddhist contexts:

... especially when you wear the robes properly, I mean, you can't hide so easily.

Especially in a sangha of thousands where there's just a handful of monks and nuns you

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<sup>27</sup> The observational and interview data used in this section concentrate largely on the Western nuns, who addressed the differences between these two contexts more explicitly than the nuns from Asian countries, particularly the Korean nuns, for whom publically wearing monastic robes in Korea seemed to be more common, and accepted, and therefore less of an issue in terms of meaning and existential/ identity implications. For the nuns from Indonesia, they had not returned to Indonesia since getting ordained, and thus had not experienced living within the robes back home. Consequently, they did not address the types of context-dependent meanings being explored in this section.

*really* stand out. Because of the robes you know, you have to be much more in check.

So, it's a little bit like social pressure, but actually it helps - sometimes it's too much, but usually it helps.

In connecting the monastic robes to 'social pressure', public scrutiny, and the feeling of having to be "much more in check," Nyingma provides a first-hand account of the challenges connected to the symbolic meanings of the robes. Her acknowledgement that it is sometimes "too much," echoes Yeshe's experiences of wearing the robes outside of Tibetan/Eastern contexts. She says,

If I'm in the West after a few days it's [wearing the robes] done because it's so tiring - really. Sometimes I just want to disappear, because really, it is so tiring. It's so tiring because it is energy as well. You know, you are more open.

Thus, while being "more open" is part of the intention and goal of being a nun, Yeshe suggests that it is also part of what makes wearing the robes (and dealing with the constant barrage of stares, comments, and questions that they elicit) exhausting and overwhelming. Other nuns shared similar stories of living as a conspicuous 'other' in Western contexts, demonstrating the degree to which they are challenged by maintaining the symbols (i.e. 'properly wearing the robes'), frame of mind, and moral dispositions of their new world once they return to their old worlds. As Buddhist nuns they have in many ways become foreigners and even, in some sense traitors to their previous secular, modern worlds. The work of French historian Paul Veyne (1988), may help to provide a framework for exploring these symbolic and social dynamics and the strategies the nuns use to cope with these clashes and conflicts of meanings and worlds.

In his work on Greek mythology, Veyne (1988) considers the plurality of truths not only within a society but within each individual, suggesting that there are many different ways of interpreting reality, each associated with a distinct 'programme of truth.' He says,

Throughout the ages a plurality of programmes of truth has existed, and it is these programmes, involving different distributions of knowledge, that explain the subjective degrees of intensity of beliefs, the bad faith, and the contradictions that coexist in the same individual (1988, p. 27).

In this way, in different contexts and under different conditions, an individual holds a particular point of view in regards to what is true, and when that individual moves from one context or set of conditions into another, their notion of truth also moves. This study, and the lives and experiences of the convert nuns that it considers, provide an interesting variation on Veyne's theory

in that the nuns have moved fully, through conversion and ordination, from one programme of truth (that defining the modern secular societies they were raised in) to another (the Tibetan Buddhist one). The robes thus become symbolic representations of the women's decisive abandonment and rejection of modern secular society.

Veyne's theory postulates that we “move endlessly from one program to another” and that we do this “without realizing it” (1988, p. 86). He also suggests that “we do not suffer when our mind, apparently contradicting itself, secretly changes programmes of truth and interest, as it unceasingly does,” because this is “our most habitual way of being” (p. 86). From his perspective then, for as long as one resides within a particular programme one holds, in a full and sincere manner, the truth of that programme; and when they shift to another programme, they can hold the truths of this new programme with the same degree of sincerity and commitment as they did when they were operating within the previous programme of truth. In the case of the nuns, however, this is not what is going on. For them, as ordained members of the Buddhist tradition, they have devoted their lives to fully understanding and indeed embodying a single programme of truth, which they have come to value and prioritize above all others. Thus, in presenting itself as an absolute ideology and complete, comprehensive framework, Buddhism is adopted by the nuns as the sole programme governing all aspects of their existence, regardless of context.

The robes play a crucial role in this mono-programme approach to life, disrupting or impairing the shifting and multi-programme arrangement suggested by Veyne. In part because of the visible and public nature of the robes, and because the nuns are literally wrapped in their religion, constantly wearing the robes, and because the chief function of the robe symbol is to remind the women of this religion (or programme of truth), shifting between different programmes does not happen for them in the seamless and automatic fashion suggested by Veyne. In their capacity to remind and transform, the monastic robes bring the women back, again and again, to the Buddhist world if and when they stray from it. As such, the robes do facilitate mental shifts, but instead of moving the nuns away from or outside of the Buddhist programme, the robes constantly shift them back towards the truths of the Buddhist way. While the robes remind the women of Buddhist tenets and teachings (non-attachment, selflessness, etc.), they also function as determinants of social interactions and positionings and so become a primary basis of identity and selfhood. By constantly reminding the nuns of who they are (or at least who they aim to become

through Buddhist practice), the robes impede shifts to alternate programmes of truth, forcing the women to stay connected to Buddhism and to the Buddhist principles and ideals they embody as ordained nuns.

What's more is that this impeding function of the robes does not appear to be problematic for the women, but on the contrary, seems to be precisely what they sought through ordination. Getting ordained, and adopting the monastic uniform, combined with their willingness to give away the possessions and markers of their former lives, collectively express a desire to move into and abide wholly within a Tibetan Buddhist world (or programme of truth). As the following example from Choden's story suggests, the women resist shifting between different programmes of truth, devising strategies, inspired by the perpetual reminder of the robe symbol, to remain fully and always within the Buddhist world/programme.

Choden, who consistently wears her robes in both Western and Eastern contexts, suggests that in the West "you have to turn the whole thing around because you are *not* anonymous... because you look so different, you are outstanding and everyone will look at you." Her approach to dealing with this sometimes awkward and stressful situation is to use her conspicuous position and the attention attracted by the robes in the service of Buddhism and as a way of practice:

I use the fact that I am standing out and that people are looking at me in a dharmic way: I very simply pray, that when people are looking at me, "May they connect with the dharma." So, you can, you can just have that approach, and then you can enjoy people looking at you, instead of trying to hide, cause it is, it's difficult with a shaved head and only wearing red.

Choden's technique of flipping a potentially stressful and alienating situation into a 'dharmic' one, suggests that she is able to successfully turn potentially threatening situations into positive ones when she looks at it from the perspective of the Buddhist programme of truth. Thus, rather than shifting between Western programmes and Buddhist ones, Choden uses the robes as a means of remaining fully and constantly within that Buddhist world, even when she is in a context where this choice makes her vulnerable to adversity or social judgment. Indeed, through the doctrine of the Two Truths, Buddhist philosophy seems to support Choden's approach and the desire evident in other nuns' stories to remain wholly and perpetually within the Buddhist programme of truth.

The most fundamental teachings in Buddhism relate to suffering and the nature of reality. The doctrine of the Two Truths postulates that suffering results from our misconceptions of reality,

whereby we fail to distinguish between conventional truth (i.e. the way things appear) and ultimate truth (i.e. the way things actually are)(Newland, 1999). From the Buddhist perspective, suffering arises when we equate the way things appear with their being real, being true, and having some kind of innate existence. But if we achieve an understanding of ultimate reality and are able to see all things as empty of concrete or inherent qualities, we will be freed from suffering and be that much closer to reaching Nirvana. Thus, bringing our conventional understandings in line with ultimate understanding is the goal – a goal which parallels the effort, displayed in this analysis, to minimize the number of programmes of truth we access and to live instead, fully and completely within a single programme (i.e. the ultimate truth of Buddhism). If you recall, Yeshe was the nun who was mesmerized by the robes, but then had nightmares once she got ordained. Later in our conversation she came back to this bewildering experience with the robes, saying

Yeah, it's very tricky because you, we, have to let go and not create other things. Before you would let go and then create your, I don't know what, illusion, but now, it's such an illusion - what are the robes? They're still conventional reality - there's nothing ultimate about them. They're just a tool, like you use this or this, and then you let it go.

Drawing on the teaching of the Two Truths, Yeshe reframes her once naïve understanding of the robes as “etheric,” transformational objects to one where the robes become just another conventional tool useful only in as much as they help her realize the true and ultimate nature of reality. This example illustrates the degree to which Yeshe has internalized Buddhist teachings, applying them to every aspect of her life, and using the symbols and implements of her Buddhist life (i.e. the robes) as a means of reminding her of these core teachings and of her desire to remain always and only within the Buddhist world, that is, the Buddhist programme of truth.

The positional field exposes the multiple and potentially conflicting meanings that come to be associated to the robe symbol, and Veyne's theory of ‘programmes of truth’ (1988) helps clarify the ways in which the nuns work to unify these divergent meanings and interpretive frames. From this perspective, the monastic robes seem to signify the nuns' resistance to shifting between multiple programmes of truth, opting instead to use the various reminders symbolized by the robes as complementary means of returning and remaining within the single and absolute truth of the Buddhist way.

## 6.5. Conclusion

In the sections above, the meanings of the robe symbol were broadly related to Turner's three fields of meaning – the exegetical, operational, and positional (1967; 1968; 1979). Much like how discursive events facilitated the women's initiations into the enchanted world of Buddhism (conversion), in this phase it is the symbol of the robes that initiates the women into the perpetual enchantment of the monastic life, transporting them fully into the sacred Buddhist world. Analysis revealed that the robes serve to remind wearers of the foundational principles of Tibetan Buddhism and of the commitment they have made to follow the path of the Buddha. These reminders implicate multiple dimensions of being and are articulated through metaphoric and metonymic associations. Additionally, the robes were also shown to serve transformational functions, changing wearers into embodied emblems of Buddhism, perpetually immersing them in the Buddhist programme of truth. The social implications of the robes were also explored, particularly in regards to their role in initiating new members and in articulating the dynamics of power and status in the institutional context. Divergent meanings, represented and expressed through particular uses of the robes, demonstrate the multiple and context-bound meanings of the robes, establishing a polarity between their symbolism and function within Tibetan versus non-Tibetan milieus.

As a whole, these layers of meaning point to the fact that the women's physical, emotional, psychological, and social lives are all impacted by the dress that they have adopted. It has been suggested that the adoption of monastic robes through Buddhist ordination "signifies the simultaneous adoption into a whole matrix of doctrinal meanings and disciplinary practices to which the monk should gradually orient his behaviour" (Mills, 2013, p. 43). The metaphor of a 'whole matrix' is appropriate for describing the complex, multi-dimensional implications of the robe symbol and relates to Marcel Mauss' notion of the 'total social fact' (1966). Total social facts are concerned with the whole of societies and inform and organize seemingly distinct practices and institutions. They represent phenomena which are "at once legal, economic, religious, aesthetic, morphological and so on" (Mauss, 1966, p.76). The robes can be considered total social facts, as defined by Mauss, because they communicate the core principles of the Buddhist religious system, represent a specific economic structure (a complex economy based around *dana* (donation), sponsorship, and exchange), constrain and inform bodily practices, and denote moral,

as well as social, psychological, and political ideals. Mauss also warns, however, that total social facts are not to be studied “as if they were motionless, in a static state” (1966, p. 102). Indeed, as “whole entities,” total social facts are dynamic, context-dependent constructs that are at once shaping and shaped by their social environments. In recognizing and defending the integrity of the robe symbol across situations - which is simultaneously an effort to maintain the integrity of their religious involvement and dedication - the nuns are expressing the intention and goal of living always and only within the sacred world of Buddhism.

The following chapter delves further into this desire for constant, deep immersion in the Buddhist world, paying particular attention to the ways in which this desire reflects and shapes the women's identities; and the chapters on the final phase deal with the nuns' adjustment to ordained life and demonstrate the challenges and variable successes that the women have in realizing this intention and pursuing this goal of total immersion and perpetual flow.

## **7. Selfhood in the Liminal Phase of Ordination**

As the women progress along their journeys, transitioning from Buddhist converts to Buddhist nuns, the significant changes they undergo have distinct effects on their identities and who they are as persons, as women, and as Tibetan Buddhists in the world. The preceding chapters have established that the women were attracted to the Buddhist path in large part because of resonances between the Buddhist system and the goods (spirituality, altruism, non-materialism) which were foundational in their personal lives. Ordination represents an opportunity to fully separate from the secular world and to become completely committed to the Buddhist way and fully immersed in a sacred flow. Returning to the theories from Taylor (moral framework, orienting goods) and Turner (rites of passage, flow), this chapter will explore how these core goods, which also represent the women's 'true selves' (altruistic, non-materialistic spiritual seekers), are implicated in the identity transformations they experience as a result of ordination and their move from the margins of secular modernity to the permanently liminal position of Buddhist monasticism.

Overall, it will be argued that ordination represents a means for the women to heal the disjunction and lack of meaning that defined their pre-Buddhist lives and to create a consonance between their private (inner) and public (external) selves. By entering the world of a sacred monastic existence that both reflects and supports the core goods they identify with, the women become emblems of Buddhism and through their social interactions with others they are able to develop a reinforced sense of self that is defined not only by these moral goods, but also by the purpose and place that membership in the sacred Buddhist world affords.

### **7.1. Hierarchies of Good**

In the identity chapter of the conversion phase, it was established that through conversion, the women had adopted Buddhism as the primary framework orienting their personal, social, and moral lives, in large part because it is based on values and moral priorities that they had identified as core aspects of their personal selves. Taylor proposes that identity is

defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done, or what I endorse or oppose. In other words, it is the horizon within which I am capable of taking a stand. (1989, p. 27)



Moreover, he suggests that identity is not only established by taking a stand on moral matters, but also in positioning ourselves in reference to a "defining community" (Taylor, 1989, p. 36). The women's articulations of self demonstrate as much since, as described previously, the crucial aspects of Buddhism that facilitate their self-definition are not limited to moral ideas and concepts (dharma (Buddhist teachings) and karma), but also include their teacher(s) (lama) and the wider Buddhist community (sangha) as a whole. As Taylor suggests, the assurance of being oriented toward, and in contact with the goods that define us provides "a sense of wholeness, of fullness of being as a person or self, that nothing else can" (1989, p. 62-63). In this sense, what is at stake in the women's ordination and full immersion in Buddhism is the opportunity to create a greater consonance between their internal worlds and their external, public experience, ensuring that the core aspects of their identities are supported, reflected, and cultivated in the intentions, activities, and relationships of their everyday lives. In the sections to follow, the impact of ordination on the women's identities and the core goods which have been identified as the basis of their private selves will be explored in greater detail and then additionally considered in regards to Turner's concept of liminality (1967, 1969, 1979).

*Spiritual Inclination.* In the previous identity chapter, spirituality emerged as a primary good articulated by the women. From their perspectives, being actively engaged with existential thoughts and theories, and diligently working on self-development and spiritual advancement, are core components of who they are as human beings. Colloquial meanings associated with 'spirituality' often include religious interests, devotional ideas and practices, and concerns relating to the 'soul' (Zinnbauer, et al., 1997). In the context of this study however, common notions of spirituality were rejected and challenged, for instance by Yeshe who said that she was "fed up" with being labeled in such a way, insisting "I am not religious and not spiritual." For her, then, the spiritual aspects of her identity are connected to existential curiosities and her efforts towards deeper understanding of self and reality: "I think, I study, and I try to understand and I observe." She goes on to qualify these efforts as "constant" and so defines spirituality in terms of "continuously observing and perceiving and going deeper and deeper and feeling that you can go even deeper than that." Pema similarly resisted conventional notions of spirituality and religiousness, for when I asked her to explain her understanding and use of the term she defined spirituality as "study, study, study." While she acknowledged its relationship to rituals and prayer, she emphasized that spirituality is more about "knowing the meanings" behind these types of

religious practices “I want to be a nun to *know*,” she said. While others did not offer specific definitions of spirituality, their framings of the ordained life as primarily dedicated to study, analysis, and reflection similarly reflects the perspectives of Yeshe and Pema.

Commonly, ordination is comparatively framed as a more full and complete means of satisfying spiritual desires for deep learning and existential analysis. This excerpt from Palden's narrative serves as a prime example:

P: Well, when I first started going to the dharma centre you know, I just wanted to read books and just be an information sponge, so now I have this opportunity [to live as a nun], and my sponge is just too small for all the information. I'm just saturated, so I have the opportunity to do what I feel it is I do best.

RG: Which is what?

P: Study. To analyze in a deep, deep way, not just sort of skim over the top – but to really analyze in a deep way... And then, the main goal, is to develop a fine point of analysis where you can get to the main point of reality. Then you can get to emptiness, selflessness of all phenomenon, that's what's it's leading up to – wisdom.

And then hopefully somewhere along the way I'll be able to recognize the bodhichitta side and then put them all together and become a Buddha – poof! [laughing]

Thus, whereas the good of spiritual seeking was a preliminary component of the women's selves prior to, and even after converting to Buddhism, in those earlier periods it was experienced largely at the doctrinal level of understanding (that is, as a cognitive experience). However, in the ordination phase, spirituality is increasingly connected to habitus and motivation as the women connect their studies and internal convictions to embodied behaviours and public acts which reflect the primacy of spirituality in their lives. In this way, ordination helps to orient their lives towards spiritual pursuits and allows them to embody and enact their identities as 'spiritual seekers.'

*Altruism.* In addition to supporting the women's spiritual identities, ordination in a Buddhist tradition also confirmed and strengthened another core component of their inner selves: altruism and the desire to be of benefit to others. In Tibetan Buddhism it is taught that if study and practice are focused on individual goals or personal motivations, the results or outcomes will be compromised. Thus, “in order to study and practice properly you need to have as your motivation the thought that you are working to attain Buddhahood in order to be able to liberate all beings”

(Thrangu & O’Hearn, 2003, p. 8). This motivation is called bodhichitta and refers to the altruistic intention to benefit others. This intention was identified previously as a fundamental aspect of the women's identities and sense of self, and in the ordination phase it also emerges as a key factor in their decision to become a Buddhist nun.

In describing her life before Buddhism, Thubten says it was "meaningless" and devoid of happiness, but since getting ordained, she says she has learned to consider others more and describes how this new Buddhist perspective has provided her with a sense of “responsibility”: “Why did I become a nun? To help sentient beings, so this is a very happy responsibility, so I have to do something...I want to do as much as I can to help.” Tenzin was also concerned with being of benefit and rhetorically asked in our interview, “it is very important to help others, otherwise what is the meaning of your life if not to benefit others?” To be certain that ordination was the way that she could be of most benefit, Tenzin “started searching within herself” and began “doing experiments.” Eventually she realized that becoming a nun was the best way, explaining: “it is not like, I do not like to do worldly activities... but I must become free and I must fulfill this in order to benefit [others].” Nyingma also did ‘experiments’ in her life to determine if ordination was right for her. She recalls,

You know all that time, I had the option to be a nun or not be a nun - like no one ever forced me to be a nun, so I would find myself in different situations with my family or with friends, or at a party or work or whatever, and I, I was an exhibiting artist by then, and I would ask myself: ‘Will I be happier if I’m doing this or if I’m a nun?’ And I would ask myself: ‘Would I benefit people more if I’m doing this or if I was a nun?’ And, always, the answer came back: ‘if I was a nun’. You know it would be better for myself and better for others if I was a nun.

Dechen said that "in the West, there’s so much spiritual poverty and there’s so much loneliness... I just found there was a great need for people who were living with clarity and compassion and living for more than just themselves." From her point of view, monastics do just that and after getting ordained she "found [that] as a monastic my love is not limited to one person, or to my family, but can be spread more evenly to all people... I found a lot more love in a life of celibacy than I did in a life of relationship with just one person." In Palden’s story, her understanding of the Buddhist notion of bodhichitta was also instrumental in choosing ordination as a life path. She explains that she would have liked to get married and to “do the family thing,” but when she

reflected on the Buddhist teaching regarding bodhichitta, she realized that when you are “so intent on looking after your own family, you necessarily neglect others outside of that group. So, I thought if I *really* wanted to help people, not just those in my family, then getting ordained is what to do.” “Buddhism supposedly provides that way,” she said, “if you become a Buddha then you can benefit all sentient beings without exception.” Palden's construction of nunhood (and its extended aim of Buddhahood) positions the monastic life not only as a means of confirming and expressing the core good of altruism, but as the ultimate and most effective means of doing so.

Thus, from the women's perspectives, the good of altruism found its most full and true expression in ordained life. As Buddhist nuns, the women are able to live a lifestyle that is completely in line with their valuation of altruism and their desire to embody and actively express their dedication to serving others. This relates back to a central component of Taylor's theory which asserts that “One is a self only among other selves. A self can never be described without reference to those who surround it” (1989, p. 35). Thus, the way in which altruism is constructed within the Buddhist framework and emphasized in monastic life not only confirms the women's notions and valuation of being of benefit to others, but it shapes them into persons (i.e. nuns) who embody this ideal and allows them enhanced opportunities to discover and define themselves in this way.

*Non-Materialism.* As with the other two foundational goods that defined the women's pre-Buddhist selves, being non-materialistic was a trait and goal that ordination further confirmed and publically expressed as defining of their lives and identities. Several of the nuns spoke about getting rid of possessions and places of residence as early as the conversion phase, and the women consistently identify themselves as people who are disinterested in the trappings of the material world. Choden, for example, says that she was never very interested in possessions, she had “no big car, no big television, no big this and big that.” So for her, not owning many things and having to give up personal possessions were just part of the ordination process and her public confirmation of this core aspect of her self. Dolma, who also asserted a long-standing indifference and even aversion to amassing material objects and wealth, says that it is “understandable why people get ordained and why they want to give up pursuit of worldly things, because there’s no real essence to that.” As indicated in Dolma’s words, Buddhist ideology resonates with the women’s non-attachment to material things and their will to embrace a lifestyle devoted to ends other than consumerism.

Becoming a nun allows the women to occupy positions which make it “a lot easier to see... the suffering in it [material objects]” (Dolma) and Buddhist teachings provide an institutional and authority-based confirmation of this view, imbuing non-attachment with deeper meaning and connecting the good of detachment from material conditions to concepts reinforced by the Buddhist worldview (i.e suffering, impermanence, etc.). Along these lines, Rinzen suggests that “when you follow the vows, you are not concerned with the rest.” She used the example of the robes, as quoted in the previous chapter, to explain how a non-material based existence frees up ‘mental energy’ and allows one to focus on more important things, noting that as a nun she “doesn’t have to worry for things that I would have to worry if I was a layperson, and that totally changes my life.” In emphasizing nonattachment and releasing the women from many of the things that connected them to materialistic pursuits and the physical world, Buddhist monasticism permits them to embody and incorporate non-materialism into their everyday lives in a meaningful way, shoring up this particular component of their identities and selves.

This discussion clearly demonstrates that the core goods around which the women's selves were based as laypersons not only continue to be main foundations of selfhood in this phase, but also become embodied and expressed in a more complete and public way through ordination. Through ordination the women are able to express these core goods and have these foundational aspects of themselves recognized by those around them. In this sense, the ability to fully integrate these parts of themselves into their work, appearance, relationships, and everyday lives becomes a major driving force in their decisions to ordain and represents, therefore, a sort of higher-order good, or what Taylor calls a 'hyper-good' (1989). The following section will describe this higher-good, framing it in terms of what was established in the first symbolic chapter as the autotelic desire for 'flow' (Csíkszentmihályi, 1997; Turner, 1979).

*Autotelism: The Emergence of a Higher Good.* Taylor suggests that while we all live with “many goods” that orient our lives and provide direction, purpose, and a source of identity, we also inevitably “rank” or order them such that certain goods gain “overriding importance” compared to others (1989, p. 62). These prioritized higher (or hyper) goods are those which “above all others, provide the landmarks for what they judge to be the direction of their lives” (p. 62). For the women in this study, spirituality, altruism, and non-materialism were established as core goods since before adopting Buddhism, and once they convert and become progressively

initiated into the Buddhist world, these goods are emphasized to an even greater extent and become foundational indicators of self, not just internally, but externally as well.

This process expresses the emergence of a type of "second-order qualitative distinction" (Taylor, 1989, p. 63) wherein the continued development and expression of these goods in a cohesive, deep, and continuous way was recognized by the women as an overarching concern. Taylor (1989) suggests that when we "attribute differential worth or importance" to certain goods, they become high-order, or 'hyper-goods' in the sense that they "not only are incomparably more important than others but provide the standpoint from which these must be weighed, judged, decided about" (p. 63). In the case of these women, the hyper-good that comes into view in the ordination phase is the desire not only for full immersion, but for a lifestyle that enables dedicated cultivation of the core goods of altruism, non-materialism, and spirituality in a way that is experienced not only as cohesive and continual, but that also creates congruity between their private and public selves. In previous chapters the concepts of 'flow' (Turner, 1979) and autotelism (Csíkszentmihályi, 1997) were used to describe the women's desires to adopt a moral frame, social position, and holistic worldview that would release flow and enable them to lead lives of higher meaning and purpose. Here, Taylor's theory of moral goods allows this desire to be recast and further understood as a hyper-good that comes to define who they are by giving a more specific direction to their lives and acting as the overarching criteria with which they judge the moral priorities and direction of their lives.

Recall that Csíkszentmihályi (1997) describes autotelic persons as those who are internally driven, motivated not by a desire for money, fame, or comfort, but driven instead by seeking experiences of flow - where action and awareness merge leading to a sense of control, high concentration, loss of self-consciousness, and transformation of time. Building upon Csikszentmihalyi's insights, Turner suggests that "to flow is its own reward" (1979, p. 488) and is connected to the transformation of structure into *communitas* (unmediated communion with others) (1982, p. 58). In Csikszentmihalyi's work, flow was typically associated to experiences in leisure time where individuals experience a temporary release from complex social and technical structures (Turner, 1982, p. 57). For the nuns however, flow represents a perpetual state of immersion in the moral and sacred world of Buddhism, wherein they are constantly focused on the core goods defining themselves (and reflected in this world) and are able to lead lives where flow

experiences are perpetually realized in ways that bind them to others and reflect progression along the path to enlightenment.

Because the women's first and early encounters with Buddhism were so life changing, providing them with experiences of flow where they were able to more fully express their true selves, to concentrate internally on processes of the mind, and externally on enhancing the lives of others, ordination was framed as a means of extending and multiplying these experiences. Rinzen, for example, said that after converting to Buddhism she realized that she "didn't want to waste time doing things that I might regret – like wasting so much time on this work, or on studying something that wasn't really important", and so she "decided just to become a nun, so that I could get full-time only to study and practice the dharma." The "good results" Rinzen references represent flow experiences, and the desire to immerse herself "only" and "full-time" in Buddhism reflects the aspiration to be released from the flow-resistant structures and responsibilities ('work' and unimportant studies) of secular life and to pursue, instead, the rewarding sense of complete focus and transcendental merging of action and awareness that monasticism, as a form of flow, offers. Dechen also framed ordination and the monastic life as connected to the higher order good of autotelic flow in the sense that it allows adequate time and opportunity to cultivate the foundational goods of spirituality, altruism, and non-materialism:

Monastics- monks and nuns- have more time than people with families, responsibilities, mortgages. They can practice the dharma full time... they have more time to study, and they also have more time to listen to the problems of others.

Each of the core goods are represented here- spirituality as the practice and preservation of dharma, altruism as the ability to listen to others, and non-materialism as disengagement from economic activities (home ownership, etc.)- and they are framed by Dechen (and elsewhere by other nuns) as being optimally expressed and experienced through monastic life. Moreover, Dechen's emphasis on time is notable and reflects the notion, articulated across all of the women's narratives, that being ordained affords nuns a greater amount of time to devote to the study and practice of Buddhism.

According to Csikszentmihalyi's theory (1997), flow is experienced, in modern contexts, predominantly during leisure time activities (playing sports, engaging with and performing the arts, etc.). Thus, while lay practitioners typically spend the bulk of their time on work, family, and other such responsibilities, they experience Buddhism primarily as a leisure activity or something

they engage with during spare time. For ordained practitioners, the allocation is essentially reversed- Buddhism is their work and sangha their family, and even during leisure time they remain cloaked in the monastic robes and are still bound by their vows. In this sense, while typical lay practitioners access Buddhist-related flow for only limited periods during mostly leisure time, the nuns are able to achieve and experience flow more consistently because the monastic lifestyle affords them the time to do so. This idea is expressed in Tenzin's reflections on the lives of nuns which also highlight the importance of time:

I think that nuns have a great deal to offer the world, because I think a lot of the world's problems come from selfishness and self-centeredness and monastics are ideally, not always, but ideally living for more than just themselves, they have more time to devote to the world, to society.

Here again, we can see how the good of altruism is connected, but also subsumed by the hyper-good of autotelic flow - full immersion, complete devotion, and adherence to a perpetually sacred lifestyle. Yeshe offers another example of the way that autotelic flow emerges as a unifying hyper-good when she likewise states: "People are running here and there, they are lost in relationships, so they don't have the time to see what is really happening now, and go inside. So we [Buddhist nuns] do it more." Additionally, she says that since becoming a nun "I know where I am, I know why I do it." Her statement reflects the orienting function of goods and higher-goods and suggests that, for these women, the ability to know themselves and better understand who they are as individuals, depends, at least in part, on integrating the 'where', which is provided by the goods inherent in the framework and worldview of Buddhism. As a comprehensive theory of reality, with a developed cosmology, Buddhism allows the women to determine not only where they are, but also where they have come from and where they are going. The women feel grounded and empowered by the cohesive teleology set forth in Buddhism<sup>28</sup> and so are motivated to ensure they have enough time to fully devote and immerse themselves in that sacred world.

The chapter so far, has drawn attention to elements of the women's selves and lives that were essentially pre-existing and only enhanced, or more fully developed and supported, through ordination. However, in addition to such continuities, as a major transformative event marking their lives, ordination also represents a major change and even a rupture that significantly impacts

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<sup>28</sup> The symbolic chapter of the ordination phase explored these themes in greater detail.



their experiences and introduces certain discontinuities regarding selfhood. In the section to follow, the impact of the ordination ceremony and the transition from lay to ordained life will be considered, specifically in terms of the changes they effect on identity and selfhood.

## **7.2. Representation and Recognition: The Effects of the Ordination Ceremony**

As we have seen in previous chapters, the actual act or ceremony of ordination was banalized within almost all of the women's stories. In recognizing the degree to which the three core goods of spirituality, altruism and non-materialism were familiar and consistent aspects of the women's lives and selves, having long since defined their identities and shaped their interactions in the world, it makes sense that for many of them ordination was experienced as a "natural sort of thing" (Nyingma) rather than an abrupt or significant change. Take for example Jiyul, who presented ordination as such a minor event in her story that it prompted me to question her further as to its effect-

RG: So did you change a lot, then, from before you were a nun and after?

C: Yes, but very slowly. Slowly, slowly, not a very big event. Just slowly and naturally I changed my mind.

Jiyul's emphasis on the 'slow' and 'natural' pace of change, which is focused on changes of the "mind," acknowledges an impact, but it is not one that was experienced as a sudden or abrupt transformation. When I asked Thubten if she felt like a new or different person after ordaining, she also gave a similar response: "No, just some changes – like no hair, robes. I feel more responsibility, but that's it really." While her response takes into account physical changes, both of these women minimize the impact of the ordination, perhaps in part, because of the ways they prepared themselves and managed their expectations. When Choden described her ordination ceremony by stating: "We went in jeans and came out in robes," I assumed she was setting it up as an abrupt, if not shocking, transformative experience. However, when I asked as much, she simply said:

C: No, it doesn't feel like that. No. First of all you prepare yourself... So, that whole process that leads up to becoming a nun, is already pretty much like working towards it. So it's not like you come out completely different.

RG: So you don't feel 'I'm a completely different person' or something like that?

C: No, no the transition just happens more on an outer level, and then everyone can see 'Oh she did it!'

Choden's perspective confirms ordination as a major change, but in her case it is related to the dynamics of private and public selfhood, where living as an ordained person and adopting this more visible social role, becomes a means of publically expressing internal developments which in turn change the ways she interacts and is perceived by others. For those nuns who did describe the ordination ceremony as more impactful, it appears that failing to anticipate the significant and varied ramifications of their decision was an important factor shaping their experience.

For others, ordination is framed as a cause of more significant changes and effects. In describing her experience of the ordination rite, Dawa said: "I really thought that I would be the same old person, just with a different hairdo." But when I asked if this turned out to be the case, she answered with a resounding "No":

RG: Like instantly you were not the same, or?

D: Instantly. Instantly. When I was ordained...*something* happened. Something happened in the ordination. I, it was far beyond just some kind of ritual. So I went into the ordination with the expectation that it was just some kind of special ceremony, which it was, but it was unlike any ceremony. It wasn't like 6<sup>th</sup> Grade graduation [both laughing] or even like college graduation where you get a little diploma and this and that. So that really shocked me. And no one told me about that beforehand and I thought for a long time that... you know maybe I had just made it up, you know, I had no words for it.

While Dawa questioned her own experience, uncertain of her sense of the elusive 'something' she felt during the ceremony, Sherab described a similar sensation: "I remember when I became bhiksuni<sup>29</sup> ... it changed something in your mind. I mean, it's a commitment, which is not visible to other people, it's a commitment like what you get when you get an initiation... I mean it has some, it has some, *feeling*." Sherab does not go further in explaining this particular effect of ordination, but Dawa went on to address some of the identity implications of her experience:

Being a layperson and not having these vows, you don't get that. So with that energy, that 'thing', like the blessings of ordination, or whatever you call it, that is a big part of this feeling of like "Who am I?"... Because all of a sudden my identity has changed dramatically and the old me is gone and I don't know what the new me is. And how do I relate to the world?

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<sup>29</sup> Sherab had ordained, initially in the Tibetan tradition, but since that ordination does not confer the full ordination, several years later she went through the full ordination (bhikshuni/gelongma) ceremony in Taiwan.

It appears, therefore, that for Dawa, the intangible, energetic change that she experienced during the ordination ceremony instigated an identity change which went beyond the private as well as social changes resulting from her adoption of the robes and shaved head. Eventually, one lama finally explained to her that she wasn't imagining the powerful sensation she felt during the ordination. He told her: "There is definitely energy. It is very strong and it is there and it comes. It's from lineage and it goes all the way back to the Buddha and it came from the Buddha to that disciple to his disciple to his disciple all the way to your abbot and, then, you get it." Dawa's reaction to the powerful ordination experience was jarring to her and brought her face to face with the 'Who am I?' question, because as she says, she changed in a way that was profound, yet invisible to others and nearly impossible to articulate. Thus, while ordaining as a Buddhist nun confirmed core aspects of herself and conferred upon her an altered appearance and social status, it also (in her experience) transmitted a form of energy and connection to the Buddha's lineage that initiated her into the sacred realm and impressed upon her the power and divine potential that membership in this tradition affirms. It is no wonder that that experience destabilized her sense of self and left her in a state of disorientation. Later, in the section on liminality, we can see that Dawa's experience with other members of this tradition and community exacerbated the challenge of defining herself after this transformation.

Rinzen did not describe her ordination experience in the same terms as Dawa, but does say that after ordaining she "was a totally different person. Totally different." In order to better understand this assessment and to see if this difference was in her own eyes or in the eyes of others, I asked her what, in particular, was different:

Yeah, everything, everything that I do. I mean, I was studying dharma also before as a lay person but, but once you become a nun and start wearing the robes, it changes a lot. Because then you are like an example. So people look at you a lot and you have to be much, much more mindful with everything- with the actions, with every time you are in front of laypeople, and also some people have hopes that you will be a good practitioner, then this *makes* you want study harder and to practice better. *Everything*, it's like a pressure, but it's a good pressure because it's for a virtuous cause. So this changes completely everything.

In her case, then, her role as "an example" is highlighted, but she is able to accept the new pressures and consequences of this status and the erasures to her unique, individual identity, because, as she says, she became aligned with a higher "virtuous cause."

For Dechen, the transition into an embodied emblem appears to have been less smooth. As mentioned previously, Dechen felt "completely unprepared" for ordination and experienced the transition as a "violent change." She says that it was "like I lost my own identity and became a, you know people didn't see me anymore, they just saw the robes." Thus, her unique identity and sense of who she was as an individual became secondary and erased, or at least undermined, by her new public status as a Buddhist nun. Not only did ordination dislodge her sense of self, but it created a new dynamic where others failed to see and appreciate her individuality. While 'selflessness' and nonattachment are core Buddhist principles sought to be realized by the women, it appears that some of the women, including Dechen, did not anticipate the social reactions that their new appearance and status would evoke, and definitely underestimated the personal and existential effect that these would have on them. Additionally, Dechen's experience speaks, once again, to the self-other dialectic and the crucial nature of social interaction in determining self. Because the only self that was reflected back to her by others was a uniform, emblematic representation of Buddhism, Dechen was challenged by the task of reconciling the 'old' and 'new' versions of herself and in making sense of who she was now that she was a Buddhist nun. Evidently, she was not alone, as all of the women were faced with similar challenges as they began their lives as ordained nuns.

All in all, undergoing the ordination ceremony significantly changed the lives of these women, confirming their exit from their previous modern secular lives. While they used to feel like outsiders in their countries of origin, now they feel that they have entered into a world where they *do* belong, where the truest aspects of themselves align with the structures, ideas, and goals of this new realm of reality. With that being said, they are still outsiders in the sense that they are newly initiated, they are non-Tibetans, and they have yet to establish a clear place for themselves in this new world. Turner's theory of liminality will help tease out these levels of difference and adjustment and allow for a more nuanced consideration of how these shifts in social positioning and immersion into the Buddhist monastic life affected the women's notions and expressions of selfhood and identity.

### **7.3. Liminality: Challenges and Adjustments in Early Ordained Life**

As the central phase in the women's tripartite journeys (situated between the conversion and adjustment phases), ordination is related to the liminal period of a rite of passage where, as

Turner notes, “profane social relations may be discontinued, former rights and obligations are suspended, the social order may seem to have been turned upside down” (1974, p. 59). Liminality is an “interstructural situation” (Turner, 1967, p. 93) that is “betwixt-and-between the normal, day-to-day cultural and social states” (Turner 1979, 465). It is a transitional period that is typically followed by the achievement of a new status and reassimilation into society. Turner does acknowledge and elaborate on instances of permanent liminality, however, where this state is extended indefinitely. This will be taken up further in the final identity chapter in the adjustment phase, however, liminality as an “interstructural situation” is most applicable here.

