

**Himalayan Hermitess:
The Life of a Tibetan
Buddhist Nun**

KURTIS R. SCHAEFFER

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Introduction

In 1961 anthropologist Corneille Jest was conducting fieldwork in Dolpo, the highland region of the Nepal Himalaya immediately west of Mustang, when a local Buddhist leader told him the tale of a certain woman. Her name, the Tibetan-speaking Buddhist told the anthropologist, was Ani Chokyi, “Chokyi the Nun.”¹ She had lived an exceptional life, and her story was well known throughout Dolpo. “Her father,” said Jest’s informant, a revered Buddhist master known as Kagar Rinpoche, “was called Drangsong Phuntsok of the Sewa lineage, and was born in Zolung.”

The informant continued, “He learned both Buddhist and Bonpo religious precepts. Her mother was of the Gyalmo lineage. Their daughter was born in Peson, and they first gave her the name Khyilong. At eleven years of age, her parents entrusted a small herd of goats to her. The first event that transformed her life then occurred: she had one goat whose kid was taken and eaten by an eagle. The goat cried out day and night; moved by its continual complaints, Chokyi sold the goat to an inhabitant of the lowland, who killed it for food. The young girl then herded *dzomo*, one of whom had a calf who was devoured by wolves. Then Chokyi tended a horse, but it died. Fleeing the valley, she went on pilgrimage to Kathmandu. She then returned to Dolpo, settled down at the temple of Dechen Palri, and stayed in meditation there. In spite of her contemplative life, she was repeatedly asked to marry. Chokyi stayed seven years at Nyimapuk in Lang, participating in the collective fast of the Great Nun Palmo. When she died, she remained in her posture of contemplation for three days, and rainbows appeared over her head.”²

Jest notes that a written biography of this Ani Chokyi was not

available in the village where he conducted his research, though he was told that there was a copy at another temple. He did not hazard a guess as to when she might have lived, or how she became ensconced in local memory. For Jest, her story ended with this short tale of goats, marriage proposals, fasting, and rainbows—no more than a side note to his more contemporary observations.

Four decades later it is possible to know something more of Ani Chokyi, for manuscripts of her life story are now available thanks to the joint efforts of the Nepalese and German governments in preserving texts from across the Nepal Himalaya.³ This book offers a study and complete translation of this woman's tale, the *Life of Orgyan Chokyi*. It presents a sketch of the historical world in which she lived and the literary world in which she wrote, and it explores what may have led to the recounting of her tale in 1961, three centuries after her birth. In doing this it focuses particular attention on history, hagiography, and gender in a small border region of the Tibetan cultural world.

Orgyan Chokyi, the Ani Chokyi of Jest's account, was a nun and hermitess who lived, worked, and wrote in Dolpo during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Born in 1675 to a father with leprosy and a mother who did not want her, she died prematurely at the age of 55 when a wooden beam fell on her head during a ritual in 1729. Throughout her life she practiced meditation, herded goats, fasted alone and with her female companions, and traveled a good stretch of the Himalayas, from Mount Kailash to Kathmandu.

Seen against a backdrop of the activities of religious women in Dolpo, Orgyan Chokyi's life is probably not unique; women were involved in a variety of religious vocations in the medieval Nepal Himalaya. They were nuns and patrons, temple keepers and hermits, queens and goatherds. A traveler through Dolpo in the early 1660s remarked on the great faith of women there: "All of the women have great faith in the Dharma and are very persistent in their efforts in meditation. As they walk along a path or gather to plow a field, as they carry something, or do nothing at all [they work on meditation]. At the beginning and the end of each furrow they set the plow down and sit in meditation. I have neither seen nor heard of people in any other country who are able to blend their work and their religious activity all of the time."⁴

What distinguishes Orgyan Chokyi from the women represented in this travelogue of three centuries ago is that she was able to write her story. From humble beginnings on the outskirts of Tibetan culture, she was able to achieve what few women have in premodern Tibetan literary history—the telling of her own life. This woman from the Himalaya was the author of a striking example of what is perhaps the most intriguing form of Tibetan Buddhist literature, the religious autobiography. Autobiographies by women were uncommon in Tibet. Contemporary scholarship knows of perhaps two thousand biographies of Tibetan Buddhist figures from the eighth to the twentieth centuries. Among these life stories, more than one hundred and fifty are autobiographies. Among these autobiographies only three or four are by women. Within this small group of life stories dedicated to women, forming less than one percent of Tibetan biographical writing, the autobiography of Orgyan Chokyi is the earliest by some two hundred years. As the earliest datable Ti-

betan woman's autobiography, it thus holds an important place in Tibetan literature.

It would be naive to assume from this that women did not tell their religious stories. Yet it is likely that such stories were either limited to local circulation—much as Orgyan Chokyi's work was—or were oral traditions, as was the mythic history of Langkhor recited by Ani Ngawang Chodron in the mid-twentieth century until anthropologist Barbara Aziz recorded it, thus encouraging Tibetans to compose a written version.⁵ Perhaps life stories such as that of Orgyan Chokyi share as much with contemporary Himalayan women's oral life stories as with the biographies of Buddhist leaders so popular in Tibet.⁶

Like no other genre of Tibetan literature, autobiography holds the potential to reveal the most intimate details of the religious life in its full spectrum, from evanescent experiences of realization to the mundane sufferings of daily life in troubled times. It “offers a view of how Buddhist traditions were embodied in the concrete social and psychological peculiarities of real persons.”⁷ Autobiography in Buddhist cultures is also an important instrument of religious edification and inspiration, and as such is always based on conventions drawn from centuries of narrative literature. Orgyan Chokyi does not disappoint the reader on either account; she writes the story of her quest for the eremitic life in vivid and gripping terms, employing simple and direct phrasing that evokes the hardships of daily life in Dolpo while never losing sight of the fundamental themes of Buddhism. In this she shares in what may be called a rural style of Tibetan life-writing in the Nepal Himalaya. Referring to the autobiographies of several Buddhists from Kutang—somewhat east of Dolpo—Michael Aris comments that “the spelling of even the most common words is often perverse, but not so as to present too much difficulty. The mistakes add a degree of poignancy to the direct and unlettered tone which dominates throughout. Uncluttered by pious re-workings and the usual fanciful embellishments, the total effect rings earthy and true.”⁸ The same may be said for Orgyan Chokyi's story.

Autobiography has had a long life in Tibet with a complex development, as Janet Gyatso has recently illustrated in her work on the esoteric autobiographical poetry of Jikmay Lingpa. Certainly many of the themes in Orgyan Chokyi's work only come into focus by using insights gained from the study of autobiography. The tension noted by Gyatso between two conflicting social norms, “one requiring that persons refer to themselves with humility and the other that religious teachers present themselves as venerable exemplars,” is clearly present in the case of Orgyan Chokyi.⁹ Yet it is also possible to look at Orgyan Chokyi's work through a different literary lens. If it shares with Jikmay Lingpa's poetry the “I” at the center of its world, it also shares much with the literature of religious biography. Rather than consider Orgyan Chokyi's work exclusively as autobiography, in this book I have chosen to spend more time presenting it as hagiography—an edifying story of a religiously significant person, or simply the story of a saint. As such I refer to her story as a *Life* in an attempt to render the Tibetan term *namtar* (*rnam thar*) into useable English. I thus speak of the *Life of Orgyan Chokyi*, and more generally of the *Lives of Tibetan holy figures* in general, when I speak of Tibetan *namtar* as hagiography.

Tibetan hagiography is a richly layered literature containing esoteric philosophy, folk practices, local history, social theory, political rhetoric, and pyrotechnic miracle displays in addition to personal and emotional musings. Hagiography is concerned first with practice and only second with doctrine. In the case of Orgyan Chokyi's *Life*, practice denotes a wide range of social and solitary activities, including ritual, pilgrimage, art, patronage, merit making, meditation, and even experiences such as joy and suffering as conceived of within a broader vision of Buddhist soteriology. Often composed first as notes, and only later redacted into formal works, Tibetan *Lives* were primarily presented as teachings, didactic tales for the inspiration of students. As a hagiographic work of religious edification, the *Life of Orgyan Chokyi* can thus be considered both commemorative and didactic. It describes the life of a woman at the same time that it prescribes popular ritual practices. It commemorates an exceptional individual's course through the suffering of samsara and the joy of liberation, while at the same time counseling its audience in proper ethical behavior.