Because the nuns have no intention of returning to the secular worlds they left behind, liminality, in this context, is connected to the position they occupy as they move from a previous status and role (in secular modernity) towards the permanent liminality of the Buddhist institutional world. Put differently, at this stage in their narratives the women have only just been ordained and they have yet to develop true familiarity with their new monastic identities and have not yet negotiated their place and position in the institutional world of Tibetan Buddhism. Turner says that neophytes are often

passive or humble; they must obey their instructors implicitly, and accept arbitrary punishment without complaint....It is as though they are being reduced or ground down to a uniform condition to be fashioned anew and endowed with additional powers to enable them to cope with their new station in life. (1969, p.95)

This description is reflected in the stories and experiences of the nuns – from having to wait until their lamas grant them permission to ordain, to shaving their heads, and donning nondescript, uniform monastic robes. Yet, by way of compensation, Turner suggests that during liminal phases, “cosmological systems,” become extremely important for novices (including the symbols, instructions, and knowledge passed through elders, rites, myths, songs, etc.) since they communicate “teachings about the structure of the cosmos and their culture as a part and product of it” (1974, p. 59). This too, applies to the newly ordained nuns, as they strongly rely upon various elements and symbols of the Buddhist framework (as attested to in the previous narrative chapter) to make sense of themselves and their roles as members of this new world.

In the context of the ordination then, liminality applies to the period of the nuns' lives when they have officially renounced their positions in secular society but have not yet achieved a set

status or identity in the permanently liminal world of Buddhist monasticism. Officially, they have become Buddhist nuns, but socially and experientially they have yet to develop a full understanding of the life of a monastic, have yet to grasp the full extent of what it means to be a Buddhist nun, and have yet to be socially accepted in their new role, both by those whom they leave behind in modern secular society and those to whom they relate in the Buddhist world. Thus, some of the central themes emerging for them during this period, particularly in terms of identity and self, relate to recognition and acceptance.

In the time immediately following their ordinations, most<sup>30</sup> of the nuns describe the social adjustment period as somewhat challenging- both for they themselves, and their friends and families. For the few that described it as a positive experience, family reactions were characterized as "happy" (Rinzen), "accepting" (Choden), and "understanding" (Lhamo). In Pema's case, her mother was "very happy" and her entire family began attending Buddhist teachings together. For Dolma, her parents were "interested" and "very supportive", as were her friends, however she says that "for them, our friendship did change a bit because...they didn't know too much about Buddhism, so they didn't know how to interact with me as a nun." On her part, she "just felt that things had to change for them not to get the wrong idea about monastics and stuff – which is a big responsibility on our behalf, not to give people the wrong impression about what we're about." The sense of responsibility she expresses was also articulated by some of those who experienced less positive reactions to their ordination.

Nyingma said that after getting ordained she “didn't really maintain many friendships” and relationships with even her close-knit family were initially strained:

I found that after I became a nun, after I was ordained, I went back to Australia for the first time, it was *really* hard trying to figure out how to relate to my family, mostly because I had all these expectations about how I should have changed, that I should be perfect now, about how I should act and, and they also, they had no clue how to relate to a Buddhist nun: if my dad could hug me in public or if they could have a glass of wine at dinner while

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<sup>30</sup> As with many other topics, some of the nuns directly addressed the reactions of people in their lives when they ordained, with some saying very little and others elaborating more extensively. Nine of the 16 nuns mentioned negative or difficult family reactions; five (Dolma, Pema, Choden, Rinzen, and Lhamo) stated positive/supportive responses; and two nuns didn't address the issue or had very little to say on the topic (Yeshe and Dechen).

I was sitting there. And I was also really, I was really protective and precious and I guess scared of breaking the boundaries.

Nyingma's experience clearly demonstrates the confusion, uncertainty, and discomfort that was felt, as much by her as her family during these early post-ordination encounters. The repeated use of the term 'should' speaks to the pressure and expectations she felt, and the sense of responsibility she bore as a newly ordained nun. Additionally, this terminology indicates a sort of indeterminate status where she had changed, but was still negotiating (with others as well as herself) exactly who she had become. It appears that at this time she was still in a period of figuring out who she was as a person, since becoming a Tibetan Buddhist nun, and she, as other nuns did as well, looked to social relationships and engagement with others as a chief means of working all of this out.

Thubten actually became very emotional during our interview when we broached the topic of family. Crying, she said of her family: "I'm sad because they don't understand." Chin-sun also acknowledged that when she first became a nun her family was "not happy." For Songheo, she says her family was initially "very embarrassed" by her decision to become a Buddhist nun. She says that they "cried very much" and "called me every day and told me to come back home." Tenzin also faced direct opposition from her family who implored her not to ordain: "do not make our family name broken," they told her and her mother often cried, saying: "Oh, I lost my daughter!" Her father's main concern was that she was being "hypnotized" by her teacher and expressed great worry about the future: "Who will take care of you when you are old? You cannot get married, you cannot get children, you cannot get a car, a home...You have graduated from university, you can find a job very easily. How stupid you are!" Tenzin's family struggled to make sense of her decision, especially when they weighed it against the backdrop of typical modern social expectations: career, family, material possessions, etc. Similarly, Palden's family in Australia voiced comparable concerns. After becoming progressively involved with Buddhism, Palden says she became "less and less involved" in rock climbing and other past times and interests, and starting "drifting away" from friends. When it comes to her family, she admits that they were "pretty disappointed, to be honest, when I first told them." When I asked what the reasons behind their disappointment were, she said:

just the typical life, because .... our idea of a typical happy life is that you have children, you have your own children, your own house, your own money, have regular holidays and things like that. And just the thing about not having a retirement fund, you know?

This financial insecurity is very worrisome, understandably, for them.

As in Tenzin's case, Palden's family struggled with her decision to become a nun and had strong reservations about the implications of this life choice.

Along with the comments and stories told by the others, these nuns' experiences point to the sense of disorientation and uncertainty that many of their relatives expressed in response to their decisions to become Buddhist nuns. As members of modern secular societies, the families (particularly the parents) had initiated their children into distinctive worlds where becoming a Tibetan Buddhist nun violated social expectations, cross-generational transmissions, and what Godbout (1998) calls the 'economy of the gift.' In voluntarily getting ordained in a foreign religious tradition, the women created a rupture with their families and friends. In managing this social conflict, the women encounter reflections of themselves in the eyes of others as a way to better understand who they are and how they will be once fully initiated into the Buddhist monastic world. It is not through introspection that the women discover and define themselves, but through social interactions and relationships with those around them. Dawa articulated the stakes involved in these interactions as well as the challenges when she said that it was not just about "wearing different clothes, behaving differently; it's having to be more mindful about behaviour, having to think more about whether or not I should engage in certain behaviours." She illustrated her point with a story about being invited to a lay friend's party after she was ordained:

So before, it would just be like: "Oh, is the food going to be good?"... or, whatever. But suddenly, it's like, not only who's gonna be there and what kind of food, but: "Should I be eating at night? Should I be in a situation where there's a lot of alcohol and drinking and jokes about sex and things like that?" And: "How's my mind going to be if I'm in that environment? Am I going to feel uncomfortable or more attachment? Are people going to be thinking should that Buddhist nun be here?" So, it's like: "Oh my god, this is exhausting!"

In providing insight into the considerations that the women now face as nuns, when interacting with people and in situations typical of their pre-monastic lives, it is clear that social interactions like these help the women to define themselves in their new roles as Buddhist monastics.



The women have taken vows and committed themselves to the ordained life, and during this liminal phase, they enter a new “space of questions” (Taylor, 1989, p. 29, 32, 45), where they face a new set of moral inquiries related to the lives they once lived as lay people. They must now answer these questions from the perspective of an ordained Buddhist nun. Recall that in Taylor's theory day to day experiences represent the “moral space” within which we must orient ourselves and find our way by answering various questions: what is good or bad? what is worth doing and what not? what has meaning and importance? what is trivial and secondary? (1989, p. 28-9). These are the precise questions that Dawa posed, and her answers reflect her new position, and hence, new self, as a nun. She says that she "started withdrawing" from those types of situations and realized that that these sorts of activities, which she had previously valued, were just "a big waste of time" that she "didn't enjoy" anymore. Thus, in facing and answering these types of questions and situations, Dawa and the others were able to establish their new identities as Buddhist nuns and to regain a sense of self that was connected, yet distinct from that which previously defined them as secular, lay women.

#### **7.4. Conclusion**

After withdrawing from the previous roles, values, and actions of their former social worlds, the women identified ordination as the ideal way of expressing their true selves and of experiencing the perpetual flow of the sacred Buddhist world. While the moral goods of spirituality, altruism, and non-materialism were important factors in the disjunction and marginalization experienced by the women in their pre-ordination lives, after becoming Buddhist nuns these goods become embodied components of themselves, defining not only their thoughts and beliefs, but determining their actions, relationships, and behaviors in the world. Through their interactions with others, the women are faced with reconciling this new consonance between their internal and external selves and are able to further clarify (not only for others, but for themselves as well) who they are as past members of those societies and as nuns poised to enter the permanent liminality of Buddhist monastic life.

The following chapters will describe how, contrary to regular rites of passage, the women, as nuns, are not re-aggregated into secular society, but instead move deeper into the margins, into a state of permanent liminality. These chapters will consider the stakes, challenges, and joys involved in this adjustment, addressing a number of the questions that this current chapter leaves

us with: Will the women's expectations about the monastic life be fulfilled or will they be disappointed? Will they fit into this new life and world, or will they struggle to find their place? Do they all follow the same post-ordination paths? How will the core goods that define them be reflected in the monastic lifestyle and institutions they become a part of?

## POST-ORDINATION ADJUSTMENT

### 8. Monastic Life: Post-Ordination Adjustment

As outlined in the text so far, converting to Buddhism allowed the women to overcome the predicament or impasse of being a type of outsider or wanderer in their modern secular worlds. But as the chapters in this phase will describe, in achieving their goal of ordination the women are faced with another set of challenges (largely unanticipated) as they attempt to adapt and integrate into the new world of Buddhist institutionalism. While compared to their previous worlds, the Buddhist institutional world is defined by completely different sets of norms, morals, and authoritative hierarchies (which have been shown to align much more closely to those valued and accepted by the women), moving into this world presents many parallel challenges in terms of integration and adaptation. Indeed, in this phase the women's tellings take on a more reflective and analytic tone, becoming defined by a narrative structure that highlights institutional ideals and their attempts to access and fulfill them. Specifically, the nuns' adaptation stories address their relationships to two central ideals defining the 'good life' in Buddhist monasticism: a close connection to one's teacher and integration and on-going membership in an established monastic institution.

Whereas the first phase of the nuns' narratives (conversion) followed the sequential, logico-temporal order outlined by Todorov (1981), and the second phase (ordination) was defined by a correlative configuration (Ricoeur, 1981), this third phase represents as a version of an ideological narrative (Todorov, 1981) centered on these two key ideals. The significance of these ideals (close teacher-student relationship and institutional integration) are articulated across all of the nuns' narratives, however, their stories make clear that there is no single or standard way to live as a nun in contemporary Tibetan Buddhism. In fact, the processes of ordination and the monastic lifestyles described by the women are incredibly diverse, with notable differences in timelines and trajectories. Yet, as striking as the differences are between the paths and procedures followed by individual women along their monastic journeys, these two ideals are the central goals or ideas around which each of their lives are teleologically framed and evaluated.

In this chapter, the criteria of the two monastic ideals, which represent the priority goals for the nuns during the post-ordination phase, will be described and analyzed. This analysis

informs the argument that, based on their ability to access and achieve the two ideals or monastic goals, the nuns come to occupy four key positions. These positions are connected to the ways in which they envision their futures, and indicate varied implications for the ongoing development of Tibetan Buddhism in the modern world.

### **8.1. Grand Ideas and Idealized Laws: Key Narrative Elements in the Adjustment Phase**

In the class of narratives defined by Todorov (1981) as ideological, causality is not tied to a sequential unfolding of events, but is characterized instead by causal events which relate to each other “only by the intermediary of a general law of which they happen to be the illustration” (p. 43)<sup>31</sup>. Ideological narratives do not, therefore, include typical plots, but rather link actions by making them “manifestations of one and the same idea, of a single law” (Todorov, 1981, p. 44). This ‘single law’ or “abstract formula,” as Todorov describes it, creates an intermediary connection between the actions and events of the story, expressing an underlying “organizing ideology” of the narrative (Todorov, 1981, p. 42). While these characteristics are evident in the women's stories, their narratives do not always and only adhere to this format, but also include elements of agency and evaluation which imply causality between events. This introduces plot into the narrative structure. The plots are not, however, immediate and sequential, but rather structural or systemic. In this sense, the women's stories display both an ideological (where causality and plot are minimized or absent altogether) *and* a causal form, creating an interesting balance where plot and ideas are held in tension.

In the sections to follow, the two grand ideas or monastic ideals that form the basis for the women's stories will be described. An analysis of the ways in which the ideals are represented in the stories and lives of the nuns will follow, becoming the basis for a categorization of the positions they come to occupy in the Tibetan Buddhist institutional world. These groupings will then be used to compare how position relates to future plans and intentions.

### **8.2. The First Grand Idea: Relationship to Teacher**

As indicated in previous chapters, the student-teacher relationship is crucially important in Buddhist contexts and is emphasized as a necessary requirement for spiritual advancement.

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<sup>31</sup> In his work on illness narratives, Good (1994) suggests that "stories, perhaps better than other forms, provide a glimpse of the grand ideas that often seem to elude life and defy rational description" (p.165). In the context of this chapter, Good's notion of 'grand ideas' acts as a complementary theoretical concept and will be used in parallel with Todorov's ideological 'laws' or 'principles.'

Overall, this ideal is defined as a sense of connection and strong rapport between the nun and their teacher(s), and also in terms of the teacher's capacity to impart advice or counsel, to express support (material and non-material – i.e. emotional, spiritual, psychological, social, etc.), and to facilitate access to institutions. The nuns' stories of their post-ordination adjustment speak to the significance of this relationship, however not all of the nuns place the same emphasis upon their connection to their teacher(s).

For several of the nuns, their teachers were introduced early in their narratives and reappeared consistently throughout their stories. Dawa, Nyingma, Thubten, and Sherab, all made consistent references to their teachers and the ongoing role they play in the trajectory of their monastic lives. In the case of Palden, who identified her teacher as the “main instigator” in her decision to ordain, mentions him several times throughout her story, summarizing her monastic life course as a result of “just doing what he asks me to.” Dolma, a young Australian like Palden, also spoke of the role of her teacher in determining the direction of her monastic life. She says: “he was helping me from the start, so I am very close with him. He calls me a lot, he checks up on me and makes sure I’m okay.” Dolma describes him as “supportive,” and when discussing her life at the Tibetan nunnery where she has lived for the past year, she says that “it was my teacher’s decision for me to come here.” In fact, after her ordination her teacher encouraged her to leave Australia and move to Thosamling, but after coming to visit he recommended that she move to a larger, more established and traditional Tibetan nunnery. She says that she “follows his advice very well” because “I do think that he knows better than I do.” Indeed, all these women welcome their teacher’s advice and believe wholeheartedly that he knows what is best. They do not feel conflicted or compromised by this relationship in any way; on the contrary they convey that obeying one's teacher is a valued principle in Buddhist contexts, particularly for novices. By constructing the teacher as a positive force in their lives, they are also articulating the central role that the teacher plays in facilitating their successful entrance and adherence to the ideal monastic life.

Themes of admiration, faith, and respect for one's teacher were also common within these narratives. Tenzin and Pema, for example, are students of the same Tibetan Buddhist teacher in Indonesia and both emphasized the guidance-based role of teachers in the Tibetan tradition as being inspiring and motivating, particularly when a close and personal relationship is achieved.

Pema says: “He knows each of us ... gives each of us specific intentions, so we have specific results and that’s what a teacher should do.” In emphasizing the benefits of direct guidance and personal attention, Tenzin and Pema's narratives speak to the role of the teacher in initiating the student to the sacred Buddhist world, facilitating access to the wisdom and realization promised by adherence to Buddhist ideology.

These types of functions are fulfilled by teachers not only through personal connection or investment and participation in individual nuns' lives, but also through formalized rites and institutional traditions. While the ordination ceremony was described in previous chapters, the element of naming was not fully addressed, but is being included here given its relationship to social integration and institutional access. It is customary in Tibetan Buddhism that at the time of ordination, the teacher performing the ceremony bestows a new name (sometimes referred to as a ‘dharma name’) on the ordaining monk or nun. Tibetans generally have between two to four names and tradition dictates that the teacher performing an ordination ceremony will pass his first name to the new monk/nun, adding a second auspicious name. For example, the Dalai Lama’s name is Tenzin Gyatso and so when he ordains someone, they are usually given names beginning with Tenzin, such as Tenzin Dolma, or Tenzin Sopa, etc. When Nyingma described this tradition and talked about her own dharma name she says: “I was really excited to get the names and it’s also a nice, intimate connection to make with the teacher.” This connection, represented through the naming process, solidifies the nuns' new, sacred status and bonds her not only to her teacher, but to her teacher's lineage which traces all the way back through a line of ancient practitioners to the Buddha himself.

In facilitating the nun's initiation into this sacred community, the teacher is affirming the nun's identity as a sacred person and also welcoming her into a social network where she is poised to inherit or gain access to the social and institutional connections established by her teacher. When speaking to her experience in Eastern institutions, Nyingma explained that “because they [native Tibetan monastics] respect my Tibetan teacher, then they respect me because I have a close relationship with him.” Similarly, when Choden was explaining that she was able to stay and study and eat for free at a nearby monastery, she said it was “because our teachers are connected.” Thus, the relationships that the nuns establish with their teachers have far reaching implications that extend beyond religious and instructive functions into social, political, and economic spheres.

While the influence of the teacher across various realms comforts and eases some of the nuns' transitions into and within Buddhist institutional life, there were indications from some of the nuns that this arrangement was not always welcomed and was sometimes experienced as stressful and oppressive. Sherab explained that “when your teacher is saying something, then sometimes we lose our minds, we are saying: ‘Yeah sure, if you are calling then yeah, I come’.” But, she admits that she has struggled with this dynamic and finds it “a little bit difficult” to automatically and unquestioningly fulfill her teacher's demands and follow his advice. Notably, she finds it sometimes challenging to balance her own personal interests with those of her teacher and community, for instance in staying in the isolated retreat centre in Switzerland instead of pursuing her own desire to live in institutions in India. Dawa similarly admits that while following her teacher's advice is what she is “trying to do,” she is actually “struggling with a lot of fear and trust.” She obviously respects her teacher greatly and had only positive things to say about him, however, she explained that the student-teacher relationship is not always easy: “because I've spent so much of my life being very independent, having lots of autonomy and authority, and now I've handed a lot of that over to someone I trust... but I don't quite trust completely.” Thus, in these women's stories, it is clear that they appreciate and deeply value the close connections they each have with their teachers, yet some of them also struggle at times with issues of power and authority, trying to maintain a sense of personal freedom and autonomy within the complex dynamics of the student-teacher relationship.

For other nuns in this study, it appears that their relationship to their teacher is far less consequential. Unlike all of the other nuns, Lhamo, Dechen, and Yeshe do not emphasize the student-teacher relationship and hardly reference their teachers at all in their descriptions of their lives as nuns. In their stories, their teachers appear only during the conversion and ordination phases, but are conspicuously absent from the post-ordination period of their narratives. After reaching the ordination point in her story, Lhamo, for example, does not even mention her teacher at all, focusing her narrative on the effort and process of establishing Thosamling. For Dechen, the connection to her teacher was evident in the early (conversion, ordination) phases of her story, but the positive tone of this relationship shifts quite dramatically after she gets ordained. Dechen recounted that “the day I got ordained, I had to take off my robes and go to work.” During this initial period, she worked full time in a regular lay job as well as working long hours in her teacher's

centre. She describes this early period of her life as nun as stressful, confusing, and generally quite frustrating: "I had no time, no introduction period, no training, no support." As will be described in the next section, Dechen's teacher and community in Australia were unable or unwilling to support her after she ordained. This violation of trust and expectation in regards to her teacher and community were clearly expressed in her narrative and colored her depictions of other teachers and leaders in the Tibetan Buddhist community in Australia as well. For example, she tells of a "land grab between two lamas about who gets to own the land and who gets control of the resources from the devotees." She also described a separate incident with another Tibetan lama who told her: "You are a woman, you can't be like us. You're a nun, you can never become enlightened in a woman's body. Pray to be reborn in a man's body." She remembers being shocked and appalled by his words, even more so because he said them to a room full of women who "totally accepted what he said.... I was the only one who put up my hand and raised concerns." Dechen was the only one of the nuns to actually criticize high level teachers and reveal some of the darker aspects of the student-teacher dynamic. Her narrative not only reveals a struggle to gain access to a teacher on whom she could rely, but also speaks to her disenchantment with regards to the figure of the teacher, as an important spiritual character in the Buddhist world.

While we do not know the full details of the three nuns' relationships with their teachers, or the exact reasons why some have been unable or uninterested in achieving the ideal of creating a strong bond with them, it is clear that these relationships have important implications for their capacity (or incapacity) to integrate into a traditional Tibetan Buddhist institution.

### **8.3. The Second Grand Idea: Institutional Integration**

Institutional integration is the second ideal that participants associated to the good life of a Buddhist nun. They defined it in terms of access to traditional Buddhist institutions and the resulting benefits of support (financial/material as well as identity-based) and mentorship (where older and more experienced nuns are able to offer guidance and support to younger or newly ordained nuns). In the context of this study 'traditional' is a comparative adjective used to distinguish between institutions following long-established historical conventions (traditional) and those which operate more independently of classical norms, displaying considerable innovation and diversity in terms of structure and function (non-traditional). Overall, non-traditional institutions are characterized by lay dominance at general membership and leadership levels, non-



sectarianism, and non-hierarchical organizational structures which emphasize equality and democracy (Queen & Williams, 2013, p. xix). Thus, in contradistinction to traditional institutions, non-traditional Buddhist organizations and institutions are not homogenous (i.e. involve a mix of women and men or lay and ordained members) and because they typically cater to lay populations, they do not tend offer rigorous, long-term study programs and are rarely able to maintain a stable and enduring population of monastics.

While I met all of the nuns at Thosamling, which is a non-traditional Buddhist institution, many of them had either come from traditional institutions (Jiyul, Songheo, Chin-sun) or had since moved to traditional Tibetan institutions within India (Dolma, Palden). For the Korean nuns Jiyul, Songheo, and Chin-sun, Buddhist nunneries (in the Korean Zen tradition) were easy to access and an established part of their local cultural landscape. Thus, when each of them got ordained they not only became members of their teachers' lineages, but also gained automatic membership into large, traditional Korean Buddhist institutions. Two other nuns, Palden and Dolma, also belong to traditional institutions, but in the Tibetan tradition. Both women got ordained in Australia (at very young ages- 23 and 18 respectively), and both, under the advice of their teachers, moved directly to Thosamling to study Tibetan language and live in a monastic environment. After advancing in their language studies however, and again under the advice and intervention of their teachers, both left Thosamling and moved into established, traditional Tibetan nunneries in India. From Palden's perspective, "in order to transform your mind, living together is very important. Plus it was the original, you know, the Buddha Shakyamuni's original wish – for all monks and nuns to live together." She goes on to suggest that institutional integration is particularly important for convert nuns who are "kind of left on our own to figure it out, unless you're in close contact with your teacher... [or] in close contact with the Tibetan community, like Tibetan monks and nuns to follow as an example." In this sense, the two ideals are represented as vital and interdependent aspects of monastic life, working together to initiate the women into this new world and to ensure that they may develop the knowledge and skills necessary to fully integrate into the distinct culture and world of Tibetan monasticism.

Traditional institutions are also valued by these nuns since they provide access to experienced mentors. In describing the nunnery that she moved to after experiencing the non-

traditional institutional environment of Thosamling, Palden focuses on the community of nuns, saying:

The senior nuns have been here for 15 years, and the junior nuns they go home maybe once every 2 or 3 years, so they're just here, together, so they just click because the harmony of the class is so important and the teachers and the senior nuns are always advising the junior nuns and they actually listen.

In this way, stable and established traditional institutions provide the opportunity for a natural hierarchy of age and experience to be established among members, which promotes mentorship and functions as a crucial channel of knowledge transmission. Jiyul agrees, emphasizing the role that senior members play in the balance and success of traditional monastic communities: "Yes, it is very good to get advice from each other and stay together and get help from big nuns." Likewise, Songheo says that in her traditional nunnery there are "many nice senior nuns...the bhiksuni sangha<sup>32</sup>, they protect us." In 'protecting' novice nuns by offering guidance and support, elder nuns provide needed mentorship that eases the initiation and transition of new nuns into the monastic world. Thus, from the perspectives of institutionally integrated nuns, being able to follow the examples of senior nuns and access their advice and support is a key element in the adjustment to monastic life.

A second component of this good monastic life emphasized by integrated nuns is the financial or material support that comes along with membership in a traditional institution. In traditional Buddhist monastic institutions (and societies more broadly), laypeople support ordained sangha either directly (through personal sponsorship or donations offered directly to individual nuns/monks) or generally by making financial or resource (i.e. cloth, food, building supplies, etc.) donations to a given institution. The wealth accumulated by an institution is shared amongst its members through monthly stipends, providing free room and board, occasionally covering medical or travel expenses, and the like. Jiyul, for example, explained that she was only able to come to India because her "master also gives some money and other lay people... they give money." She goes on to say that she can concentrate on studying and practicing because she has these "supporters." Songheo also acknowledges that as a member of a traditional institution, she "can get support very well" because "in Korea if people visit some temple then they just give money,

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<sup>32</sup> 'Bhikshuni sangha' refers to the community of fully ordained nuns.

they give money to us." While financial support is readily offered and available within the traditional Korean context, the Western nuns who have integrated into traditional institutions rely on the financial support of their families.

Overall, for these five nuns, their initial post-ordination adjustment was very smooth and they were never exposed to the stress or disorientation of finding a place or supporting themselves after ordaining as a nun. Their achievement of the first ideal (establishing and maintaining a close relationship with a teacher) helped secure them a place in the Buddhist institutional world, aligning their experience further with the second ideal of the good monastic life. As members of traditional institutions, they were able to experience the benefits of financial support and mentorship from elder nuns. Their identities and intentions as nuns are thereby reflected and acknowledged by their ordained peers and they are able to lead lives that support their spiritual development and their study and practice of Buddhism in ways they find deeply satisfying and continually motivating.

For all of the other nuns, however, this second ideal was not so seamlessly realized and even the achievement of a strong relationship with a teacher did not necessarily translate into membership in a traditional institution. In the cases of Nyingma, Thubten, Dawa, Choden, Sherab, Pema, and Tenzin, despite the fact that they were all very close to their teachers, this relationship did not provide them - for various reasons - with automatic or direct access to a traditional Tibetan Buddhist institution. For Nyingma, Choden, Pema, and Tenzin, they had met their teachers outside of India/Tibet (in France and Indonesia, respectively) and since these teachers were not living, at that time, in traditional monastic institutions, the nuns became affiliated with the non-traditional centres or institutes associated with those teachers. In Nyingma and Choden's case this meant traveling to Nepal to get ordained and then returning to their teacher's centre in Europe. From their perspectives, belonging to a non-traditional community where lay and ordained members mix, particularly when lay practitioners outnumber ordained sangha, presents distinct challenges. Nyingma says: "There was five nuns and one monk in a dharma center where thousands of laypeople come in the summer and with an international sangha of thousands of lay people. And we didn't know much... We were a minority and we hadn't actually lived in an established monastic community ourselves." This lack of experience and knowledge becomes even more problematic in these contexts where, according to Choden, "the lay sangha think there's no real difference between them and us." She goes on to say that "of course, ultimately, there is not any difference, but we hold vows, and it's actually a big difference." Thus, having access to only a

mixed-community and non-traditional institution, Nyingma and Choden experience a lack of acknowledgment regarding their value and authenticity as ordained sangha, and struggle with how to position themselves within such an environment. They received little help in this regard given that, as Nyingma explains, “we had lamas, or monk rinpoches coming each year to teach, but not to teach the monastics in particular.” In brief, the lack of guidance and instruction available to the new nuns further compounded the issues they were dealing with in terms of recognition and status.

By contrast, when Nyingma speaks of a traditional Buddhist nunnery in Taiwan where she temporarily lived while pursuing her bhikshuni ordination, the inadequacies and limitations of non-traditional institutional life became all the more obvious: “It the first time that I’d been in just a nunnery. You know all the other times it had been mixed between monks and nuns. So this place was amazing. It was just, these *really* incredible senior nuns, oozing with compassion and bodhichitta.” When describing her encounter with the senior, fully-ordained nuns at this traditional nunnery, Nyingma says it was “really, really inspiring,” because she “really felt the spirit of the sangha, right back to the time of the Buddha, and his aunt who was the first nun.” She went on to suggest that when “there is no men... it makes a *huge* difference.” In reflecting on her experience in this traditional all-female community, she continued: “the behaviour of the women is much different [when there are no men] and there’s much more of a sister-hood feeling, which I find very supportive. And personally, I just feel myself relaxing...I love being around other nuns- it’s nice.” The stark differences between Nyingma's experiences in the mixed community of her non-traditional institute in Europe and the homogenous community in the traditional nunnery express not only a valuation but also a yearning for the relationships and atmosphere that traditional institutions (which are exclusively gender-based) foster. Throughout the narratives of the nuns reviewed so far, gender specific institutions are defined as more favorable to the development of connection and *communitas*, particularly when the community is made up only of ordained members. These bonds are constructed as a crucial aspect of monastic life. Thus, achieving a sense of authenticity, in regards to being a Buddhist nun is apparently compromised both by gender (female versus male) and status (lay versus ordained) diversity in non-traditional Buddhist institutions.

Another issue that Choden and Nyingma raise, which has implications for acknowledgement and authenticity, is financial and material support. From Nyingma's perspective

“one of the disadvantages of being a Western nun is that it’s much harder to get support and sponsorship.” She explains that Westerners are “much more willing to support a Nepalese or Tibetan [nun],” which leaves many Western monastics with little support since most non-traditional institutions in the West also do not provide financial assistance to their monastic members. Choden expressed similar views despite the fact that at her French centre she was actually allowed to stay for free and was offered limited financial support for travel and subsistence. While her basic expenses are covered by her centre, she says that she has to “pay it off with work.” Nuns in traditional institutions are also required to work within their institutions, however their increased and more direct access to sponsors and donations mean that work demands are far less. Additionally, in the context of traditional institutions the nuns tend to work alongside other nuns for the benefit of their nunnery, but in Choden and Nyingma's cases, they are typically working with lay people (both male and female), in predominantly lay environments. Their status as ordained nuns is not affirmed and supported in the same ways that it is within traditional institutions, where nuns are not only taken care of financially, but are also afforded greater respect from the broader Buddhist community and are able to live within a more protected, homogenous monastic environment.

Many of the themes and challenges highlighted by Nyingma and Choden in regards to their experiences living in non-traditional institutions in the West, apply to those nuns who, immediately after ordaining, moved into Thosamling, which is likewise a non-traditional, mixed (all female, but housing both lay and ordained women) environment. Four of the nuns in this study fall into this category, having gotten ordained in India by the Dalai Lama and moved directly to Thosamling: Pema, Tenzin, Thubten, and Yeshe. For Pema and Tenzin, while their teacher had a small centre in Indonesia, there were no accommodations for monastics and so after getting ordained, they moved into Thosamling. In much the same way that Nyingma and Choden lamented living within a mixed community, Tenzin also expressed certain frustrations and limitations related to life in a non-traditional, mixed institutional environment: "Community is very important when we become ordained... but here [Thosamling] the community is mixing... Maybe when a nunnery or monastery is full without any [lay] Westerners<sup>33</sup>, we could focus on the community of the nuns."

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<sup>33</sup> Isolated from the broader context of our conversation, it may appear that when Tenzin says "without Westerners" she is referring broadly to non-Asian women, however, in this section of the interview she was in fact discussing differences between lay and ordained women, but since all of the laypeople at Thosamling were Western women, she used 'Westerners' as a way of labeling the collection of Western lay women.

Again, it is evident that authenticity is at stake here, not only in terms of recognition by lay Buddhists but also in regards to the crucial contact and acknowledgement of peers and elites within the Buddhist system. The importance and value of living with other nuns is not only related to the validation that this provides in terms of shared goals and commitments, but also because integration into the community and being surrounded by other ordained women is essential to the process of fully embodying the character of a nun. Despite Tenzin's strong feelings and desire for such guidance, the non-traditional institution she lives in (Thosamling) does not provide access to the monastic mentors she seeks: "we cannot find that here because people are coming and going, coming and going." Along with Nyingma and Choden, then, Tenzin agrees that support, guidance, and mentorship from senior nuns is a very significant issue in adjusting to monastic life.

Thubten's case is a little bit different. She had decided to get ordained in India (as opposed to returning to Korea) and though she was already fluent in Tibetan, she did not join an established Tibetan nunnery, but opted instead to move to the non-traditional institution of Thosamling. When I asked her why she had made this choice, she explained that at Thosamling "they have Korean nuns, some from the Korean tradition, so I can learn from these senior nuns.

So I have to take time to learn about nun's life and then I can go on." From her perspective then, it was most beneficial to live and learn from senior nuns from her home country before committing to the disciplined studies and potential social isolation (given her status as a Korean convert) of a traditional Tibetan institution. Yeshe (a Western nun from Europe) is another nun who was ordained by the Dalai Lama in India and moved directly into Thosamling. In her case, she lived at Thosamling for less than two years, at which point she chose to move outside of any Tibetan monastic institution, opting instead, to live with a small, informal community of Indian Buddhist nuns. She does not describe making an effort to enter any established, traditional institution, pursuing instead a less institutional course: "I'm not part of any group; I'm not part of any centre."

She did move close enough to Thosamling so that she can visit and attend teachings there and at other local Tibetan Buddhist institutions. She says: "I'm staying now with Indian nuns who have been long, long, long years nuns, and they have really trained minds and are stable." Despite leaving the Tibetan institutional world, she continues to live with Buddhist nuns (though they are from a different tradition) and in describing these nuns as having ample monastic experience (e.g. 'long, long, long years nuns'), Yeshe continues to affirm the importance and value placed on mentorship in the Buddhist monastic context. In living among these Indian nuns, Yeshe is

maintaining the common emphasis on certain aspects of the institutional integration ideal, namely mentorship and the sense of community and belonging that arises through recognition and acknowledgement from elders and peers.

For the remaining nuns (Dawa, Sherab, Lhamo, and Dechen), achieving the second ideal of institutional integration was presented as an even greater challenge. In Dawa's case, she had a close relationship to her teacher, but given that he did not have a formal centre in her area, she was unable to access any form of Buddhist institution. After receiving ordination at a centre outside of her state in America, when she returned home she found that "being one of two nuns in the entire state, but the only nun within 50 miles, that was really hard." She explains,

It's one thing when you're kind of an apprentice and you have someone looking over you and it's another thing when you actually go solo. Because then all kinds of questions come up, and I didn't even know what the questions would have been, until all of a sudden I was in that situation, like: 'What do I do now? Oh my god!'

Adding to the pressures and uncertainties that she felt after getting ordained and 'going solo,' Dawa was also challenged by the demands of continuing in her lay job and negotiating life as a nun in a completely lay world outside of any institutional context. Reflecting on this early period of her monastic life, she recalls that "one thing that I found lacking" was guidance and mentorship from other Western nuns. She says that she "had this expectation that the older sangha would help to be a model for me that I could look up to them." However, she goes on to explain: "I found that actually the nuns that were around were not at all receptive to playing a 'big sister' role." In brief, Dawa concludes that she initially suffered from a lack of guidance and support, something she evidently craved and needed as a newly ordained nun.

Sherab, who had gotten ordained in Europe, also returned to her own home and work after becoming a nun, an arrangement which to her "somehow doesn't fit together." She says that "if you are a nun and you live only with lay persons, it's difficult. You have no support." Living in a "community only with laypersons," she adds, "slowly your mind goes into the other direction...your mind gets away from the nuns." Like Dawa, Sherab found it challenging to live outside of an institutional environment, finding the lack of support and guidance particularly challenging, and so she broached the subject with her teacher: "So, then I asked Geshe-la, you know, I would like very much to quit my job and become a nun, to become a nun in a centre, in

*your* centre.” However, she was quite disappointed by his response: “Sorry, no, we have no place anymore.” Given that there was no place for her at her teacher’s centre, Sherab “gave everything away” and left for India. While there were plenty of established, traditional Tibetan Buddhist nunneries in India, Sherab was once again unable to join an established Tibetan institution because, she says, “I was already too old. And the Tibetan nunneries, they don’t like so much the Western people.” Another obstacle to her inclusion in a nunnery was that “you have to know the language.” Since she could only “speak a little bit of Tibetan, but not so much,” she decided to move to Thosamling, to study Tibetan and do some retreats in a more open and less traditional environment. She ended up living at Thosamling, on and off for five years, moving between India and her teacher's centre in Europe.

Sherab's story is not the only one to detail failed attempts at accessing the second ideal - membership in a traditional Tibetan Buddhist institution. Dechen, who ordained in Australia, explains: “My teacher said they would support me and then they said: ‘No, we can’t support you because we’re buying a new centre and we don’t have any money.’” Her teacher and community's refusal to support her left her devastated and struggling to figure out things on her own. Reflecting on this experience, Dechen said that it was “almost impossible to be a Buddhist nun in Australia. There’s nowhere to stay. There’s not one Tibetan Buddhist centre that will support me freely to stay there.” Unable to realize the second monastic ideal, which strained and undermined her previous achievement of the first ideal (connection with teacher), Dechen moved to India where she spent three years at Thosamling before moving out on her own, founding a charity for Indian Buddhists in central India. Lhamo is a third nun who experienced obstacles in accessing a traditional Tibetan Buddhist institution. After establishing a relationship with a Tibetan teacher in Europe, she had moved to India to be ordained by the Dalai Lama. She had visited a traditional Tibetan nunnery in the South of India prior to her ordination and had arranged to move there once she became a nun. After finally receiving her ordination, she was preparing to move to the nunnery when she got a letter from that institution. It said: “Sorry, we have no space.” Lhamo described it as a “really, really big disappointment”, adding that she was “really was quite sad that I could not go there.” She had nowhere else to go since she was “just on my own”, so she ended up renting a room in a “sort of guest house with mainly Tibetan people.” Like Dechen and Sherab, Lhamo had been denied access to Tibetan institutions and she was forced to figure things out for herself.