But to consider Orgyan Chokyi's tale as a hagiography—a *Life*—makes sense only if she can be considered a saint, or more precisely if the category of saint may be considered useful to understand the *Life*. I do think that this is a useful language to understand the work, for Orgyan Chokyi shares a great deal with the saints of European Christianity, the subject that has generally formed the basis upon which the modern study of hagiography has developed. In their statistical survey of saints' *Lives* in medieval Europe, Weinstein and Bell isolate five defining features of sainthood: miraculous activity, asceticism, good works, worldly power, and evangelical activity.¹⁰ Although these five idealized aspects of sainthood were developed upon the basis of statistical surveys of medieval Christian *Lives*, they are heuristically useful in approaching Orgyan Chokyi and her *Life*.¹¹ Certainly not all of these apply to her equally; this would be the case when looking at any particular saint. She wielded little worldly power, as will become clear, though her master, Orgyan Tenzin, did play a role in local politics. Orgyan Chokyi's miracles are few, yet significant. They appear at the beginning of the *Life*, as she is blessed by the dakinis—or celestial goddesses—with permission to write the *Life*, and in the final pages as her cremated body produces holy relics. Yet asceticism (fasting), good works (compassion toward animals), and—to a lesser extent—evangelical activity (the preaching of later chapters) form central themes in the *Life*. Even if we do not see all of these in the *Life*, perhaps what we see in the *Life of Orgyan Chokyi* is a saint in the making. We see the practices, the life narrative, and the representation of emotions, personal and social struggles that often play a role in transforming a living person into a saint in the eyes of her community.¹² We also see these five points debated and contested. If Orgyan Chokyi's tears are rich symbols of her good works of compassion and her empathetic suffering—a theme explored in chapter 3—not every character in the *Life* considered her conduct appropriate to Buddhist practice. Secular women, men, and monks could be particularly critical of her emotional outpouring of tears, much as we see in the *Life of Margery Kempe* in late medieval England.¹³ By the time we hear of Ani Chokyi in 1961, we are listening to the oral tradition of a local saint.

Medieval historian Patrick Geary suggests a concise three-point program for the study of hagiography, a program that I have found productive. “To understand a hagiographic work,” he writes, “we must consider the hagiographic tradition within which it was produced; the other texts copied, adapted, read, or composed by the hagiographer; and the specific circumstances that brought him or her to focus this tradition on a particular work.” In short, the hagiographic “text stands at a threefold intersection of genre, total textual production, and historical circumstance. Without any one of these three it is not fully comprehensible.”¹⁴ Although he writes from a disciplinary perspective very different from Buddhist studies—medieval European history—Geary’s remarks suggest that we seek to understand Orgyan Chokyi’s *Life* in relation to themes broadly relevant to hagiography in Tibet, to the production of hagiography and other religious writing in Dolpo, and to the historical situation of Buddhism in Tibetan cultural regions of northwest Nepal during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This is the goal of part I of the book. The five chapters detail these three principle areas—genre, textual production, and historical circumstance.

By the term “textual production,” Geary refers to the total literary output of any given hagiographer. Yet because Orgyan Chokyi is the author of only a single work, I have expanded Geary’s category to include the works of Orgyan Chokyi’s master, Orgyan Tenzin, reasoning that Orgyan Tenzin’s writings directly influenced his female disciple’s writing. Chapter 1 will look at Orgyan Chokyi’s “historical circumstance” both in terms of the social and political world of Dolpo as it relates to religious life, and in terms of women’s religious practice at the southwestern border of the Tibetan cultural world in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Subsequent chapters will look to the few *Lives* of Tibetan women that are currently available in order to read Orgyan Chokyi’s *Life* in the context of Tibetan writing by and about women more broadly.

In examining Orgyan Chokyi’s *Life* in relation to *Lives* as a genre, I have chosen to focus primarily on the *Life of Milarepa* composed by Tsangnyon Heruka. There are several reasons for this. Orgyan Chokyi claims to have read about Milarepa, and the two *Lives* share crucial themes. Milarepa’s *Life* is also widely known to English-speaking audiences, though it has received little critical attention as part of a literary tradition. Tsangnyon Heruka’s rendition of Milarepa’s *Life* was widespread throughout the Tibetan cultural world, and in many ways might be considered the classic *Life* of a Tibetan hermit. It is thus an ideal work with which to compare the *Life* of the hermitess from Dolpo.

The *Life of Orgyan Chokyi* consists of a series of episodes threaded through a pair of overarching themes: joy and sorrow. Chokyi’s joys and sufferings, however, are not merely convenient categories with which to divide up the episodes of her life story. As a pair these themes allude specifically to the Buddhist notions of liberation and suffering, to the *sūkhā* of meditative experience and the *duḥkha* of worldly work, the bliss promised in nirvana and the torment guaranteed in samsara. Yet despite the presence of ubiquitous Buddhist concerns, her story stands in contrast to the *Lives* of many Tibetan Bud-

dhist figures. There is no trip to the great monasteries of central Tibet, as is commonplace in so many men's biographies. There is no enlightenment in Orgyan Chokyi's *Life*, no definitive moment of realization. There is no attempt to cast her life into the twelve acts of Śākyamuṇi Buddha's dramatic tale, as in Milarepa's life story, no night battling demons under the Bodhi tree. There is no great renunciation in Chokyi's youth, no escape from the palace; she had already experienced the suffering of sickness and death as a child. In this woman's *Life*, the quest for liberation is the quest for autonomy from a restrictive social setting. Her most profound successes—her "joys" as she would put it—are her fasting, her tightly held vows, and the fact that she was able to engage in solitary prayer and contemplation at all. These issues, as well as other select features of Buddhist practice highlighted in the *Life*, are the focus of chapter 5.

Orgyan Chokyi's *Life* is also unique for the strong equation it makes between the female body and the key term in the Buddhist view of human life in its unenlightened state, *samsara*. Her work thematizes gender, for in it women are among the most significant symbols of suffering. To be female is, according to the *Life*, to be *samsara* embodied. According to Orgyan Chokyi the female body is itself *samsara*. Women's bodies are—in her terms—the round of rebirth and suffering, the negative pole in the dualistic system of bondage and enlightenment that constitutes the Buddhist predicament of human existence. There is a unique rhetoric of the body in the *Life*, as I hope to make clear through comparison with the rhetoric of suffering in men's autobiographical and hagiographic writings. My concern here is to understand the category of gender as represented in the *Life of Orgyan Chokyi*, and to make general statements about the activities and images of religious women in a localized, premodern Tibetan setting. It would be presumptuous to make any broad claims about the interplay between gender, rhetoric, and religious experience based upon the writings of a handful of individuals. Nevertheless, such comparison can be fruitfully used as a means to orient further studies. I see this line of inquiry as but part of a larger endeavor to look at gender as an important aspect of Buddhist religious life in specific times and places, and to relate this to transcultural Buddhist themes. I have not set out to develop a theory of gender in Buddhism, though the details presented here may well serve such a project in the future. If the historical study of Buddhism in Tibetan cultural regions can continue to participate fully in this broadly based discussion and debate, it will be richer for it. But the reverse is equally true: the study of Buddhism as a pan-Asian phenomenon will benefit from microhistories such as this. Our vision of gender—to name but one theme that requires both particular and generic attention—as both a concern of Buddhists and as a category through which we attempt to view Buddhism comes into sharper focus when we look to a local setting such as Dolpo. It is thus my hope that this study of the *Life of Orgyan Chokyi* can at once reveal something about Buddhism in a particular time and place and at the same time encourage consideration of the methods by which knowledge about such bound subjects is produced.

With this in mind, I do not intend the following study and translation of Orgyan Chokyi's *Life* to refer to Buddhist women's experiences in general—to speak for the “women of Tibet.” Such a general category, however, at once essentializing and so vague as to be of little historical value, is hard to avoid in a book of this sort.¹⁵ Precious few writings about women in pre-twentieth century Tibet are available, and even fewer writings by women, and it is tempting to ask Orgyan Chokyi to stand in for all women between Yeshe Tsogyal and Mandarava in the mythic days of imperial Tibet to Jetsun Lochan Rinpoche at the dawn of the modern world. This book is less about the life of Orgyan Chokyi than it is the *Life of Orgyan Chokyi*. It is about a work of hagiography, albeit a hagiography of a particular kind, told in great part in the first person—and by a woman, no less. The first-person voice of the *Life* is a powerful rhetorical technique to convey authority and a sense of truth. The words of Orgyan Chokyi in the *Life* are—borrowing a phrase from Judith Perkins's work on the rhetoric of early Christian *Lives*—“a self-representation of a woman subverting and transcending her society's strictures, buttressed by a growing sense of her empowerment through suffering.”¹⁶

But this caveat, this restriction to the literary, is not entirely honest. Although I do not presuppose that the *Life* provides us some unique and privileged view of the experiences of a single woman who lived centuries ago, I do hold that the work is an important source for understanding the concerns, practices, and Buddhist cultural life of the society in which this work was produced and reproduced. Orgyan Chokyi lived in the midst of the great Himalayan range, and her religious world was particular to this complex region. Buddhism in the Himalaya is unique in many ways, both because of its proximity to both the great Indic cultures to the south and the great Tibetan culture to the north and because of its distance from any major Buddhist centers of learning. One of the most important defining characteristics of Dolpo, Mustang, and other regions in which Buddhism flourished in the Himalaya is their status as border communities.¹⁷ The Himalayas have long been a crossroads between Indic and Tibetan cultures, economies, and people. Although it is obvious that the Himalayan range forms a geographic border between the high plains of the Tibetan plateau and the lowlands of the Gangetic plain in India, the mountains also have helped to maintain cultural, political, and ethnic boundaries. The great monastic cities of central Tibet were weeks away by foot for the monk or nun from Dolpo, and the Indian cities were separated by language, religious tradition, custom, and culture.