Living outside of traditional institutions, these nuns were unable to benefit from the material and social support offered by traditional institutions. Dechen, who ended up leaving her centre in Australia after they refused to support her, says that she was "completely disillusioned and burnt out." She went on to explain, that "laypeople expected more work from us, and yet weren't prepared to give dana [donations], food, support whatever.... It was really one of the most painful experiences of my life." The painful experience of being unable to integrate into a formal institution was only intensified by the lack of acknowledgement and recognition of her ordained status. As was evident in many of the stories above, Dechen sought to satisfy the ideals of the good monastic life outside of traditional institutions by founding a charity and Buddhist centre of her own in central India (which will be discussed in greater detail in the following section). Thus, while these nuns fail to realize the ideal of institutional integration, they continue to draw on elements of the good monastic life to frame their stories. In most instances they do so in order to point out the failures or inadequacies of non-traditional institutions and to justify the innovations they instigated by seeking to realize these ideals outside of established, traditional institutional structures.

The variety of trajectories defining all of the nuns' narratives of entering or conversely being denied access to Tibetan Buddhist institutions are quite striking. However, regardless of where the nuns ended up or how they got there, they each frame these experiences of adjustment in reference to the underlying ideals of inclusion, support (material and spiritual), and mentorship. It is quite clear that traditional Buddhist institutions are considered ideal by most of the nuns because they offer both financial and spiritual security, creating a focused and homogenous (only ordained females) community where guidance and support are readily accessed. In such contexts, the nuns' identities as spiritual devotees are not only acknowledged, but strengthened and respected both by peers, elites, and the broader Buddhist community. When faced with the prospect of being unable to access such institutions, some opt to live in non-traditional institutions (which in some ways fulfill, but in other ways fail in helping the nuns to achieve the benefits of the institutional integration ideal), while others take the initiative to develop alternative paths towards fulfilling these ideals (i.e. Lhamo, Dechen, and Yeshe).

In sum, when considering the adjustment experiences of the nuns, it is clear that there is no uniform way to live as a Tibetan Buddhist nun and that adjusting to the ordained life can lead one

on many different paths. In the section to follow, these varieties of experiences will be categorized into meaningful groups and then considered in terms of how adherence (or nonadherence) to the two ideals impacts the women's intentions for the future.

#### **8.4. Variations in Positioning & Teleological aims in Tibetan Buddhist Institutional Life**

When the shared ideals regarding monastic life expressed in the nuns' stories are considered in relation to how completely or incompletely they have been realized within the lives of individual nuns, four distinct positions emerge:

1. *Doubly Realized Ideals*: Those who manage to achieve both of the ideals – meaning they both maintain a close relationship to their teacher and live as integrated members of established, traditional monastic institutions. In the following diagram, they are located in the center, at the intersection of both circles: Jiyul, Palden, Songheo, Dolma, and Chin-sun.

2. *Partially Realized Ideals*: Those for whom the ideals are partially, but not completely, realized: they are connected to their teacher but live in non-traditional Buddhist institutions or dharma centres (in the East and West), where monastics are a minority and the institutional benefits are not completely achieved. They are located within the 'teacher' sphere, on the edge of its intersection with the 'institution' sphere: Nyingma, Tenzin, Choden, and Pema.

3. *Singularly Realized Ideal*: Those who attain singular realization of the ideals - meaning they remain close to their teacher but do not live within a traditional monastic institution and have only temporary affiliations with non-traditional institutions. They are located fully in the 'teacher' sphere: Dawa, Sherab, and Thubten.

4. *Completely Unrealized Ideals*: Those whose lives and experiences include neither a close connection to their teacher, nor integration into established monastic institutions: they either live independently or have themselves founded non-traditional institutions. They are located below and outside the two spheres: Lhamo, Dechen, and Yeshe.

These diverse positions demonstrate the possibility of existing as a Buddhist nun without achieving both, or even either, of these ideals. Indeed, as the diagram and following discussion demonstrate, only one-third (5 of 15<sup>34</sup>) of all the nuns participating in this project

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<sup>34</sup> While there are a total of 16 participants, one of the nuns, Rinzen, did not complete a life history interview, and so is not generally included in the narrative chapters. She is thus not represented in this discussion and analysis, however, as a former resident of Thosamling, now living independently outside of any institution, Rinzen would fit within Group 3 since she maintains and emphasizes her relationship to her teacher despite choosing to live outside of either a traditional or non-traditional institution.

actually live in full accordance with the two-part ideal. Thus, rather than reflecting contemporary Buddhist monasticism as a uniform lifestyle, these ideals and the nuns' variable achievement of them illustrate that while the women are united by a shared, underlying ideology, the institutional elements attached to this ideology are not universally accessible nor are they unanimously valued or pursued.

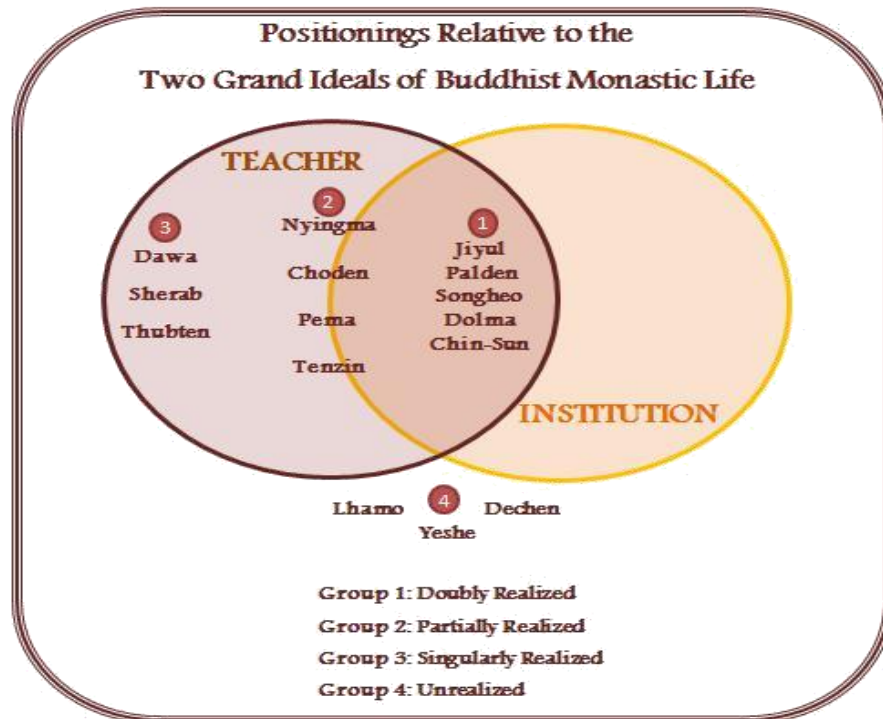


Figure 6. Monastic Ideals and Institutional Positioning

While the consequences and implications of these differing degrees of integration have been pointed to above and will be explored more fully in the chapters to follow, we will use the nuns' life history narratives and their discussions regarding the future to explore what their relative successes or failures in realizing these ideals mean for their future lives as Buddhist nuns.

For the five nuns belonging to the first group, where both ideals are fully realized, there is near unanimous agreement regarding the future: they all intend to focus their lives around the study of Buddhist texts and traditions. Three out of the five women in this group are from Korea and though they originally ordained in the Zen tradition and remain affiliated with their traditional monastic institutions back home, they were each drawn to the vigorous and systematic scholastic system of the Tibetan tradition. Jiyul, for example, explained “most [Korean] Buddhists want to

study Zen and practice meditation, but I want to study more Buddhist texts, so that is why I am here.” When we met, she was in her first year of a 2-year Tibetan language course and when I asked her about the future she said she would finish the Tibetan language course and then after that “I will study in the Tibetan nunneries.” The second Korean nun in the group, Chin-sun, also explained why she came to Tibetan Buddhism: “In Korea, we emphasize Zen practice too much, but I wanted to study sutra [texts] more.” Like Jiyul, Chin-sun will also complete the Tibetan language course at Thosamling and then “stay in India” to continue her studies. Songheo, who comes from the same Korean nunnery as Chin-sun, was clear that her future would also revolve around studies: “I need a philosophy degree, in Buddhist philosophy, a doctorate degree.” The other two nuns in this group were both from Australia and had become members of established Tibetan Buddhist nunneries in India. As members of these institutions, Dolma and Palden have both committed to a rigorous and long-term (17 year) program of study. Palden expressed great excitement about the prospect of formally advancing her knowledge and practice of Buddhism and she plans eventually to return to Australia to “teach what I know.” Similarly, Dolma also plans to return to Australia and act as a translator for visiting Tibetan teachers. She says that she wants to apply her knowledge by doing “something productive like translating.” Dolma expressed with great certainty that she wants to “study dharma, whether it’s in the West or here, for the rest of my life.”

While Dolma demonstrates that these intentions of following this path are life-long, Chin-sun offers an even more powerful testament of intention saying that “in the next life, yes I will become ani [nun],” adding with a laugh, “yes, again, but more younger” (referring to the fact that, in this life, it took her over a decade to fulfill her wish of ordination). In drawing on the Buddhist notion of reincarnation to articulate her commitment and intentions for the future, Chin-sun demonstrates the degree to which these women have internalized Buddhist ideals. All of the nuns in this group clearly expressed their unwavering dedication to the formal study of Buddhism, which they connect both to traditional institutions and to their teachers (i.e. Dolma's desire to translate teachings). In our conversations about the future, none of the women in this group expressed any uncertainty or doubt: they had clear and definite plans to become even more integrated into the Buddhist institutional system and to live as completely within the Buddhist world as possible.

While the narratives of the first group are defined by a strong and long-term commitment to the study of Buddhism, the stories in the second group - where the teacher/institution ideal is partially achieved - tend to revolve more around the nuns' teachers and their plans to return to their home countries to impart the knowledge they have gained. The stories of the four women in this group - Nyingma (Australia), Tenzin and Pema (Indonesia), and Choden (Denmark) - demonstrate full achievement of the student-teacher ideal, but only partial fulfillment of the second since they live within non-traditional institutions that fail to offer them the full benefits of support and mentorship from senior monastics and elites. For Tenzin and Pema, this experience seems to translate into a strong desire to realize both ideals in a more full and complete way. Recall that both are from Indonesia where they belong to a centre run by an Indonesian monk ordained in the Tibetan tradition. When discussing her future, Tenzin articulates plans that connect her both to this teacher and to more traditional institutional settings:

If my teacher allows me to study more, then I will change my place into an Eastern community - maybe in China, or maybe here [India]. But totally a monastic community, I want to search it in full and get the feeling. So, as long as he will give me time, I will learn as much as I can. And after that I will go back to Indonesia and start to build a nunnery and share what I got, and also help my teacher.

This quote demonstrates deference towards the teacher which is directly connected to a desire to gain membership in a more traditional, "Eastern" and "totally monastic" community. Her willingness to allow her teacher to determine, in large part, what her future will entail is common to the stories of the other women in this group as well.

When I asked Pema about her plans for the future, she said simply: "our teacher wants us to build a Tibetan nunnery in Indonesia." She seemed excited and pleased with this plan and the role she could play in establishing Tibetan Buddhism in her country: "the younger generation, they really want to hear dharma, but there's not so many around who can give the real teaching." As with Tenzin, we see how the will and intentions of the teacher seem to take precedence, however both Pema and Tenzin accept this as part of their lives as nuns and express no hesitation or displeasure at having their futures determined to such an extent by their teachers. Continuing this trend regarding the role of the teacher in future plans, Choden also downplayed her own personal goals and aspirations, emphasizing instead the part that her teacher, and wider Buddhist community, play in determining what comes next. She explained: "because I'm living in a centre,

it's not only depending on what *I* want or what *I* like.” Rather, she must make decisions about the future “in agreement with my monastic community, but with also the bigger community.” It is clear from these narrative excerpts that the nuns in this second group are particularly focused on institutional ties, whether directly to their teachers, to other important members of the institution, or to their wider communities in general. Like those in the first group (who achieved both ideals), these nuns narrated future plans in positive, intentional, and rather definite terms, with full and unwavering confidence that following the Buddhist path (informed by the advice of their teachers and considerations for their Buddhist communities) would provide them with the happiness, meaning and purpose they had been unable to achieve in their former, secular lives.

While in Group 2 the nuns' membership in non-traditional institutions translate into experiences where the two-part ideal is only partially realized, the nuns in Group 3 have little or no affiliation with Buddhist institutions (though they do maintain relationships with their teachers). Their stories thus highlight an even greater distance from the dominant conception of the good monastic life and are the first to display traces of uncertainty in regards to the future. Dawa, for instance, has a strong bond to her teacher and has clearly relied on his guidance and advice since she ordained (6 years prior to our meeting). When I asked her about the future her response was colored by notes of doubt and ambiguity:

So the plan...well, my teacher has told me to learn Tibetan. He has also told me to learn stone carving... I don't know after that. He has been, from time to time, putting me with sangha who have health problems, because I have a medical background. So, I have spent some time helping out sick lamas and sick nuns. But I really don't know what the future will bring after I finish the language program here.

She has clearly followed her teacher's advice to study Tibetan by moving to India and entering the language program at Thosamling, and while she seems open to following his advice in other matters, she does not mention any specific plans and repeats more than once in this short passage how she “doesn't know” what the future holds. As our conversation continues, it becomes evident that this ‘not knowing’ is something that Dawa struggles with quite significantly and that the struggle is not simply related to future plans, but to her future as a nun altogether:

I think that on some days, yeah, I really feel that pioneer spirit, like I want to try to keep it going and inspire people, but on the other hand, I just don't know, I just don't know what's around the corner really. I can see how there can be some benefits to being a layperson, and

also some drawbacks, and I can also see how there are some benefits to being ordained. Like if I weren't ordained, I probably would not be here. And so, yeah, I just don't know. It's just not easy to be ordained.

Dawa's openness and willingness to share the uncertainties she experiences as a nun were quite unique among the narratives, but Sherab's story also included a tone of conflict and uncertainty, especially in terms of the role she plays at the centre she is affiliated with in Europe.

At the time of our interview, Sherab had been living as a Buddhist nun for 17 years, the longest of any of the nuns in this study. Despite this lengthy post-ordination period and the depth and range of experiences she has had as a nun, her narrative was still rife with uncertainties regarding the compromises, responsibilities and ambitions she shoulders as a nun living in the West. As mentioned in a previous section, her access to the institution of her teacher was originally denied and this is what initially brought her to India. Throughout her story a definite ambiguity surrounds her role and personal commitment to her centre in Europe and she has clearly been involved in some difficult negotiations regarding where and how she spends her time. She expresses a preference for living in India because it is a place of "so many different cultures, so many different beings," where religion is "still going on," and where it is a "cheap place to live." She relishes in the complex and spiritual atmosphere, and in the freedom she has to move between places and not be tied to the sometimes unrewarding duties of working in the largely lay community associated with her teacher. Regarding her future plans, she said: "I have to talk to Rinpoche [reincarnated teacher]", noting that this most recent trip to India had already made the nuns at her centre at home "afraid" because they say that she always "comes depressed back and then she wants to go again back there!" Clearly then, Sherab's life as a nun, even after so much time and despite a continued connection to her teacher, still involves a good deal of uncertainty, stress, compromise, and negotiation, and is, as she says, "a little bit difficult."

Thubten was very newly ordained at the time of our interview, having been a nun for only a few weeks, but her discussion of the future was similar in many ways to the other nuns in this group in that it included statements of uncertainty and also articulated a future motivated by the desire to help others. Thubten's initial response to my questions about her future plans was "Future? Ah! I don't know." And though she repeated several times that she "didn't know" what her future would entail, she expressed a commitment to "studying Buddhist philosophy" and says

that she “wants to practice more.” As our conversation continued, she also shared: “eventually I have to go back to Korea - I’m Korean, and I want to help some Koreans.” She says that now, as a new nun, she is “just learning and so I don’t have much power,” but once she has deepened her knowledge and practice, she wants to return home because “at this time in Korea younger people, the young generation, they have mind problems, very big problems, so I want to help them.” Additionally, when I asked Thubten about her plans after Thosamling she said: “I am waiting for my teacher, for my teacher’s advice.” Her words emphasize the implications of the first ideal and the important role that her teacher plays in terms of her future life course.

Overall, the women in this third group reveal, in more explicit terms than the women from the second group, the challenges inherent in the experience of converting and ordaining in a foreign tradition. Their experiences demonstrate, as Dawa articulates directly, that “It’s just not easy to be ordained.” Unlike the women in the previous groups, Dawa, Thubten, and Sherab speak openly about some of the difficulties they have faced, and share, as Sherab did, that they even sometimes entertain doubts regarding their decision to ordain:

Well, I do not doubt in general, but sometimes it comes in my mind that... and I think: ‘Oh my God, this is not true, or there is no rebirth, or it’s nothing, oh my God!!’ But then I say, but I have a good life, I have a better life, and I’m helping other people, and so it’s quickly over. But the doubts are still there.

We can see from the analyses so far that the further the women get from the ‘ideal monastic life,’ the less certitude exists in their narratives. The women experience and share more concerns and fears, and subtly question certain aspects of Buddhist monasticism. As we will see with the nuns in the final group, this is a trend which only intensifies as additional tenets of the ideal monastic life go unrealized.

The last of the four groups is the one comprised of nuns who are living essentially independent lives outside of traditional institutional contexts. Whereas deepening knowledge and expertise, and integrating more fully into Buddhist institutions were the clear motivational forces underlying the surmised futures of the nuns in the other groups, those in this group express the greatest doubt and detachment from traditional Tibetan Buddhist norms and ideals. They convey instead a desire to pursue personal goals and etch out a unique place for themselves in the wider Buddhist world. Lhamo is the founder and head of Thosamling, and when I asked “what kind of future plans” she had, she answered: “Well, I don’t have future plans.” Recall that Lhamo had



intended to enter a traditional Tibetan nunnery in India after getting ordained but, when her application was refused, she eventually ended up establishing Thosamling. Lhamo has spent every waking moment of the last decade building and securing the future of this institution and admits “maybe I forgot to look further than what I am busy with, because I have too many things on my mind.” When she finally took a moment during our interview to consider the future, she spoke mostly of the “visa situation” in India and the uncertainty she faced with being able to stay in the country long-term: “If I can’t come back here to India, then I have to live somewhere in the West and that’s really hard, and I don’t see myself doing that.” So while she does indicate some certain plans or intentions for the future, they remain quite vague. This lack of specificity was also present in Yeshe’s discussions of the future.

One of the questions I posed to Yeshe was informed by the sort of flippant attitude she expressed regarding her life-long commitment to monastic life:

*RG: So do you imagine that you’ll stay a nun?*

Y: Yes, I think so; but I mean, it doesn’t matter. If I get what I need to get, I mean, a little bit of deeper understanding, it’s, who knows. I’m not grasping on to it, I don’t know. Of course, now I feel good that I have this experience, but.....

This sort of vague, non-committal response that trails off without conclusion, mirrors the uncertainty expressed by Lhamo. However, the idea that “it doesn’t matter” was definitely not present in any of the other narratives. Yeshe’s framing of the future expresses her unique perspective and a willingness to challenge and resist the more traditional and expected norms of traditional Buddhism (which the nuns in the other groups clearly valued and reflected in their stories). Her point of view and the way that she often positioned herself on the edge, moving between the traditional/conformist and defiant/non-conformist perspectives is very unusual among participants. In one instance, for example, she draws on a traditional element of Buddhist ideology (karma) to explain her connection to the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, but then immediately distances herself and undermines her commitment and status as an ordained member of the sangha: “Perhaps I have a karma with this tradition. But it doesn’t matter. One day I will go perhaps to Japan... But, who knows. But it doesn’t matter where we go and how we call it.” Thus, Yeshe takes the uncertainty characteristic of this group of narratives to a new level, expressing her personal views through a detachment with regards to any specific end point, tradition, or denomination. In a

similar fashion, Dechen also distances herself from the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, but, rather than using detachment to do so, as Yeshe did, she adopts a more critical perspective and describes goals and plans that remove her further from the Tibetan Buddhist institutional tradition.

The distancing process underlying Dechen's narrative began with her center in Australia refusing to house or support her. While this situation did not reflect a choice or intention on Dechen's part, later instances of distancing are presented as more intentional. For example, after spending a couple of years living as a member of the Thosamling community, Dechen decided to leave, in large part, she explains, because she Here we see a stark and definite contrast to the major motivation shared by the nuns in the first group. The major focus of those women's (Jiyul, Palden, Songheo, Dolma and Chin-sun) intended future was study, and more specifically, the advanced study of Tibetan language texts. In this way, Dechen's differing perspective and emphasis on alternative values and goals distances her from the collectively expressed monastic ideals and pushes her to the edges of the Tibetan Buddhist world. This is clear, as well, when we consider her stated plans for the future which center around "building a really big charity" for Indian Dalits<sup>35</sup>. So, while her ambitions do connect to the Buddhist world, they simultaneously thwart and challenge traditional norms and expectations by operating outside of the typical lineage-based system of the Tibetan tradition, embodying more social justice ideals, and concentrating on populations outside of the Tibetan cultural sphere.

All in all, then, the three nuns in this final group seem particularly motivated by the feeling that Dechen describes experiencing early in her monastic life: "the feeling that there was no place for me." While Lhamo and Yeshe did not directly articulate their feelings in this way, their stories indicate that they too have had to find a place for themselves at the outer edges of the Tibetan Buddhist world, Lhamo by building a hybrid nunnery-guest house-institute and Yeshe by living on her own among Indian nuns.

Unlike the narratives of the nuns who live monastic lives more closely aligned to the 'ideal,' Lhamo, Dechen, and Yeshe articulate greater struggles during the adjustment phase and directly critique aspects of the Tibetan Buddhist system. Their denied attempts (or unwillingness on Yeshe's part) to integrate into the Buddhist institutional network have been difficult on a

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<sup>35</sup> 'Dalit' is the name given to members of what is traditionally considered the 'un-touchable' caste of Indian society. Significant numbers of Dalits are Buddhists, having participated in a Buddhist revival movement led by B.R. Ambedkar in the 1960s.

number of levels, yet they have each managed to find a way and a place to live a fulfilling Buddhist monastic life. In Dechen's case, being excluded from Buddhist institutions in the West eventually brought her to India where she founded an organization supporting a Dalit community in central India. She explains that she can "understand these so-called untouchables, because that's exactly how I felt in Tibetan Buddhism. I felt like an outcast." While neither Yeshe nor Lhamo used terms or descriptions as specific as 'outcast,' they were never initiated into established Buddhist communities and so, like Dechen, they have had to create their own versions of a monastic life. The challenge of living independently and of creating an alternative monastic lifeworld has admittedly been difficult for each of them. Yeshe says: "It was not easy; it's still not easy I must say"; and Dechen reveals that "over the years it was really trial by fire." The three nuns in this group, then, describe experiences which do not conform to the two ideals of the good monastic life; however, they nonetheless use these ideals to shape their stories. In some instances, the disparity between their lived-experience and the unrealized ideals becomes an expression of sadness or regret, while in other cases the nuns use that distance as an opportunity for reflection and critique, and even scathing repudiation.

By using Todorov and Good's insights into narrative structures, to identify the shared, underlying ideals and then mapping them onto the women's stories, we can see that the four distinct groupings are defined by particular themes, perspectives, and intentions regarding the future. It becomes clear that the more fully the nuns' experiences conform to the ideals, the more closely their plans for the future align with traditional Buddhist values and the more certitude exists within their intentions. Adding in Linde's insights regarding coherence and the role of shared, cultural assumptions regarding the good or successful life, it is evident that having immersed themselves in Buddhist lifeworlds, the nuns now rely on established ideals from within that world to frame their stories, to negotiate group membership, and to construct identities that are intelligible in the context of those worlds (1993). The nuns who experience separation from one or both of these two ideals (i.e. groups 3 and 4) display less certainty and more ambiguity, and surmise futures which increase the distance between them and entrenched, established expectations of nunhood in the Tibetan institutional world. It appears that not being integrated into an authentic, traditional institution challenges their capacity to embody the monastic character and puts some of the nuns on a path towards innovation where they create space for themselves (and

others like them) on the margins of Tibetan Buddhist institutional society. Detachment from the traditional hierarchies, authorities, and responsibilities of the Buddhist institutional world looks to open up a space of alterity, innovation, and diversity. They are less defined, by others and consequently themselves, by the traditional roles of Buddhist nuns, and so operate at the fringes of Tibetan institutional society.

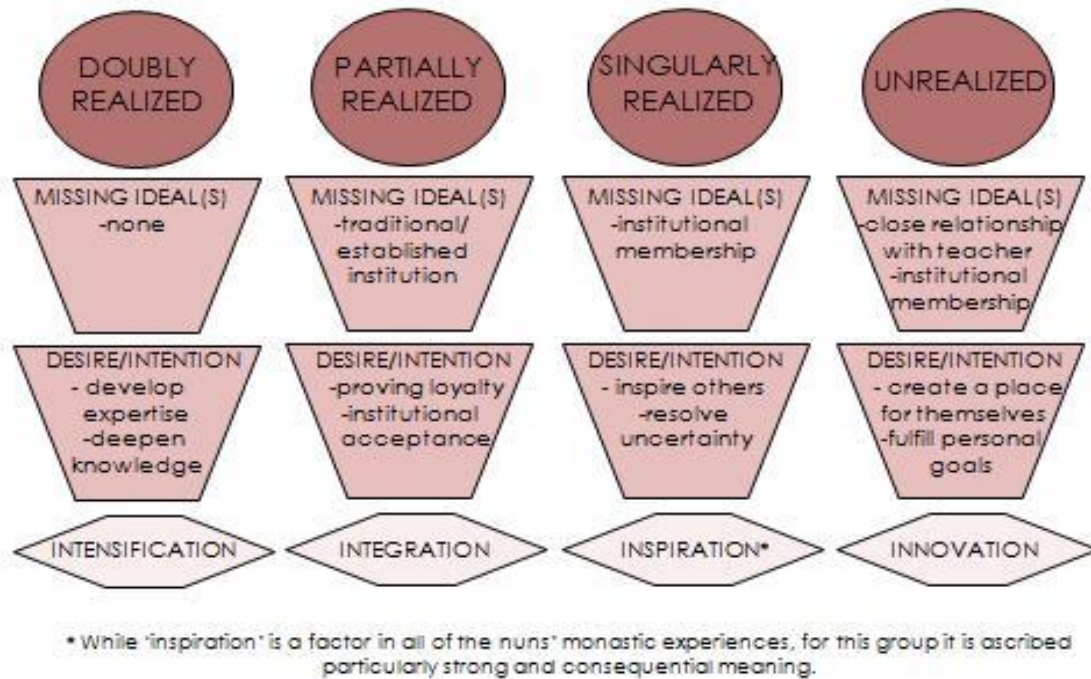


Figure 7. Summary of Social Positionings in the Adjustment Phase

### 8.5. Conclusions

As converts and ordained members of Tibetan Buddhism, the women's experiences and expressions are influenced by their beliefs and commitment to this religious system as well as by the dual ideals that define the good monastic life. This is expressed in the narrative structure of their stories of adjustment where a plotless ideological form is infused with causal features, creating a tension and dualism that reflects the nuns' lived experiences of dealing with the unanticipated challenges involved in adapting to institutional monastic life.

What appears to be most at stake in these underlying ideals, and the nuns' various approaches to realizing them, is recognition and authenticity. As committed members of the Buddhist faith, the women have devoted their lives to the study and practice of this spiritual tradition, yet when the ideals defining monastic life go unrealized, their ability to fully embody the persona of a Buddhist nun is compromised. When either or both of the ideals are not fully achieved, the nuns' connections to the rich history and traditions of Buddhism are undermined and

their attention to the goals of the path may be diverted. They may also become alienated from similarly devoted members of the community. In short, failing to achieve the good life of a Buddhist monastic as represented by these two ideals dilutes the authenticity of their lives and selves as Buddhist nuns. In the chapters to follow, the dynamics of the nuns' adjustment to this situation and the implications of their varying integration into the Tibetan Buddhist institutional world will be addressed, first in a chapter analyzing the status and role of Thosamling as an institution within this world (via symbolic interactions and performance), and secondly in the final identity chapter which looks at issues of self in terms of the permanently liminal or liminoid nature of monastic life.

## **9. Presentation and Performance: Interaction Rituals at Thosamling**

In the final phase of adjustment, the women are adapting to life as ordained Buddhist nuns. As the previous narrative chapter shows, this phase is suffused with institutional elements and is dominated by the women's notions that the ideal monastic life is defined by both a close and on-going relationship with one's teacher as well as integration and participation in a traditional Buddhist institution. There were indications that failing to completely achieve these ideals poses particular challenges to the nuns, in terms of both initial adjustment and long-term adaptation to monastic life. Moreover, that chapter introduced the issues of recognition and acknowledgment as well as authenticity, specifically in terms of the women's abilities to fully realize the character of a Buddhist nun. These themes and ideas raise many questions and point to the need for a theoretical framework that can facilitate a more nuanced consideration of the status of Thosamling and the effects and implications that life in this institution has on the nuns who live there (even if only briefly).

While Thosamling was referred to, in previous chapters, as a non-traditional institution, this chapter will provide greater definitional clarity by addressing the question: "What is the status of Thosamling as an institution in the Tibetan Buddhist world?" Beyond this, the symbolic interactionist theories of Goffman (1967) and Collins (2004, 2009, 2010) will be used to frame an answer to this inquiry and, additionally, to consider the social dynamics and performative interactions at Thosamling in an effort to clarify how the status of Thosamling as an institution impacts its institutional leaders (head nun and resident geshe) and members (past and present resident nuns).

In the end, it will be argued that Thosamling is a non-traditional institution defined by interaction rituals which fail to adequately generate and sustain the emotional energy required to inspire strong membership feelings. More precisely, it will be shown that the ambiguity surrounding Thosamling's institutional status compromises its validity within the Tibetan Buddhist world and thereby limits the authenticity experienced and ascribed to both its leaders and resident nuns. As such, Thosamling functions as type of intermediary, liminal institution supporting movements within the Tibetan Buddhist world that correspond to two general courses of action, that is, either towards or further away from traditional institutional life.

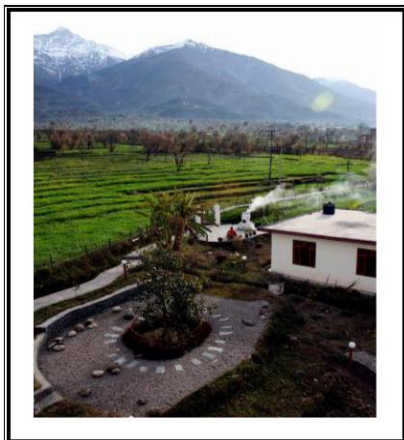
### **9.1. Thosamling: Institutional Status and Implications**

Thosamling occupies an ambiguous position in the Tibetan Buddhist world. Situated in and among many traditional Tibetan institutions and having the financial and public backing of the Dalai Lama himself, Thosamling bears many of the marks and contains many of the elements required of an authentic and traditional Tibetan institution. With that being said, Thosamling diverges from tradition in numerous ways as well: it is unaffiliated with any specific teacher, tradition, or lineage; it houses both lay and ordained women; there is a high turnover rate among both lay and ordained residents, with very few staying more than 2-3 years; and there is a resident geshe (teacher), but he does not function as nunnery abbot or lama in the traditional sense. These characteristics of Thosamling will be addressed throughout the chapter, but even in listing them it is clear that this nunnery is unconventional in many senses.

In order to identify exactly what Thosamling is, in institutional terms, and how it functions within the Tibetan Buddhist world, the work of Erving Goffman (1956, 1967), a sociologist who employed a dramaturgical framework to study human behaviour and social interaction, will be used. His symbolic interactionist approach, which focuses on social dynamics and the 'micro interactions' that underlie both personal and institutional structures in society, is useful in distilling some of the key features of Thosamling as they relate to the core issues of authenticity and recognition. Goffman suggested that "the proper study of interaction is not the individual and his psychology, but rather the syntactical relations among the acts of different persons mutually present to one another" (1967, p.2). Goffman (1983) investigated these dialogical relations at both face-to-face, micro-levels (comprising what he termed the 'interaction order'), and the broader, macro-levels characterizing the 'institutional order.' Everyday life is lived in the interaction order: we encounter situations and others, projecting and maintaining images or versions of ourselves through face-to-face interactions. In this way, the interaction order is produced and reproduced through chains of interaction that accumulate over time into the established routines and norms of the institutional order to which it is "loosely coupled" (Goffman, 1983). From this perspective, human interactions of every type, from the formal and ritual to the everyday mundane, are a form of performance (Goffman, 1956). Additionally, human performances require the necessary support of what Goffman terms a 'front' (1956). Fronts represent the largely fixed elements of a performance that are essential in defining the situation for both performer and audience. In Goffman's words, front is "the expressive equipment of a standard kind intentionally or unwittingly

employed by the individual during his performance" (1956, p. 10). This 'equipment' can be divided into two main categories: setting and personal/social front. The specifics of the personal and social front, which define the performer, will be elaborated in the sections to follow, whereas this discussion concentrates on setting: "the scenery and stage props for the spate of human action played out before, within, or upon it" (p. 10).

Thosamling was introduced and described in the introduction chapter, and it functions as the geographically fixed setting for the interactions considered here. In terms of appearances and 'props', Thosamling is obviously recognizable as a Tibetan institution, with architectural and design elements in keeping with traditional Tibetan Buddhist conventions, notably a maroon and yellow/white color scheme, displayed lung-ta (prayer flags), images of the Dalai Lama, and a



*Thosamling' Geshe-la's house, Bodhi tree, Main entrance path*

prominently placed 'bodhi tree'<sup>36</sup>. The temple building, a central focus of the nunnery compound, includes a traditional Tibetan style temple on the first floor and houses a bathroom and three guest rooms on the upper floor, along with a library and a special apartment on the third floor which is reserved exclusively for the highest visiting lamas (e.g. Dalai Lama). The exterior walls of the temple depict standard frescoes, including the Wheel of Life, which appears on all Tibetan Buddhist temples. There is a large gong that is wheeled out and sounded to call the nuns to morning meditation and at the start of all ritual ceremonies.

Inside the temple, there is a main aisle flanked on both sides with low tables and maroon colored mats where the nuns sit in order of seniority: most senior nuns (duration since ordination) sit closest to the altar. At the end of the aisle is a large dais or throne, upon which a framed image of the Dalai Lama is placed, shrouded with the traditional white khata (silk scarf). There is a secondary throne, lower than the Dalai Lama's but sitting higher than the nuns, which is reserved for the resident teacher/lama, Geshe-la. The entire back wall of the temple acts as a type of altar, covered from the ceiling down with golden images of the Buddha along with framed images of important arhats (accomplished practitioners that are not fully Buddhas). The altar is lined with a

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<sup>36</sup> The bodhi tree is a large, ancient fig tree located in Bodh Gaya in north eastern India and is the place where the Buddha is said to have attained enlightenment. Many Buddhist institutions plant seeds or cuttings from the original tree and Thosamling's is located adjacent to the temple near the entrance of the nunnery compound.



string of lights, various offerings (flowers, foods, incense, etc.) and a set of seven water bowls which are filled, cleaned, and emptied each day by one of the nuns according to a weekly rotation. The temple is used each morning for the 'morning meditation' which is a practice required for all nuns, and optional for lay residents. This daily ceremony begins each morning at 6:00. It includes 30 minutes of silent meditation, prostrations, prayers/chants said out loud as a group and led by a designated chant master or umze<sup>37</sup>, and the sessions end with dedications<sup>38</sup>. The 'morning meditation ends around 6:50 and everyone leaves the temple in silence, heading to the dining hall for breakfast which is served at 7:00. In addition to this daily practice, several ceremonies ('pujas') are held in the temple according to a standard Tibetan lunar calendar, which identifies auspicious days for particular ceremonies. The different schools emphasize and practice different pujas, so as a 'rime' or non-sectarian institution, Thosamling includes important ceremonies from each - including the Guru Rinpoche puja on the 10th day of the month and the Tara/Dolma puja, among others. Thus, as a performative setting, the appearance (architectural elements, physical layout) of Thosamling conforms to traditional Tibetan Buddhist institutional standards and so sets the stage for interactions and activities that potentially fit this tradition. Yet, while the setting of Thosamling adheres to the traditional front of Tibetan institutions, its organizational and social structure introduce non-standard elements that create a divergence from tradition.

As previously noted, Thosamling is a mixed-community, housing both lay and ordained residents. Though it is an all-female community<sup>39</sup>, this mixed residency approach is not traditional in the Tibetan Buddhist context. It is also atypical to continue this mix within classes and courses

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<sup>37</sup> The prayers/chants are included in a booklet with English translation and Tibetan phonetics. Some of the nuns recite them from memory, while others follow along in the booklet. The sequence of prayers include: 1. Refuge Prayer; 2. Seven Limb Prayer; 3. Mandala Offering; 4. Heart of Wisdom Sutra; 5. Praises to the Twenty-One Taras; 6. Chenrezig Prayer; 7. Guru Rinpoche Prayer; 8. Lama Tsongkapa Prayer; 9. His Holiness Dalai Lama's long life Prayer; 10. His Holiness Sakya Tizin's Long Life; 11. His Holiness Karmapa's Long Life Prayer; and 12. Dedications.

<sup>38</sup> The dedications include request for the "swift return" of departed lamas and rinpoches, and all people who have died within the last 49 days. Prayers are also offered for the health and happiness of Thosamling's benefactors, who are then listed by name. Special dedications are also included, when submitted along with a donation, and typically involve prayers and thoughts for an ill family member or friend, victims of recent natural disasters, etc. The standard opening prayers also voice the desire for the "dharma to flourish in the East and West" and that "all Western sangha be taken care of." The prayers also say "May Tibet become free and may Tibetans be allowed to return to rebuild Tibet" and end with the intention that "our minds never turn from the dharma" and that "all obstacles be dissolved."

<sup>39</sup> That is, with the exception of Geshe-la, who lives in a separate building and eats most meals inside his private residence. The presence of male teachers or lamas in Tibetan nunneries or female-oriented institutions is not necessarily typical, but is somewhat common, and does not in and of itself set Thosamling apart from tradition.

offered within the institution. Perhaps the most notable non-traditional feature of Thosamling is its organizational structure. In Tibetan Buddhism, nunneries and monasteries are typically lineage-based institutions, affiliated with one particular lama/teacher from one of the four schools of the tradition. In the case of Thosamling however, both of these conventions are absent, as it is a *rime* or non-denominational institution founded and run by an essentially independent, convert nun. Typically, the hierarchy of organizational leadership begins, at the apex, with a high lama or rinpoche (recognized reincarnation). These leaders represent the moral and religious authority and are typically supported by an abbess/abbot (*khenmo/khenpo*) who oversees the administrative and regulatory operations of a given institution. The abbess/abbot is usually appointed by the highest lama of the lineage in conjunction with a monastery council and s/he manages several organizational positions, generally filled by advanced nuns/monks within the community on a rotational basis (positions are reassigned every 2-3 years), including: disciplinarian, kitchen manager, ceremony/ritual leader (*umze*), etc. (Sangharakshita, 1996, p. 62). In my interview with the resident geshe, he commented (through a translator) on Thosamling's lack of traditional organizational structure, saying

So, for the hierarchy kind of structure that's only because there is not enough nuns here to have this sort of heavy structure: a hierarchy starting with the abbot and the umze and the disciplinarian and all these. That's done in the Tibetan structure because there are so many people, but it's not done in Thosamling because there are not so many people, there's no need to have this heavy structure. Also, because nuns are leaving every year, often after a year, there's no time to get a strong structure that would be the same forever. There's no purpose in having this strong structure.

Indeed, as Geshe-la points out, the lack of consistent, long-term residents makes a traditional institutional structure unfeasible at Thosamling. Other aspects of institutional life at Thosamling are less dependent on the number of resident nuns or the duration of their stay, yet they also reflect a less traditional form. For example, nuns each have their own rooms, and beyond the morning meditation there are no institutional restrictions on what the nuns do with their time or where they go throughout the day. When considering these issues from the nuns' perspectives, it becomes clear that these structural and organizational aspects of Thosamling shape their experiences and have important implications for not only their evaluation of the nunnery's institutional status, but on their commitment and engagement as well.

Overall, most of the nuns expressed great appreciation for the time they spent at Thosamling. Many of them describe it as a "beautiful location"(Dechen), "clean and nice" (Jiyul) and generally a "very good place" (Thubten). However, once the nuns' experiences and perspectives on various elements of the institutional structure of Thosamling are considered, more complex variations in views emerge and the ambiguity defining the nunnery becomes increasingly consequential in regards to emotional investment and feelings of belonging.

In interviewing both past and present resident nuns, the issue of defining Thosamling as an institution of the Tibetan Buddhist world arose often. Dolma, the Australian nun who had spent two years there studying Tibetan language and philosophy before following the advice of her lama and moving into a traditional Tibetan nunnery in the area, rhetorically asked: "Is it a women's institute? Is it a nunnery? Is it both?" She adds: "There's good things about Thosamling, it's a wonderful place. But as a *nunnery*, it doesn't really, I don't know, it doesn't really function like how a nunnery is supposed to function." She describes it more as a "private nunnery" given the role that Lhamo, as an essentially independent nun, has played in its founding and ongoing operation and on account of its rather loose organization. In my interview with Rinzen, she similarly asked: "What is Thosamling? Do you think this is a nunnery? I mean what does it offer as a nunnery? The morning prayers, that's all. There is no, like, monastic training." Others tend to agree, like Palden, also an Australian nun who lived at Thosamling before moving on to join a more traditional, established Tibetan nunnery. From her perspective, because it is such a "transient" place, Thosamling is "more a dharma centre" than a nunnery. Pema, from Indonesia, said directly: "I do not think this place is really a nunnery. It is an institute; because a nunnery has to have spiritual activities." I suspected that she was referring to ceremonies and rituals, but when I asked her to explain what she meant by 'spiritual activities', it was clear that she was referring to the rigorous and guided study of Buddhist philosophy. She clarified by using a nearby traditional Tibetan nunnery as an example. There, she says, "from day until night they study, study, study, and at night they debate. And there is a teacher who really watches each of them and really knows each of them on what level they are at, what book they have to read, what test they need to do, that's a nunnery!" Dawa, the American nun who moved to Thosamling to study Tibetan language, voiced a similar opinion, saying that "the feeling here is more like, it's, it's kind of a little university. It's a school, not so much a nunnery."

As founder and head of Thosamling, Lhamo acknowledges these opinions and says that "some nuns have the idea that a nunnery is only for nuns, so sometimes they just leave because there are too many laypeople here, and the courses are going on so it's not really a nunnery." While she recognized the confusion and dissention among resident nuns (including former residents) in regards to the status of Thosamling, Lhamo persisted in trying to get nuns, particularly Western nuns, to buy into her vision and commit long term to living at Thosamling. Despite her best efforts, however, Thosamling continues to function primarily as a temporary home for both Eastern and Western nuns.

Overall, the nuns appear to feel quite conflicted about their experiences and evaluations of Thosamling: they note many challenges related to its unconventional leadership and structure, but at the same time they acknowledge the need for institutions that support convert monastics and they greatly respect and admire Lhamo for her dedication and hard work in running this institution.

The implications of Thosamling's organizational structure were addressed often in our interviews. Dolma, for instance, considers the lack of structure, along with the mix of lay and ordained practitioners, as factors that undermine Thosamling's status as a traditional nunnery. She noted: "It's not like anyone's really going wrong there – I mean everybody's studying and completing their studies and stuff... it's just the internal discipline, there's not much discipline." She goes on:

[At Thosamling] there's no structure. Like here [referring to the traditional Tibetan nunnery within which she currently resides], it's the most structured place I've ever seen in my life. Like all your time is structured, all your time, except on a Sunday, where you do your other things, but at Thosamling none of your time is structured, except morning prayers and then classes, if you attend any of those, but apart from that you're free to go outside, do whatever you like, in your room, have whatever you like.

So yeah, it's a very relaxed feeling, but at the same time I don't think that's too helpful. From Thubten's perspective (as a newly ordained nun from Korea), this 'relaxed feeling' and the freedom and privacy that Thosamling offer are particularly well suited to "Western nuns" because "they don't know much" and so it is good to "start here with studying Buddhism." Moreover, she thinks that "Western nuns, or other nuns but not Tibetans, are more comfortable staying here. If you stay in a Tibetan nunnery everything is together – you have to do all, everything together. But here we are not like this; here we are a very private place." While Thubten defines the

independence and privacy that define Thosamling as an explanation for why Westerners may feel comfortable there, Jiyul, a more senior nun also from Korea, says that this individualized environment is "not so good....Yeah, it's not so good to be a nun like that." It is largely for this reason that she expresses a near opposite opinion to that of Thubten, suggesting that Thosamling is "a very good place, not for beginners, but for more professional nuns." These diverse and conflicting perspectives are indicative of Thosamling's ambiguous status and of the ways that the nuns - particularly new nuns like Thubten- variably make sense of it and its place within the Tibetan monastic world.

One additional issue that elicited more general consensus was the lack of a stable nuns community at Thosamling. As the previous chapter shows, the guidance and support offered by senior nuns within a stable community is an essential element of the ideal monastic life. All of the nuns, including Lhamo, and even Geshe-la, agree that Thosamling is a "transient community" (Palden) where "nobody is staying" (Geshe-la). The lack of a consistent and long-term community of nuns has many implications for Thosamling as an institution, and definitely distinguishes it from traditional institutions, for which stable, long-term (and even lifelong) residency is a hallmark. Songheo, for instance, compares the traditional monastic institutions in Korea to Thosamling, noting that "in Korea the nunneries are only for nuns" and nuns "stay for a long time, even a lifetime", while "here [Thosamling] there are so many nuns coming and going, coming and going— it is very changeable. Ah, it's not good, it's not stable." Dolma expressed a similar perspective when I asked if she could speak to the reasons behind her move from Thosamling into an established Tibetan institution:

Well, it's [Thosamling] a nunnery, but there's no stable nun's community. Obviously, because of visa problems - that doesn't allow many people to stay for a long time, so of course you've got no stable community of nuns, or senior nuns. So then, it loses its foundation- the foundation it needs to be a proper monastic community. Which is you know, senior nuns, stable rules, and consistency basically.

Geshe-la similarly pointed to the inability of foreign nuns to secure visas in India as a major reason for the turnover of resident nuns. "Since I arrived here," he says, "there is nobody left – all the ones that I have seen they are all leaving one after the other." And from his point of view, "the main problem is the visa." He suggests that, as a result, nuns "cannot be stable here –

because even if they start to study here they cannot finish 15 years of study, so that makes a big difference." Consequently, he notes that at Thosamling "the focus is completely different due to this visa situation." While obtaining a long-term visa in India can be problematic for foreign nuns, many of those living outside of Thosamling, either independently or as members of traditional Tibetan nunneries, have managed to overcome this issue, which seems to indicate that visas alone are not responsible for the high turnover of monastic residents in Thosamling.

Overall, it appears that the lack of structure, unconventional leadership, and the unstable nun population at Thosamling act as what Goffman refers to as 'disruptive events' (1956). In his writings he describes how certain things may occur within interactions that "contradict, discredit, or otherwise throw doubt upon the projection" (1956, p. 6). These 'disruptive events' undermine the performance and destabilize situations as perceived and experienced by participants. In the case of Thosamling, the qualities of the institution described above seem to function as types of 'disruptive events' which compromise the nuns' ability to live an ideal monastic life. The non-traditional characteristics of Thosamling create confusion and limit the nuns' access to crucial elements of Buddhist monastic life (focused studies, mentorship, authoritarian hierarchy, etc.). In the discussion to follow the precise implications of these disruptions or limitations will be explored, as we move closer to a conclusive definition of Thosamling's institutional status.

Randall Collins is a contemporary social theorist who has extended Goffman's work on human interaction by setting out the processual ingredients which make interaction rituals succeed or fail (2004). Drawing on the work of Goffman and Durkheim, Collins defines interaction ritual as "a mechanism of mutually focused emotion and attention producing a momentarily shared reality, which thereby generates solidarity and symbols of group membership" (2004, p. 7). In this way, Collins introduces a focus on emotion and connects the solidarity-producing and symbol-sustaining interactions of human life to the continuity and stability of broader social and institutional structures. Maintaining Goffman's situational emphasis on micro-contexts, Collins suggests that intersubjective interactions generate and regenerate emotions in a way that charges particular symbols, situations, and relationships with powerful emotional energy such that they, as compared to ones of lesser intensity, are imprinted or internalized as more significant and meaningful (2004). In fact, Collins contends that "emotional energy is what individuals seek" and that "situations are attractive or unattractive to them to the extent that the interaction ritual is

successful in providing emotional energy" (2004, p. 44). This theoretical framework may be usefully applied to the context of Thosamling in order to gain additional insight not only into its institutional status, but into the implications and effects that this status has (or has had) on its resident nuns.

Collins' framing of human interactions in terms of emotional energy appears particularly relevant to this study seeing as though many of the nuns used similar concepts (e.g. "dharma spirit", "core", "spiritual nourishment") to articulate their overall assessments of Thosamling. Each of those who employed the notion of energy or spirit concluded that it was precisely that that the nunnery was lacking. Moreover, the explanations they offered for the energy or spirit deficits were consistently rooted in interaction rituals. The specific interactions highlighted by the nuns as problematic in this regard were tied both to the leadership and teacher-student relations as well as to the broader social dynamics of Thosamling. Choden is one who associates the lack of energy to the non-sectarian approach adopted in Thosamling. She said: "The sense of a nunnery, like a core where everything kind of turns around, is not really present." When I asked her to explain, she connected this feeling to the fact that, at Thosamling, "people come from many different places and even within the Tibetan tradition there are many lineages and the nuns here have all different teachers, so they have different commitments and practices to do." The result, she explained, is that "there's not the sense of something that holds the whole thing together." By way of comparison, she mentioned a traditional Tibetan Buddhist institution (monastery) that had recently been built in the area:

Choden: If you go over to that monastery that's just 300 meters away, you can immediately feel that it is *held*. Even if it's just one year old. There's a container – something that holds people together.

*RG: And do you feel that same sense also in your centre in France?*

Choden: Yeah. It's very clear, that this is what we follow. And here [at Thosamling], it becomes... the ground is a little bit shaky.

From the perspective of Lhamo, the head nun, the diversity and multiplicity of lineages and schools within Tibetan Buddhism is what motivated her to make Thosamling "as broad as possible, so that everyone has a place to stay, if they want to live and study." While creating a welcoming and inclusive atmosphere was a core motivating factor in this institutional decision, Choden, along with several others, found that, in fact, it diminished the sense of connection and general 'energy'

of Thosamling. Dawa, for instance, called the *rime* (non-sectarian) approach "a bit bewildering" because instead of generating a "strong spiritual focus...it's all sort of weak across the board." She explained:

We do these pujas, but no one really knows how to do the Nyingma puja, and no one really knows how to do the Gelugpa puja, and you know, we all kind of limp along in the gompa [temple]. And so I feel kind of lost. Like, I want to learn how to do these pujas, but I don't know who there is to teach me, so that's a bit of a conundrum. I also feel like not doing my Gelugpa practices in a group, I'm probably losing a bit of an edge on that ... Thosamling has its own prayers and practices, and those are nice, but as far as anything deeper, it's lacking.

This excerpt from Dawa's interview raises many important issues. First, it indicates a failure of sacred performances at Thosamling. Secondly, it underscores the desire and importance of regular, collective interaction rituals. Thirdly, it identifies the lack of ritual guidance and teaching as particularly problematic.

Collins reminds us that "encounters have an emotional aftermath": the emotional energy generated in effective interactions "charges up individuals like an electric battery, giving them a corresponding degree of enthusiasm toward ritually created symbolic goals when they are out of the presence of the group" (2009, p. 24). When this charge begins to fade and the emotional energy ebbs, "individuals are drawn back into ritual participation to recharge themselves" (p. 24). Dawa's words speak directly to this need for renewal and recharging, specifically for guarding against 'losing her performative edge,' and at Thosamling she worries that the resources to do so (i.e. guidance from a teacher; regular, collective ritual practice; etc.) are simply lacking. Rinzen also touches on this when she says that some of the nuns she has known from Thosamling ended up leaving because the non-sectarian approach requires nuns from different lineages to perform pujas which are not part of their tradition and to neglect the practices they want, or have even vowed, to do. Dawa also spoke of previous Thosamling residents, explaining that many nuns (Western nuns) have left because "they didn't feel enough spiritual nourishment here", and, she goes on to say, "I find that that's one weakness that Thosamling has." It is not only Western nuns, however, that sense this lack of energy or 'spiritual nourishment'. Pema, one of the nuns from Indonesia, says that at Thosamling "there's no dharma spirit." From her perspective, the main reason for this lack



of 'spirit' is because "nobody acts as a teacher, nobody taught us what to do." While there are resident meetings and many "rules and instructions" about day to day living (i.e. maintaining quiet, meal times, cleaning instructions, etc.), Pema feels that there is no guidance or support related to the dharma (Buddhist teachings and practices). There is no one "giving the nuns the real feeling of the dharma," she says, so "if the nuns are really serious about achieving a spiritual achievement, she can't find it here – she has to find it somewhere else."

Collins notes that "the strength of religious commitment, and of belief in religious symbols, rises and falls with the success of its interaction rituals" (2010, p. 4). He goes on to outline the "ingredients" of successful interaction rituals: 1. bodily assembly of participants; 2. barriers excluding outsiders; 3. mutual focus of attention; and 4. a shared emotional mood), as well as their outcomes or social effects (5. membership feelings; 6. sacred objects or symbolic emblems; 7. emotional energy; and 8. moral feelings of right and wrong) (2010, p. 3). Overall, Collins emphasizes that what "makes or breaks a ritual" is the extent to which the group builds up strong collective emotion (2010, p.3). Interaction rituals, then, are instances where a shared focus of attention and mutually experienced energy attune the physical (actions, speech, etc.) as well as psychological and emotional experiences of individuals to a united reality that reinforces the boundary between them and non-present others. This relationship is symbolized by the settings, objects and practices used in framing the interaction. The sense of moral obligation that results binds those present, charging them up with a particular emotional energy which future meetings and ritual enactments will renew.

Collins' evaluative framework is very much applicable to the settings, structures, and interactions described above (as well as those which will be addressed in the following sections), not only from an etic perspective, but as indicated in the nuns' own reflections on life at Thosamling. Taking all of this into account, it may be concluded that the organizational structure of Thosamling and the interaction rituals that it fosters, fail to strengthen the emotional energy and hence the engagement and commitment of its resident nuns. While the interaction rituals fostered within Thosamling may not explicitly diminish or negatively impact the women's overall commitment to Buddhism, they do fail in generating the emotional energy necessary for *institutional* commitment. As Dawa says, her disappointment and dissatisfaction with the spiritual energy of Thosamling confirmed that "I don't see myself as staying here, as making a career out

it here.” The same for Pema, who affirms that the lack of structure and engaged teachers also lead her to assert that she will not stay long-term at Thosamling because it "is not the place where I can improve my spiritual side." Collins says that religions and religious movements decline when their "rituals go emotionally cold, leaving participants indifferent, and open to being recruited by rival ritual communities” (2010, p. 4). In many ways, this is exactly what is happening at Thosamling: it is failing to formulate intense religious practices and social experiences that bond the nuns to a common identity. As a result, it is pushing them to seek places and opportunities that better meet their need for energy and emotional connection.

As a primary setting of interaction rituals, then, Thosamling is a contested environment, defined by constant change, differing (and often conflicting) opinions and expectations, and an overall ambiguity as to its status as a Buddhist institution. While varied, the nuns' overall impressions of Thosamling in regards to its place and function within the broader Tibetan Buddhist world indicate a general consensus that it fails to perform as a fully authentic Tibetan Buddhist nunnery. When the institutional elements of the ideal monastic life (discussed both here and in the previous chapter) are brought to bear on these impressions, it is clear that Thosamling does not, in the eyes of past and present resident nuns, qualify as a traditional Tibetan Buddhist institution. Having established Thosamling as an ambiguous and non-traditional institution, the following sections will consider, in greater detail, the effects that this institutional status and atmosphere have on both its leaders and monastic residents.

## **9.2. Leadership in the Non-traditional Buddhist Institution of Thosamling**

Goffman includes in his definition of performance "all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers" (1956, p. 10). Thus, an essential component of performance is the reciprocal influence that individuals have upon one another. When we encounter one another we use the information we are able to gather to "define the situation" in order to determine what others may expect from us and what we may expect of them. Any given situation is thus defined by interpersonal dynamics and the interactive performances which guide and control impressions. This chapter addresses itself most directly to the ways in which the status of the setting (i.e. Thosamling as an ambiguous, non-traditional institution) impacts interactive performances, and this section looks specifically at implications for the performances of institutional leaders Geshe-la and Lhamo.

One particular concept from Goffman's (1956) theory which applies to this specific situation (authority and leadership implications) at Thosamling is mystification. One of the chief goals of human performance is the coordination of one's own conception of self with the persona that others perceive. Mystification is one of the primary means we rely on to manage either the exaggeration of the positive or the masking of the negative in order that "awe can be generated and sustained in the audience" (Goffman, 1956, p. 45). Mystification is thus a technique by which actors restrict contact between themselves and the audience in order that the mundane elements of their performance are concealed and they are able to sustain their performed illusion with an air of mystery and awe (Goffman, 1956). In suggesting that performance both accentuates and conceals certain matters, Goffman establishes that "failure to regulate contact involves possible ritual contamination of the performer," compromising the ability of that performer to hold the audience in a state of mystification (1956, p. 44-45). Relying on Goffman's theoretical insights, we may ask what is the role of mystification in the interaction rituals at Thosamling and how does this role or function relate to the larger performative context of this institutional setting?

This discussion pertains mostly to the nuns' perceptions and evaluations of leaders' performances, which build on their assessments of how well Thosamling, as an institution, performs<sup>40</sup>. The chief perspective considered is thus that of the audience, which in this case is the nuns themselves as they interact during their daily routines in the shared spaces of the nunnery as well as during ritual performances. Given this focus, participant observation data is heavily relied upon, supported by conversation and interview excerpts in addition to passages from the nuns' life history narratives.

As the oldest, most experienced, accomplished, and revered figure of the community, Geshe-la embodies traditional Tibetan Buddhism and acts as its primary representative within Thosamling. Key structures and elements of the setting at Thosamling support Geshe-la's mystifying performance, including his separate private residence, his special throne or elevated seat in the temple, as well as his reserved seat at the head of the table in the dining hall and the

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<sup>40</sup> While Goffman's dramaturgical theory is rooted in the micro level of human interaction, he has addressed the institutional realm in other work (1961) and his notion of performance may extend to institutions, such as Thosamling, in the sense that the performances and interaction rituals taking place there are both reflective and constitutive of particular values, norms, etc. Additionally, the related theoretical insights provided by Collins (2010, 2004) offer an evaluative framework that applies specifically to the social structural and institutional outcomes of interaction rituals.

special dishes that he alone eats from during meals. When anyone, lay or ordained, encounters Geshe-la, both within or beyond the nunnery compound, they clasp their hands in prayer position and bow their heads. If you go to visit Geshe-la in his private residence, it is customary to perform three prostrations and offer a traditional silk scarf. Geshe-la's presence within Thosamling is limited to the temple (where he gives teachings on weekdays and attends some ritual pujas, maybe once or twice per month) and the dining hall (where he eats only lunch and only on weekdays after he has given a teaching). Except for these rather limited times, he typically remains inside his house (though he sometimes visits nearby monasteries and institutes, and leaves Thosamling altogether for two to three months during the winter/off-season). The sounds of ritual bells often emanate from his house, and most evenings the sound of Tibetan language radio can also be heard.

Goffman notes that "in the matter of keeping social distance, the audience itself will often co-operate by acting in a respectful fashion, in awed regard for the sacred integrity imputed to the performer" (1956, p. 45). At Thosamling, the audience did indeed play a co-operative supporting role, sustaining a palpable feeling of awe through their outward signs of deference and respect. At lunch time, for example, a bell would be rung to signal the meal and often lay residents, visitors, or non-students would begin serving themselves and eating before Geshe-la's class in the temple was concluded and he made his way to the dining hall. Regardless of what activities or conversations those present were engaged in, someone near the door would inevitably interrupt them with a sharp though hushed "Geshe-la is coming!" Others would mimic the warning call, until everyone fell silent and prepared for his entrance. With clasped hands and bowed heads, they would face him and remain in that posture until he walked through to the separate dining space reserved for ordained sangha. Once he moved into the separate area and took his seat, activity and noise would resume until his exit when the scene was repeated as he left the building. The physical as well as symbolic distance that Geshe-la maintained between himself and the residents of Thosamling definitely contributed to his enigmatic character and seemed to support Goffman's (1956) suggestion that when mystification is used to dramatically realize a performance, the audience is often left with an idealized view not only of the performer, but of the character and qualities imbued by the performance.

With that being said, the non-traditional atmosphere of Thosamling introduces certain challenges to Geshe-la's mystifying performance as well, and, as will be explored in the following paragraphs, it appears that the unconventional institutional nature of Thosamling creates a social

situation wherein there is a type of reversal in terms of mystification: contrary to typical (and in this case traditional Buddhist) scenarios, here it appears that efforts to mystify are initiated not by the performing leader himself, but more so by the audience.

Lhamo, the founder and head of Thosamling, considers Geshe-la the "head lama" and says that "he takes care of us. So, if we have problems, we always go to him, [to figure out] what is the best option." She adds, however, that "he also, is also, a little like 'well, solve your own problems'." While she says that this approach "is a good thing," other nuns expressed more neutral and even negative reactions to this aloof positioning. As a past resident of Thosamling now exposed to a traditional Tibetan Buddhist environment, Dolma offered a similar summary of Geshe-la's role at Thosamling, saying "he doesn't like to get involved in anything really – that's his personality. So he'll only really step in if something is really starting to go bad, or people really ask him for advice, otherwise he really tries to keep out of it. Yeah, he doesn't act as an abbot or anything." In Tibetan Buddhist institutions, the abbot/abbess (*khenpo/khenmo* in Tibetan) is the highest institutional authority, playing an important role in the training of monastics, overseeing meditation, and offering teachings on Buddhist philosophy and practice. Part of the abbess'/abbot's legitimacy and power is derived from the lineage s/he represents, however in the context of Thosamling, since it is an independent and non-sectarian (*rime*) institution, Geshe-la's position becomes more ambiguous.

Clearly, he fulfills an elevated role as the main teacher and philosophical authority, however, as Dolma says, he is not an abbot and the institution is not an extension of his personal lineage. Other nuns also expressed confusion or conflict in regards to their understanding of Geshe-la's position and their relationship with him. Jiyul, for instance, says: "Geshe-la's teachings are good and we live together closely, but there is no one to teach, no one is the teacher." Here, she is using 'teacher' in the traditional Buddhist sense of an advisor/mentor connected to the student and invested in passing on the tradition (moral, ritual, and embodied), rather than simply an instructor. Similarly, when I asked Pema what she would change about Thosamling if she had the opportunity, she said: "put more energy and emphasis on spiritual practices – on teaching and really watch, one-by-one, watch them and see what they need." This type of involved, personalized teaching is what she was used to at her centre in Indonesia where she said of her teacher: "he knows each of us...Because the teacher gave us specific intentions, so we have specific results. That's what a teacher should do." At Thosamling, Pema says that Geshe-la "doesn't give any attention to us...we

have no close relationship with him, so how could he know our needs?" She doesn't blame Geshe-la personally, but notes that because Thosamling is a *rime* (non-sectarian) institution, Geshe-la has to give "only general teachings," and is perhaps afraid that if he teaches from his own, Gelug, tradition, that "maybe someone will refuse him: 'I'm not a Gelug, I don't see you as my teacher.'" So he has to keep the distance." She surmises that this "must be difficult for him," saying that sometimes she even "feels pity for him." This is a prime illustration of the types of reversals taking place in regards to mystification at Thosamling. The leader or authority figure (Geshe-la in this case) is not the agent of mystification, but on the contrary, he is pitied and protected – that is, mystified - by the audience. The context and institutional structure of Thosamling is blamed and constructed as a factor limiting his potential and contaminating his authenticity.

While Pema partially resolves her feelings of frustration regarding Geshe-la's role by connecting them to the institution, other nuns appear to remain in a state of confusion, uncertain of what to make of Geshe-la's status or what implications this has on their relationship or on their own status as nuns. Dawa, for example admits that she "actually expected that there would be more direction from the resident geshe." Geshe-la's distance and restricted participation in nunnery life contradicts her expectations, but also her past experience in more traditional settings: "In my experience, the resident geshe has been the leader and been the one, with the sangha especially, doing prayers and pujas and teaching us." Thus, her experience at Thosamling leaves her feeling that it is "a little bit strange" and she doesn't understand why when the nuns "do these pujas... the geshe is in his house 30 feet away and not participating with us." When she revisits the topic later in our interview, she says: "It feels like we don't have a geshe here, but we eat lunch with him. So, it's very odd. To me it's almost like the geshe is just this guy that shows up for lunch and I stand up and bow and sometimes I practice my Tibetan a little bit with him." Dawa is obviously not mystified by Geshe-la's performance, which speaks to the fact that to be effective, mystification requires an appropriate stage where the physical and social fronts are all on point, collectively presenting a cohesive backdrop for the performance. Evidently, as an innovative and non-traditional Tibetan Buddhist institution, Thosamling represents only a partial and reduced version of the traditional ideal, and so is unable to adequately support any truly mystifying performances. Essentially, the entire economy and efficiency of the mystifying mechanism is compromised at Thosamling, creating a certain amount of frustration, dissatisfaction, and even distress in the nuns.

For those nuns who enter Thosamling with expectations informed by their desire to enter fully into the enchanted world of traditional Tibetan Buddhist monasticism, disappointment and confusion are rife.

In many senses a parallel situation - in regards to representation, mystification and performance - arises around Lhamo, the other chief authority figure at Thosamling. As mentioned previously, leaders and authority figures in Buddhist institutional contexts are formally recognized as such through various institutional mechanisms - lineage, educational status, and organizational structure. Given its non-traditional nature, Thosamling was unable to develop or rely on these types of devices to orient its institutional processes or leadership hierarchy. In their absence, Lhamo as founder, came to occupy a complex position that was an amalgamation of many traditional roles: abbess, disciplinarian, financial director, nunnery manager, etc. Moreover, in addition to fulfilling administrative and management duties, she was also expected to fulfill ceremonial or ritual functions, and on many occasions to act as *umze*, or chant master, in important ceremonies/pujas.

As mentioned above, Thosamling follows an established ritual calendar that includes important pujas from all four schools of Tibetan Buddhism. On one occasion, a Guru Rinpoche Tsog puja was to be held in the nunnery temple. Tsog means 'community' and is a form of 'feast practice' where donations are collected and various food items are purchased and offered during the ceremony which is meant to create bonds of generosity, distribute merit, and help overcome inner and outer obstacles in order to achieve realization (Thurman, 1995). The responsibility for leading this particular ceremony fell to Lhamo and for days in advance she had been studying and practicing in preparation. I was with her the night before the puja when she was informed that Geshe-la would not be attending the ceremony. She was clearly nervous about her role and expressed great relief that the geshe would not be in attendance. When the puja began in the temple the next afternoon, all of the nuns were there along with eight laywomen. Lhamo was leading the chants and directing the ritual, and fairly soon after it began I realized why she was so relieved that Geshe-la was not there.

She fumbled through parts of the text and had to restart several times, adjusting the tune and rhythm of the chant: her lack of familiarity and confidence in performing this ritual were apparent. About 25 minutes into the puja, she stopped altogether and instructed the nuns to get the offerings because she realized that she had missed the section where the offering is made to the teachers. There was a bit of discussion, some flipping through the puja booklet, and finally,

Thubten was instructed to go disperse the offerings. Everyone was uncomfortable and the atmosphere became heavy with a mix of guilt (on the part of Lhamo who was supposed to lead and some of the nuns who appeared guilty over not knowing themselves how to do it), frustration (from those nuns and lay women who seemed to blame Lhamo for failing to lead the puja with conviction), and confusion (many people clearly wanted to help, but just did not know what was going on or how they could possibly make things better). The temple setting establishes a mood of seriousness and sanctity, but the inaccuracies and uncertainty that permeated Lhamo's performance verged on parody, and a sort of tragic and almost punitive atmosphere developed.

The performance pressure was palpable, emanating from both the audience and performer's desire for authentic experience. On these occasions there was a tangible sense of the stakes involved in successfully performing the given ritual. As an observer, I could feel that these ceremonies were crucial not only in a spiritual or religious sense, but equally so in terms of creating social cohesion, maintaining an institutional image, and consequently, of supporting the self-image that goes along with being a Buddhist nun. In demonstrating and partaking in authentic and proficient performances in the ritual realm the nuns could personally and collectively affirm the validity and authenticity of Thosamling as a Tibetan Buddhist institution, and by the same token assert themselves as Tibetan Buddhist nuns. Thus, when Lhamo (particularly as a symbolic leader in the institution) failed to perform, and thereby failed to provide an adequately authentic experience for those present, she was not only compromising the legitimacy and authenticity of Thosamling as an institution, but by extension, the personal authenticity of each of the nuns as well. What was at stake then, was not simply an accurate execution of a traditional rite, but the conservation of a sacred and enchanted realm that would legitimize the women's very existence as Buddhist nuns.

If we apply some key concepts from Goffman's (1956) dramaturgical theory to interpret this scene and Lhamo's general function and position in Thosamling, we can see that these stakes are not personal or discrete, but implicate shared realities with important consequences for each woman present. In setting forth a theory of performance and interaction, Goffman took into account the fact that most scenarios are not individually-based, but involve instead concerted and coordinated efforts among a group. He identified a team as a "set of performers who cooperate in presenting a single performance" (1956, p. 50). The collective nature of shared acts means that an intended definition of a situation depends on the cooperative efforts of multiple cast or group



members, and as a result any one of these members has the power to give away the show or disrupt it with inappropriate conduct or an unconvincing performance (Goffman, 1956). This gives rise to what Goffman calls a "bond of reciprocal dependence", that is, a feeling of membership and mutual reliance (p. 50). In this way, team performances tend to "integrate divisions" and "provide a source of cohesion for the establishment" (Goffman, 1956, p. 50). As the establishment of interest here, Thosamling was constantly being defined by dramaturgical plays like the one described above, and the reciprocal bonds that such plays either foster or fracture.

Given Thosamling's ambiguous institutional status, traditional ceremonies along with institutional leaders are the primary means of asserting its credibility and legitimacy within the Tibetan Buddhist world. Thus, when any member of the team or any aspect of the setting fracture the reciprocal bonds which are crucial in maintaining the legitimacy and authenticity of its ceremonial and authoritative structures, the consequences are incredibly destabilizing for the entire community. In Lhamo's case, her lack of ritual expertise and formal philosophical study compromise her ability to perform as a fully authentic leader in the traditional Tibetan Buddhist sense. While her role and function may in fact be appropriate given the non-traditional surroundings, most of the nuns' expectations and desires to inhabit a traditionally legitimate enchanted world, in addition to Thosamling's own institutional efforts towards authenticity and traditionalism, mean that she is unable to achieve the status or to perform the role of a traditional Tibetan Buddhist institutional leader.

The non-traditional nature of Thosamling thereby creates a situation where typical and traditional roles are skewed: Geshe-la's positioning and treatment within the community reflect a much higher status than that of a simple geshe (teacher) and Lhamo's role as head nun approximates that of a traditional abbess, but is not accompanied by the requisite levels of education or ritual expertise. In this sense, the leaders of Thosamling either do not possess or are not supplied the various supports (fronts) required to successfully realized the mystifying performances characteristic of traditional and authentic Tibetan Buddhist leaders. Because the nuns hold shared ideals regarding the good life of a Buddhist monastic, and because these ideals are so intimately tied to institutional structures, the nuns have expectations that Thosamling, as a sanctioned institution within the Tibetan Buddhist world, will provide them with the enchanted and immersive experience they seek. Yet, the ambiguity that defines Thosamling and which makes

it an incomplete version of a traditional nunnery, comes to define its leaders as well and results, overall, in a type of simulacrum of tradition and hence authenticity. This situation contributes to a sense of confusion and unease among resident nuns, who consequently make a collective effort to salvage the enchanted and authentic quality of their monastic experience by mystifying Geshe-la and withholding their institutional support and engagement from Lhamo and the nunnery she has established.

Evidently, intricate connections between the three levels of monastic life - the institution, the leadership, and individual nuns - means that instability and ambiguity at any level, and particularly at the highest or most broad institutional level, have important consequences. In the section to follow the status and dynamics defining the third level - individual nuns- will be explored in an effort to further understand the implications of ambiguity and non-traditionalism in this context.

### **9.3. Life in a Non-traditional Institution: Personal implications**

So far, the non-traditional nature of Thosamling, as a Tibetan Buddhist institution, has been established and the implications explored for its leaders. In this section, the nuns are the focus and Goffman's (1956) notion of the social front will be used to address the following question: How do variations in social front impact relationships between nuns at Thosamling, and how, in turn, are these impacts related to the ambiguous and non-traditional setting and leadership of the nunnery?

As part of his dramaturgical theory, Goffman expands the notion of 'front' - the expressive equipment required for performance- to performers themselves, defining both a 'personal front' (which "intimately identifies" the performers and includes such things as "insignia of office or rank; clothing; sex, age, and racial characteristics; size and looks; posture; speech patterns; facial expressions; bodily gestures" (1956, p. 14)) and a "social front" (developed as a type of "collective representation" when different routines employ the same front and take on a meaning and stability apart from specific performative tasks/contexts (1956, p. 17)). Goffman explains that social fronts free observers and audience members from the burden of having to "maintain a different pattern of expectation and responsive treatment for each slightly different performer and performance" (1956, p. 16). Instead, by relying on social fronts, audiences are able to place the situation into a "broad category" around which it is easy for them to "mobilize past experience and stereotypical

thinking" (p. 16). Thus, while social fronts function as types of interpretive shortcuts for observers, they also act as performative shortcuts for the actors who are rarely required to develop a unique front, but can instead draw on and choose among well-established pre-existing ones. In general, 'Buddhist nun' would constitute a recognized social front, however, analysis of the intercultural dynamics of Thosamling's diverse nun community appears to challenge the monolithic category and functionality of the Buddhist nun social front, which begs the question: What happens when individuals from different cultural backgrounds come to occupy the same social front?

Overall, and as demonstrated by the shared ideals addressed in the previous chapter, as well as by my observations and conversations with the nuns, general characteristics of a 'Buddhist nun' social front may be discerned. They typically include characteristics of both comportment and appearance that are, ideally, maintained consistently and perpetually by the nuns: the monastic robes are always worn appropriately; the hair is kept well shorn; and the demeanor and mood are kept steadily within a pleasant, calm, and controlled range. The established front would also be defined by a helpful, cooperative, and compassionate attitude and by an understated, humble deportment. At Thosamling, cultural differences, including language, values, frames of reference, and typical manner, had major implications for successful interaction rituals and for the embodied realization of the Buddhist nun character and social front.