Recent scholarship has drawn attention to local traditions of Buddhist life in Dolpo and the different regions of northern Nepal, though the words of E. Gene Smith, who suggested more than thirty years ago that “it is important to see what was occurring in Dolpo within the broader picture of the trends that were also predominant in the richer Mustang and throughout southwestern Tibet,” are still relevant.¹⁸ The border as a theme around which social and religious concerns were voiced is predominant in the writings of Buddhist writers from Kailash in the west to Dolpo in the center and Tsari to the east, and is perhaps one point at which to address Smith's call. A variety of related

topics come into play in the literature from the borderlands: ecumenicism between certain groups, the search for hidden lands with their promise of religious freedom, the critique of religious institutions in central Tibet, fear of violent political persecution, the slandering of scholasticism at the expense of personal spiritual experience, and a questioning of ethnic identity, to name but a few. The *Life of Orgyan Chokyi* suggests that gender should be included as a category of analysis in any study of the history and literature of these regions. If men felt marginalized from the centers of religious power in central Tibet, did women feel the same? Did they feel this marginalization in the same ways, or did they have different concerns? We will see that Orgyan Chokyi certainly expressed her discontent with the social roles in which she was compelled to practice in somewhat different terms from those of her male contemporaries. For some religious men in Dolpo, the borders were between central Tibet and his mountain homeland, between institutionalized religion and the eremitic life. And those of Orgyan Chokyi? Perhaps they fell between her body and her bodhisattva vow, between the monastery kitchen and the small cave, between the great tradition of men's life writing and her struggle to speak for herself. But the *Life of Orgyan Chokyi* is only one example. Future studies will surely seek to ask the question anew in terms both specific and broad.

This book is thus also a work of local religious history, and of local women's history in particular. This is part of the beauty of the *Life*—that it speaks about Orgyan Chokyi's personal religious career, a career intimately bound with the lives of her female companions. I have attempted throughout to minimize speculation about the religious activities of women based upon sources from other times and places, though at certain points this has been unavoidable due to the paucity of sources at hand. It is possible to gain a general sense of women's religious lives from current anthropological work or from contemporary firsthand accounts,¹⁹ and quite tempting given the relative lack of Tibetan literature by or about women in the premodern period. I have sought to portray their lives as far as possible through literature composed during this period and from this region. This restriction has no doubt resulted in an incomplete picture of the religious life of Himalayan women two hundred years ago. Yet perhaps this is the value of the *Life*. It is partial. It is particular. It is but a single instantiation of Buddhist life and literature in a small part of the Himalaya.

But it is partial in ways that are unique and interesting. The *Life of Orgyan Chokyi* affords us a view of religious life in the Nepal Himalaya hitherto inaccessible. The *Lives* of men from this area do not address the same concerns for the spiritual implications of gender and suffering, or for the religious life of women that are to be found in this work. As such, this *Life* may be read as a rich source for the cultural history of the Tibetan borderlands, a history that takes into account human experience at multiple levels of social life. It harps on the suffering of this life, on the suffering of women even in their efforts to participate in Buddhist traditions. The study of women's history and the social construction of gender in Tibet—and within Buddhist cultures more generally—can do no better than to rely on such localized works as Orgyan Chokyi's

Life, for in such works we see broad cultural themes played out in concrete situations. The work exemplifies John Strong's simple and powerful contention that "Buddhism, as it is popularly practiced, consists primarily of deeds done and stories told, that is, of rituals that regulate life both inside and outside the monastery, and of legends, myths, and tales that are recalled by, for, and about the faithful."²⁰

The five chapters of part I are also intended to orient the reader to the translation in part II. I have not attempted to explore each facet of religious practice mentioned in the *Life*—indeed this is scarcely possible. I have sought, however, to provide some sense of the great diversity of practices, doctrines, literary themes, and historical perspectives with which one is inevitably confronted when reading Tibetan hagiography and autobiography. Where I have brushed over a topic in strokes too broad, I hope this will be forgiven for the wide view of this rich form of literature that such general coverage provides. Where I have focused too narrowly on what the *Life of Orgyan Chokyi* and other works from Dolpo have to say about subjects that pervade the whole of Tibetan culture—and thus rightly deserve transregional and diachronic study to be appreciated—I hope this will be forgiven as an attempt to convey something of the rich particularity that Tibetan hagiography presents to us.

The complete translation of the *Life of Orgyan Chokyi* constituting part II of the book is based upon three manuscripts of the *Life*. These are all housed at the Nepal National Archives—the preeminent treasure house of Tibetan literature from the Nepal Himalaya. Chokyi's autobiography is episodic in style, and often lacks narrative development where we might wish for it. The scenes contained in each chapter are often vignettes that illustrate the central theme of the chapter rather than crucial components of a developing story. I have attempted to render the episodic quality of her life story more apparent in translation by inserting section headings within the chapters. These do not exist in the Tibetan texts, though the clarity that they bring warrants their inclusion. I trust they will help the reader negotiate the often random changes in scene and subject, and to highlight what I take to be important events.

The manuscripts upon which this translation is based abound in orthographic variation, some of which may be due to regional variation and much of which is simply loose or incorrect spelling, at least when judged by the more refined manuscripts and blockprints of central Tibet. The process of translation has therefore involved numerous editorial decisions on my part, though in the interest of presenting the work for a general audience I have left the vast majority of these unmarked. Annotations to the translation have been limited to signaling difficult passages for which my translation is necessarily tentative. Like all interesting works of literature, this one will eventually deserve more than one translation, and it certainly deserves to be read in the original Tibetan by those so inclined. I encourage specialists to look at the manuscripts themselves.

All Tibetan names have been rendered phonetically throughout the body of the essay. Transliterations of proper names, as well as the dates for individuals, may be found in the index. I have left all Tibetan names occurring in the

notes in transliteration, with the notion that most of what is said therein regarding sources will be of interest primarily to those involved in Tibetan studies. Tibetan sources are referenced in the notes by the author's name and the first word of the title, or simply by title in the case of corporate works. Tibetan references are listed in Tibetan alphabetical order in the bibliography.

PART I

The Buddhist Himalaya of Orgyan Chokyi

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I

The Religious World of the Hermitess

Buddhism in Dolpo around the Year 1700

The great Himalayan mountain range runs 1,700 miles northwest to southeast, separating the vast South Asian peninsula from the high Tibetan plateau. Bound at its western edge by the Indus River in Pakistan and by the Brahmaputra in far eastern India, it forms the geocultural dividing line between Indic culture to the south and Tibetan culture to the north.¹ In the midst of its high peaks—more than thirty over 25,000 feet—these two cultural worlds meet, mix, intertwine, and define each other through mutual exchange, inspiration, and antagonism.

Situated at the northern edge of the center of the Himalayan range in northwest Nepal, Dolpo is renowned as one of the highest inhabited places on earth. It also stands at the southwestern edge of the Tibetan cultural world, for just south of Dolpo the largely Indic world of the Nepalese mid-montaigne regions begins. With thirty-five villages scattered across 2,100 square miles of Himalayan peaks and valleys, the population of Dolpo was estimated at 4,500 people in the 1960s. Local tradition divides the region into “four corners,” or four principal valleys: Nangkhong, Panzang, Barbung, and Tarap. All are agricultural areas with significant village settlements. Barley is the major crop, irrigated by high mountain streams. The yak and its hybrid, the *dzo*, are integral to life in Dolpo; its meat is food, its hide is clothing, its fur is warmth, and its dung is fuel. The people of Dolpo have long been traders, exchanging grain for salt procured from the Tibetan plateau to the north, and in turn trading salt for grains other than barley with the lowlanders to the south.

The Tibetan culture of Dolpo has been an object of fascination

for contemporary European and American scholars for almost five decades. Nevertheless, considerably fewer of contemporary scholarly works are dedicated to Dolpo to the neighboring region of Mustang or to the more eastern Sherpa regions at the base of Mount Everest, where anthropological work has been routinely conducted for the past half century. In the modern academic study of Buddhism, the significance of Dolpo was promoted almost entirely through the efforts of a single scholar, David Snellgrove. Snellgrove traveled through Dolpo in 1956, and stayed there again in 1960–1961. His travel account in *Himalayan Pilgrimage* is among the most enjoyable English-language descriptions of mid-twentieth-century religious life in the region.² In 1967 Snellgrove published the most important collection of Tibetan life stories in translation at the time, all of which hail from Dolpo. Corneille Jest traveled with Snellgrove throughout Dolpo in 1960, and returned throughout the early 1960s to conduct extensive ethnographic research.³ Whereas Snellgrove wrote primarily of northern Dolpo, and spent most of his time at the Bonpo temple of Samling, Jest concentrated his efforts on the southeastern valley of Tarap, the home of Orgyan Chokyi three centuries ago.

Dolpo has long been a presence in the history of Tibetan Buddhism, even if its name has appeared only sporadically. The best-known figure from the region is Dolpopa Sherap Gyaltzen, famous (and infamous) to the present day among Tibetan philosophical circles as the originator of a controversial interpretation of Madhyamaka, or Central Way philosophy. But though he hailed from Dolpo, Sherap Gyaltzen left his homeland at the young age of seventeen to seek an education, first in Mustang immediately to the east and then in the great centers of scholastic learning in central Tibet.⁴

Dolpo is also connected with the development of medical tradition in Tibet. An early-fourteenth-century history of medicine relates that a physician from Dolpo was one of nine scholars to be invited to the court of Trisong Detsen in the early ninth century to establish a canon of medical literature.⁵ Though this does not prove that Dolpo was a center of medical learning either in the ninth or the fourteenth century, it does show that the region was considered by Tibetan historians to be part of the constellation of regions surrounding central Tibet capable of contributing to the high culture of imperial Tibet.

It is thus not surprising that we hear only occasionally of Dolpo in the ecclesiastical histories produced over the centuries in Tibet. A high-mountain rural economy such as has existed in Dolpo for centuries cannot support institutionalized religion in the way that Lhasa in central Tibet or Shigatse in west-central Tibet have. That notwithstanding, each valley of Dolpo has its own temples, both Buddhist and Bonpo, the other major tradition of Tibetan religion. In terms of its relation to broad socio-ecological patterns in the Tibetan cultural sphere as a whole, Geoffrey Samuel categorizes Dolpo under the “remote agricultural pattern,” in which “there are sometimes small communities of trapa [monks] and ani [nuns] but there are rarely monastic gumpa [monasteries] of any size. The leading religious practitioners are hereditary or (less often) reincarnate lamas, often of the Nyingmapa order. Communities of part-time chopa [practitioners of dharma] who are non-celibate and do agricultural

work as well as their religious duties are also common.”⁶ This summary accords well with the vision of Buddhist life in Dolpo elaborated in the *Life of Orgyan Chokyi*, and the following pages will attempt to enrich Samuel’s model with data from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

It is not clear whether premodern writers from Dolpo considered their homeland to be part of Tibet or not, despite the fact that it was clearly a Tibetan-speaking region, that it was home to numerous Tibetan Buddhist temples, and that it produced a prodigious amount of literature, both Buddhist and Bonpo, relative to its small population. Local histories link the origins of Buddhist culture in Dolpo with the great imperial past of Tibet, and claim direct historical ties between the local leadership and the great “Buddhist kings” of central Tibet such as Songtsen Gampo and Trisong Detsen.⁷ But voices from Dolpo are not univocal in this matter; there is ambivalence about ethnic identity in these areas. Orgyan Chokyi’s master, Orgyan Tenzin, refers to his primary religious center of Tadrü in the Tarap Valley as the “great place of Tadrü sequestered in the lowlands,” suggesting that he considered this part of Dolpo to be part of the lower ranges of the Himalayas and not strictly part of the Tibetan plateau.⁸ And Orgyan Chokyi’s contemporary Tenzin Repa, the founder of Shey Monastery in upper Dolpo, wondered whether or not he was Tibetan at all as he listened to the strange dialect of his fellow students at Langkhor in southwestern Tibet.⁹

Yet if opinions about the cultural identity of Dolpo people were varied, it is fairly clear that in political terms during the time of Orgyan Chokyi the region was under the control not of its Tibetan neighbors to the east and north but of the Jumla royalty to the south. During its several centuries of rule, the Jumla kingdom attained a relatively high degree of renown, receiving gifts from as far away as China,¹⁰ and letters from the fifth Dalai Lama, the most powerful Tibetan leader during the mid-seventeenth century.¹¹ On encountering one of the Jumla leaders in the Kathmandu Valley around 1630, one Tibetan traveler could describe him as “the conqueror of many mountain lands from Mount Kailash to Purang.”¹² The royal families of Jumla had enjoyed regional prestige for many generations, so that by the end of the seventeenth century “the hegemony of Jumla . . . was based to some extent on the historically well-established high prestige of the dynasty, but also on its comparatively great military potential.”¹³ In the decades before Orgyan Chokyi’s birth in 1675, armies deployed from Jumla attacked even the fortified castle of Dzong in the Muktināth valley to the west of Dolpo, homeland of Tenzin Repa.

By the dawn of the eighteenth century, Jumla held control over a number of Tibetan cultural areas to the north, including Dolpo, Mustang, and Muktināth.¹⁴ They were a significant enough political presence to have a party of forty representatives received by the Tibetan government at the Potala in Lhasa in 1698.¹⁵ A peace treaty preserved in Tibetan between Jumla and the king of Mustang stipulated that, although the Tibetan king would retain local authority, he would support the Jumla kings with military might and through taxes exacted upon the culturally Tibetan population of Mustang.¹⁶ Dolpo is mentioned only in passing within the treaty, which commands the king of Mustang that

“with regard to traders from the region of [Dolpo] . . . bad habits . . . and unlawful actions inappropriate to the old customs shall not be committed.”¹⁷ This suggests that the inhabitants of Dolpo may have been under the control of Mustang even while Jumla exerted broad economic control.

In terms of the perceptions expressed in Tibetan biographical sources from the period, the interactions between the rulers of Jumla and the Tibetan-speaking people of Dolpo ran the gamut from patron-priest relationships, in which mutual respect seems to have been generally present, to master-servant relations, in which the Jumla royalty exacted tax and compulsory labor from their northern neighbors. The rulers of Jumla had patronized Buddhism since at least the late thirteenth century, when an early prominent leader made prayers at the stupa of Swayambhūnāth in the Kathmandu Valley during a military campaign.¹⁸ And in the time that concerns us directly, we find that in 1690 a certain Jumla ruler patronized the restoration of a Buddhist temple along the southern border of Dolpo.¹⁹

Aside from reports of patronage or military disruption, what can be gleaned from the literature of the relationships between Buddhists from Dolpo and regional rulers? The Tibetan traveler and Buddhist master Karma Lobsang visited Dolpo sometime around the 1660s and bore witness to encounters between Jumla royal patrons of Buddhism and Buddhist leaders from the monastery of Sangak Choling. His autobiography provides us with an interesting account of the exchange: “I was staying at Sangak Choling when two relatives of the Jumla king stopped by while traveling to Mustang. They had the demeanor of divine sons. We employed a translator.” With a translator between them, the business begins in earnest. “Maharajas, are you not cold,” he asked. “Master, no cold comes from your kindness,” they replied. “How could you come here? The [Indian] border king and we have finished a time of unceasing troubles. I have need to go into fighting. Please give us a prediction of who will win and who will lose. Great Tibetan master, you are very kind to us lay folk who have come. If you were to stay [with us] we would be pleased. You must stay. We would take care of you.”

To this request from the Jumla king’s relatives, Karma Lobsang responds with the following: “The great king is perceptive. I am not a good master myself. My master was all-knowing. I do not know very much. Nevertheless, as the Jumla king is the greatest king of the region, I will explain from the Dharma: Because it is risky to invite you, the king will not come. If that happens, he wants defeat.’ And they laughed and left.” He recounts hearing of them later: “Subsequently I heard that the Indian border king had some internal intrigue, was defeated, and lost bitterly to the noble Jumla king.”²⁰

Several things of importance emerge from this passage. First, it is clear that the two parties employed a translator in order to communicate effectively with each other, suggesting that bilingualism between Indic and Tibetan languages was relatively uncommon. Both parties are polite to each other, offering effusive praise. The rulers from Jumla address Karma Lobsang as a “great Tibetan master,” and it is clear that they are less interested in his scholastic credentials than his abilities as a soothsayer. They want his help in military

matters, not in philosophical or even soteriological matters. Although Karma Lobsang is self-effacing about his prowess as a Buddhist master, he concedes to undertake a divination on behalf of the ruler and wisely predicts that they will emerge victorious, a divination that he will moreover explain according to the Buddhist Dharma. He jokes with them, yet stops short of accepting their invitation to visit their court, thus riding a fine line between politeness and diffidence in his encounter with the “greatest king of the land.” The rulers leave appeased and the Buddhist master continues on his journey, as we see Buddhism fully embroiled in intercultural political relations.

Hard Times in Buddhist Himalaya

For those who did not hail from a royal family—and perhaps even for those who did—life was hard in the high-mountain regions of the Nepal Himalayas. Suffering and sorrow are major themes in Orgyan Chokyi’s *Life*, and in this she is not unique. Even with a cursory glance at such environmental and political conditions, it is easy to imagine that life in Dolpo three hundred years ago was difficult. The growing season is short, very little grows, and stock animals must be herded long distances through the mountains. Dolpo was never a political center, and was constantly at the whim of stronger powers to the south and north. The hardship of premodern life in the high mountains is a constant theme in the writings of Buddhist masters from these regions. It is also a theme in anonymous Buddhist literature that circulated in these regions. A short story from a popular apocryphal sutra known as *Benefits of the Diamond Sutra* exemplifies representations of the difficulty of life and the ever-present threat of warfare or danger that confronted the average Tibetan living in the Himalayas. It also epitomizes the hopes of the average person for a better life, and the stock put in forms of religious power such as scripture. The story is as follows:

In another country there was a lot of fighting, and people were killing each other. One fellow who recited the *Diamond Cutter* was going to be killed, and he was terrified. He leapt outside of the fort, but outside there was a man wielding a sword. He thought, “I’m going to be killed!” He concentrated his thoughts and leapt into a deep ravine. But before he hit the ground a virtuous guardian deity caught him on his shoulders. He put the man down on a boulder that appeared out of nowhere. Then a voice resounded from the sky: “Human, because of the merit you have made by reciting the *Diamond Cutter*, this guardian deity caught you on his shoulders, and now you will be liberated.” Until that man went to heaven his body was never without a sweet fragrance.²¹

Benefits of the Diamond Sutra was immensely popular in the Himalayas, and from this tale it is easy to see why. The simple style, general themes, and

generic location—another country, any other country—could be readily applied to one's own situation. The stories are simple and to the point; even the person with a hopeless karmic record may trust in the beneficent power of this sutra to aid him or her in the quest for a better life and rebirth. More will be said about this collection of tales below.