The dynamic and diverse nature of Thosamling's population meant that nuns from a variety of cultural backgrounds were living together and interacting in both mundane and sacred settings. When I asked the nuns about their experiences in this regard, their responses varied, spanning positive and negative impressions. On one hand, several nuns articulated positive impressions of the intercultural aspect of social dynamics at Thosamling. For instance, Songheo (from Korea) said that living with nuns from so many different countries was "very good, very interesting." She was happy to "get the opportunity to learn about another country, another culture." Chin-sun (also Korean) agreed, saying that "Thosamling nuns are all very good" and that there are "no problems" with the relationships between them. Dawa, the only American nun, said that she thought that things were "very harmonious with the nuns," and that a "feeling of sisterhood" existed among them. She also acknowledged that though she had "never lived with Korean nuns before," she had "come to appreciate their background and the discipline that they come here with and the vast knowledge that they already have." She also says that the Korean nuns are "very kind and generous

and quiet" and that they "lend a sort of model" and a "type of community spirit" to Thosamling. Dolma, one of the Australians who now lives in a traditional Tibetan nunnery, says of her time at Thosamling that there were "probably about half-half" Western and Korean nuns. She says that that "was OK" because "the Asian nuns have good training and a good foundation and they don't start any trouble." Because "monasticism is Asian, or from an Asian culture," she suggested that "it's easier for them to live in a monastic community." In contrast, she observes that "Westerners are individualist, they want to give their opinions on everything and they don't mind standing out." From her perspective, the Asian as opposed to Western manner "works better" in Buddhist institutional contexts because it generates "less conflict."

The perception that qualities ascribed to Westerners (particularly individualism) are a factor impeding successful integration into traditional Buddhist settings and performance of the Buddhist nun front was echoed by others as well. Tenzin, who comes from Indonesia, said that at Thosamling it is "quite difficult to be all together" because, she explains, "Western nuns have a lot of problems because of the culture; because they come from a culture that is not a Buddhist culture." Thus, from her perspective "it is very good for Western nuns to learn from the East because when we tell about religion, you have to study about the culture, otherwise it does not come into your heart." Dechen, born in Australia, had this to say about Western monastics from her perspective as a Western woman:

I think there's a problem where we're individualistic, and we don't know how to live together and we're not prepared to accept seniority, we're not prepared to accept guidance. We don't trust each other, and we respect Tibetan lamas because we think that they're fully trained, they're exotic. We put them on a pedestal.

She goes on to say that whereas Asians are "much more used to hierarchy and working as a group...Westerners prefer being alone, they're used to being an individual, so it's a big cultural shift for us." She specifically notes that while Tibetans and other Asian groups have had a thousand years of experience with Buddhism and monastic culture, it is a new phenomenon among Westerners and "Western monastics are not good at making it look easy." Dechen's assessment fits well within Goffman's dramaturgical framework, and even more so when she says that "you can read people from your own culture much more easily – you can see their pain, you can see their difficulty, you can see that it's not easy for them, and *that* is painful to watch." In pointing out the

ways in which familiarity informs the evaluation and interpretation of performance, Dechen touches on the crucial fact that the social front of the Buddhist nun - based largely on a homogenous, generalized characterization of Asian Buddhist female practitioners - is being challenged and complicated by the increasing cultural diversity of women adopting this role. In taking a closer look at the interaction rituals taking place at Thosamling - which often occur between nuns from different cultural backgrounds who are not intimately connected to the nuanced performances being offered by one another- important insights may be gained in regards to the function and implications of such social fronts in and beyond the non-traditional atmosphere of Thosamling.

When I asked Thubten, who comes from Korea, about her experience living with nuns from so many different backgrounds, she said: "Actually, the relationship between Western and Asian nuns is pretty difficult. We are very different and also we have a language problem." When I continued the line of questioning, she said that the relationships are "not bad, but not good", due mostly to the fact that "each person is studying, so there's not much time to share something." Pema offered a similar, but less positive, assessment:

*RG: So, in Thosamling, how would you describe the relationship between the nuns, all the different nuns?*

P: No, no...no.

*RG: No, like there's no relationship?*

P: No. Just, just strangers staying together. No building, no relationship building, because here, nuns come and go.

Pema comes from Indonesia, and she and Tenzin along with one other woman, were the first Indonesians to be ordained as nuns in the Tibetan tradition. Thinking that the transitory nature of Thosamling was not the full story behind her answer and wondering if the fact that they were such a small minority among the community may play a role in her experience with the other nuns, I asked about her relationship with Tibetan monastics and the Tibetan community in general. She said: " I have no trouble at all with Tibetans ...we have a very close connection with Tibetans. We just feel the same." She concluded by saying: "We have problems with Westerners, not Tibetans." Her suggestion that Indonesian nuns feel "the same" as Tibetan nuns seems to underscore the representation of a Buddhist nun social front that is stereotypically Asian, and that excludes the qualities and attributes of many Western women. It turns out that the problems she alluded to are

rooted in the fear she has that "in the future the Westerners could cause a schism" in Tibetan Buddhism. She explained further:

Different cultures have different ways of life and make very distinctive ways of thinking and also different...different perceptions about the dharma... They [Westerners] have very strong, their own perceptions about how things should be done. But it's all according to their own perceptions, based on their culture, their self-independence. It's so different than Tibetans. It doesn't mean that they are better, but they think so! ....And Tibetans, just like their tradition, when it is threatened, they don't challenge it, they don't react, they just watch it and let it be— just watching, maybe laughing, but the Westerners don't do that. The Westerners are not satisfied just being themselves: they want to rule them all...they think what they know is true.

Overall, Pema says that Westerners' "way of life is so independent, they have high self-esteem, so the way they see things happen, they easily give judgment... that's what worries me."

She also connected her worry to what she identifies as the Western tendency to "put so much interest in performance...the way you should walk, the pujas, the way you should behave." From her perspective, this is "very different than Tibetans – they don't care so much about that." Thus, while she notes that "Western centres are so very fond of rituals and pujas," her experience at her home Buddhist centre in Indonesia and at the Tibetan institutions she has spent time in has taught her that "study is the most important." In those traditional contexts, rituals and pujas were performed much less frequently: "It was so rare, because the teacher said: 'You have to realize and understand what you are doing. Otherwise you only do karaoke.'" Pema's impressions of Western Buddhists are thus filtered through her training and experience with traditional Tibetan Buddhism in Asia, where engaging in pujas and other ritual performances without developing adequate knowledge or experience is akin to 'karaoke', that is, imitation lacking substance.

This perspective, articulated here by Pema, but implied in the narratives of other Asian nuns as well, appears to be rooted in a desire to resist and guard against any structures, behaviours, or characters who threaten or comprise the authenticity of Tibetan Buddhism generally, and the monastic life in particular. While Pema was certainly the most vocal and open in discussing her perception of Western Buddhists, she was not the only nun from Asia to note differences between Eastern and Western nuns (particularly the Western nuns' individualism and predilection for performance). Many of Pema's views were shaped by her experience at the month long Pre-

Ordination course she attended at a Western Buddhist centre in the vicinity of Thosamling. The course, which was organized, run, and largely attended, by Western monastics (the course leader is a Western nun) was also attended by Thubten (from Korea) and left her with a similar impression:

H: They [Westerners] know very well about puja – how to do puja, like bell like this, ding, ding, ding [imitating traditional ritual posture]. But Koreans, like here...they are more interested in practice.

*RG: Like philosophy, or what do you mean by practice?*

H: Yeah, philosophy, like how to develop.

Nyingma, a westerner from Australia, acknowledged as much when she said that it is common to see Westerners "that are attracted by the cultural trappings – you know the spiritual trip, and they want to be seen... and outwardly they display: 'Oh I'm being kind and I'm helping,' and they're doing puja and stuff." She explains that while you do "get ones who are really genuine," there are those that get "caught up in the outward appearance." She goes on to say that in her experience as a Western monastic "it's very easy for us to fall into the [same] trap."

Throughout all of these excerpts and discussion of social dynamics, it is noteworthy that opinions and expressions are rarely phrased at the personal level; that is, the nuns rarely say 'I' or 'she.' Instead, they express things in broad, general terms (i.e. 'Asians', 'Westerners', 'Koreans'). In this way they do not directly position themselves (or concrete others, for that matter) in their stories and descriptions. This way of articulating experience reflects a form of discourse that relates directly to Goffman's (1956) notion of the social front. In the context of Thosamling (which is arguably extendable to contemporary Tibetan Buddhism more generally), the social front of 'Buddhist nun' does not appear to function as a universal interpretive and performative short-cut, but is instead problematized by the consistent prominence that the nuns, as both performers and audience within their shared Tibetan Buddhist world, attribute to cultural identifiers (i.e. 'Eastern', 'Western', 'Korean', 'Tibetan', etc.). In this sense, the social front of 'Buddhist nun' is challenged and rendered secondarily important to cultural identity, which appears to take precedence as a performative marker.

Returning to Goffman's dramaturgical theory, these interpretations and divergent orientations to performance may be considered in terms of what he calls 'misrepresentation'. Goffman explains that as members of an audience, it is "natural for us to feel that the impression

the performer seeks to give may be true or false, genuine or spurious, valid or 'phony'" (1956, p. 38). We orient ourselves in a given situation by "accepting performed cues on faith" and "treating these signs as evidence of something greater than or different from the sign-vehicles themselves" (p. 36). Thus, we have faith that a performer's routine is a true reflection of his or her character, belief, and intention.

In the context of Thosamling, it appears that cultural differences impact the 'faith' upon which successful performances rely. For Eastern nun, it looks to *diminish* the faith they have in Western nuns, introducing a sort of skepticism where the performances of convert nuns are often viewed as 'over acted' and contrived, and as signaling a lack of substance and true understanding. For Western nuns, cultural differences – like the perceived quiet demeanor and ability of Asian nuns to live well in a group- seem to *increase* faith, solidifying the value that they attribute to the performances of Eastern nuns as evidence of ideal traits and character (generosity, elevated knowledge, stability, sound training, etc.). Overall, Goffman suggests that when we are concerned with whether or not a performance is 'true or false', whether it is an accurate presentation of character or a flagrant misrepresentation, what we are really interested in is "whether or not the performer is authorized to give the performance in question" (p. 38). We are not, it turns out, as concerned with the actual performance as we are with ensuring that the performer has "the right to play the part he played" and that s/he is "an accredited incumbent of the relevant status" (1956, p. 38). Goffman goes on to say that "if we grudgingly allow certain symbols of status to establish a performer's right to a given treatment, we are always ready to pounce on chinks in his symbolic armour in order to discredit his pretensions" (p. 38). This seems to describe precisely the dynamics between the nuns at Thosamling, where non-Asian converts from diverse backgrounds are getting ordained and adopting the 'symbols of status' (and existing social fronts) that entitle them to the 'given treatment' of a Buddhist nun. However, as displayed in the interaction rituals discussed above, this also creates a situation where authenticity and genuine representation become contested and performances may be observed with puzzlement and even suspicion.

Goffman established social fronts as repertoires of well-developed techniques that function as "the enactment of rights and duties attached to a given status" (1956, p.9). Building from this theoretical perspective, it may be argued that Buddhist nunhood is a role and performative task that has become associated with a generalized social front inspired by its development within native Asian cultures. The more recent development of the convert or Western Buddhist nun,



however, is a variation of this social role and status that has yet to be shaped, through socialization and symbolization processes, into a consistent social front of its own. Thus, since "fronts tend to be selected, not created" (Goffman, 1956, p. 16), non-Asian women who adopt the role of Buddhist nun are required to assume a front which is not necessarily reflective of her habitual character and way of being, but which, nonetheless, reflects the stereotypes and established expectations of the traditional Buddhist culture she has come to inhabit. The interaction rituals defining social experience at Thosamling suggest that this gives rise to a somewhat perplexing atmosphere where nuns from different backgrounds inhabit similar roles and shared worlds, but where cohesion is undermined by differences which appear to be exasperated by the ambiguity of the institution of Thosamling, its leaders and its membership.

#### **9.4. Conclusion**

In this chapter, Goffman's (1967) micro sociological theories of interaction ritual and dramaturgical performance were applied, along with Collins' (2010, 2004) evaluative framework, to some of the key relationships and activities of Thosamling, as well as to the institution itself. It was shown that, as a Tibetan Buddhist institution, Thosamling exhibits many of the characteristics of a traditional setting complete with appropriate props, costumes, and characters, yet it does not succeed in its performance. Its institutional function and legitimacy are undermined by its unstable population, non-traditional leadership, and disconnection from the traditional lineages and structures of the Tibetan Buddhist world. Additionally, the cultural differences between its resident nuns are impacted by the non-traditional atmosphere, highlighting the limitations of existing social fronts, which do not, as of yet, reflect the growing diversity of women assuming the status and role of Buddhist nun.

Overall, Collins considers interaction rituals as "a mechanism of change" and notes the potential for intense ritual experience to "create new symbolic objects and generate energies that fuel the major social changes" (2004, p.42-43). As has been demonstrated throughout this chapter, Thosamling's ambiguous and non-traditional status (which necessarily impacts its residents and leaders) has compromised its ability to generate enough of the emotional energy Collins refers to. In fact, it appears to give rise to a chain of confused, if not negative, evaluations, where the incompleteness or inauthenticity of the institution limits the ability of its leaders to embody traditional, mystifying roles. This in turn impacts the experiences of resident nuns who, already

challenged by issues of misrepresentation tied to cultural differences, try to compensate for the lack of authenticity and to protect and sustain the elements that do confirm their personal legitimacy as Buddhist nuns.

Overall then, it appears that Thosamling is not a strong or complete "mechanism for change" in and of itself, but it nonetheless plays a role in the social changes that are occurring within the Tibetan Buddhist world. As a marginal institution, operating near, but not quite within, the traditional boundaries of the Tibetan Buddhist world, Thosamling occupies an ambiguous position. It lacks the consistency and legitimacy that enable traditional Tibetan institutions to generate adequate emotional energy and hence commitment and membership feelings, yet it is not so different or independent that it creates an equal but different energy of its own. In failing to generate the type and strength of emotional energy that either confirms its status as an authentic Tibetan Buddhist institution or as a unique and valid alternative, Thosamling is stuck in this type of intermediary position where it is neither similar nor different enough from the traditional institutions defining the Tibetan Buddhist world.

Consequently, for all but the head nun Lhamo, for whom Thosamling is a permanent home, it acts a temporary place, functioning as a type of liminal space, or antechamber that leads to one of two paths, or in keeping with this metaphor, main 'rooms': traditional Tibetan Buddhist institutionalism or a truly innovative way of living as a Tibetan Buddhist nun. In other words, the essentially dissatisfying experiences that the nuns have at Thosamling (in terms of emotional energy, developing a shared sense of identity and symbolic and moral order, and inhabiting an enchanted world) inspire them to either pursue gratification through integrating into traditional Tibetan institutions or to seek fulfillment by striking out on their own, and moving further away from tradition and deeper into the margins of the modern Buddhist world. The next chapter will explore the implications of these life courses in greater detail and specifically in terms of identity and selfhood.

## **10. Selfhood in the Permanent Liminality and Liminoidity of the Post-Ordination Phase**

This chapter will bring some of the insights from the narrative and symbolic chapters into dialogue with those on selfhood and identity in order to more fully explore the situated selves of the nuns, as they come to occupy distinct positions within the contemporary Tibetan Buddhist

world. As documented in these previous chapters, all of the women share similar moral bases of self- namely spiritual inclination, altruism, non-materialism, and a desire for enchanted flow. After ordination, however, the nuns are initiated into institutional worlds which introduce changes and challenges which are variably experienced by the women, setting them on divergent courses. This raises an interesting conundrum related to how women holding the same moral priorities and sharing similar sets of moral bases of self can occupy such varied positions in the Buddhist institutional world.

In developing a view of these varying paths and the attendant institutional positionings that they give rise to, this chapter argues that while all of the nuns continue to have identities and selves rooted in the same moral goods, the positions which they feel most effectively orient them towards these goods vary. When the range of these positions is considered in terms of a continuum, the nuns may be situated in diverse positions from the center to the periphery of the Tibetan Buddhist institutional world. Those closest to the center exist within a permanent liminality and find that integrating into traditional Buddhist institutions and adopting assimilationist postures are most conducive to authentic being. Contrarily, those occupying more peripheral positions reflect liminoid characteristics and experience fulfillment and connection to core moral goods through more independent and unconventional monastic lifestyles. This argument draws attention to the agentic, personalized, and creative nature of negotiating social positioning and also highlights the fact that positionings within the socio-cultural context of modern Tibetan Buddhist monasticism are determined by multiple interacting factors including pragmatic contextual factors, institutional structures, social relationships, personal traits and characteristics, and shared moral and ethical orientations.

### **10.1. Moral Bases of Self and Institutional Positioning in the Post-Ordination Phase**

Taylor's moral framework has established the critical role of moral goods in determining self, particularly higher-order goods to which assured connection or orientation provide "a sense of wholeness, of fullness of being as a person or self, that nothing else can" (1989, p. 62-63). Recall that for these women both the foundational goods (altruism, spirituality, and non-materialism) and the higher order good of full immersion or autotelic flow have heretofore been largely shared and consistent. In fact, in the first two phases- conversion and ordination - these goods were accessed and articulated in very similar ranges of experience and expression. However,

as the narrative chapter of this final phase demonstrates, these experiences and expressions diversify during the post-ordination phase, and the women, as nuns, come to occupy distinct positions in relation to established ideals, structures, and figures in the Buddhist monastic world.

In this section, these diverse positions will be tied to orientation efforts, whereby the women's attempts to ensure alignment with prioritized moral goods contribute to variations in institutional positioning. As Taylor suggests,

Because my orientation to it [a highest good] is essential to my identity, so the recognition that my life is turned away from it, or can never approach it, would be devastating and insufferable. It threatens to plunge me into a despair at my unworthiness which strikes at the very roots of my being as a person (1989, p. 62).

Given such stakes, the nuns make laudable efforts to rightly orient themselves and to re-orient themselves if or when the position they occupy 'turns them away' or compromises their connection to these goods. It is valuable to understand then, how the shared prioritized goods, and the nuns' abilities to orient themselves towards them, relate to the distinct positions they occupy in the Tibetan Buddhist institutional world.

The narrative chapter of this phase hinted at positional differences based on the monastic ideals of institutional integration and relationship to teacher. This section will further connect institutional positioning to moral goods and to the nuns' moral orientation efforts. Thus, whereas that chapter distinguished four distinct categories relative to monastic ideals, here a continuum will be used to present positions ranging from assimilation (where the convert nuns adapt and integrate into traditional institutional contexts) to differentiation (where the convert nuns resist conforming to traditional structures and standards, adopting more unconventional and independent lifestyles instead).

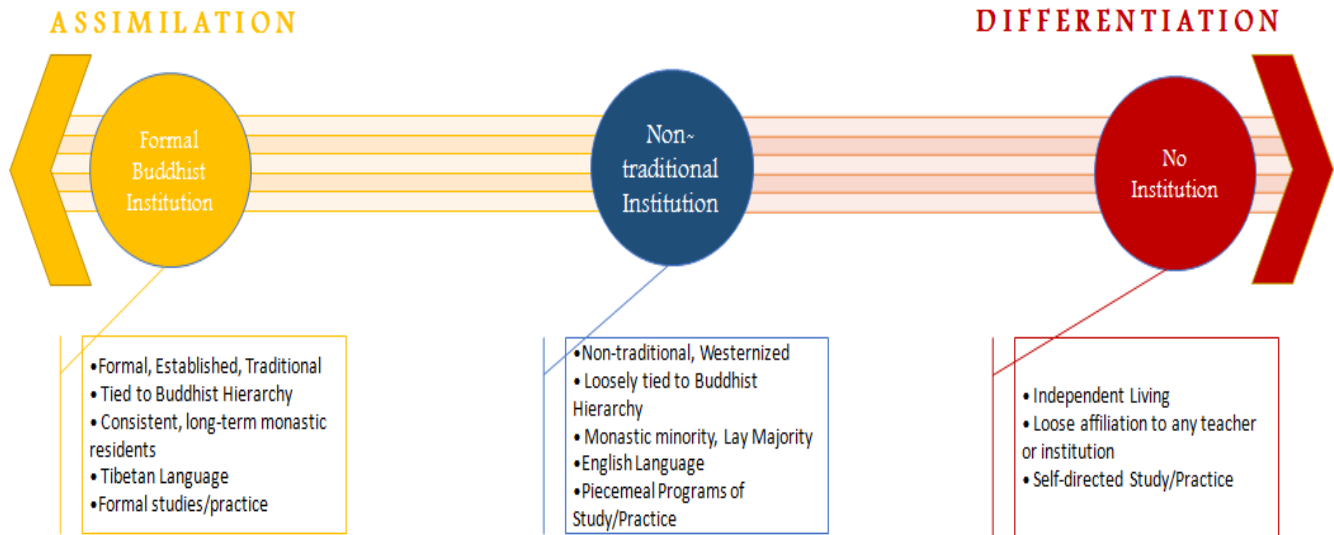


Figure 8. Continuum of Post-Ordination Institutional Positioning

When the movements that define the nuns' diverse paths towards distinct institutional positions are considered, the moral goods they value clearly play an important role. For those nuns who are positioned towards the 'Assimilation' end of the spectrum, full integration into the Tibetan monastic world is sought as a means of connecting to valued moral goods. They maintain relationships with recognized Tibetan leaders, associate predominantly with native sangha members, and follow practices and study programs in accordance with established lineages and hierarchies within the Tibetan Buddhist world. Nuns positioned in this range emphasize the moral good of spirituality, linking their decision to ordain with their desire to dedicate their entire lives to cultivating spirituality (which is defined in terms of dedicated study, focused engagement with Buddhist philosophical teachings, and deeper understanding of Buddhist concepts, practices, and languages). Pema, for instance, grew up in Indonesia, where the chief function of Buddhist monastics was "doing social activities" such as performing ceremonies and offering blessings. She knew that she didn't "want to do this kind of living as a nun because," she goes on to explain, "I want to be a nun to *know*, to understand what it is to get enlightenment." It was only once her lama assured her that "his sangha would have to study first," that she agreed to get ordained. She moved to Thosamling after getting ordained, but, as noted in the previous chapter, Pema does not see it as a place where she "can improve my spiritual side." Consequently, she plans to leave Thosamling and move into a more traditional Tibetan institution.

Evidently, others have felt the same about the non-traditional institution of Thosamling and have likewise moved towards more formal and established Tibetan institutional contexts in order to achieve greater connection and realization of core moral goods. Palden is one such nun who feels that moving closer towards tradition and assimilation, and "receiving teachings directly from His Holiness the Dalai Lama and teachings from geshe from the great monastic institutions" is the most effective way of developing spiritually. Moreover, she constructed this traditional approach as a superior means of achieving the knowledge and skill necessary to "help others" and "become the example for people." In this way, the good of spirituality (committed study and practice) is connected directly to good of altruism (helping others) as well as to figures and structures of traditional Tibetan monastic institutions. This reflects the sense of cohesion that defines many of the nuns' lives along the assimilationist range where individual moral goods are experienced as being strengthened and reinforced through their connection to other goods and elements of the traditional monastic world.

In relation to the goods of altruism and non-materialism, nuns positioned within the Assimilation range emphasized the support offered by their Buddhist communities, particularly through *dana*, or monastic sponsorship by the community. By occupying more traditional and assimilated positions in the Buddhist world, these nuns have direct access to the support required to lead the good life of a Buddhist nun, not only in physical or material terms, but in identity terms as well. The institutionalized support systems built into traditional Buddhist monastic organizations and communities mean that the nuns in these institutional positions are readily cared for and the dependence they have on sponsors and the wider community is experienced as confirming their moral priorities of non-materialism and altruistic interdependence. The nuns are admired and appreciated as valued, merit-making practitioners and are treated with elevated respect (which is expressed via financial and material support). This connection to community and the consistent emphasis on social bonds throughout the nuns' narratives expresses the degree to which the nuns' sense of self is shaped through these interdependent relationships.

Dolma's stories of her experience in a traditional Tibetan nunnery highlight another shared quality of nuns in assimilationist positions - not only a willingness, but a strong valuation of assimilation and communal living. Dolma suggests that traditional institutions "work better" than non-traditional, Western-style institutions because "there's less conflict" due to the fact that integrated nuns "are a lot more contented to shut-up and just do what they're supposed to." She

adds: "If you actually just go along with the flow, there's a lot of contentment with that." For her then, contentment, which may be read as a fulfilling connection and orientation towards valued moral goods, is achieved by being positioned at the Assimilation end of the positional spectrum.

Clustered around the mid-point of the spectrum are those nuns who neither pursue courses aligned to strict tradition nor independent differentiation. Generally, these are the nuns who are members of non-traditional institutions, mostly Western Dharma Centres, for example Nyingma from Australia. When we met, Nyingma had recently left a Western dharma centre where she had lived prior to and for several years following her ordination. She explains that

In some ways the dharma centre is really great, cause it's difficult, it's much easier living there than living back with my family or in a city or something like that. It's kind of a bit of a limbo state: it's neither a monastic community with a model or a teacher to guide you, but also there's no nightclubs and boyfriends, alcohol or movie houses, or whatever it is that will distract you. So, uhm, we were kind of protected, but not nurtured, you could say.

By fostering a sense of being 'in limbo,' the non-traditional monastic position that Nyingma occupied presented certain challenges in regards to moral orientation and her ability to embody the character of a Buddhist nun. Indeed, while she sought, through ordination, an opportunity to life fully within enchanted flow, she felt that life within this non-traditional institution afforded her "very little chance for study and practice." This is a big part of why she left and moved to India in order to "rest and do a bit of practice."

It was not only orientation towards the moral good of spirituality that was compromised by non-traditional Buddhist institutional life, for Nyingma and others in similar positions, faced considerable challenges in being able to orient their lives towards the goods of altruism and non-materialism as well. Nyingma said:

I think one of the disadvantages of being a Western nun is that it's much harder to get support and sponsorship. Like people are more, especially Westerners, are much more willing to support a Nepalese or Tibetan, but actually many nuns are in the same difficult bind. And actually at some centres it's only the ones who have inheritances or savings who can go to get the teachings and the others are just, you know, miss out.

There is a palpable tension then, in the experiences of nuns in the middle and peripheral end of the positional spectrum, between their desire for renunciation, non-attachment, and non-materialism

and the reality that they experience outside of traditional institutions (whereby they must remain engaged with the secular world through paid jobs or economic activities). Several of these nuns agree with Nyingma, like Sherab who says that “the support is very difficult in the West... they give more money to Tibetan nuns than to Western nuns.” The same with Rinzen: “Tibetans help Tibetans and Westerners help Tibetans also. But who helps the Western monks and nuns? Not so many people.”

Dechen also shared a number of personal experiences relating to financial support and the material realm that left indelible impressions on her, strongly impacting her position in the Buddhist institutional world and her sense of self as well. She recounts how, after she got ordained, her centre in Australia told her: “We’re not going to support you...we can’t support you cause we’re buying a new centre and we don’t have any money.” The shock of this refusal of support was made all the worse by the fact that they “spent \$20,000 on statues, on golden statues and then they spent one million dollars on buying a centre.” She goes on to say that “whatever funds they were getting, they would funnel into the Tibetan community” and that she and other Western monastics “went hungry as we watched other people bring food for Tibetan lamas.” She was obviously deeply affected by these experiences and eventually distanced herself from both traditional and non-traditional Buddhist institutions.

In regards to enchanted flow, nuns occupying this middle position also identified the work requirements and lay-majority populations characterizing the non-traditional institutions they belonged to as chief barriers to their successful achievement and embodiment of their prioritized moral goods. Sherab, for example, noted that "if you live in a centre, then you have to do a lot of work. You have to do all these kinds of things for the laypeople and there is mostly no time to do retreats or to take care of yourself, your mind." It is evident from Sherab's words, as well as those of the other nuns in a similar position, that as a result of work demands and lack of opportunities for study and practice, these non-traditional institutions were unable to satisfy the nuns' desire for complete immersion and for a life perpetually oriented to an enchanted or spiritual flow.<sup>41</sup> In fact, this is precisely what led Nyingma to “step back from the centre” she belonged to in France: "I was under a tremendous amount of work pressure. I was given a lot of responsibility... So, yeah, it just got too much for me."

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<sup>41</sup> is was reflected in the preceding symbolic chapter as well, which argued that Thosamling - as an institution that is similarly unconventional and Western-oriented- failed to generate the type and level of emotional energy and institutional commitment that traditional institutions do.



Similarly, Dechen eventually left her centre in Australia because she felt that she was “taken for granted” and refused the support and opportunities for spiritual development that she felt entitled to after ordaining. In Dechen's case it was these, among other, experiences that pushed her further along the positional spectrum, moving her deeper into the margins of the Buddhist institutional world. When she finally left and moved to India, she continued to struggle and was even homeless for a time as she continued to morally orient herself by attempting to integrate into the traditional Buddhist institutional system. Despite the extreme challenges she faced, she never abandoned her Buddhist faith and eventually realized that it "was not productive for me to just go on and on and on when no one is listening." She says that it was "just too painful to be marginalized all the time," and so she gave up trying to integrate into either traditional or non-traditional Tibetan Buddhist institutions.

Nuns positioned towards the peripheral end of the spectrum thus achieve enchanted flow and moral orientation through institutional (or non-institutional) positions that represent deviations or innovations, differentiating them from the traditional majority of native and assimilated Tibetan Buddhist practitioners. Take for instance, Dawa, who lived on her own when she ordained but made significant efforts to access or engage with traditional Buddhist institutions in order to orient herself in this new monastic world. She received little support or assistance and says that it “felt like a kind of double alienation where I’d just left this old world and I had gone into this new world where I’m also not accepted.” These were difficult times for Dawa, who has since lived a unique, independent monastic life that blends certain traditional institutional elements (she is deeply engaged in Tibetan language studies, maintains a formal, rigorous practice schedule, and is close to her Tibetan lama) with many peripheral ones (she maintains a secular career, working from time to time in order to support herself, she travels, and is not formally attached to any traditional Buddhist institution). Other nuns in peripheral positions have likewise designed monastic lives that are uniquely suited to them, reflecting personalized orientation efforts towards shared moral goods.

As one of the nuns who lives outside of any institution, Rinzen suggests that, in her experience, Thosamling, like the dharma centre she lived in in Europe, impeded her connection to the spiritual good she so valued. She says that "Buddhist monks and nuns are supposed to use all their energy for study, contemplation, and meditation." She notes however that work pressures in non-traditional institutions make it nearly impossible to sustain this focus. In fact, one of the main

reasons that she moved out of Thosamling was that "more than the actual work... the pressure" to contribute in certain specified ways felt restrictive and oppressive. In her experience, this pressure "creates constant tension and unhappiness" which interferes with her ability to study and focus spiritually as a Buddhist nun. Dechen is also positioned at the extreme end of the peripheral side of the spectrum, having developed a monastic lifestyle that allows her to enact a differentiated view of a spiritual life in enchanted flow. The distancing process underlying Dechen's move towards a peripheral position began with her Buddhist centre in Australia refusing to house or support her. While this situation did not reflect a choice or intention on Dechen's part, later social movements display more intentional efforts towards moral orientation. She explains that part of the reason she never integrated into any Buddhist institution was because she "wanted to study dharma in a way that was simpler and more related to the problems of life...the real world." Indeed, she says that she was "more interested in doing social work, in doing socially engaged Buddhism than I was in studying dry, obscure Tibetan texts and a language I would probably never master." Dechen's words construct the once idealized world of Buddhist institutionalism as 'dry' and unrelated to the basic realities of people's lives. Furthermore, after experiencing Tibetan Buddhist institutional life as an ordained nun she sees that monks and nuns "are working really hard for Tibetan lamas, doing what Tibetan lamas say, or raising money for Tibetans, or studying like this really long, really involved thing." From her point of view, this current state of affairs is "not good enough and it's not what the Buddha had in mind when he started the sangha." As such, she works to reorient herself, devising a life and position that allow her to achieve a sense of fulfillment and connection to the moral goods of altruism, non-materialism, and spiritual flow. In her case, she moved to central India where she started a charity for disenfranchised Indian Buddhists. In her words, this enabled her to put her "energy into a community that is supporting me and that I feel I can help."

For other nuns situated at the peripheral end of the positional spectrum, similar experiences of dissatisfaction or violation of prioritized moral goods also inspired movement further into the margins. In Lhamo's case, the experience of being rejected by a traditional Tibetan institution<sup>42</sup> and her inability to find a suitable place to live as a convert nun inspired her to establish an alternative institution (Thosamling) that provided a space for her and other international nuns to

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<sup>42</sup> Lhamo was not given any reason from the Tibetan nunnery to which she applied for why they were denying her application for membership/residence. She says that they simply sent her a letter saying that they "had no space."

live, because, as she says: "It is actually very difficult to find a place – even in the West." Given that her attempts to access traditional Tibetan Buddhist institutions<sup>43</sup> were unsuccessful, she was particularly motivated to build a place that was as open and inclusive as possible, especially to convert nuns: Thosamling is "more flexible because there are so many different people from different places, so you don't want to make it too tight." Thus, like Dechen, the institutional innovation displayed by Lhamo can also be traced to a desire to reassert and re-establish connection to the core goods that define her (namely spirituality and enchanted flow), and that she found wanting in more traditional Buddhist institutions. She built Thosamling in an effort to provide convert nuns a flexible and inclusive space wherein they may realize their intention to live an enchanted monastic life and have access to the teachings and practices that are the foundation of spiritual development in the Buddhist context.

Regardless of the position that a given nun occupies along the positional spectrum, she displays an identity and self rooted as strongly as any other, in the goods of spirituality, altruism, non-materialism, and flow. The preeminence of these moral goods and the nuns' desires to remain oriented to them contribute to the range of positions they come to occupy as they adjust to life as a Buddhist nun. Evidently, there is no one way to live as a Tibetan monastic and no one way to ensure satisfactory orientation towards the moral goods that continue to be valorized by each one of them. Multiple factors beyond simply perspective and preference are involved, impacting each of the nun's ability to connect with these moral goods in a way that she deems fulfilling and meaningful. Some of these additional factors will be addressed in the section to follow, as we begin to consider the implications of the varied positions occupied by these nuns.

## **10.2. Recognition and Selfhood along the Positional Continuum**

In navigating the institutional environment, the women, as nuns, work to maintain contact with their shared prioritized moral goods, positioning themselves within spaces, places, roles, and relationships, that ensure their orientation towards these foundational bases of self. While the previous section presented positioning along a continuum based on institutional affiliation (or lack thereof), there are multiple levels and layers of experience which are implicated in the nuns'

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<sup>43</sup> She had also been asked to leave a Tibetan language program offered by a traditional institute in India that she had enrolled in just prior to her ordination. She told me, laughing, that "they told me to go because I was too slow and not intelligent."

adjustments to life after ordination and many diverse factors influencing their positions in the monastic world.

Personal, structural, cultural, historical, and economic factors, for example, all play a role in determining each individual nun's positioning within this world and the implications and ramifications that she experiences as a result. When we maintain a focus on moral goods but conceptually broaden the continuum beyond institutional position to represent the general social positioning of the nuns, the ends of the spectrum may be reconceived as the 'Center' and the 'Periphery' of the Buddhist institutional world.

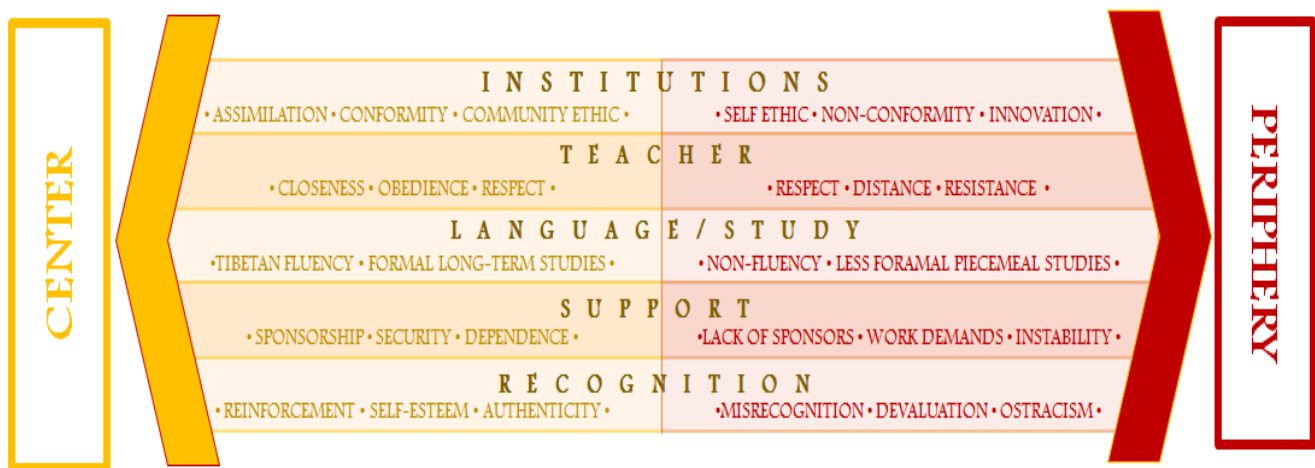


Figure 9. Factors Defining the Post-Ordination Positional Continuum

Around the 'Center' end of the spectrum, assimilation is still a dominant theme and the highly formalized quality of monastic life is considered by the nuns occupying positions in this range as providing meaningful and ongoing connection to the core goods of spirituality, altruism, and non-materialism. These connections are furthered by institutional structures and norms that validate the women's personal worth by recognizing their dedication and commitment towards realization, enabling assimilation into stable social communities, offering emotional and material support, and finally, by providing an intensive and cohesive framework for a life dedicated to the philosophical study and spiritual practice of a worldview that is founded on similar moral ideals (mental transformation, nonattachment, and benefitting others). Additionally, life in positions at this end of the spectrum are characterized by an underlying emphasis on community and the social aspects of institutional life.