When we turn to local writings from Dolpo and nearby regions, we see that death takes many forms and is always nearby, whether in the guise of warring rulers or devastating epidemics. The masters of Dolpo are often called upon to save crops, protect people from disease, or maintain the physical welfare of their disciples, either through personal intervention or through the continued production of Buddhist scripture. In his autobiographical songs, Orgyan Chokyi's master, Orgyan Tenzin, mentions outbreaks of smallpox on several occasions, as well as natural calamities of various sorts. In 1696, when Orgyan Tenzin was forty years of age, a smallpox epidemic broke out in Dolpo, killing many people. Many faithful requested blessings from Master Orgyan Tenzin for the deceased. The response to such outbreaks of disease was usually to turn toward Buddhism for protection, if not in this life then in the next. Orgyan Tenzin considered his response to the smallpox outbreak, and came to the conclusion that there was really no refuge from such events other than the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. He thus prepared volumes of Mahayana Perfection of Wisdom literature to function as a support for people's faithful requests, clearly participating in the cult of the book promoted by the *Benefits of the Diamond Cutter* stories.²² Recourse to the salvific power of the Buddha's word found its supporters in the mid-twentieth century as well. When Corneille Jest traveled around Dolpo on an anthropological pilgrimage in 1961, the following story was related to him by the custodian of Lang Monastery in upper Dolpo:

A very long time ago, the sacred volumes of *Do* and *Yum* [*Perfection of Wisdom Sutras*] had been removed by the traditional leader of Dolpo, who at that time lived in the valley of Barbung. A man of little faith, he sold these manuscripts to a Thakali of Tukucha.²³ As soon as this unpropitious action took place, the inhabitants of Barbung fell seriously ill. The books were then brought back to Dolpo, and were being transported through the valley of Panzang, when a violent wind arose. It was the time of the harvest and the wind carried away the grain with the husk, destroying everything. The books were then taken to Shey [Monastery], where the monks fell ill. . . . Finally the books were packed onto yaks, which of their own accord took the road to Pijor, stopping only at the very door of the temple of Lang!²⁴

Even in Jest's retelling of this folktale, the words of Orgyan Tenzin echo. The volumes of Buddhist scripture were a source of blessings, keeping sickness at bay and ensuring prosperity. Yet they could also be fickle if not treated properly, causing as much suffering as they might relieve. One thing is sure: The volumes of Buddhist scripture with which Buddhist masters sought to fill their

temples in Dolpo were an integral part of local religious life, and were viewed in terms that ranged from economy to soteriology. We shall return to this topic below when we look at Orgyan Chokyi's religious practice, and particularly her patronage of local book-printing projects.

In addition to the environmental challenges inherent in the Himalayan life, economic and political challenges were continuously present during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Dolpo and surrounding regions, as we have seen. Sufferings natural and human-made were thematized by Tibetan poets, who drew parallels between local war and pestilence and the pervasive suffering of human existence as conceived by Buddhist cosmology. In reading the role of suffering as a theme in Orgyan Chokyi's *Life*, we are aided by the fact that her master, Orgyan Tenzin, employed vivid and varied images of pain and suffering in his poems about Dolpo life. One winter, Orgyan Tenzin traveled to meet with some twenty men and women. While they met, a great snowstorm arose and the master was trapped with his hosts. Everybody became rather depressed as the snow piled up, so Orgyan Tenzin sang this song "to alleviate their darkened thoughts." One wonders how successful this particular song was:

Listen here men, women, children,
 Stuck indoors your minds are choked.
 You eat food, drink beer, get drunk, fall down.
 In the valleys of Mustang, Dolpo,
 Hundreds of soldiers hack at hands and feet and die.
 Consider well impermanence, mothers.
 The army of the Jumla king attacks.
 The merchants of the kingdom
 Choke, imprisoned by the Jumla king.
 Consider impermanence, and recite *mani* prayers.
 Mustang is ablaze and tattered.
 Fathers, sons, and brothers are killed by sword.
 Suffering surrounds all Tibetans and lowlanders.
 Ay, Ay! Such a pitiable state.
 Every village merchant climbs a mountain of suffering.
 When I see these acts of great sin,
 My mind suffers; I cannot bear it.²⁵

To a certain extent such local miseries were seen as no more than the inevitable realization of the devolution of human existence. The present era is a dark age of petty rivalry in which human life is nasty, brutish, and short. Considered in terms of the Tibetan imagination, the golden age of yogis such as Milarepa and Padmasambhava, in which dazzling feats of spiritual wizardry were possible, is long gone, "and today all that remains of them is their stories. As for us, our negative actions . . . have driven us here into this filthy contraption . . . in which we are trapped."²⁶ Orgyan Tenzin would have agreed with this

estimation, and took numerous opportunities to remind his followers of their debased state. In the following poem performed for several hypocritical “great meditators” whom Orgyan Tenzin wished to reprimand, he evokes a dour vision of men, women, and children in bad times. The bleakness of human life is measured only by the bleakness of the land in a long season of draught. His disgust at their conduct takes the form of dark humor as he can only laugh at the failings of men, women, kings, ministers, elders, and children acting out of selfishness, and seemingly unconcerned by their own impending deaths. Such deplorable behavior affects even the weather.²⁷

The weather of degenerate times is laughable:
 The rainfall was uneven for many bad years,
 In the rainy season the sun burned and the crops were destroyed.
 In these bad times people miss the rain and the fields lie fallow.
 I behold this weather and I am sorrowful.
 Each master and disciple should practice austerities in mountain
 retreat.

People in degenerate times are laughable:
 The men drink beer and delight in eating meat.
 The women are taciturn, and
 Even the children act old and are without merit.
 Whether I look at men or women I am sorrowful.
 Each master and disciple must meditate on the lama’s instructions.

The king of degenerate times is laughable:
 Whenever someone takes a king’s body they act like an emperor.
 From a single village [comes] two kings, and three.
 Minor kings without merit become many.
 A king without food and clothing is pitiable.
 The minister gets his fiefdom, collects tax,
 But even then he is poor.
 When I look at such kings I am sorrowful.
 Each master and disciple should be without lord and bond.

The elders of degenerate times are laughable:
 Harsh, stubborn, they oppress the helpless—
 Rotten-hearted stewards of tax and enforced labor.
 When I behold such leaders I am sorrowful.
 Each master and disciple must renounce arrogance and visions of
 grandeur.

The people of degenerate times are laughable:
 Even though everyone dies they give no thought to their own death.
 Without considering impermanence even for a moment,
 They collect food and wealth like a rat or a bee.
 Not comprehending enemies, friends, desire,
 They do not consider death even for a moment,
 And act like stupid animals.

When I behold such people I am sorrowful.
 Each master and disciple must meditate on impermanence and
 death.²⁸

In the world of Dolpo so described, there are any number of reasons why a woman or a man may have chosen to enter monastic life. To be sure, the possibility of escape from suffering stands at the heart of Buddhist rhetoric. Orgyan Chokyi's contemporary, Tenzin Repa, relates that the call to religion first found him as he listened to stories of Milarepa, famed poet-saint of Tibet. He wept openly as he heard of the trials Milarepa undertook for the sake of the Dharma, for the sake of enlightenment, and vowed to become a monk. Orgyan Chokyi was encouraged to enter the monastic life for altogether different reasons by her female mentor, Ani Drupchenmo. The elder nun counseled her young friend: "You must persevere in the Dharma, for if you were to do worldly work in Peson, you would be forced into corvée labor spring, summer, winter, and fall without rest. As a corvée laborer you would carry water and work all the time. Meet the Dharma, take refuge, study: then you will not suffer." Clearly the threat of a life of enforced labor was as much an incentive as the hagiographic tales of Tibetan saints.

But if lay life was difficult, what was monastic life like? What did it really offer in the way of retreat from the trials of pastoral life? These questions may be approached by looking at the literature from two different perspectives. First, we will look to the writings of Orgyan Tenzin and Tenzin Repa to gain some sense of what the religious career of a Buddhist master in Dolpo actually entailed, both for himself and his close disciples. Second, we will ask what Orgyan Tenzin and other Buddhist masters of his day said about religious women, and what types of teachings they gave to them.