As a case in point, Palden, who is a member of an established Tibetan nunnery some 40 minutes from Thosamling, says that since the day she arrived the nuns “consider me a Jamyang Choling nun, because this is where I study, where I live and I’m included in everything.” This excerpt demonstrates that the primary markers of her identity within this traditional nunnery are not age or country of origin, but are derived from her membership in the community: she is simply a “Jamyang Choling nun.” This designation equalizes her status, downplaying her uniqueness as an individual separate from the rest and foregrounds a communal, institutional identity as a dominant source of self. In assimilating to this traditional monastic lifestyle and in fulfilling responsibilities associated with particular roles in their communities, Palden and others in similar positions experience satisfying levels of respect, support, and recognition.

This recognition confirms for these nuns that they are rightly aligned with the goods that they value, which, by virtue of being shared and pursued by all members of the community, strengthens and validates them as even more meaningful and effective bases for identity and self. Importantly, these validation and recognition processes are not relegated to the confines of the group (i.e. ordained members of the same institution), but are experienced more broadly through interactions with their wider Buddhist communities and the general public.<sup>44</sup>

The community-based lifestyles of nuns in positions at this end of the spectrum fulfill their desire for full and perpetual immersion in an enchanted world, while assuring them that their lives are oriented to the goods which they consensually identify as crucial determinants of the good life of a Buddhist nun. They are able to focus fully on spiritual matters, to be materially and psychologically cared for (thus fulfilling the valued good of non-materialism/ nonattachment), and to develop the knowledge that will enable them to benefit others and realize the role of an altruistic renunciant. Overall, it is clear that for the nuns occupying more central positions in the Buddhist monastic world, assimilation and integration into a defined community are prized achievements that are deemed beneficial to the development of a shared, community-based identity that deemphasizes individuality and autonomy. For these integrated nuns, the recognition and support they receive from members within and beyond their traditional communities provide a sense of validation, appreciation, and respect for the role they play as ordained sangha and for who they are as Buddhist nuns.

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<sup>44</sup> See discussion in chapter 8, section 8.3. "The second Grand Idea: Institutional Integration."

At the other end of the spectrum - around the periphery of the Buddhist monastic world, things look quite different. In contrast to those occupying more central positions, many of the nuns located around the periphery feel disrespected and devalued as Buddhist practitioners in the mixed, non-traditional institutions to which they belonged (and still belong, for some). Indeed, despite the fact that the nuns in these positions have taken the same vows, wear the same robes, share the same teachers, and engage in the many of the same practices and studies as their assimilated counterparts, the fact that they are not integrated into established, traditional Buddhist institutions exposes them to a wholly different social experience.

For instance, Dawa, who lived on her own and was not a member of an established institution when she ordained, described the period following her ordination as profoundly “bewildering.” She explained that when she reached out to “older sangha” in the Western Buddhist monastic community after her ordination, she was ignored, dismissed, and received little support. Similarly, Dechen says that she “like an outcast” within her non-traditional Buddhist community in Australia because members of her dharma centre did not “take [her] seriously as a practitioner” and “didn’t even know what to do with us [Western convert monastics].” Thus, whereas the nuns positioned nearer to the center highlight the support they received and the welcoming communities that embraced and encouraged them once they ordained, for the nuns at this other end of the spectrum, their experiences outside of traditional institutions meant that they receive far less material, emotional, and identity support. This lack of recognition and support strongly impacts their ability to embody the nun persona and hence compromises their very sense of self.

Taylor states: “my own identity crucially depends on my dialogical relations with others” (1994, p. 34). In this sense, the levels of social connection, recognition and support that the nuns do or do not experience at different positions along the continuum are incredibly significant in regards to self. Depending on their position, the dialogical relationship that exists between them and the wider Buddhist community may be supportive, reflective of the moral goals, and hence personally empowering. On the other hand, near the periphery these relationships may be strained, becoming a source of conflict and even despair, for in refusing or withholding support from the nuns, members of those communities are expressing a lack of respect, and are failing to recognize the value and merit of these women as Buddhist nuns. The implications of these dynamics, including those related to sponsorship and the politics of wealth distribution, are powerful because

“our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others” (Taylor, 1994, p. 24).

It follows that “a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves” (Taylor, 1994, p. 25). According to Taylor, misrecognition may act as “a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being” which may lead to the “pain of low self-esteem” (1994, p. 25-6). Occupying a position on the peripheral end of the spectrum, then, exposes nuns to this type of treatment where threats of non-recognition destabilize their identities and undermine their connection to the goods at the core of their very selves. While this may indeed be the case, and while the nuns in this positional range did connect experiences of maltreatment and stress in their monastic lives to being misrecognized by others, they did not necessarily dwell on the negative ramifications of misrecognition. Rather, they express great resilience and appear to make sense of these negative experiences by relying on Buddhist philosophical principles and their commitment to realizing the moral goods that they most value. They tended to display a proactive and determined stance where dissatisfying circumstances were avoided or eventually abandoned and new, more supportive and fulfilling ones were sought.

All in all, while the nuns at the central end of the positional continuum experience confirmatory validation and recognition from fellow nuns and Buddhist community members, nuns at the other end, closer to the periphery, often describe near opposite experiences, where their value and legitimacy as Buddhist nuns are challenged and compromised, and they feel devalued, forsaken, vulnerable, and even endangered, in the non-traditional or non-institutional environments they are positioned in. While all of the nuns continue to orient themselves to the same fundamental goods (spirituality, altruism, non-materialism, enchanted flow), for those located nearer the center, this orientation is facilitated through integration and assimilation into traditional communal contexts, whereas those scattered around the periphery find that a more differentiated, independent, and less traditional monastic lifestyle is the most effective means of ensuring that their lives are rightly turned towards these goods. These differences and the implications they represent for contemporary Tibetan Buddhism, relate in many ways to the distinctions that Turner established between the liminal and the liminoid (1982). As such, these concepts may be useful in furthering our understanding of the meanings and implications of the varied positions occupied by the nuns.

### 10.3. Liminality and Liminoidity: Implications of Social Positioning in the Buddhist Institutional World

While Turner defines the typical third phase of the ritual process as a return to secular or mundane life (1979, p. 3), he acknowledges that the liminal phase can actually be extended and institutionalized such that ‘reaggregation’ becomes, instead, a permanently liminal state. Turner initially developed his notion of liminality as a functional social form within small-scale, tribal contexts that represents a communal and obligatory phase of the ritual process (Turner, 1982, p. 83). When Turner later developed the notion of liminoidity, as the "successor of the liminal in complex large-scale societies" (1987, p. 29), the collective and obligatory characteristics of liminality became more pronounced as they were contrasted with the optional and playful qualities of liminoidity, which is more focused on the individual as a source of innovation and creativity (Turner, 1982, p. 74-5). In the context of this study, both of Turner's concepts are relevant and maybe usefully applied to the continuum of positions occupied by the nuns in the post-ordination phase.

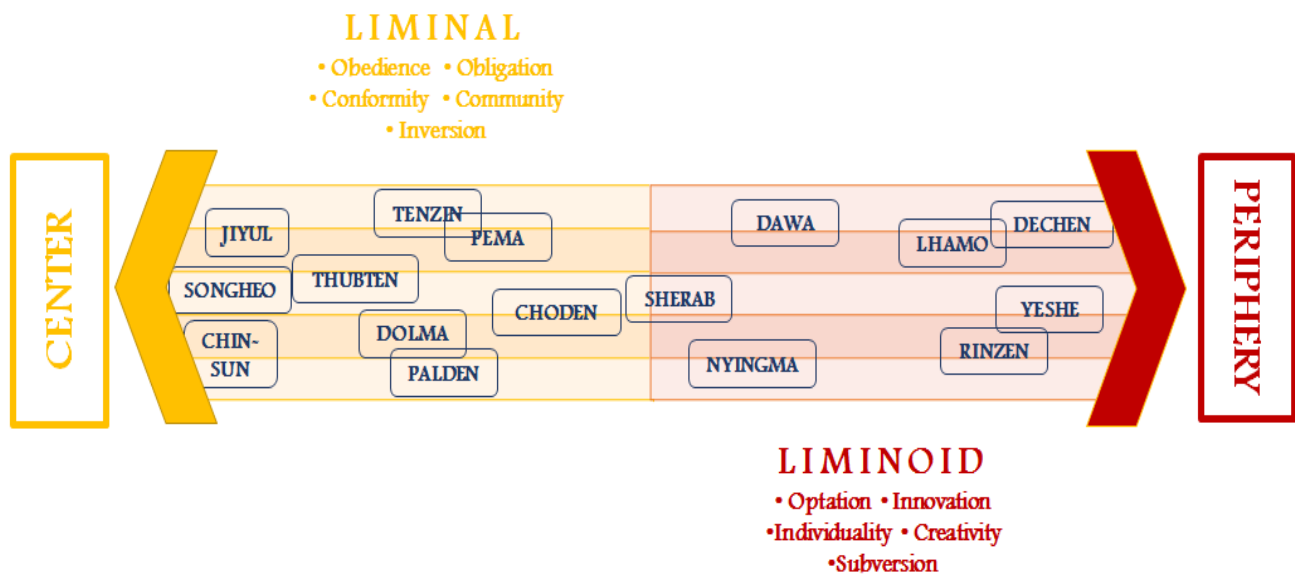


Figure 10. Positional Continuum: The Liminal and the Liminoid

*Permanent Liminality in the Post-Ordination Phase.* In regards to permanent or institutionalized liminality, Turner notes that “nowhere has this institutionalization of liminality



been more clearly marked and defined than in the monastic and mendicant states in the great world religions” (1969, p.107). Indeed, the monastic tradition of Tibetan Buddhism is a prime example of the process “whereby the inspirational forms generated in some experiences of *communitas* get repeated in symbolic mimesis and become the routinized forms of structure” (Turner, 1974, p. 249). The established organization and structure of Buddhist - and specifically monastic - culture in Tibet was progressively institutionalized over several centuries into its present form. This means that through ordination the women in this study were not entering a temporary liminal state, but rather had joined an established system whose liminal qualities had long since been routinized into a complex and highly structured institutional entity. Turner explains,

In complex large-scale societies, liminality itself, as a result of the advancing division of labor, has often become a religious or quasi-religious state, and by virtue of this crystallization, has tended to re-enter structure and acquire a full complement of structural roles and positions (1969, p. 167).

Thus, whereas the *communitas* which originally applied to the wandering ascetics of early Buddhism allowed for more free and open experiences outside of established social roles and at the margins of society, the monastic world which the women have entered is more akin to what Turner calls ‘normative *communitas*’ where “under the influence of time, the need to mobilize and organize resources, and the necessity for social control among the members of the group in pursuance of these goals, the existential *communitas* is organized into a perduring social system” (1969, p.132). The women’s stories and experiences attest to the highly institutionalized, codified and stratified nature of contemporary Tibetan Buddhist monasticism and support Turner’s characterization of social movements where the “spontaneity and immediacy of *communitas*” cannot be maintained and are eventually replaced by a structure “in which free relationships between individuals become converted into norm-governed relationships between social personae” (Turner, 1969, p.132). The nuns’ descriptions of connecting with recognized and authentic teachers, the processes of obtaining permission to ordain, and of integrating into established monastic institutions, demonstrate the extent to which the liminal aspects of Buddhist nunhood are embedded in a rigid and enduring structural system.

Another important aspect of liminality is that it is characterized by "anonymity and normative *communitas*," where the "sphere of the optional is...much reduced" (Turner, 1982, p. 74-5). As assimilated members of highly structured Buddhist institutions, the nuns at the central

end of the positional spectrum demonstrate how these liminal characteristics are experienced positively and as effective in creating an orientation to moral goods of altruism, spirituality, non-materialism and flow. The nuns in positions near to the center thus willingly accept the hierarchies and bureaucracies that define traditional Buddhist monastic systems and construct life within these social collectivities as highly gratifying and meaningful.

Tenzin, for example, explained that “the jewel of ordination is to be contained, and by being contained you lead a simple life, but who leads your life is community and the power of the community makes you better.” This conceptualization of Buddhist nunhood as a ‘contained’ life enhanced by social relationships reflects a community ethic (Shweder et al., 1997) whereby traditional monastic social structures and the established roles and responsibilities they delineate create clear boundaries and expectations which ‘contain’ and define nuns in these positions, both in relation to each other and to those outside of their immediate community. Indeed, other nuns near the center also articulated notions of self where the autonomous role of the individual is downplayed in favor of an integrated, conformist, and communal existence.

Choden’s experience of monastic life, and as a member of an established Buddhist community in Europe, reflects this perspective, highlighting the ways in which the good monastic life is framed in collective terms and as a central determinant of behavior, life decisions, and hence personal identity: “Because I’m living in a [dharma] centre, it’s not only depending on what *I* want or what *I* like.” She uses her trip to India as an example and describes how she had to make plans “in agreement with my monastic community, but with also the bigger community.” Choden’s role in her community and her adherence to the rules and norms that govern their collective behaviour are thus important determinants of her identity and self, informing a constant awareness of how her personal actions impact the group as a whole.

The privileging of a community ethic displayed by those in positions near the center means that their identities and selves are based on their role, status, and membership in these cohesive social structures, and they feel empowered rather than oppressed by the rigid structures that define life within these institutions. Their commitment and assimilation into these established, liminal institutions reflect a desire to conform, preserve, and perpetuate the traditions, relationships, and structures of the Tibetan Buddhist institutional world. These nuns, then, avoid transforming, to the greatest possible degree, Tibetan Buddhist traditions and work instead to perpetuate them as ‘purely’ and authentically (i.e. traditionally) as possible.

In this way, the liminal experiences of nuns nearer to the center of the Buddhist institutional world may challenge conventional, secular structures, but only to reaffirm them. They invert or contrarily organize the typical secular order, but in the end they do not completely overthrow or destroy it. This is what typifies permanent liminal life - adhering to an alternative collectivity in ways which protect and sustain the unity and cohesion of a world that abuts typical secular society, functioning as an inverted affront to the structures and norms of the mainstream modern world. As will be demonstrated in the paragraphs to follow, the permanent liminality experienced by the nuns in more central positions in the Buddhist institutional world contrasts in many ways the permanent liminoidity defining the lives of the nuns occupying more peripheral positions.

*Permanent Liminoidity in the Post-Ordination Phase.* Whereas the permanently liminal lives of the nuns nearer the center of the Buddhist world revolve largely around obligation, conformity, and community, the lifeworlds of those around its periphery are much more attuned to "optation" and the preferences and creative efforts of the "the individual innovator, the unique person" (Turner, 1982, p. 74-5). Many of the metaphorical descriptors and self-definitions used by nuns positioned around this end of the spectrum attest to this by constructing the convert Buddhist nun as "an individualist going against society, a rebel" (Dechen). Dawa, for instance, describes herself as "a pioneer, adventurer, going to places that many other people wouldn't go." She says that this "pioneer spirit" combined with a "kind of feeling for Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism" is what originally motivated her to become a nun. Similarly, Dechen equates herself to "a trailblazer who has fought for a good cause or gone against the values of a materialistic or more self-centered society." These types of descriptors – rebel, trailblazer, pioneer- reflect the independent autonomy that defines nuns around the periphery who appear to consider themselves as non-conformists who, as Yeshe says, have sought out the most "radical" and extreme means of discovering the truth about reality. These self-representations are very close to the liminoid character described by Turner and articulate individualist readings of reality that challenge the dominant views and conventions not only of mainstream secular modernity, but of historical, traditional Buddhist institutionalism as well.

These nuns' foregrounding of individualism and personal autonomy above the roles and status offered by integration into a community, translates into a sort of selective mode of monastic being where they pick and choose which aspects of the institutional world to adopt or engage with, and which ones to resist or leave behind in order to morally orient themselves. Rinzen, for example,

spent several years living at Thosamling before deciding to get her own apartment in the nearby village. This way, she can participate in the courses and teachings, and maintain a relationship with the resident geshe (spiritual moral good), but she no longer has to abide by the rules of the institution or fulfill the responsibilities that come along with membership in the community (which she considers disorienting). She spoke specifically about the morning prayers, which take place every day in the nunnery temple at 6:00 am and are mandatory for nuns. Rinzen said that knowing that “You *have to* wake up at five because there is meditation and prayers, it creates lots of stress in me.” She is also anemic and could not tolerate the vegetarian food offered in the nunnery. So, she moved out and as a result was “happier and healthier” because she had “freedom.” This example demonstrates the ways in which moral orientation is achieved through an individualistic approach at the peripheral end of the positional spectrum.

Consequently, it appears that the moral implications of maintaining a self-concept that relies significantly on an ethics of autonomy (Shweder et al., 1997) may be related to exclusion from nunneries, relative isolation from Tibetan Buddhist communities, and lifeworlds quite distinct from those whose moral navigations are underlain with a community-based ethic.

Overall, as converts and ordained members of a religious tradition that falls far outside of the women’s original socio-cultural worlds (i.e. secular Western, or non-Tibetan, society), they are indeed, each one, located firmly in permanently liminal and liminoid worlds. They are no longer a part of the standard structures (social, economic, political, religious, philosophical, etc.) that defined their earlier lives. They have given up relationships, jobs, possessions, and statuses that previously identified them as members of those worlds and fixed them in particular, recognized social categories. And while separations of these kinds are often associated to negative impacts on most individuals’ sense of self, for the women in this study, the opposite is actually true. Because their sense of personal identity and inner self was always at odds with the values and structures of the modern secular worlds in which they were raised, converting to Buddhism and ordaining as nuns in this tradition, represent means of connecting to and further developing what they consider to be their true selves, while at the same time, publically articulating their identities as spiritual seekers.

In this sense, the women can be seen as moving from one marginal state to another, but whereas the original margin they occupied (as outsiders in the modern secular world) was experienced negatively, the permanently liminal or liminoid world they now inhabit (depending

on their social position within the Buddhist world) is highly valued since it is associated to meaningful purpose and the perpetual pursuit of purification and realization. The implications of the various liminal and liminoid statuses along the positional continuum are thus important to consider. Given that nuns at both ends of the positional continuum prioritize a Buddhist ideology or worldview, it is clear that their notions and enactments of self will continue to be influenced by Buddhist principles and goals, as well as by the shared moral goods of spirituality, non-materialism, altruism, and enchanted flow. When we consider how the selves represented by nuns along the continuum differ, it appears that the nuns nearest the center, who are integrated into the Tibetan Buddhist world, see themselves wholly reflected in the conventional Buddhist nun character that they embody. They feel that traditional monastic life both affirms and supports the moral goods that define them as beings-in-the-world. Their willingness to adapt to traditional institutional contexts and to submit and adhere to the authoritative hierarchies and established structures that define them, indicate that they will continue to support the norms and roles established and perpetuated within the institution, working hard to conserve and protect what they consider to be the truest and most authentic way of Buddhist monastic life.

The nuns on the other end, around the periphery, however, display selves that are defined more by liminoid qualities and a moral conviction in autonomy. They have, and will continue, to change the landscape of the Tibetan Buddhist world by forging paths that are not tread by the majority of that community. As unintegrated and non-traditional members of Tibetan monastic society, they are undoubtedly fringe characters, but their notable resilience and creative resistance to the institutional elements they deem detrimental to their connection and orientation to prioritized moral goods, mean that they exert significant influence in this world, embodying alternative ways of living and giving rise to innovative institutions and ways of being in the world.

#### **10.4. Conclusion**

When it comes to issues of self and identity, it appears that the moral goods that define the selves of these ordained women are consistent and have been known and articulated by each of them since before they began engaging with Buddhism. While the core and higher order goods (spirituality, altruism, nonmaterialism, and enchanted flow) are expressed with remarkable consistency across all of the nuns' narratives, it is clear that the distinct positions and lifeworlds that they come to occupy in the Tibetan Buddhist world reveal differences, not necessarily in the

goods themselves but rather in the divergent ways that the nuns find confirmation and connection to those goods.

For those nuns who confirm the capacity of traditional institutions to support and nurture connection and alignment to these goods, adherence to an underlying community-based ethic makes them well poised to assimilate into such structured, communal, and historically-embedded social contexts. These nuns (positioned nearer to the center of the traditional Buddhist Monastic World) emphasize community and their roles within established institutions as a core basis for who they are. They identify themselves as members of distinct groups (e.g. members of a particular centre/nunnery or monastic cohort) within the larger Tibetan Buddhist community and are able to fully embody the nun character and achieve spiritual flow due in large part, to the recognition and validation they receive both from their immediate and wider communities.

For the nuns at the opposite end of the continuum, around the periphery of the Buddhist institutional world, a more autonomous, self-focused ethic is perceptible which is reflective of a liminoid nature. These characteristics are connected to subversive efforts to reinvent and revitalize contemporary Tibetan Buddhist monasticism. For some of them, the core moral goods that they share with nuns along different points of the positional spectrum are ideally realized within non-traditional, adapted, or Westernized Buddhist institutional contexts that position them at neither end of the spectrum, but in the middle. For others, orientation to these shared moral priorities is not adequately achieved within the rigid confines of traditional institutions, nor by life within less traditional ones. Instead, they find the clearest and most meaningful connection to these goods comes from occupying even more independent positions, completely outside of any sanctioned institution. The sharp distinctions that mark not only the experiences, but also the selves, of the nuns in these varied positions are striking and reveal a proliferation of visions, not only of the good monastic life, but of the very future of Tibetan Buddhism in the contemporary world.

The conclusion chapter to follow will summarize the key findings of this work and also further explore the varieties of postures and positions that define not only the individual lives of these nuns, but the wider world of Tibetan Buddhism and the contemporary religious landscape of which it is part.

## **11. Conclusions- Plural Positionings: Transformation in the Context of Contemporary Tibetan Buddhism**

The chapters of this dissertation have traced the experiences of sixteen persons as they went from modern lay women to Buddhist converts to Buddhist nuns, ending with their adjustments to the institutional world of Tibetan Buddhism and the life plans associated with their respective paths. The analyses in these chapters have demonstrated the various ways in which their individual stories converge and diverge throughout this transformation process, and highlight certain patterns and themes which were elucidated with the narrative theories of Todorov (1981) and Ricoeur (1991), the structural framework of Victor Turner's rites of passage (1974, 1969), and theories of self and identity by Charles Taylor (1989). Additional theories further informed the interpretative approach and theoretical perspective applied in this work which have allowed the precision and detail of the individual life to be juxtaposed against the contours of wider social and institutional contexts. In alternating the focus between these diverse levels, a critical hermeneutic approach was used to guide a dynamic analysis of lived experience. This conclusion will maintain this comparative and contextualizing strategy, building upon the findings and arguments developed thus far, to provide an overall interpretation of personal transformation within the particular socio-religious context of contemporary Tibetan Buddhism. In this way, the study ends by answering the call for analytical approaches to contemporary Tibetan Buddhism that are "capable of articulating the 'local' and the 'global' through ethnographic descriptions of micro-level case studies and their contextualization within political and religious dynamics carried out on a global scale" (Lopes, 2014, p.7).

In the first section of this conclusion, the three phases of the nuns' journeys will be considered as unique worlds, and by bringing together chief findings from previous chapters, the characteristics and main frames of references for each world will be summarized. These integrated summaries will reveal key implications of the positional plurality that defines the women post-ordination lives.

A second section will use theoretical insights from Paul Ricoeur's (1986) concepts of the social imaginary (ideology and utopia) to further explore this positional plurality and to demonstrate how the women's movements and positions along this continuum map onto significant shifts and embedded perspectives within the world of contemporary Tibetan Buddhism. Lastly,

the conclusions drawn from these final analyses, as well as key findings from the previous chapters, will be brought into dialogue with the literature. Instances of both correspondence and divergence will be highlighted along with the central contributions of this work and suggestions for potential areas of future study.

### 11.1. The Worlds of Conversion, Ordination, and Adjustment

Given that each of the three phases travelled by the nuns is defined by distinct social structures, symbolic universes, and personal experiences, and marked by various thresholds of transition and transformation, they may be considered as unique worlds unto themselves. Analysis reveals that there are no uniform paths either within or between the three worlds of conversion, ordination and adjustment.

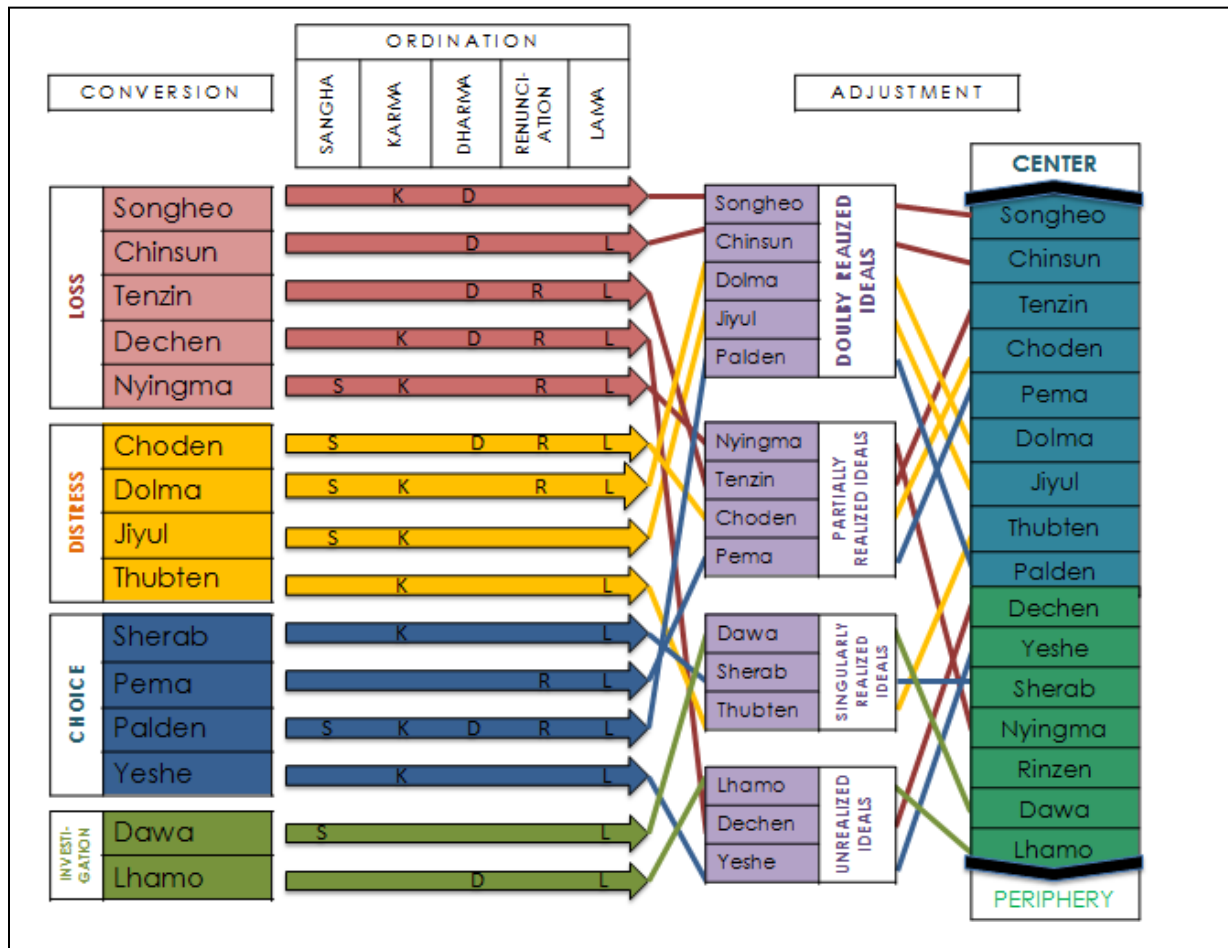


Figure 11. Transformation Pathways Through Conversion, Ordination, and Adjustment



While general characteristics are discernible, no two women experience the three phases in precisely the same way. Moreover, the elements and positionings defining a woman's experience in one phase or world do not necessarily predict those of the successive phase(s)/world(s). Overall, the transitions and transfigurations highlighted in this study of religious conversion and ordination demonstrate movement not towards a new self, but rather towards a new context, space, and lifeworld wherein that true self may be fully embodied, and made manifest. The focus, then, of the following discussion will be the dynamics and stakes of self embedded in the shifting contexts of successive realms of transformation.

*The World of Conversion.* At the outset of their journeys, each of the women in this study were rooted in modern secular societies that restricted rather than expanded their potential to develop, affirm, and express their true sense of self. Their disengagement from the dominant values and norms of their native societies meant that they were unable to recognize themselves in those around them. They felt as if they didn't fit or belong and struggled with a sense of otherness and meaninglessness. These experiences and the consequent existential and identity crises that they gave rise to motivated the women to search for a way of being that better reflected their core identities, beliefs, and moral values. Indeed, they knew who they were - they clearly articulated themselves as spiritual, altruistic, and non-materialist persons- but because the lives they were living were not oriented to these core aspects of themselves and did not allow for the full expression and realization of these traits, they suffered a lack of meaning, purpose, and self-esteem. This all changed however, once they discovered Buddhism.

The overall mood of uncertainty, unease, and disorientation that colored the early parts of the women's stories was transformed into a more joyful, purposeful, and assured tone after they met with Buddhism. In many senses, Buddhism spoke these women's language - as a cohesive philosophy and worldview, Buddhist discourse articulated so much of what the women were unable to express or access in their previous lives. From ideas and doctrines, to symbols, practices, and communities, the interrelated elements of Buddhism encountered by the women resonated deeply with each of them and facilitated, finally, a way of existing in the world that felt authentic, meaningful, and completely congruent with who they were and where they wanted to be. This synergistic connection was experienced as strongly empowering and allowed the women to transform their outsider status into a meaningful position. It also provided them an opportunity to articulate and enact a vision of the world that was consistent and reflective of their true self which,

theretofore, they were unable to fully or coherently express. In this way, conversion to Buddhism signals a redirection, where, as 'spiritual seekers,' the women move ever closer to embodying and fully inhabiting a world befitting their moral priorities, intentions, and selves.

*The World of Ordination.* As lay converts, the women remained a part of modern secular society, which acted as their primary frame of reference. All the while, however, they were becoming more and more engaged in Buddhist moral frameworks, social networks and institutions. The embedded configuration of their narratives of this period connected various actions and transitions to elements in the overarching, cohesive Buddhist system, reflecting their deepening integration into the Buddhist world and their increased adherence and embodiment of its dominant moral goods.

While this increased immersion into Buddhism was experienced as fulfilling and made the women feel more at peace, their continued connection to the mundane realities of secular life left them wanting more. Indeed, the desire to be fully and perpetually immersed in a Buddhist world emerges clearly in this phase as the women unanimously establish the attainment of enchanted flow (Csíkszentmihályi, 1997) as a moral priority. For them, flow represents a perpetual state of immersion in the sacred, which contrasts the temporary states of flow experienced by non-ordained people that both Turner and Csíkszentmihályi have described. They are seeking a means of living always and only in an enchanted state, and of fully embodying the Buddhist principles which they find so resonant, inspiring, and helpful. From their perspectives, donning the robes and taking the vows represent a deeply meaningful way of unifying their private (inner) and public (external) selves, and of ensuring that they are rightly placed in a world and in a role that will allow their key personal characteristics (namely spiritual seeker, existential investigator, and compassionate altruist) to prevail in every context and at all times. During this period then, their frame of reference shifts from secular modernity to sacred enchantment and they consider their ties to the secular world as limiting restrictions prohibiting them from inhabiting a sacred, flow-releasing, and enchanted world.

*The Worlds of Post-Ordination Adjustment.* After finally realizing their goal of getting ordained, the women, now nuns, are transformed into conspicuous and embodied symbols of the Buddhist tradition. They have succeeded in accessing the enchanted life they desired, and must now adapt to the institutional contexts that accompany their monastic station. During this period they must adjust to ordained life and reconcile their expectations with the realities of what it means

to live as a Buddhist nun. In the previous phases of conversion and ordination the women were united in their experiences, sharing the same general trajectories and expressing similar ranges of thought, emotion, and behaviour. In the adjustment phase however, varied experiences with the social, institutional, and authority structures of the monastic world create divisions and the nuns come to occupy distinct positions along a continuum- from the center to the periphery of the Tibetan Buddhist institutional world. They continue to share the same primary frame of reference- Buddhist institutionalism- however, while traditional institutional integration is seen by some (those closest to the center) as providing adequate meaning, recognition, and support, motivating them to conform, assimilate and adhere to tradition, for others (those scattered around the periphery) traditional institutional life conflicts with their expectations and visions, inspiring them towards varied levels of innovation and autonomy instead.

Positions at the 'Center' end of the positional spectrum are thus generally defined by integration into traditional Buddhist institutions. Assimilating to such worlds is experienced in overwhelmingly positive terms: it creates a cohesive social experience where the nuns are recognized and accepted as valued members of the community. They are cared for and supported (emotionally and materially), able to focus undistractedly on Buddhist study and practice, and achieve the sense of enchanted flow they had been seeking. The stories from nuns in such positions are suffused with a sense of purpose, determination, and clarity; the tone is self-assured, and the nuns appear content and satisfied in these positions. The closer they are to the center, the more definite their visions for the future; they clearly intend to further their formal studies, protecting and conforming to the status quo of the traditional monastic system.

Social positions nearer to the peripheral end of the spectrum contrast those nearer the center in many significant ways. The periphery represents a non-traditional, marginal space and is occupied by nuns (all from Western backgrounds) who have been either unable or uninterested in integrating into established, traditional institutions. The nuns within this range face specific challenges, not only in terms of orientation to moral goods, but in regards to garnering the recognition and acknowledgement necessary for realizing the authentic character of a Buddhist nun. While some of the nuns clustered around the mid-point of the spectrum (e.g. Sherab, Nyingma) are loosely affiliated to Buddhist institutions, these are non-traditional organizations rooted in the West with a strong lay focus and majority lay populations. Others, further along the

peripheral path (e.g. Rinzen, Yeshe, Dawa), lead essentially independent lives, though they access certain forms of training, education, and practice across a mix of mostly non-traditional institutions and centres. Lhamo and Yeshe are the two nuns at the far end of the periphery who have actually established non-traditional institutions of their own (Thosamling, in the case of the former). Overall then, these nuns are leading far more independent and unconventional lives at the margins of the Tibetan Buddhist institutional world.

While nuns positioned along the peripheral side of the spectrum remain committed to the Buddhist Path, their journeys in the institutional world have included far more turns, detours, and obstacles than those in or around the center. Thus, the tone of their narratives during this phase is less uniformly joyous, optimistic, and focused compared to that defining the stories from the other end of the spectrum. They express a wider range of negative emotions, including frustration, bewilderment, anxiety, disappointment, and uncertainty. Their visions of the future are marked by determination, but also unpredictability, vagueness, and a certain amount of insecurity. Thus, while they do express great pleasure and appreciation in being able to live life as a Buddhist nun, they acknowledge the difficulties that come with their positions and particular life paths. As such, their narratives are rife with articulations of resilience and are underlain with a clear autonomous ethic. This further distinguishes them from those occupying more central positions who display selves rooted instead, in a community ethic.

Thus, despite the fact that all of the nuns, regardless of positioning, continue to have identities and selves based around the same moral goods (spirituality, altruism, non-materialism, and most significantly, enchanted flow), the overall ethics that characterize them differ. Consequently, those liminal nuns positioned nearer to the center consider integration and assimilation into traditional Buddhist institutions as the most effective and fulfilling means of orienting themselves to these goods, while liminoid nuns positioned in the peripheral range find independent, unconventional and innovative monastic lifestyles to be most conducive to authenticity and orientation to these same goods. In sum, while the women articulate and valorize the same sets of moral goods, true selfhood and authentic being are experienced through associations to various, distinct lifeworlds.

In order to draw conclusions from these findings it is necessary to consider, more directly, the wider Tibetan Buddhist world within which these nuns are situated and within which their movements and positions are negotiated. Tibetan Buddhism is in a period of significant change,

and has been, mostly since its highest recognized leader and practitioner, the Dalai Lama, left Tibet in 1959. Thus, when the nuns' experiences and the postures of assimilation and preservation (displayed by those nearer the Center) and differentiation and innovation (around the Periphery) are contextualized within this contemporary landscape, what types of correspondences or contrasts exist between them and their adopted tradition? Do the divergent positions inhabited by the nuns echo or diverge from positions held by native Tibetan Buddhists? And how might the diverse positions displayed within both Tibetan Buddhism and its convert nuns impact the ongoing development of this tradition?

In the following section these issues will be explored and the theoretical framework of Ricoeur's social imaginary (ideology and utopia) (1986) will be used to develop some final thoughts, questions, and conclusions.

### **11.2. Encounters in Exile: Ideological and Utopian Shapings of Self and Tradition**

In the context of this study, the social field made possible by exile is the site where the worlds of the convert nuns become entangled with those of native Tibetan Buddhists, creating a complex dynamic wherein multiple exilic experiences intersect. In situations of exile, the risks of chaos and extinction that threaten a given society, individual, or world inspire various reactions, including redoubled affirmations of tradition (which typically result in increased rigidity and control) or adaptation and reinvention (Talebi & Desjardins, 2012). As such, exile space may be both a site for condensing and conserving tradition as well as challenging and changing it. In the case being examined here, both Tibetan Buddhism and individual convert nuns are faced with such dilemmas, in the sense that they must each develop perspectives and formulate strategies in order to meaningfully navigate their exiled positions. Notably, while both are experiencing exile, the exile of Tibetan Buddhism was imposed by another state while exile in the nuns' cases (that is, from their countries/communities of origin) was self-imposed and freely chosen. Nevertheless, in all cases of exile, and including those considered here, the interplay between traditions of origin and traditions of current context are the general frame within which appropriations and rejections, as well as negotiations and shifts of all sorts occur.

This section will thus explore these navigations, using the notions of ideology and utopia (Ricoeur, 1986). These two 'experience-distant' concepts (Geertz, 1974) are applicable here since

they allow the forces and patterns of action and movement displayed in the nuns' individual lives to be more broadly considered and connected to varied elements and social forces in the wider world of a globalizing Tibetan Buddhism. Specifically, the concepts of ideology and utopia are relevant to this study because the dialectic between ideology and utopia maps onto the continuum of positions occupied by the nuns (from the Center to the Periphery) and also onto the forces of traditionalism and reform that define contemporary Tibetan Buddhism.