The Career of Orgyan Tenzin

In the 1960s Orgyan Tenzin was well known to the yogins of Tarap, the village in southern Dolpo that was the focus of Corneille Jest's fieldwork. Jest's informant, Kagar Rinpoche, related local oral history about his religious ancestor: "He did not cut his nails, mustache, or his hair. He did not blow on the fire so as not to soil himself, and made no noise so as not to disturb the earth deities. He wore his hair braided in a sort of crown on his head, and following his example the monks of Tarap and Dolpo wear their hair lengthened with yak[-hair] extensions on the head, as a sort of turban on their heads." Kagar Rinpoche held Orgyan Tenzin to be a great promulgator of religious life in Dolpo, for he "encouraged the religious activities of laity, persuading numerous family leaders to become religious." It is also interesting to note that this Buddhist master was known several centuries later for his connection with his female disciple. "We often associate this lama," Kagar Rinpoche concludes his discussion of Orgyan Tenzin, "with his wife—or rather his disciple—Ani Chokyi, whose biography is in the convent of Jang at Tichurong."²⁹

Orgyan Tenzin tells us of his life in two collections of verse, the *Brief Life of the Old Beggar Orgyan Tenzin* and *Songs of Meditative Experience in Mountain Retreat*. In the opening pages of the *Brief Life* he chronicles his religious endeavors from age four to age seventy-two.³⁰ In 1660, at the young age of four, Orgyan Tenzin met a person we have already heard from, Karma Lobsang, whose travel notes on Dolpo life are of such interest. At the age of seven, Orgyan Tenzin's mother taught him the basics of writing. He was ordained in 1668, and shortly afterward his father died, leaving him sorrowful. "I remember my kind mother, Ama Petsho, suffering greatly," he writes. In the midst of this family tragedy his mother gave him advice: "The world is like the tip of a knife: It is impossible for human bodies to stand on it. Son, let the death of Father be an example to you. Be diligent in the holy Dharma!"³¹

Heeding his mother's advice, as a young man Orgyan Tenzin departed from his homeland in Dolpo to undertake a pilgrimage to central Tibet. He visited the great city of Lhasa during the era of the fifth Dalai Lama's newly established central government. He went to Samye, the central monastery of imperial Tibet. He traveled to the hermitage of Rechung Phuk, where Tsangnyon Heruka promulgated the *Life of Milarepa*, and on through Lhodrak, the heartland of the Milarepa's great master, Marpa. He finally ended up at Sakya Monastery, where he stood in awe of its great halls. "As I beheld the large carved pillars of the great temple of Sakya I thought, 'The people who have been reborn here must have collected merit in earlier lives.' When I see a lesser place I am sorrowful, for they are the effects of sin."³² It is not hard to imagine that he was speaking of his own home as he stood in wonder at the greatness of central and western Tibet's massive institutions.

As he returned to Dolpo, he encountered Buddhist masters from both the Nyingma and Kagyu traditions, whom he lists in detail.³³ Some years later, at the age of twenty-four and with most of his formal training complete, Orgyan Tenzin wondered if he should continue in the tradition of the new schools, exemplified by the Sakyapa, or rather in the Nyingma traditions. His mind was decided when he had a vision of no less than Yeshe Tsogyal herself, who assured him that he is a "Nyingmapa monk."³⁴ Shortly after this vision confirmed his spiritual path for him, he met with Garwang Dorje, a Nyingmapa master who was to have a lasting effect on the young Orgyan Tenzin. Garwang Dorje bestowed upon him the *Self-Luminous Dharma Realm of the Profound Essence*,³⁵ a cycle of esoteric ritual and meditation instructions stemming from Great Perfection traditions of the Nyingma school. Orgyan Tenzin would later compose a commentary to his master's work³⁶ and teach from it to his community of meditators in Dolpo. It was this cycle of instructions that he gave to Orgyan Chokyi, as Chapter Four of her *Life* shows us.

In his thirties Orgyan Tenzin became involved with the politics of Mustang, Dolpo, and Jumla, as he was enlisted in 1690 to restore the temple of Sandul by a member of the Jumla royalty.³⁷ He gathered donations, managed a team of masons, carpenters, and construction workers, and procured a statue of Padmasambhava. He worked on the renovations at Sandul until 1692. This appears to have been the beginning of his role as an important Buddhist leader

in the region, and from this point onward he found himself involved in various building or renovation projects throughout the length and breadth of Dolpo. Between 1696 and 1706 he spent the summers teaching at another institution that he had founded, known as Dechen Palri. He spent the winters during these years traveling incessantly throughout Dolpo giving teachings and establishing, renovating, or invigorating Buddhist institutions.³⁸

In his fifties he began to spend time at the temple of Nyimapuk in the southern Dolpo valley of Tarap. It is in his accounts of this place in the first decade of the eighteenth century that he first mentions Orgyan Chokyi, though he had met her when she took ordination from him years before. Nyimapuk was not all that he had hoped, however, for he could find no time to practice in solitude amid the many well-meaning people constantly bringing him things and asking for teachings.³⁹ After seven years he moved to his most important hermitage, Tadru, located in the Lang Valley in the southeast corner of Dolpo. Orgyan Chokyi would follow him to this hermitage. The life at Tadru was difficult, and Orgyan Tenzin comments that his male and female disciples became weary as they assisted him in building the new institution. He encouraged them to keep fast to their vows despite their fatigue, for just as all beings bear their own burden so must they uphold their own moral responsibility. Just as the yaks in Tibet become weary, so do the monks and nuns in the valleys, he explained.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, according to Orgyan Chokyi, at least, the solitude afforded for meditation at Tadru was worth the effort.

Before settling down, Orgyan Tenzin traveled extensively throughout the Himalayas, frequently making offerings to the holy sites and religious establishments he visited. He tells us of the gifts he received from patrons in various places in a note on the year 1722: "When I was sixty-five I was invited to Lang, Dopa, Takyu, Bantshan, and Nangkhong. I was offered horses, yaks, gold, silver, and much wealth. I was invited to the school and monastery, and met the great gods and the master. I went to Tadru Temple and offered a tea ceremony." He then appears to speak more broadly of his good Buddhist works: "At the two stupas in the Kathmandu Valley I offered rituals. At the great place of Tise I made offerings three times. In the four valleys of Dolpo I offered commentaries to all the laymen and brethren. To all the faithful patrons I gave blessings impartially."⁴¹

Orgyan Tenzin died at Tadru in the spring of 1737 at the age of eighty-two.⁴² According to the editors of his *Brief Life*, as his consciousness left his body a rainbow appeared to the west, and celestial offerings and music miraculously appeared. His cremation was conducted according to the *All-Liberating* teachings of the Nyingma school's Northern Treasure tradition.⁴³ As his body was committed to the crematory fires a rain of flowers fell—a ubiquitous sign of a saintly death in Tibetan hagiography. The fire did not smoke, but burned by itself in the shape of a lotus. The amazing visions experienced by his close disciples were without measure, but the editors refrain from writing about them, "for they are difficult to fit in the minds of the stupid or the faithless."⁴⁴ His relics were meted out by the stewards of Tadru to the major institutions of Dolpo, to be placed in holy objects. As Orgyan Tenzin's *Life* comes to a close,

we find further evidence of his influence after death. The manuscript itself was created by Kunga the scribe on behalf of Tenzin Chopel, who patronized the *Life* of this master to make merit for the sake of human beings, and most particularly for his mother and father.⁴⁵

The other Buddhist master of Dolpo whom we will look at in some detail is Tenzin Repa. A member of the Kagyu tradition and the founder of Shey Monastery in northern Dolpo, he was among the most important religious leaders of Dolpo in the late seventeenth century.⁴⁶ Tenzin Repa and Orgyan Tenzin knew each other well, and each spent time in the other's institution.⁴⁷ They also exchanged letters. It is difficult to know with certainty whether Orgyan Chokyi knew Tenzin Repa personally, though there is every reason to believe that she did. Her own master was on good terms with the elder Kagyupa master, and Orgyan Chokyi helped patronize the printing of Tenzin Repa's works at his death. What was this figure like, in whose name Orgyan Chokyi saw fit to give her money away?

Tenzin Repa was close to Orgyan Tenzin and Orgyan Chokyi, though accounts of his experiences in the Himalayas are sometimes very different from those of either the hermitess or her master. Tenzin Repa's story provides another view of the Buddhist world in which Orgyan Chokyi lived—that of a well-traveled hermit who had significant contact with the scholarly monastic world of central Tibet. The following section concentrates primarily on Tenzin Repa's travels outside of Dolpo in order to view life in Dolpo from a perspective different from that possible in the survey of Orgyan Tenzin's life. We will also look briefly at his opinions on the social life of Buddhism. Like his friend Orgyan Tenzin, Tenzin Repa was a hermit at heart. But where Orgyan Tenzin was content to let other forms of religious life be, Tenzin Repa could be fiercely critical of forms of Buddhism he did not agree with.

The Trials of Tenzin Repa

It must have been in the first or second decades of the eighteenth century that Tenzin Repa bid farewell to his closest disciples at the small hermitage on Shelri, the "Crystal Mountain" in Dolpo. As Tenzin Repa himself had done years before, his three students were setting out on a pilgrimage from their homeland in the high-mountain valleys of northwestern Nepal to the far-away religious cities of central Tibet. They would travel for three years—maybe more—and by the time their odyssey brought them home they would have journeyed on foot some fifteen hundred miles. Upon their leave, Tenzin Repa would sequester himself in a silent retreat at his hermitage on Crystal Mountain for as long as they were gone, and—if he were to live long enough—he might even see them again.⁴⁸ As a parting instruction from his master, the young Tenzin Namgyal requested one final spiritual song. "First of all," their master scolded, "Don't run after women like dogs! Look straight, and think of your master." Then he offered the following verses of encouragement, advice, and warning:

You three brethren, heading off to the kingdom,
 Meeting all the supreme incarnations and good masters:
 Bring back spiritual instructions,
 Then return, come back to Crystal Mountain.

In U, Tsang, Dakpo, and Kongpo, supreme bastions of religion,
 Visit the seats of the Kagyupa masters.
 Behold the spectacle that is religion in Tibet,
 Then return, come back to Crystal Mountain.⁴⁹

“Behold the spectacle that is religion in Tibet”: This was the tired warning, the ironic teaching with which Tenzin Repa sent his disciples on the trail—a veiled critique in the midst of an inspirational verse, and possibly the last teaching he would give them in this life. And in this verse we find a complex view of central Tibet as seen from the borderlands of Tibetan culture, hundreds of miles and countless hardships to the west. What experiences led him to give leave to his students with such verses? What ordeals in life had brought him to this point on Crystal Mountain, and what encounters had he had with “the spectacle that is religion in Tibet”? In drawing out the implications of these verses, it will be useful to begin with the early days of Tenzin Repa’s life.

Tenzin Repa was born in 1646 to a noble family in Dzong, a village situated in the middle of the steep high-mountain valley that holds one of Nepal’s most important holy sites, Muktināth, just east of Dolpo.⁵⁰ He styles his homeland in various ways, sometimes as part of the larger western Tibetan region of Ngari, sometimes as the lower part of Mustang, and often as the “divide between India and Tibet.”⁵¹ It was beautiful country for the yogin, and he waxed eloquent on his valley as he beheld it once coming back from Mustang: “From the top of a pass I saw the mountains of Muktināth in a ring of rainbows and orange clouds clustered together. As I met those shining pale white mountains I thought, ‘This Muktināth is the abode of [the deity] Cakrasaṃvara.’”⁵²

The ancestral roots of his family—as he relates at the beginning of his autobiography—reach back to the Tibetan imperial period, and stretch through the noble houses of Ngari in western Tibet, Mustang in northern Nepal, and finally to the fortified castle of Dzong. His impressive lineage was to mean little to him in practical terms, however, for as the armies of Mustang to the north and Jumla to the south fought, his family estates were looted, ransacked, taxed, and levied into ruin. His father had died in 1656, leaving his mother to fend for six children in an unstable war-ridden economy. Tenzin Repa’s strongest memories of his early life center on his mother’s misery, her tears and wailing as she beat the trails up and down the Muktināth valley begging for food and clothing. She had taken out loans with the wicked lowlanders, the Monpas, and as she drew nearer to default the threats that her children would be taken in slavery down south increased. But this was just the first time that Tenzin Repa would be in danger of being enslaved by the Indic peoples at the foot of his mountain home.

To ease the burden of his mother, Tenzin Repa’s uncle took him under his wing in 1657. In the evenings, after herding animals in the mountain pastures,

he was introduced to the Dharma—first to prayers from the Sakya school. It was during one of these evening study sessions that both he and his uncle shed tears while reading of the trials of the great saint Milarepa.⁵³ Inspired by the *Life* of Tibet's great saint, from this decisive moment Tenzin Repa was overcome with desire to lead the eremitic life. It was also during this time that he first expressed a will to go on pilgrimage to central Tibet. And though he was full of desire to see the great halls of central and southwestern Tibet, his purse was empty; he had not the means to make the long journey himself, and his uncle would not give him the money.

Eventually, in 1660 or 1661, two wandering yogins from central Tibet came on pilgrimage to Muktināth. Despite their shifty and greedy demeanor, Tenzin Repa insisted on taking teachings from them, and when they made their way north he tagged along, thus beginning what was to be a several-year odyssey of unfulfilled hopes, disillusionment, and physical hardship. As soon as they arrived on the high plains north of the Himalayas, the two yogins sold their young apprentice into slavery to a wealthy nomad. Once, trying to escape, he was bound hand and foot and then sold again to a Nepalese merchant. Led by force to the forests of the Kathmandu Valley, ever in fear of being sold to a yet worse owner, he was at last set free by a kindly brahmin. He made his way north of the mountains for a second journey to central Tibet, only to be held captive again, this time by the lord of the manor at Gungthang in southwestern Tibet. Here he worked as a servant for some five months, enduring constant ridicule for the zeal he expressed over making it to central Tibet. Time and again he was told simply to return to his homeland, as a poor boy should.

After some time, the lord of Gungthang fell ill, and in what appears to have been a deathbed conversion, released Tenzin Repa from servitude and sent him down the road. From Gungthang the young mendicant toured the holy places of his spiritual role model, Milarepa, visiting the “caves of realization” that are sprinkled throughout the Himalayan highlands just north of the Kathmandu Valley. After a period of unfruitful wandering, he found himself directed by a group of traders to a hermitage at Langkhor, in the far southwest corner of Tsang. Here he waited to meet the man who was to be his main teacher, the Drukpa Kagyupa master Rangdrol Dorje—himself out on the pilgrimage trail at that time.

As Tenzin Repa waited with the other disciples gathered in Langkhor, he listened to their strange dialect and wondered to himself—in a significant moment of cultural self-reflection—if he really was a Tibetan after all. And though he was filled with faith at finally finding what appeared to be a genuine spiritual community, the older students became irritated by his presence and gave him the provisions he needed to at last make the pilgrimage to central Tibet, to Lhasa. In a final turn of events, he made the journey accompanied not by Tibetans but by an Indian yogin with whom he got on well.

So it was that sometime during the mid-1660s Tenzin Repa walked into central Tibet. This was the Tibet of the fifth Dalai Lama, and the young man from Dolpo found it to be a place of severe social unrest. He relates that the

troops of all the central Tibetan regions were being overcome by Lhopas from the south, and the “the kingdom was filled with widows.” Conflicts between the recently formed Ganden government and the Drukpa Kagyu made it impossible for anybody known to be a Drukpa to travel freely. The young wanderer—with his newly formed Drukpa allegiance—decided to lay low at the residence of a wealthy shepherd in the Karma Kagyu stronghold of the Tolung Valley, northwest of Lhasa. After some six months of waiting, the troubles subsided. He was finally able to make a pilgrimage around the “four horns” of central Tibet.⁵⁴ But these travels—the very goal that had been the driving force of his life for years—receive only the briefest mention in his autobiography. In the end central Tibet was the castle in the sky of his young religious imagination; it in fact played a very small positive role in his development as a man of religion.

From this now-empty center he journeyed south to the holy mountain of Tsari, and then southwest once again to the Kathmandu Valley to meet his teacher, Rangdrol Dorje. It was here—in the heartland of the Newars and not in the halls of the colleges of Tibet—that Tenzin Repa was to receive his most significant religious instructions. And in the 1670s and 1680s it was not in central Tibet that Tenzin Repa was to undergo his most profound spiritual experiences, but in the famous mountain centers of the Himalayan rim—Tsari, Lapchi, Kyirong, Muktināth, and Kailash.

After all this, what did Tenzin Repa think of central Tibet? How did he view this place from the vantage point of his later years—a land whose power and attraction had led him on the religious quest in the first place? The following verse makes his feelings fairly clear:

Not a hill or dale exists where
 Armies are not followed by famine,
 And tidings of bandits race.
 Hermits, meditators must be wary of thieves.
 As I beheld these ways my heart longed for solitude,
 To Dolpo, to Mount Dragon Roar I fled.⁵⁵

Such is his view of religious life of central Tibet, a place where—as Tenzin Repa would have his listeners believe—lamas and patrons cavort at the expense of the common people, a place where scholars pontificate in ivory towers while the Dharma is reduced to empty definitions. This could not be more at odds with Orgyan Tenzin’s glowing praise of the great halls of Sakya. With such a dark vision, is it any wonder that Tenzin Repa warned his disciples as he did?

As might be inferred from this passage—so critical of the hypocrisy and social injustice he perceived in central Tibet—Tenzin Repa did not compose detailed philosophical treatises or delight in baroque displays of classical Sanskrit-influenced poetry. For him the life story and the spiritual song were the preeminent forms of Buddhist instruction. A strong antischolastic theme runs through Tenzin Repa’s teachings, a theme that is implicitly tied to his negative assessment of the colleges of central Tibet. He opens one exemplary

poem with a prayer of homage to the great scholars of Tibet, but then goes on to do all he can to transform this homage into mockery by praising the ways of the hermit yogin with the following words:

For the yogin who recognizes his own mind,
 It dawns without studying the ideas of sutra and tantra;
 He leaves behind the tomes of fragmented scholarly explanations.
 The yogin for whom everything shines as a clue [to enlightenment]
 Has no need of black-ink explanations.
 To explain the deep and profound spiritual instructions
 He doesn't need high poetry with sweet-sounding words.⁵⁶

Tenzin Repa expands his critique of scholasticism at times to a critique of scripture-based religion in general. The Buddhist canon, the weighty tomes of commentary, the debate manuals, the venomous polemic treatises—all these are impediments to spiritual practice if they are held to be more valuable than personal experience. The critique of scripture on soteriological grounds is, of course, certainly not unknown, and in this Tenzin Repa follows his Kagyupa forefathers. Yet when heard in the context of his negative assessment of the religious climate in central Tibet, Tenzin Repa's condemnation becomes a social critique as well; the very existence of hundreds of costly volumes of scripture depended on the economic and social gravity of the giant monasteries of the central regions—those same institutions whose contradictions he was so eager to point out. For Tenzin Repa, the great libraries of Buddhist literature themselves became symbols of hypocrisy. Praising the master's word over scripture as the locus of spiritual authority thus became a way to differentiate the religious lifestyle of his community and his region from what he saw in central Tibet. He writes:

We talk about scripture, the Dharma wheel,
 But really the instruction of the lama is [scripture] itself.
 If you are not deluded by sophistry, by clinging to theologies,
 There is nothing distinct to call a sutra, a tantra, or a treatise.⁵⁷

In the empty valleys of Dolpo, Tenzin Repa spent years in silence, and when he did speak it was to praise the glorious beauty of the mountains around Muktināth in the orange hue of dawn, to exhort his Kagyupa and Nyingmapa brethren gathered at Svayambhūnāth Stupa to have done with all their Dharma disputations, to inspire his students with sorrowful tales of his poverty-stricken widowed mother. In the end, Tenzin Repa was not to participate in the centuries-old debates over the learned treatises of the great Buddhist masters of the past, debates so much a part of the spectacle of religion that he encountered and fled from in central Tibet. Nowhere does he speak of the noble Nāgārjuna, nowhere does he cite a passage from the great logician Dharmakīrti. Instead he took retreat in the hermitage of Crystal Mountain Dragon Roar, much as Orgyan Chokyi would later seek to do in Orgyan Tenzin's hermitage at Tadru, to the south of Dragon Roar.