Ricoeur suggests that "Unless social life has a symbolic structure, there is no way to understand how we live, do things, and project these activities in ideas, no way to understand how reality can become an idea or how real life can produce illusions" (1986, p. 8). Indeed, the symbolic structure pointed to by Ricoeur relates to the broader concept of imagination, or what he calls the "social imaginary" (1986). Along with others (notably Geertz, 1973), Ricoeur contends that since people are not endowed with a genetic system of information for human behavior, they require a cultural system to map their experience of social reality and to provide "templates or blueprints for the organization of social and psychological processes" (1986, p. 12). In his estimation, social or cultural imagination is precisely this type of system, providing structure and meaning to social experience by articulating the images and ideas that a society has about itself. He goes on to suggest that social imagination works in two different ways: on one hand, it constitutes, legitimates and preserves the order of the world; on the other, it has a 'disruptive function' which supports 'breakthroughs' that allow us to "imagine something else" (Ricoeur, 1986, p. 265). In this sense, social imagination constitutes social reality, operating as both "confirmation and contestation of the present situation" (Ricoeur, 1986, p. 3).

As the first type of social imagination, ideology provides the values, doctrines, concepts, institutions, tools, practices, and images that help both to constitute and to conserve the goals and legitimacy of a particular social order, thereby preserving the lifestyle and respective identities of its members (Ricoeur, 1986). Ricoeur thus identifies the three primary functions of ideology as symbolization, legitimation, and distortion, noting that "ideology has a function of conservation in both a good and a bad sense of the word" (1991, p. 318). The 'bad' or pathological side of ideology relates to the coercive, manipulative or hegemonic aspects of justifying and legitimizing a system of authority which is detrimental to some or even a majority of the population. Consequently, in as much as ideology integrates and orders society, it also distorts reality and conceals meaning in order to protect certain interests. This is what is meant by mystification. Thus, "something becomes

ideological – in the more negative meaning of the term – when the integrative function becomes frozen, when it becomes rhetorical in the bad sense, when schematization and rationalization prevail" (1986, p. 265-266).

When distortions and mystifications are revealed as such, when they are exposed, questioned or challenged, a space opens up within the ideological complex allowing alternative possibilities to be considered. Unlike ideologies then, utopias enable us to openly "rethink the nature of our social life" (1986, p. 16). By introducing "imaginative variations on the topics of society, power, government, family, religion," utopian visions allow us to "radically rethink" the core elements and framing structures of our lives and provide us with a "fantasy of an alternative society" (Ricoeur, 1986, p. 16).

These different forms and functions both of ideology and utopia are clearly reflected in the perspectives and positions of the nuns in this study and also in the wider world of Tibetan Buddhism itself. This discussion will concentrate, therefore, on exploring the ideological and utopian visions operative within both, and the ways in which they contribute to the ongoing shaping of Tibetan Buddhism in contemporary times.

When considering the world constituted by traditional Tibetan Buddhist ideology, the chief authority that it legitimates is that of male lineage holders. Tibetan Buddhism is notably characterized by a hierarchal and patriarchal structure built upon established lineages and maintained, even in exile, through a complex institutional and bureaucratic network that reinforces and perpetuates the power and authority of reincarnated lamas (Bishop, 1993). As Bishop suggests, the "idealized image of hierarchical order, where everything is checked and assigned a specific place, where control and authorization occurs in the name of omniscient paternalism, is the root-metaphor of Tibetan Buddhism" (1993, p. 127). Tied to this metaphor and to the legitimating authority structures of Tibetan Buddhist ideologies are themes of protection and preservation, conservatism and traditionalism. Indeed, for many Tibetans and Tibetan Buddhist practitioners, exile represents an opportunity, or obligation even, to preserve and protect its traditions and its past which are under significant threat in the occupied territories of what is now 'China's Tibet' (Norbu, 2012; Smith Jr., 2008). These conservative and protective postures are strong within the Tibetan Buddhist community and while, in the exile context, modern Tibetan Buddhist society has loosened the rigidity of this male dominated, hierarchal structure through democratic and gender

equality reforms, traditional ideologies prevail and continue to be legitimated through deeply rooted ideological visions (within both political and religious spheres).

As evidenced by the continuation of historical (male dominated) lineages and the persistent influence and power concentrated among elite (mostly male) lamas and rinpoches, traditional Tibetan Buddhist patriarchal ideology endures. Yet considerable shifts, innovations, and reforms are also evident. Indeed, many of the political reforms and social transformations being enacted within the contemporary Tibetan Buddhist world reflect precisely the types of “imaginative variations” that Ricoeur ascribes to utopias.

One prime example relates to the centuries old socio-political system of Tibet which has been radically restructured following the mass exodus of Tibetans from Tibet after a failed uprising in 1959. Establishing a Tibetan government in exile - officially named the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) - was one of the Dalai Lama's top priorities upon leaving Tibet and was successfully achieved within only a few years. In 1960 the first democratic elections were held to select representatives from each of the main provinces and schools of Buddhism in Tibet (Bernstorff, & von Welk, 2003) and in 1963 a 'Draft Constitution for Future Tibet' was adopted, officially establishing a democratic polity infused with the Buddhist values so defining of Tibetan culture (McConnell, 2013). In shifting the theocratic polity of Tibetan society towards a secular democracy (Jacoby & Terrone, 2012, p. 103), the Dalai Lama initiated a form of ideological re-visioning based around principles of democratization and secularization. Arguably, the apex of these initiatives came in 2011 when the Dalai Lama acted on a utopian vision which would see the role of the Dalai Lama in Tibetan society change. He fully devolved his political station, ending an almost 400-year-old tradition of power and transferring his political authority to the first directly elected prime minister (McConnell, 2013, p. 165; Sangay, 2003). In retaining his role as spiritual leader and relinquishing his position as head of state, the Dalai Lama has aligned the Tibetan exile community with many modern nations who have long since promoted the separation of 'church and state.' In this way, the utopian vision of a de-politicized Dalai Lama was established as a new ideology within the Tibetan state.

Beyond the political arena, utopian ideals have also inspired further ideological changes within the religious institutions of Tibetan Buddhism, where, despite "the vigorous opposition of more conservative elements," the Dalai Lama has advocated for the reinstatement of full ordination for women, initiated modern education reforms, and voiced subtle "distrust of the institution of



reincarnated lamas" (Dreyfus, 2005, p. 179). When it comes to the issue of full ordination for women, a topic which garners much attention in contemporary Buddhist circles, other Tibetan Buddhist elites are also working to shift entrenched conservative views and usher in more egalitarian and hence utopian, visions of a modern Tibetan Buddhism. The 17th Gyalwang Karmapa, for instance- a younger reincarnated lama living in exile and head of the Kagyu lineage, has been working not only to re-establish full ordination for women in Tibetan Buddhism, but advocating for 'genuine gender equality.' On a recent trip to the United States he was quoted as saying: "It is important to remember that the restoration of women's rights and the full empowerment of women must go far beyond mere external appearances and institutionalized mechanisms or structures" ("In Princeton Lecture", 2015). The efforts of the Karmapa and other reformers in this area have been bolstered by the involvement and advocacy of convert (namely Western) nuns who are often cited as the "most vocal advocates" of reinstating full ordination for nuns (Swanepoel, 2014; Mrozik, 2009). Indeed, in 2005, the Dalai Lama sponsored the founding of the 'Committee for Bhikṣuṇī Ordination in the Tibetan Buddhist Tradition', explicitly requesting that Western, rather than Tibetan, nuns be the ones to research and promote (particularly among senior monks) the reestablishment of full ordination (Swanepoel, 2014, p. 588). Thus, despite the strength of conservative, traditional ideologies, the Dalai Lama and others in Tibetan society have used certain utopian imaginings to advance the ideology of their collective social system. Life in exile has thereby exposed Tibetan Buddhism to influences and pressures (both from within and without) that challenge, in various ways, many of its entrenched, conservative ideologies. As evidenced above, Tibetan Buddhist society's responses to these challenges are defined by plural and contradictory perspectives: forces of preservation are not monolithic or all-encompassing, and nor are forces of innovation and change.

Similar diversity is evident among the group of convert nuns considered in this study for whom ideological and utopian postures are further complicated by their convert status and their positioning within and between two distinct cultural universes. As converts, these women came to Buddhism because they were in ideological conflict with their own societies of origin. They entered into exile by converting and ordaining, freeing themselves from their pasts and abandoning these previous ideologies in favor of the ideological order of Tibetan Buddhism which, at least initially, they were perfectly aligned with. In this sense, there is a near reversal or at least significant contrast in regards to the motivation and impetus behind initial ideological positions.

Despite this underlying and precursory movement, once embedded and immersed in the Tibetan Buddhist cultural world, these women's navigations and positionings may be considered in parallel to those of native Tibetans Buddhist practitioners within that shared world.

When the perspectives and narratives of the convert nuns are considered in relation to the ideological enactments of traditional Tibetan Buddhism, then, there are clear instances of correspondence, with many of the nuns, particularly those positioned near the Center, expressing similar ideological stances. Several of the nuns positioned at this end of the spectrum articulated perspectives on a variety of issues (economics, relationships, gender issues, etc.) which were closely aligned to the ethos and conventions of traditional, conservative Tibetan Buddhist ideology. Take for example these nuns' emphasis of the power and presence of their lamas and their willingness to accept these teachers' directives and advice regarding the direction of their lives. For many of these nuns the traditional and institutionalized systems of Tibetan Buddhist authority were strongly supported and considered not only necessary and justifiable, but deeply meaningful and even inspiring.

Further to this, many expressed deep conviction in protecting and preserving these conservative structures. Take Palden, for instance, who describes her life as an integrated member of a traditional Buddhist nunnery as "following the pure dharma...where it's in its traditional style." She contrasts this with the lifestyles of "people who haven't studied in this traditional way," and goes on to suggest that these unconventional and non-traditional approaches may "leave things out" and will likely change the teachings and traditions in a way that will, over time, leave only "a skeleton of what the traditional dharma was like." Likewise, recall Pema's expressed worry that non-traditional, and specifically Western, influences on Tibetan traditions would lead to an irreparable "schism" that would threaten the very survival of Tibetan Buddhism. These nuns, who have committed their present and future lives to the study and preservation of traditional Buddhism, thereby articulate intentions that closely echo those of many conservative Tibetan Buddhists.

It is not, however, the case that only assimilated nuns share these ideological visions. Dechen, for instance, who is located firmly at the periphery of the institutional world, considers one of the benefits and chief values of her ordained position as being able to "preserve the dharma full time." Similarly, Dawa (also positioned towards the periphery) tied her decision to ordain to

wanting to do my part to keep that [Tibetan Buddhism] alive, because I see that it's very worthwhile, beneficial for the world. So, by being ordained specifically and now also trying to learn the language, I feel that I'm doing my part to help keep it from dying.

Thus, preservationist discourses were employed by nuns across the positional spectrum. As converts to Tibetan Buddhism it is perhaps not surprising that all of the nuns, regardless of level of integration into the institutional world, display alignment to certain ideological stances in Tibetan Buddhism. With that being said, there were also clear divergences from such ideological positionings, as the nuns expressed utopian perspectives which often, and again, aligned with some of those emitted from within the native Tibetan Buddhist world.

As an illustration, take Rinzen, a nun situated at the periphery, who challenged aspects of traditional Tibetan Buddhist institutionalism, which she qualified as a "hierarchical, patriarchal and medieval system." From her point of view, if Tibetan Buddhism is going to be successfully adapted to modern times and transmitted to the West it will have to change because contemporary (and specifically Westerners) converts are "grown up people... used to democracy and equality." In her estimation, rigid adherence to the traditional Tibetan Buddhist social and institutional structures in modern times is untenable. Buddhism "has to change, it has to change for good, not for worse," she says, and for her "changing for good means putting aside things that are just superimpositions and ornaments and things like that, things that are not necessary and just keeping the essence." Part of what she deems the "unnecessary parts" of Tibetan Buddhism are what she labels Tibetan "tradition" or "culture," including "superstitious things... festivals, and things that have really nothing to do with dharma." Her critical stance on these issues represents an awareness and resistance to what she considers the mystifying elements underlying traditional Tibetan Buddhist ideology (Ricoeur, 1985). Despite her position and expressed views, she maintains faith and a commitment to what she considers the "essence" and "pure philosophy" of the Buddhist system. She is thus expressing both resistance to the mystifying power of Tibetan cultural traditions and its incarnation discourse, and a utopian vision which, for her, involves the pursuit and development of a non-dogmatic, non-superstitious, non-hierarchical and non-patriarchal Buddhist tradition: "If you can study it [Buddhism] properly and get the right message that the Buddha was giving, then there is no superstitions, no dogma. But many people are attracted by the other aspect of ritual and stuff, but this is a bit useless I think." Rinzen exemplifies here the close

connection between the denunciation of the mystifications inherent to the traditional Tibetan Buddhist system and its reinvention or revitalization through the utopian pursuit of a new non-contaminated version - that is, from her perspective, a distortion-free version - of Buddhism.

Interestingly, Rinzen's views are not foreign to the Tibetan Buddhist world, but have in fact been voiced by certain factions within that world. Take for example, Tibetan lama Dzogchen Ponlop. As a recognized reincarnation and respected lineage holder in various schools of Tibetan Buddhism, Dzogchen Ponlop is an internationally renowned teacher and author who has expressed views similar in some ways to those articulated by Rinzen. He asserts that we are in a time of "too much culture," and suggests that "it may be best to swing to the opposite end of the spectrum, the extreme of 'no culture', and then slowly come back to a middle ground" (Ponlop, 2010, p. 177). Dzogchen Ponlop has advocated for a "stripping of the cultural artifacts of Tibetan Buddhism from its essence", which he identifies as mindfulness practices that work with the mind directly in realizing Buddha nature," (2010, p. 178). In fact, Ponlop is only one of several prominent Tibetan Buddhist elites (including the Dalai Lama himself) who promote Tibetan Buddhism as a "system of values and a philosophy that accords with modern secular, democratic, and scientific views" (Jacoby & Terrone, 2012, p. 104-5). While these postures operated as utopias when they represented critical perspectives outside of the mainstream, they now function as a new ideologies, shaping the daily structures and collective lives of members of the Tibetan Buddhist world.

Another case in point, wherein the perspectives of the nuns vary and also map onto the divergent perspectives within the Tibetan Buddhist world, relates back to the issue of full ordination for Tibetan nuns. When the nuns located at the assimilated, central end of the positional spectrum are considered, several suggested that they were not interested in pursuing full ordination (e.g. Dolma, Choden, Palden), while others described it as a pressing and vitally important concern (e.g. Chin-sun, Jiyul, Songheo), and still others fall somewhere in the middle, acknowledging it as a significant, but non-urgent issue (Pema, Tenzin). When the perspective of nuns positioned around the periphery are considered, there is much closer consensus on the need for immediate reform, with some of the nuns already having pursued full ordination in other traditions (Sherab, Nyingma) and others calling for more direct action (Dechen). Yet, others at the periphery, like many nearer the center, also seemed unconcerned with full ordination, considering strong investment in the issue as another form of attachment and illusion (Yeshe, Rinzen). Thus, across

all nuns, and even within the ranges of the center and periphery, there is variability in the adherence and support of traditional or conservative ideologies.

Thus, while many of the convert nuns variably embrace the ideologies defining traditional Tibetan Buddhism, many have, like the Dalai Lama and other social innovators, resisted and countered mystifying forces by envisioning and enacting utopian ideas. This is particularly true of the nuns positioned towards the periphery, many of whom have voiced and initiated changes inspired by the utopian values – at least, in the Tibetan Buddhist context - of inclusion, democracy, secularism, and equality. Dechen directly asserted that “sometimes we should voice a bit of opposition if we’re going to change things.” In displaying the liminoid penchant for change, Dechen is a prime example of a convert nun who, in reaction to the sort of dystopia she experienced in the Tibetan Buddhist institutional world, enacts a personalized (utopian) vision of Tibetan Buddhist monastic life. She established a charity and institute to support disenfranchised Indian Buddhists, and positioned herself at the periphery of the institutional world where she is able to live out a more "socially engaged Buddhism."

Lhamo also embodies the utopian spirit, having developed an alternative institution (Thosamling) that, like Dechen's, reflects a personalized vision and is based on principles and structures that differ and even undermine traditional Tibetan Buddhist ideology (i.e. unaffiliated to any lineage, socially engaged, run by unrecognized female practitioners, focused on inclusion and non-rigidity, etc.). Other peripheral nuns, including Dawa, Sherab, Rinzen, and Yeshe, have also contributed to a re-imagined Tibetan Buddhist system by following unconventional paths and by introducing alternatives into lives rooted in traditional ideology.

Implicitly, many of the critiques underlying the utopian visions outlined here point to historical rather than spiritual dimensions of Buddhist monastic life and indicate that efforts to change Tibetan monastic traditions or to construct completely new versions of Buddhist institutionalism are simultaneously in continuity and in rupture with its traditional forms. From this perspective, these utopian movements may be seen as similar to those of the various mystics and reformers who contributed to the renewal of the Catholic faith across the centuries, like Saint Francis, or to the fathers of the Protestant faith, who challenged the moral hierarchy of traditional Catholicism on similar grounds. Indeed, changes marking certain Buddhist traditions, notably Sri Lankan Buddhism in the 1960s have been termed 'Protestant Buddhism' given that their emergent

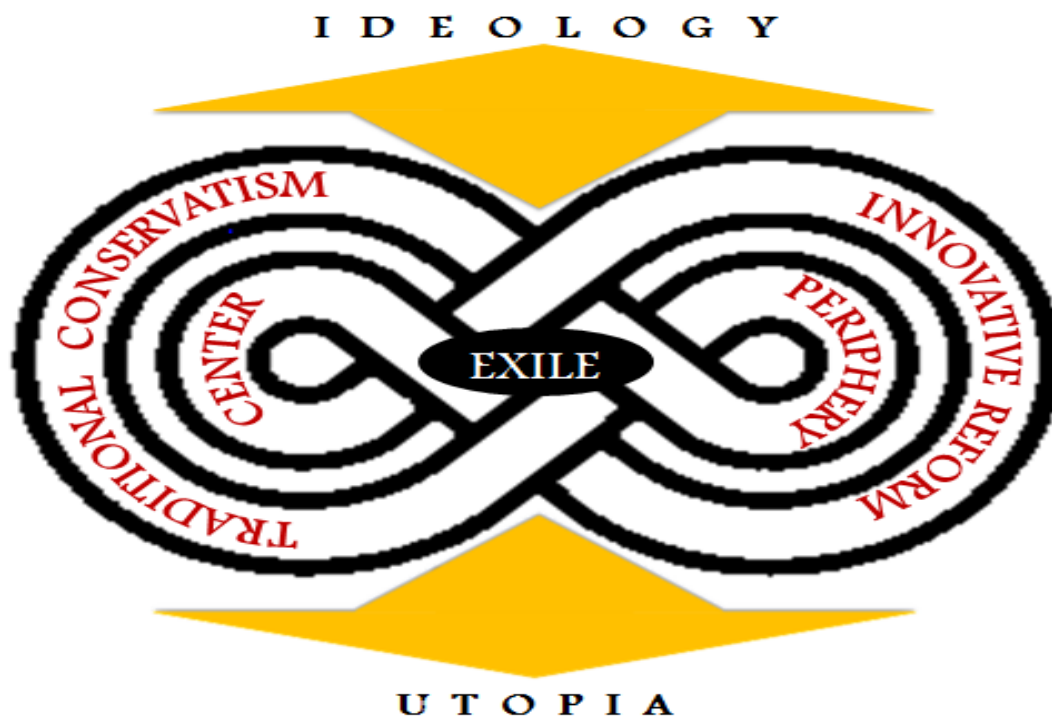
forms displayed many characteristics similar to Protestant Christianity and developed as a form of protest against Christian missions (Obeyesekere, 1970). Other scholars have employed the term 'Buddhist Modernism' to define globalized forms of Buddhism (including Tibetan Buddhism) which are framed as egalitarian philosophies that accord with democracy and social activism, and display features such as demythologization, secularization, a de-emphasis on ritual, image worship, and 'folk' beliefs (Jacoby & Terrone, 2012, p. 7).

In this sense, the utopian acts and imaginings articulated in the stories and lives of the nuns in this study seem to be united by underlying moral ideals that resonate with those informing the transformations that Tibetan Buddhism itself is considering and, at least in some areas, is already undergoing, including those that align with conceptualizations of Buddhist modernism (McMahan, 2015; Lopez, 2002; Prebish & Baumann, 2002): decentralization, equality, openness, and non-rigidity. This is not to say that the ideological and utopian visions operative within Tibetan Buddhism are equivalent to those within the lives of these convert nuns, or that movements in either direction are attributable to the same motivations or intentions. It is to say, however, that complex and nuanced relationships simultaneously exist between the nuns and their adopted tradition, as well as within both the women and Tibetan institutions respectively. Moreover, additional factions and forces involved with the world of Tibetan Buddhism (for example the growing lay-majority Buddhist communities in the West) further complicate this dynamic, since unique stakes and particular utopian and ideological visions are expressed by them as well.

Just to briefly point to some such complexities, what functions as traditional, conservative ideology to native Tibetan Buddhists has become the basis of a utopia imagined by many Western Buddhists wherein traditional Tibetan Buddhism is constructed in utopian terms as an ancient, healing tradition and a sacred 'Shangri-la' (see Lopez, 1998; Obadia, 2011, p. 109; Gutschow, 2009, p. 10). In fact, the democratization processes initiated by the Dalai Lama that were described above were actually impeded, or at least resisted by some Western forces, particularly 'counter-culture' travelers, who are said to have stifled Tibetan interests and advancements in secular politics through their support and promotion of Tibetan traditionalism (Norbu, 2004; Sangay, 2003, p. 122-3). There may be an essential reversal then in what counts as ideology and what as utopia, depending on one's perspective and vested interest (see Kyabgon, 2001, p. 386-7). While space does not allow for a more detailed elucidation of these complicated plays, it is nonetheless

clear that movement and exchange between the social imaginary poles of ideology and utopia enable social and institutional, as well as personal, changes and transfigurations.

"The only way to get out of the circularity in which ideologies engulf us," writes Ricoeur, "is to assume a utopia, declare it, and judge an ideology on this basis" (1986, p. 172). He goes on to explain that "we cannot get out of the circle of ideology and utopia, but the judgment of appropriateness may help us to understand how the circle may become a spiral" (1986, p. 314). In other words, when the imaginative alternatives of utopia are used as critical reflective horizons to reveal the distortive features of ideology, society may rejuvenate and reinvent itself, spiraling upwards by continually opening itself up to potential change, innovation or adjustment. In the context being considered here, it is evident that such plays are occurring across multiple axes in the sense that in as much as the women are using this Buddhist tradition to transform themselves, in many ways, Tibetan Buddhism is also using converts, such as these nuns, to reinvigorate and transform itself.



*Figure 12. Interplays of Ideology and Utopia in Contemporary Tibetan Buddhism*

Ricoeur further suggests that "we must try to cure the illnesses of utopia by what is wholesome in ideology... and try to cure the rigidity, the petrification, of ideologies by the utopian element"

(1986, p. 312). In essence, this appears to be an apt description of the transformations marking both Tibetan Buddhism and the lives of the nuns, as each uses the other to reflect upon and innovate within their own traditions and selves, continually drawing upon utopian elements to dislodge entrenched ideologies.

This analysis has extended Ricoeur's theoretical framework to be a comparative instrument wherein the movements and transformations in multiple worlds may be meaningfully mapped onto one another in order to expose linkages (resonances as well as resistances) that inform personal as well as institutional transformation. In reflecting on these findings I find that my own personal assumptions and ideas have likewise been transformed. This research has enabled me to clarify and evaluate the latent assumptions that I myself had in regards to authenticity and tradition in Tibetan Buddhism. Though it is somewhat uncomfortable to admit, I realize that at the beginning of this research project I held a rather naïve view of "traditional" Tibetan Buddhism, as an authentic and historically pure tradition; one which, from my perspective at the outset of this process, I felt was being somewhat compromised and diluted by modern innovations and, in all honesty, converts such as myself and the nuns in this study. I now have an elaborated notion of authenticity and recognize that it is both forces within and without the Tibetan tradition that inspire changes and modern adaptations. I have also developed a deeper respect and admiration for convert monastics after gaining insight into their lives and the extreme challenges that these women face in choosing the Tibetan Buddhist monastic path. The limiting and idealized view that I had of Tibetan Buddhism as an ancient and rather monolithic entity has thus been broadened and I now see the diversity that exists within the tradition and the changes and innovations that mark its growth not as a threat to authenticity and tradition, but as inevitable and ever present realities of all social systems.

By factoring in the role of social imagination, a more meaningful and contextualized exploration of the experiences of convert nuns was made possible. This interpretive approach has also facilitated important insights into their relationship to the Buddhist tradition they have adopted and into the role they play in the transformation and revitalization of that ancestral religious tradition.

### **11.3. Revisiting the Literature: Confirmations and Contestations**

The review of relevant literature presented in the introductory section of this dissertation outlined dominant perspectives and key findings in the areas of Buddhism and psychology,



contemporary Buddhism, women in Buddhism, and religious conversion. The analyses, arguments, and conclusions of this study address many of the gaps outlined in that review and both confirm and contest perspectives represented in the literature.

The initial literature review presented at the start of this dissertation considered four separate fields of psychology (social, positive, clinical, and experimental). Overall, it was shown that across these fields there is a tendency to construct and operationalize Buddhism as a diffuse, contemplative philosophical tradition or a universally applicable secular ethic (i.e. Atkins, 2002). Core Buddhist concepts and practices are often viewed and treated as compatible or complementary (and even superior, in some cases) to those of modern psychology (Shupe & Bradley, 2011; Wallace & Shapiro, 2006; Ekman, et al. 2005; Metcalf, 2002; Coleman, 2001). On the other hand, most empirical work in this area reflects a type of myopic focus wherein the effects of a particular practice (i.e. mindfulness meditation) are studied in isolation and without being adequately considered in relation to other key processes or life experiences. Indeed, this study points to the fact that while many of the clinical and experimental findings regarding the benefits of Buddhist practices (i.e. meditation, etc.) are supported in the stories and experiences of the nuns, they can sometimes be undermined or decreased by larger, or at least additional, factors in the practitioner's life, particularly those related to the inter-subjective and embodied aspects of life as a Buddhist. For example many of the nuns who live in lay-majority centers in the West lamented the workloads and organizational structures that impeded their meditation and ritual practice. It was also shown that from the nuns' perspectives spirituality and the practice of Buddhism was strongly rooted in study and less so in ritual performance or the types of meditation that the majority of psychological studies investigate in reference to Buddhism. Additionally, the crucial role of social recognition (and misrecognition) in determining self-esteem was also highlighted as an important factor impacting the psychological well-being of the women in this study. Thus, many of the socio-cultural and institutional aspects of Buddhism, including its monastic institutions, sectarian divides, and hierarchic power structures, as well as the living traditions that define how Buddhism functions in the lives of common people around the world, are generally neglected in the psychological literature.

Because this current work is not explicitly focused on Buddhism itself, but rather concentrates on the lived experiences of a particular segment of its ordained population, and

because it does not predominantly use Buddhist theories (or Westernized applications of Buddhist theoretical concepts), it is a marked departure from most literature and research at the crossroads of Buddhism and psychology. It does not aim at establishing correspondences between Buddhist and non-Buddhist theories, nor does it attempt to justify the validity or value of Buddhist concepts and practices. Instead, it explores many of the psychological concepts and processes that underlie personal transformation, bringing attention to the role of symbolic appropriation (related to the metaphor and symbol of the path and the monastic robes), the desire and effort to live within a single 'programme of truth' (Veyne, 1988), and the role of emotional energy in determining social cohesion (Collins, 2009, 2004), to name a few.

Underlying much of the literature on contemporary Buddhism is the implied dichotomy of traditional/ethnic/Asian traditions versus new/convert/Western traditions- the former being located in Asian countries and practiced by indigenous followers, and the latter being an adapted version of the former, developed by non-Asian converts. These 'two Buddhisms' as they have been called (Prebish, 1993; Numrich, 1996, 2003) are often parsed into separate and completely distinct categories, and a majority of the work being done on the developments and characteristics of 'New' or 'Western' Buddhism (Seager, 2000; Numrich, 2003) is located exclusively in Western contexts and among convert or 'non-native' Buddhist practitioners. As the current study illustrates, this leaves many segments of contemporary Tibetan Buddhism out of the equation- namely non-Western converts (like the Korean and Indonesia participants of this project, who made up 38% of the sample) and Western converts who have spent the majority of their monastic careers in Asia (like Dechen, Palden, Dolma, Yeshe, and Lhamo).

Research relating to contemporary Buddhism (and Tibetan Buddhism in particular) is thus in significant need of expansion. The topics of non-Western converts and the experiences of Western and 'New' Buddhists in Asia are not only relevant, but necessary in making sense of the ongoing transformation of Buddhist traditions and the mutual impacts and influences of these parallel Buddhist worlds and the women and men who move between them. Additionally, considering contemporary Buddhist developments (across both new and 'traditional'/ethnic traditions) from the perspectives of a more nuanced and inclusive definition of practitioner will encourage greater critical engagement with reductionist categories and generalized labels (East/West, Modern/Traditional). As the data and analysis from this study demonstrate, many young convert (i.e. 'modern') nuns support and reinforce traditional Buddhist ideologies, even

those that go against contemporary values such as equality and democracy. Relying on a diverse sample, this study was also able to show that the crises of self and meaning that are often pointed to as a key feature of modern Western life (Frosh, 1991) and a prime incentive for Buddhist conversion (Coleman, 2001) was similarly evoked in the narratives of Asian women. They, like their Western counterparts, framed Buddhist philosophy and practice as a profoundly meaningful and effective way of understanding reality, self, and suffering. Ultimately, as Tibetan Buddhism continues to expand and diversify it is increasingly necessary to consider the broader range of people who are engaged with this tradition - 'East' and 'West', lay and ordained.

Works on women and Buddhism are often literary in nature, concentrating on texts from the Buddhist canon and using writings from different eras to trace changes in attitude and representation (Campbell, 1996; Paul & Wilson, 1985). Others offer feminist re-readings of classical texts (Gross, 1993) or highlight the contributions and achievements of specific female practitioners (Haas, 2013; Gyatso & Havnevik, 2005). There are, however, some important ethnographic works investigating the lived experiences of women, and particularly nuns, in various Buddhist traditions (DeVido, 2012; Salgado, 2013), including Tibetan Buddhism (Gutschow, 2009; Makley, 2003; Havnevik, 1990). Despite the variety and richness represented in this literature, none of it offers specific descriptions or theoretical insights into the lives of contemporary, convert nuns in Buddhism. While autobiographical works on Western women who have become nuns in the Tibetan tradition exist (Mackenzie, 1999), there are no published sources that document or analyze the collective experiences of convert nuns and none that describe the everyday lives of these women. This study is thus an important contribution to this subject area, offering details and interpretations of various aspects of these women's monastic lives.

Additionally, this study highlights the diversity of contemporary Tibetan Buddhist nuns, including the perspectives of both Eastern and Western women from a total of nine different countries. This diversity of participants represents another contribution of this study seeing as though little, if any, research has been done on communities (lay or ordained) with such broad membership. The symbol chapter in the ordination phase explored some of the important implications of this diversity, highlighting, with the use of Goffman's dramaturgical theory, the ways in which enduring definitions of what it is and means to be a Buddhist nun (based largely on stereotypes and assumptions of Asian femininity) can be limiting and negatively impact social interactions and the sense of personal value and authenticity sought by diverse women. This

approach also allows for some of the generalizations and stereotypes relating to Buddhist nuns to be challenged, or at least re-evaluated. Chief among the generalizations often made of contemporary, and specifically Western, Buddhist nuns is their preoccupation with gender equality and their active involvement with challenging and changing sexism and patriarchy with the Tibetan Buddhist tradition<sup>45</sup>. Indeed, the impetus for reform in regards to women's rights and the establishment of full ordination for nuns in the Tibetan tradition is often tied directly to Western female practitioners who are described as the chief initiators and advocates behind such movements (see Oldmeadow, 2001, p. 271; Barnes, 1996, p. 274).

In many ways this study confirms such views, providing ample evidence of difficulties and discrimination faced by the women in the hierarchical and male-dominated contexts of Tibetan Buddhism and giving voice to their calls for change. In other ways, however, this study also challenges these perceptions by demonstrating that not all convert nuns and not all nuns from Western backgrounds are as actively engaged in the type of advocacy or reform efforts suggested in the literature. Indeed, it was Korean nuns who were the most consistent and adamant about the importance of achieving full ordination for women in the Tibetan tradition, and while some Western nuns (e.g. Dechen, Sherab, Nyingma) voiced similar views, several of the Western nuns (particularly those occupying central positions- Dolma, Choden, Palden) expressed a type of ambivalence on the issue, framing full ordination as neither a priority nor a major concern and paying little heed to conservative or traditional devaluations of women within the Tibetan tradition. By and large, this study reveals a complex and nuanced range of experiences; experiences which resist easy classifications or broad overused categorizations such as 'East' and 'West,' 'traditional' and 'modern.'

The final body of literature reviewed related to religious conversion. Some of the major gaps identified in that review were the lack of research relating to women and also to non-Christian religious experience (i.e. nontheistic traditions such as Buddhism). Other important elements of the current study were similarly underrepresented, if not completely absent, in the conversion

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<sup>45</sup> Stereotypes and generalizations constructing Western Buddhist nuns as feminists and social justice activists may be connected to the visibility of some prominent women in this group whose published writings and public teachings foreground gender and equality issues (e.g. Karma Lekshe Tsomo 2000, 2003, 2004) and whose involvement in organizations, such as the Sakyadita International Association of Buddhist Women (founded by several Western Buddhist nuns), involve international travel, speaking engagements and wide publicity.

literature. The first of these is the issue of ordination, which, while connected to conversion, represents a separate and additional process whose description and analysis are nearly absent from the literature. The theoretical underpinnings of this study help address this gap by analyzing various aspects of ordination (including chief symbols, impacts on selfhood and identity, institutional implications, different social and political elements, etc.) and by bringing a diverse range of theories to bear on the individual as well as collective experiences of these nuns.

This study contributes nuanced, theoretically-based analyses of religious transformation, beyond simply conversion, and while it takes a processual approach, as most proposed theories in the field do (Rambo, 1993; Lofland & Stark, 1965), it identifies the multiple and shifting frames of reference that underlie that process, which constitutes a unique contribution. Moreover, in exploring the ordination process this study was able to highlight some of the critical impacts of undergoing such a rite, including the identity shifts facilitated by the bestowal of a new name and adoption of a new mode of dress, and the transformative experience, mediated by symbolic acts and objects (shaving the hair, throwing of rice, etc.), of transitioning into a sacred realm of being. In formally expressing the women's abandonment and detachment from former religious, symbolic, and social systems, ordination confirms their replacement by new Buddhist versions which, from the women's perspectives, improve the quality of their lives, their sense of value and purpose as well as personal self-esteem. Some additional implications of the full and embodied transformation, from a secular and profane being to a sacred and ethereal one, that ordination represents include the disruption this causes with friends and family; the experience of becoming a conspicuous representative of that tradition (which became both a source of pride and purpose as well as pressure and burden); the attendant changes in the women's habitus and way of being in the world; and the ways in which the sacred frame of reference becomes not only a model of the world, but a model that guides behavior and intention and that becomes the sole framework with which the women view themselves and their worlds (Geertz, 1973).

These outcomes and implications of ordination are thus intensely meaningful and involve significant emotional, psychological, physical, and social changes that go far beyond those related to conversion alone. Another aspect or finding of the current study that is all but ignored in the conversion literature is the role of resonance and confirmation of pre-existing beliefs, values and intentions as incentives and facilitators of conversion/ordination. Generally speaking, throughout

the literature, religious conversion is constructed as fundamental change - as a shift or alteration of self as well as ideas, beliefs, behaviour, and relationships. Often, this change is characterized as radical, sudden, and dramatic (van Nieuwkerk, 2008; Zock, 2006; Köse, 1994; Snow & Machalek, 1984). Core motifs have been identified (Lofland & Skonovd, 1981) and several processual models of conversion outline essential steps defining such change (Rambo, 1993, 1993), yet the idea that conversion may involve, or even be rooted in, consonance and complementarity between the convert and the religion/system of belief, is largely ignored within the literature<sup>46</sup>. Earlier sections (specifically the symbolic chapter of the conversion phase, and the self chapters) described how Buddhism was embraced and pursued by these women in large part because it reflected, elaborated, and systematized a set of ideas, practices, values, goods, and intentions that deeply resonated with them. Prior to conversion the women had established identities as spiritual seekers (a quality of converts noted within the literature (Lofland & Stark, 1965, p. 874)), and in Buddhism they finally find what they had been looking for, constructing Buddhism as familiar<sup>47</sup>, fitting, and congruent with their personal perspectives. Thus, while themes of resonance are pervasive in the nuns' conversion experiences, they are largely absent from the literature.

One final issue relating to the literature on religious conversion is an extension of the critique of the individual, atomistic focus of conversion theories. While the individual focus of early conversion paradigms has been extended to reflect wider social and political processes (Rambo, 1999, 1993) as well as greater contextualization of human experience (Jindra, 2014), much of the research continues to spotlight the convert and the changes and shifts that define his or her life. In this way, the religious or spiritual tradition which the convert engages with is treated as a type of monolithic, stable, and consistent system which remains essentially unchanged; it is the convert that transforms, adopting and adapting to the qualities and elements of the unmoved system. This study takes a different approach, exploring characteristics of Tibetan Buddhism not as fixed features of a static or established context, but rather as dynamic elements of a system undergoing its own shifts and changes. In considering the continuous development of Tibetan

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<sup>46</sup> Rambo mentions 'congruence' ("the degree to which elements of a new religion mesh with existing macro- and microcontextual factors" (1993, p. 37), however the concept is only elaborated with reference to a 1976 work by Kraft on the conversion of the Higi people of Nigeria (Kraft, 1976), and does not figure prominently in any of the theorizing or analysis included in the book. Beyond this there is very little evidence in the literature that this idea has been explored, theoretically or empirically.

<sup>47</sup> Recall Dechen's description of her first encounter with Buddhism as "love at first site...It was like something I already knew, something I knew more than something from this life – more powerful, like a, I dunno, like the lover you've known a thousand lifetimes."

Buddhism and the mutual interchanges which fuel its transformation, and by further linking these to both resonances and resistances among converts, this study exposes layers of conversion experience that are typically overlooked and unexplored. Finally, this work highlights the creative, innovative, and agentic nature of conversion experience. In contradistinction to much of the literature (which tends to assume and ascribe unified and assimilationist postures to religious converts), this study describes a diversity of experience across a range of positions which are rooted in personalized (in addition to only shared) processes of adaptation that display variable degrees of assimilation and resistance.

#### **11.4. Final Reflections, Implications and Recommendations**

The narratives of transformation that form the basis of this study emplot disruptive events, key turning points, as well as aspirational goals and objectives that are linked to various processes of meaning, memory, symbolism, identity, and change. The relevance and chief contributions of this work are tied to the analysis and interpretation of these interconnected processes – both in terms of the findings or insights they support, and the questions they raise.

In contrast to much Buddhism-related work, this study is not text-based research but rather takes the lived experiences and personal narratives of converted female practitioners, contextualized within the socio-political world of Tibetan Buddhism, as the basis for discussion and critical interpretation. While female converts to Tibetan Buddhism who go on to ordain as nuns are a very specific group, they represent a growing trend in Buddhist globalization<sup>48</sup>, a trend which is sparsely described and virtually absent in the literature. Additionally, in broadly addressing religious transformation, this research expanded the focus beyond simply conversion to the worlds of ordination and institutional adjustment. This is important not only because such work is notably rare in the literature, but because it highlighted the many challenges and indeed suffering that might be experienced in the aftermath of ordination, which may strongly contrast the outcomes of conversion. Moreover, the theoretical contributions of this work are tied to the mosaic of theories that comprise the theoretical framework employed. This mosaic enabled a comprehensive analysis not only of psychological, but social, emotional, and institutional components of experience as well. This unique synthesis helped to expose the

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<sup>48</sup> No available statistics were identified in regards to the number of non-Tibetan women and men ordaining in Tibetan Buddhism. The growing numbers of Westerners and other non-Tibetans converting and ordaining in Buddhist traditions, and particularly Tibetan Buddhism, is however stated in various sources (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012; Matthews, 2002; Kay, 2004).

multifaceted nature of experience and the complex interconnections that link the individual to the social, the personal to the universal.

While this study addresses many of the gaps identified within the literature, its relevance and contributions extend well beyond these specified areas. Indeed, in highlighting the role of discursive networks, personalized symbolic appropriation processes, and the possibility of persistence and confirmations of self (rather than only change and alteration) in religious conversion, this study makes strong contributions to theory and work across diverse fields that deal with all manner of personal transformation. Take for example the issue of radicalization, particularly Islamist radicalization. In attempting to address and prevent radicalization among converts and/or radicals, theorists and security agencies have heavily invested in developing demographic profiles of those most at risk of radicalizing (see McCauley & Moskalenko, 2014). The failure of this approach has been resoundingly affirmed (Hafez & Mullins, 2015; Horgan, 2008) and there is growing acknowledgement that the complexities of individual pathways, socio-political histories, and international relations render this approach completely futile. The need to better understand the processes of conversion and radicalization remain of vital importance, however. This work, while focused on Buddhist nuns, nonetheless demonstrates the value and ability of rigorous, qualitative, and theoretically-based analyses to reveal patterns and similarities within groups that transcend demographic characteristics, establishing shared trajectories based, instead, on factors such as valued moral goods, key life events (turning-points), symbolic appropriations, or adherence to a unified programme of truth.

Finally, the importance of this work is also based on the creative space that it opens up and the questions that it leaves unanswered. Namely, this study provides an in depth portrait of women who are living what may be considered an ancient and enchanted lifestyle in a thoroughly modern context. They are simultaneously living a modern and enchanted life, in ways which blur the boundaries, so often insisted upon, between the secular and the sacred, the traditional and the modern, the individual and the universal. This work, then, begs the question of how the distinct categories of experience associated to each of these categories are navigated and what implications this has for contemporary religion. These and other compelling aspects of the nuns' lives and of the ways in which they intersect with the 'life' of Tibetan Buddhism thus indicate a number of possibilities and directions for future study.



The processual nature of this study presupposes ongoing change in the nuns' lives (as well as in Tibetan Buddhism itself), and so longitudinal studies are recommended as a fruitful methodology for increasing our collective knowledge of contemporary monastic experience. Given the deep implications of the various institutional and social positionings identified here, it would be extremely valuable to continue this analysis and investigate any further shifts within or beyond the range of positions identified.<sup>49</sup> Secondly, the number of converted lay and ordained Buddhists continues to rise, and correspondingly, there are also growing numbers of ex-monks and nuns (those who disrobe or give back their vows). While significant informal and anecdotal information is available on these ex-monastics (e.g. Damchoe, 2012), very little published literature exists on the topic (Mapel, 2007 is one exception). Given the potential contributions of such studies to better understanding the entire conversion and ordination process, they represent rich, but largely untapped, sources of knowledge. In regards to Western Buddhist monastics, a third potential direction for future study would be the monastic institutions established in the West. Since there are now a handful of viable Tibetan Buddhist monastic communities in existence in the West (including a Canadian example - Gampo Abbey, in Halifax) it would be interesting to consider monastic experience within such settings, exploring their role in the ongoing transformation of contemporary Tibetan Buddhism.

The above literature review indicates a significant engagement by psychology with various aspects of Buddhism. There remains ample room for expansion in this area, including studies on the potential contribution of Buddhist conversion (and/or ordination) to the resilience of people experiencing distress or disconnection within various social environments, and more systematic explorations of the psychological implications of adopting and enacting Buddhist understandings of self (i.e. no-self). While numerous psychological studies look at the effects of particular forms of Buddhist practice (e.g. mindfulness meditation), these are often considered in isolation and so there is a need for additional studies and research approaches that contextualize these practices and effects in the everyday lives of both native and convert Buddhists, and consider their relationship to various Buddhist beliefs and theories which practitioners may variably endorse.

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<sup>49</sup> At least one of the nuns who participated in this study has since 'disrobed' and given up the monastic life. Thus, this work provides a rich background, or 'baseline' of experiences that could be elaborated upon through additional study.

This current study summarily addressed some of the developments and transformations that Tibetan Buddhism is undergoing and this represents an important topic worthy of further attention as well. The previous sections of this conclusion have explored, through the use of Ricoeur's concepts of ideology and utopia, the clash of forces that are shaping Tibetan Buddhism today. However, the majority of research and descriptive analysis of contemporary Tibetan Buddhism is concentrated on developments and changes in what is dubbed 'New' or 'Western' Buddhism. For the most part, this literature does not address the implications and impacts on traditional Tibetan Buddhism or its institutions, nor does it consider the effects of various forms of intersectionality on either native or convert practitioners (and monastics in particular). Research that further explores this topic and elucidates more precisely the power dynamics and impact of various groups would be extremely useful. It could be that the work of Taylor (1999) regarding cultural and acultural based reforms could be used to pursue questions regarding the status attributed by reformers to the innovations they are fighting for.

In a related vein, this study documented the various positions occupied by convert nuns, indicating that a majority of those occupying positions near the center of the traditional Buddhist world were from Eastern cultural backgrounds, while all of those occupying positions in the peripheral range were from the West. In order to gain further insight into the assimilation tendencies of convert nuns, it is recommended that further research be undertaken with broader samples of non-Tibetan converts. Such research stands to contribute to better understanding the relevance and value of current notions of 'East' and 'West', individualism and collectivism. Relatedly, the narratives and interview data collected in this study do not provide enough information or evidence to support any direct causal links between orientation towards autonomy as being a reason for exclusion or rejection by Buddhist institutions. It is also impossible to know, definitively, if autonomous/individualist postures were adopted by some nuns in response to rejection by these institutions. Further investigation into such issues is thus also recommended as a future topic for research.

Some additional areas for future study include exploring the connections and unique processes involved in religious conversion versus religious ordination. Given the dearth of theory and research on ordination processes, this is a wide open field, and many opportunities exist for comparative studies among individuals from various traditions and also within the same religious

communities where it would be possible to consider the experiences of those who remain lay people and those who go on to ordain.

In closing, this study has offered a complex analysis of monastic experience that is rare in the field given that it is a meaning-centered study of the lived experiences of diverse ordained Buddhist women and the major stakes involved in their lives. The contemporary focus of this research helps to balance the overabundance of historical works in the area of Buddhist, and particularly, monastic, studies, and to provide insights into the multifaceted influences and exchanges that connect traditional institutions and perspectives to an increasingly diverse community of converts. Moreover, this work highlights the agentic and innovative processes that underlie religious conversion and ordination and makes considerable theoretical contributions by demonstrating the analytic and interpretive value of a unique mosaic of social science theories.

Evidently, the women's stories upon which this research is based involve various forms of transformation across numerous realms of experience; transformations which are likewise reflected in the wider socio-political story of Tibetan Buddhism itself. The resonances indicated through the storied connection of these two trajectories of transformation reflect the ongoing efforts of each to find meaning and purpose in the complex and challenging realities of our contemporary world.

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## Appendix 1: Life History Interview Script



### Western Nuns in Eastern Worlds: Female Monastic Experiences in Contemporary Buddhism

Researcher: Raissa Graumans      Advisor: Michel Desjardins  
Program: Culture & Human Development      Department: Psychology

#### LIFE HISTORY INTERVIEW

Could you tell me the story of how you became a nun living in a Tibetan Buddhist nunnery?

Please start with the time before you became a Buddhist; to how and when you became a nun; and moving into your experiences as a nun now...

How do you imagine your life as a nun in the future?

## Appendix 2: Semi-Structured Interview Script



Researcher: R a i s s a G r a u m a n s

Advisor: M i c h e l D e s j a r d i n s

Program: Culture & Human Development

Department: Psychology

### Western Nuns in Eastern Worlds: Female Monastic Experiences in Contemporary Buddhism

## SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW P A R T I C I P A N T S

### CONVERSION

What was it that attracted you to Buddhism in the first place?

Why do you think 'Westerners' become Buddhist?

What made you decide to become ordained rather than living as a lay Buddhist?

How do you compare the transition you experienced first in becoming a Buddhist (i.e. from non-Buddhist to Buddhist), and then in becoming an ordained nun (i.e. from lay Buddhist to ordained Buddhist)?

-If it applies: the transition from Buddhist to TIBETAN Buddhist?

Can you describe the process and significance of taking a Tibetan name?

### NUNNERY LIFE

- Have you found anything particularly challenging about adjusting to life in the nunnery? -

How did you learn of Thosamling and why did you choose it (Thosamling) to live in? -Did moving here to India impact your Buddhist practice? If yes, how so?

-Have you visited or spent any time in Buddhist centers/monasteries in Europe or North/South America? If yes, Could you describe those experiences? If no, how do you imagine those Western Buddhist institutions are similar to or different from Thosamling?

-Could you describe the main differences between the environment you live in now and the one you were raised in or lived in before moving to India-

- o When you first came to the nunnery did you experience any type of 'culture shock'?
- o What would you describe as the most significant differences between the nunnery and your previous home in the West?
- o What would you describe as the most significant similarities?

### ACTIVITIES

What are your favourite things to do here – what do you enjoy doing most on a day to day basis? Least favourite/least enjoyable activity?

Can you describe the types of ritual activities that you are engaged in here at the nunnery? -  
How important are the ritual activities that you are involved in here at Thosamling to you?

- How do these ritual activities compare to other non-ritual activities (i.e. attending class; meal times; private practice, etc. that you participate in?

## BUDDHISM/BUDDHIST FORMS

If you had to choose one teaching or one concept from Buddhism that has had the greatest impact on your life, what would it be?

Is the Buddhism that is practiced in 'Western' countries different from the Buddhism practiced in "Eastern" "Buddhist" countries like Thailand, Tibet, Korea, etc.?

- o if Yes, in what ways?

How then do you position yourself among these traditions – as a Westerner, who first came to Buddhism in the West, to an ordained nun now living in a Tibetan institution in the 'East'? Do you see any advantages and/or limits to the form that Buddhism takes in the 'West'?

Of all the Buddhist traditions, why did you choose to become ordained in the Tibetan tradition? From a Tibetan Buddhist perspective, how can we make sense of the myriad of religious that human has embraced?

What do you think of religious proselytization in an general and what role to you think proselytizing plays in Tibetan Buddhism in particular?

## NAVIGATING TWO WORLDS (HOME VS. INDIA)

How and why did you choose to move to India and live here at Thosamling?

When was the last time you returned to and from your 'home country'?

o Can you describe the transition of moving between here (India) and 'home'? Is there anything that you miss from 'home'?

- o Anything you are happy to be away from?

When you go home do you wear your robes? Maintain your daily practice?

What is it like when you go 'home' now that you are a nun?

## RELATIONSHIPS

How did your family and friends react when you told them that you planned to be ordained as a Tibetan Buddhist nun?

Have your relationships with any of your important family members or friends changed since you became a nun? In what ways?

What are your relationships like with the other nuns living in this institution? -

How are conflicts or disagreements handled in the nunnery?

Social system or social groups may be organized or grouped in certain ways– for example there may be class differences, different status levels, social roles, etc. How would you describe the way that the social system of the nunnery is organized? Are there any clear divisions between any particular groups in the nunnery?



Do you interact much with the locals in this area?

What are some of the most important relationships in your life right now?

How do you envision your social life in the future?

## POLITICS/ECONOMICS

How do you support yourself and your monastic lifestyle?

There are a lot of political issues surrounding Tibet (and its relationship with China), do you engage at all with these political aspects?

Recently, there seems to be a movement towards engaged Buddhism (supported especially by Thich Nhat Han, and also to some degree by His Holiness the Dalai Lama), where Buddhism is used to inspire and guide various forms of political, social, ecological activism – what do you think of the application of Buddhism to these sorts of areas and activities?

Do you have any thoughts about the economics of monasticism today? How important is foreign/international support/involvement?

## TIBETAN MONASTICISM/ MONASTIC STRUCTURE

-What do you find most rewarding about being a Tibetan Buddhist nun? -

What is the most challenging thing about being a Buddhist nun in 2011? -

This is a nunnery (i.e. all women) with a male lama/head teacher –

- Is this typical in most Tibetan nunneries (i.e. male lama)?

- Would it be possible for a nun to be the head of Thosamling?

- Could you describe your relationship with Geshe Nyima?

- What do you appreciate about this context/structure – are there certain advantages or disadvantages with this structure?

-Could you share your thoughts about full ordination for women in Buddhism (Tibetan)? -Being a nun/monk in Buddhism is often described in terms of renouncement and in rejecting the mundane worldly life so that you can wholeheartedly devote yourself to study/practice/enlightenment. Is this similar to the way that you conceive of monasticism?

## WORLDVIEW

-Has practicing Buddhism changed the way you see the world and your place within it? -What beliefs do you hold about an afterlife (i.e. what happens after you die)? Have you always believed this or has becoming a Buddhist shaped these ideas/beliefs in any way?

-Could you talk a bit about your conceptions of birth and death?

-How do you conceive the relationship between the divine and the mundane? Between religion and daily life? Between religion and the state? Between religion and the economic system?

## SELF

Often the Buddhist approach to self is referred to as ‘no-self’ – could you briefly describe the Tibetan Buddhist theory of self?

- o What are the implications of adopting this view of self?

- o How does this understanding of self compare to the ideas of self you held before you became a Buddhist?
- o Does this view of self have an impact on how people relate to one another? If yes, how?

Has being exposed to the Buddhist view of self had any impact your social and emotional life? Many people have proposed that there are some fundamental differences between the models of self held by people in the West and East. The ‘Western’ notion of self is often considered to be self-focussed, or egocentric, while ‘Eastern’ notions of self are described as other-focussed or sociocentric --- What do you think about these models? How do you think these ideas of self play out in an institution like this –i.e. a Buddhist (Eastern) institution catering to Westerners? How would you say that you’ve changed as a person a result of adopting Buddhism and becoming a Tibetan Buddhist nun?

How do you relate to the person you were before entering the nunnery?

- As a person with something added/expanded/changed? As a completely new person? Or a collaboration of two person (pre and post nun)?

## GENDER / SEXUALITY

How is it living in an all-women institution?

What is the meaning between the separation or segregation of genders into separate monasteries and nunneries, from your perspective?

How do the lives of nuns differ from the lives of monks?

Are there any distinctions between men and women in terms of their embodiment of Buddhist teachings/principles?

How does being ordained, as either a monk or nun, in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition impact one’s gender identity (how one sees/understands him or herself as either male/masculine or female/feminine)?

How would you describe the status of women in Buddhism today?

- o Are there differences in this regard between Buddhist institutions here in India and back home?

In what ways has becoming a nun – following all the precepts, shaving you head and wearing robes – impacted your sense or ideas of womanhood or femininity?

As a nun you follow many rules/precepts, and these cover a wide variety of topics, could you describe those that relate to sexuality or sexual conduct?

- So what is the status of sexuality in Buddhism?
- How have these rules/precepts changed your ideas/feelings/thoughts about sexuality?

A lot of the ‘traditional’ or stereotypical expectations and roles usually ascribed to women (i.e. to get married, to be a mother, caretaker, etc.) don’t apply to nuns -- has it been difficult in any way to transition or adjust to this new female life (as a nun)?

-In the Tibetan Buddhist context how is sexuality related to renoucement?

- Is renouncing sexuality a form of renoucement of a mundane human status or a way of transcending human life?
- What does this imply for gender – do ordained Buddhists transcend gender in a way?

## BODY

Can you describe the first time you shaved your head and put on the robes? Do you remember what you felt or thought at the time?

What does it mean to you to wear these robes every day?

Certain Buddhist practices/teachings may have psychological, emotional, or social implications, but are there any that have physical consequences – that affect the way you think, use or feel about your body?

Do you think there are any physical benefits to studying/practicing Buddhism? Drawbacks ? Buddhism is often referred to as a type of mind training, or at least involving, to a large extent, different forms of training the mind. Does it also entail any sort of physical or body training? Have you experienced any physical or bodily changes since becoming a nun?

Now that you live in India do you use/rely on Tibetan or Aryurvedic medicine? If yes, has your access/use of these medical systems changed anything about the way you understand health, illness or physical/mental well-being?

## EMOTIONS

Some of talk surrounding Buddhism in the West is about mind training and controlling or changing emotions (i.e. destructive emotions) – has working on your emotions (avoiding certain emotions, cultivating others, understanding the impact of emotions, etc.) been an important part of your experience and training as a nun?

Has becoming Buddhist changed the way you understand, experience or work with emotions? Are you happier now, as a nun, than you were before you became ordained?

Are there any emotions/feelings that you experience/feel/sense differently since becoming a Buddhist? Any that you experience more often, or more intensely? Less frequently/intensely?

- Have any emotions disappeared from your life?

## GENERAL/WHAT'S AT STAKE

- Has becoming a nun required you to sacrifice/give up or compromise anything important in your life?

- Why was it important to you to become ordained as a Tibetan Buddhist nun?

## LIFE GOALS

What inspires or motivates you to continue practicing Buddhism?

Has becoming Buddhist impacted the life goals or ambitions you set for yourself?

- o As a Buddhist do you think that your priorities in life are different than they were before you were a Buddhist, or are they different than what you'd imagine them to be if you weren't a Buddhist now?

How long do you plan to stay at Thosamling?

- o What plans do you have for after you leave?

What does it mean to you to be a Tibetan Buddhist nun?

**Appendix 3: Demographic Questionnaire**



**Western Nuns in Eastern Worlds:  
Female Monastic Experiences  
in Contemporary Buddhism**

Researcher: R a i s s a G r a u m a n s      Advisor: M i c h e l D e s j a r d i n s  
Program: Culture & Human Development      Department: Psychology

**DEMOGRAPHICS QUESTIONNAIRE**

Participant Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date/Place of Birth: \_\_\_\_\_

Nationality: \_\_\_\_\_

Language Fluency: \_\_\_\_\_

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Family Status: Single \_\_\_\_\_ Married \_\_\_\_\_ Divorced \_\_\_\_\_

Children (number & age): \_\_\_\_\_

Level of Western Education: High School \_\_\_\_\_ BA \_\_\_\_\_ MA \_\_\_\_\_ PhD \_\_\_\_\_

Other \_\_\_\_\_

Forms of Buddhist Education: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Date/Place of Refuge: \_\_\_\_\_

Date/Place of Ordination: \_\_\_\_\_

Total Years as a nun: \_\_\_\_\_

Tibetan School/Sect: \_\_\_\_\_ Kagyu \_\_\_\_\_ Gelug \_\_\_\_\_ Sakya \_\_\_\_\_ Nyingma

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Periods/Locations spent living in Asia: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Thosamling- Date of Arrival: \_\_\_\_\_

Time Spent in Total:  
\_\_\_\_\_

Date/Duration of Most Recent Visit Home: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix 4: Consent Form



UNIVERSITY OF  
SASKATCHEWAN

### Western Nuns in Eastern Worlds: Female Monastic Experiences in Contemporary

Researcher: Raissa Graumans  
Psychology

Program: Culture & Human Development, Department of

## CONSENT FORM

Research Ethics Boards (Behavioural) Approved

You are invited to participate in a research project entitled ‘**Western Nuns in Eastern Worlds: Female Monastic Experiences in Contemporary Buddhism**’. Participation is completely optional. Please read this form carefully, and feel free to ask any questions you might have.

### Researcher:

Raissa Graumans

University of Saskatchewan Department of Psychology

9 Campus Drive Saskatoon, SK S7N 5A5 306-979-3307 [raissa.graumans@usask.ca](mailto:raissa.graumans@usask.ca)

### Advisor:

Michel Desjardins University of Saskatchewan Department of Psychology 9 Campus Drive  
Saskatoon, SK S7N 5A5 306- 966-6650 [michel.desjardins@usask.ca](mailto:michel.desjardins@usask.ca)

The primary purpose of this research is to gain understanding and insight into the experiences of Western women who become ordained as Tibetan Buddhist nuns and live in Thosamling Nunnery, in Sidhpur, India. This is a qualitative research study which will use two types of interviews (life history and semi-structured), a demographics questionnaire, participant observation and participant-guided site tours, to collect data on the experiences of the nuns in regards to their conversion and practice of Buddhism in a Tibetan nunnery.

This study involves participant observation, which means that the researcher will be observing, and often take notes on, the daily activities, classes, teachings, meal times, ritual ceremonies and events in the nunnery. The researcher will always respect the privacy of the nunnery residents, never entering private rooms uninvited and never intruding in private times or conversations, however, she may often observe the behaviors and activities taking place in the communal/public areas of the nunnery (i.e. temple, library, classroom, kitchen room, courtyard, etc.).

The researcher will be conducting two guided site tours and one-on-one, audiotaped interviews on two separate occasions with each participant (the study will involve 15-18 participants). The guided tours may take between 30 and 90 minutes and if you agree, will be audiotaped. The first interview is an open-ended life-history interview which may last between 1

and 2 hours. The second meeting, expected to take place approximately one month later, will involve a more directed semi-structured interview which may also last between 1 and 2 hours. After your interview(s), and prior to the data being included in the final report, you will be given the opportunity to review the transcript of your interview, and to add, alter, or delete information from the transcripts as you see fit.

**Potential Benefits:**

Though participation in this study guarantees no specific benefits, material or otherwise, participants may consider their involvement in the study as a beneficial contribution to the general state knowledge on the experience of female monasticism and the practice of Tibetan Buddhism in contemporary times.

**Potential Risks:**

There are no known risks involved with participation in this study. It is acknowledged that the reflective consideration and expression of personal experiences may be emotional and challenging for some, but participation is purely voluntary and participants may choose not to answer questions, to end the interviews at any point and/or stop participating in this study at any time during the process. There will be no negative repercussions for participants who choose not to answer questions or to stop participating altogether and upon withdrawing from the study all data related to that participant will be destroyed.

**Storage of Data:**

In order to ensure confidentiality, all signed forms will be stored separately from all other study documents (e.g. recordings, notes, reports, analysis) so that it will not be possible to associate a name with any given set of responses. Pseudonyms will be used in all notes and transcripts and all subsequent publications/presentations. During the data collection period data (audio recordings of interviews, notes, forms) will be securely stored on the researcher's personal laptop which only she is able to access. This data will be backed onto the University of Saskatchewan's secure server. This data is password protected and will be inaccessible to anyone except the researcher herself. Upon completion of this project all data and forms will be securely stored on the University of Saskatchewan campus for up to five years. When the data is no longer required, it will then be destroyed beyond recovery.

**Confidentiality:**

Anonymity cannot be guaranteed in this research but confidentiality will be ensured by assigning a fictitious name (pseudonym) to all participants and institutions at the outset of the research process. Participants will be identified in the interviews, transcripts and research report only by this fictitious name and information which could identify a participant (place of birth, personal history, job title, for example) will be removed or modified.

The data from this research project may be published and presented at conferences; however, your identity will be kept confidential. Although I will report direct quotations from the interviews, only pseudonyms will be used and all potential identifying information will be

removed. Moreover, the signed forms from the study will be stored separately from all other study documents (e.g. notes, reports, analysis), so that it will not be possible to associate a name with any particular pseudonym or given set of responses.

Given the small size of the nunnery and its community, it is possible that you may be identifiable to other people on the basis of what you have said and the descriptions that will appear in the research report. After your interview(s), and prior to the data being included in the final report, you will be given the opportunity to review all interview recordings/ transcripts, and to add, alter, or delete information as you see fit.

**Right to Withdraw:**

Your participation is completely voluntary, and you can answer only those questions that you are comfortable with. You may withdraw from the research project for any reason, at any time, without penalty of any sort. If you withdraw from the research project at any point, all data that you have contributed will be destroyed and will not be used in any way.

**Follow-Up and Debriefing:**

Participants will be debriefed in a private one-on-one session and will be given a copy of the Debriefing Form to keep for their records once participation is complete. This debriefing session will provide you, the participant, with the opportunity to review all your data and transcripts/recordings. You are welcome to add, delete or change any of the information and any words/information that you do not wish to be used in the write up or future presentations of this study will be destroyed.

**Questions:**

If you have any questions concerning the research project, please feel free to ask at any point; you are also free to contact the researcher or her supervisor via mail, telephone or e-mail if you have other questions or concerns. This research project has been approved on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board on January 3, 2010. Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to that committee through the Ethics Office at the University of Saskatchewan (306-966-2084). International participants may call collect.

**Consent to Participate:**

I, Raissa Graumans, have read and explained this Consent Form to the participant before receiving the participant's consent. The participant had knowledge of its contents and appeared to understand and accept all of the information provided. The participant has been given a signed copy of this consent form.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Researcher

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**Appendix 5: Data & Recording Release Form**



**Western Nuns in Eastern Worlds:  
Female Monastic Experiences in Contemporary  
Buddhism**

Researcher: Raissa Graumans Program: Culture & Human Development, Department of Psychology

**DATA & RECORDING RELEASE**

Research Ethics Boards (Behavioural) Approved

I, \_\_\_\_\_, have voluntarily participated in the research project entitled 'Western Nuns in Eastern Worlds' and have had the chance to review all audio recordings and/or transcripts of my personal interview(s), with the researcher, Raissa Graumans. I have been provided with the opportunity to add, alter, and delete information from the recordings/transcripts. I understand that my anonymity is not being guaranteed but that the information I have provided will be kept confidential by use of pseudonyms and aggregated reporting. Nonetheless I understand that direct quotes will be used and that it is possible that I may be identified by the data I allow the researcher to use. I acknowledge that these data accurately reflect my personal perspective as shared with the researcher.

I hereby authorize the release of these data and recordings to Raissa Graumans to be used for publication and/or presentation in the manner described in the accompanying Consent Form.

I have received a copy of this Data & Recording Release Form for my own records.

.

Name of Participant

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Researcher

Date



## Appendix 6: Debriefing Form



UNIVERSITY OF  
SASKATCHEWAN

Researcher: Raissa Graumans  
Psychology

**Western Nuns in Eastern Worlds:  
Female Monastic Experiences in Contemporary**

Program: Culture & Human Development, Department of

### DEBRIEFING FORM

Research Ethics Boards (Behavioural) Approved

**Thank you for participating in the ‘Western Nuns in Eastern Worlds’ research study. Your contributions to this study are very much appreciated.**

This research project looked at the experiences of Western women who have been ordained as Tibetan Buddhist nuns and who currently live at Thosamling Nunnery in India.

Anonymity was not guaranteed, but confidentiality is ensured by the use of pseudonyms, aggregated reporting and the deletion/alteration of any identifying information. However, I understand the possibility that I may be identifiable to some through the quotations included in the research report. In this debriefing session I was given the opportunity to review the recordings/ transcripts of my guided tours, life-history and semi-structured interviews and was able to add, alter, or delete information. I understand that the data collected for this research study will be securely stored by the researcher for up to five years and may be used in publications and presentations.

I have been encouraged to contact the researchers listed below, at any time, if I have any questions or concerns. I may also contact the researchers if I require any further information or to gain access to study results and reports. Although no negative effects are expected to arise as a result of participating in this research, if I experience any type of emotional or psychological distress I am advised to contact the administration of Thosamling Nunnery.

Raissa Graumans University of  
Saskatchewan Department of  
Psychology 9 Campus Drive  
Saskatoon, SK S7N 5A5 306-966-  
1841 raissa.graumans@usask.ca

Michel Desjardins University of Saskatchewan  
Department of Psychology 9 Campus Drive  
Saskatoon, SK S7N 5A5 306- 966-6650  
michel.desjardins@usask.ca

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Researcher

## Appendix 7: University of Saskatchewan REB Approval Certificate



UNIVERSITY  
SASKATCHEWAN

Behavioural Research Ethics Board (Beh.-REB)

### Certificate of Approval

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR  
Michel Desjardins

DEPARTMENT  
Psychology

BEH#  
10-335

INSTITUTION(S) WHERE RESEARCH WILL BE CONDUCTED  
University of Saskatchewan

STUDENT RESEARCHERS  
Raissa Graumans

SPONSOR  
UNIVERSITY OF SASKATCHEWAN

TITLE  
Western Nuns in Eastern Worlds: Female Monastic Experiences in Contemporary Buddhism

ORIGINAL REVIEW DATE  
10-Dec-2010

APPROVAL ON  
11-Jan-2011

APPROVAL OF  
Ethics Application  
Consent Protocol

EXPIRY DATE  
11-Jan-2012

Full Board Meeting

Date of Full Board Meeting:

Delegated Review

Expedited Review:

#### CERTIFICATION

The University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board has reviewed the above-named research project. The proposal was found to be acceptable on ethical grounds. The principal investigator has the responsibility for any other administrative or regulatory approvals that may pertain to this research project, and for ensuring that the authorized research is carried out according to the conditions outlined in the original protocol submitted for ethics review. This Certificate of Approval is valid for the above time period provided there is no change in experimental protocol or consent process or documents.

Any significant changes to your proposed method, or your consent and recruitment procedures should be reported to the Chair for Research Ethics Board consideration in advance of its implementation.

#### ONGOING REVIEW REQUIREMENTS

In order to receive annual renewal, a status report must be submitted to the REB Chair for Board consideration within one month of the current expiry date each year the study remains open, and upon study completion. Please refer to the following website for further instructions: [http://www.usask.ca/research/ethics\\_review/](http://www.usask.ca/research/ethics_review/)

  
John Rigby, Chair  
University of Saskatchewan  
Behavioural Research Ethics Board

Please send all correspondence to:

Research Ethics Office  
University of Saskatchewan  
Box 9000 RPO University, 1602-110 Gymnasium Place  
Saskatoon SK S7N 4J8

**Appendix 8: Participant Demographics: Countries of Origin, Age, Demographic Summary Charts**

	COUNTRY	NUMBER OF NUNS	TOTAL #
<b>'EAST'</b>	Korea	4	6
	Indonesia	2	
<b>'WEST'</b>	Australia	4	10
	Denmark	1	
	Germany	1	
	Holland	1	
	Southern Europe	1	
	U.S.A.	1	
	Venezuela	1	

Age Range (Years)	Number of Nuns
20-30	4
30-40	4
40-50	3
50-60	4
60-70	1

NAME	AGE	BIRTH PLACE	LANGUAGES	M. STATUS	KGS	SECULAR EDUCATION	ORDINATION PLACE & DATE	YEARS AS RIN	YEARS AT INCALMING
Chin-sun	41	Korea	Korean, English, Tibetan	S	-	Post-Graduate Degree	2001- Korea	11 (152 months)	4 months
Chöden	52	Denmark	Danish, English, Dutch	D	-	M.S.; Incomplete University	2006 - Nepal (at age 47)	5 (60 months)	2 weeks
Dawa	51	USA	English, Spanish, learning Tibetan	S	-	M.A. Pharmacist	2004, San Francisco, USA (at age 45)	6 (72 months)	<1 month
Dechen	34	Australia	English, Tibetan, Hindi	S	-	10 <sup>th</sup> grade	2001- Australia (at age 24)	10 (120 months)	2 years (2006-2008)
Dolma	21	Australia	English, Tibetan	S	-	High school	2003- Australia (at age 18)	2.5 (30 months)	1 year (2009-2010)
Jiyul	28	Korea	Korean, English, Tibetan	S	-	BA + 4 yr. 5.31 institute Degree	2003- Korea (at age 21)	7.5 (90 months)	3 months
Lhama	52	Holland	Dutch, English, Tibetan	S	-	Mt + Nursing Certificate	1997: Dharamsala (at age 38)	14 (128 months)	15 years
Nyingma	38	Australia	English	S	-	BA-Finance	2002-Nepal; 2010- (8 Karmal Taiwan (at age 29)	9 (108 months)	1.5 months
Palden	30	Australia	English; Tibetan	S	-	Incomplete College	2004 (at age 25)	6.2 (74 months)	3 yrs (2006-2008)
Pema	51	Indonesia	Indonesian, English, Tibetan	S	-	BA	2011 - Dharamsala (at age 51)	1 month	3 months
Rinzen	24	Venezuela	Spanish, English, Tibetan, Hindi, Italian	D	-	M.S.; Incomplete University	2004 - Italy (at age 21)	5 (60 months)	4.5 years (2007-2011)
Sherab	61	Germany	German, English, French	D	1	M.S. + Teacher certificate and Physiotherapy	1995 - Dharamsala 2009 - (Bhikshu) USA (at age 44)	17 (204 months)	5 yrs (1999-2004) 1 wk (2011)
Songheo	43	Korea	Korean, Tibetan, English	S	-	University + 4 yrs. 8.31 University	1995- Korea (at age 30)	15 (180 months)	2.5 years
Tenzin	27	Indonesia	Indonesian, English, Tibetan	S	-	BA	2011 - Dharamsala (at age 27)	1 month	3 months
Thubten	31	Korea	Korean, Tibetan, English	S	-	Incomplete university	2011-D Tala (at age 31)	1 month	1 month
Yeshe	48	Switzerland Europe+	Native Language, English	S	-	-	2009 - Dharamsala (at age 46)	2 (24 months)	1.5 yrs (2008-2010)

## Appendix 9: Summary of Phases of Buddhist Ordination

PHASES OF BUDDHIST ORDINATION					
	1. UPASAKA/UPASIKA (Skt) GENYEN/ GENYENMA (Tib)	2. PRAVRJYA (Skt) RABJUNG (Tib)	3. SRAMANERA/SRAMANERI (Skt) GETSUL/ GETSULMA (Tib)		4. BHIKSU/ BHIKSUNI (Skt) GELONG/ GELONGMA (Tib)
Status	Dedicated Buddhist Practitioner (Layperson)	Entering Monastic Life	Novice monk/nun	Female novice-in-training	Fully Ordained Monk/Nun (For nuns- only in China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Vietnam, Korea, and recently re-established (1998) in Sri Lanka)
Vows	<p><b>5 Root Vows (5)</b> The five root vows are the foundation for the monastic vows but are also taken by lay people. The five root vows are: 1.) Not killing human beings, 2.) Not stealing, 3.) Not lying, 4.) Not committing sexual misconduct (adultery), 5.) Not becoming intoxicated (drugs, alcohol).</p>	<p><b>Renunciate Vows (8)</b> By taking the rabjung vows, a person commits to: 1.) leave behind lay clothes and signs, 2.) wear the robes of an ordained person and shave one's head, 3.) follow the Buddha's teachings.</p> <p>The combination of the five root vows and rabjung vows is the first step to ordination. After taking these vows, one can then take the vows of a novice nun (getsulma) or monk (getsul).</p>	<p><b>Novice Vows (36???)</b> The 10 Precepts: Ten vows to abandon:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. killing (to break from the root, one must kill a human being with intention)</li> <li>2. taking what is not given (stealing) (to break from the root, one must steal something that could bring about legal intervention in one's society)</li> <li>3. sexual intercourse (to break from the root, one must have intention and experience orgasm)</li> <li>4. lying (to break from the root, one must lie about one's spiritual attainments)</li> <li>5. taking intoxicants</li> <li>6. singing, dancing, playing music</li> <li>7. wearing perfume, ornaments or cosmetics to beautify the body</li> <li>8. sitting on a high or expensive bed or throne</li> <li>9. eating after midday</li> <li>10. touching gold, silver or precious objects (including money)</li> </ol>	<p>two year probationary ordination that a novice (Shramaneri) nun receives prior to taking the Bhikshuni</p> <p>The two-year shikshama period was instituted to ensure that candidates for bhikshuni ordination were not pregnant nuns</p>	<p>253 vows of a fully ordained monk (Mulasarvativadin)</p> <p>348 vows for fully ordained nuns</p>
Markings/ Signs	No physical signs—may receive dharma name	Shaved Head & Robes	Shaved Head & Robes	Shaved Head & Robes	Shaved Head & Robes -In some traditions the heads (Mahayana, China/Taiwan) or arms (Korea) are burnt with incense or special dried plants