Lamas, Hermits, and Patrons

With images of the lives of two lamas of Dolpo in view, it is possible to sketch a more general picture of the career of a Himalayan Buddhist master. The career of a lama was dictated in great part by patrons who traded goods, money, or lodging in exchange for religious services. Patronage was absolutely essential to support the activities of solitary recluses such as Orgyan Chokyi, for they produced no goods themselves that were economically valuable. This dependence caused tension for those who wished to remain apart from the social world either through retreat or pilgrimage, for such people were caught in the paradoxical situation of needing patronage to escape the company of those very people who patronized them. The *Life of Orgyan Chokyi* notes this difficulty. When Orgyan Chokyi expressed the desire to go on a lengthy pilgrimage, one of her monastic sisters cautioned her against offending her patrons: "If you forsake faithful patrons and go traveling, your patrons and students will pay you back for it. Put off your plans to leave." And yet despite this relationship, Orgyan Tenzin could also be critical of the people of Dolpo, even his patrons.⁵⁸ He took them to task for being lazy hypocrites in religious practice. He lamented that the old faithful patrons had disappeared and the younger generation had no faith: "Deceitful ones who pollute human life defile the view, meditation, and practice so there's nothing left! The old patrons of the valley are disappearing, and the young valley people have no faith."⁵⁹

Orgyan Tenzin appears to have used his patrons' funding to great effect. According to Orgyan Chokyi, he built a temple at Dechen Palri, a temple at Sandul to the south, at Lang, and at Tadru, where Orgyan Chokyi spent the latter part of her life. He oversaw the creation of paintings and statues of deities at Drigung. He also managed the production of twelve volumes of scripture at Kok, including the *Lotus Sutra*, a work as important to the Buddhist cult of the book as the *Diamond Cutter Sutra*. As Orgyan Chokyi summarized his activities, "there were artisans creating many religious supports for the enlightened body, speech, and mind of the Buddha here, as well as many people requesting teachings."

Yet a busy lama also meant busy disciples, for his students were in a sense his employees. Orgyan Chokyi complained that the work of promoting Buddhism in Dolpo was in fact bothersome and irritating from her perspective, for it kept her trapped in the bustle of the social world, unable to reach her solitary cave. Meditation retreats were also afforded by patronage, though the two could often be difficult partners. When her master was invited by the residents of Tingkyu to reside at Mekhyem Monastery for a time, and she accompanied him. The patrons were overwhelming in their demands. Orgyan Chokyi was again saddened by the din. "I had a heavy heart. There were many people asking for religious teachings. Day and night there was so much bustle—boiling tea, serving meat, serving liquor." Even offerings of yak meat and butter could bring her no solace if it meant having to labor serving patrons rather than go into retreat. On a second trip to Mekhyem, Orgyan Tenzin

traveled with a entourage of one hundred—hardly a solitary journey. Once there, he and several close disciples disappeared, leaving Orgyan Chokyi to wonder about the whereabouts of her master. She eventually discovered that they had secretly gone into retreat, no doubt wishing to avoid a repeat of the last noisy “retreat” at Mekhyem. This episode hardened Orgyan Chokyi’s resolve to enter retreat herself. “He has decided to leave the bustle and go into solitary retreat!” she thought to herself. “Now I should request the same thing, and go to meditate alone in a solitary retreat.” On another occasion, Orgyan Tenzin undertook a one-hundred-day retreat at Lang after patrons provided timber for the construction of a dormitory.

The relationship between Buddhist masters, monks and nuns, and lay patrons is the explicit topic of a debate between Orgyan Chokyi and Orgyan Tenzin detailed in Chapter Seven of the *Life*. On one occasion during her latter days of solitude, Orgyan Chokyi paid a visit to her master only to find the place full of important patrons. These included the chief of Pingdring, Chowang and a companion, Kunga Drolma, the master of Dechen Palri and his brother, the chief lady of Changtsa, Chang Palmo, Lady Karchung, and Lhamo Butri. As soon as Orgyan Chokyi arrived they proceeded to give her gifts. Orgyan Chokyi was reticent. “I have no need to be given anything,” she responded. Yet her patrons persisted in offering things of no relevance to her life of solitude, such as bolts of silk and jewels. Her master did hear her, however, and quickly put her in her place: “Keep quiet!” he chastised her. “Just read some scripture for them, and recite some long-life spells. This is how meditators must behave.” It was clearly not her place to criticize the good intentions of her patrons, even if their good intentions were misplaced. To do so, Orgyan Tenzin intimated, would be to risk losing their kind offerings entirely. Orgyan Chokyi left the scene feeling tired and depressed.

Some days later she returns to her master to offer a song reflecting on the experience. In it she derides the potential for hypocrisy dwelling at the heart of patron-practitioner relations. Faithful patrons make offerings, but there is no guarantee that such offerings as bolts of silk will be used by or for the faithful. And in the midst of the seemingly endless meetings between Orgyan Tenzin and his financiers, Orgyan Chokyi feels caught in a social network that allows for little of what her *Life* takes to be essential—solitude. “In the midst of this offering back and forth, I know about food, drink, bolts of silk, and cordial relations,” she laments. She then asks her master a potentially threatening question: How it is that one might be enlightened and yet still have need of offerings?

But if the mind of enlightenment is so great,
 There is no reason to ask for these things.
 Delighting in those who donate,
 But not delighting in those who beg:
 Such a master is incredible.
 How could one offer to such a master?

It is tempting to suppose that Orgyan Chokyi has in mind Milarepa and his tumultuous relations with the wealthy master Geshe Tsukpuwa when she offers this verse to her master.⁶⁰ Orgyan Tenzin responds with an answer that is less than satisfying, yet which suggests that he is a realist who understands well the necessity of funding to carry out the business of temples, monasteries, and retreat centers. Here he teaches Orgyan Chokyi not just about the Dharma but also about the realities of economic and social relations between meditators and those with money. But, he cautions, just because he is willing to accept gifts from patrons he is “not joined at the neck” with them. In other words, he is not blindly falling prey to materialism by accepting such things, but skillfully using the generosity of patrons to accomplish his goals in the development of religious institutions around Dolpo.

Even Orgyan Tenzin must have wearied of his patrons at times and shared in his apprentice’s distaste for the hustle and bustle brought about by successful relationships forged. Orgyan Chokyi relates that in the seven years she and her master had stayed at Nyimapuk it had grown noisy. There were often many guests, including nomads from as far away as Amdo and Kham in eastern Tibet. Orgyan Tenzin thus decided to leave the institution he had had a hand in developing. He quipped: “The victorious Buddha said many times, ‘When the yogin is pestered by people and dogs it is time to go. Each month, each year, change your retreat. The risk of death comes like lightning.’” He thus resolved to go to the “empty valley” of Tadru and establish another retreat. Orgyan Chokyi beseeched him to take her along. The master consented, and she thus came to the place that was to be her principal hermitage. On another occasion as he, Orgyan Chokyi, and others visited Mekhyem Temple, patrons treated him with great hospitality, and he in turn counseled them against drinking liquor, for drink leads to loss of property. He told his patrons that he must sequester himself in retreat for a time, and they assured him that the temple would be solitary and quiet. It was, Orgyan Chokyi notes, in no way solitary or quiet, perhaps owing to the drink that Orgyan Tenzin had warned his patrons about.

As the years wore on, Orgyan Chokyi came to feel differently about those who had patronized her life, who had made the successes of her religious career possible. As she pondered their efforts on her behalf, she thought: “The patrons of Tarap and Bantshong—in particular Jatang Kali⁶¹—and also my kind religious brothers and sisters gave me provisions such as vegetables, trousers, meat and fat, a water pot, and salt during the entire time I stayed in retreat at both Nyimapuk and Tadru. And yet they had no reason to give me anything.” How could she repay this kindness, which she had thought to deride years before while complaining to Orgyan Tenzin? In a classic Buddhist response, she redoubled her efforts at reciting *mani* prayers and meditation to give thanks to them. Despite her critique of the system of patronage, at the end of her *Life* she professed a debt of gratitude to her patrons, thus accommodating her master’s efforts to procure the provisions that would support his, and her, community of monks, nuns, and hermits.

By the end of his life, Orgyan Tenzin was the leader of an establishment of some size in southern Dolpo, and the caretaker of monks, nuns, yogins, and laypeople. He functioned in many ways as any abbot of a Tibetan monastic institution would: as a manager. This aspect of his career is clear in the dealings he had with other nuns, recounted in chapter Seven of the *Life*. After Orgyan Chokyi had secured from him a certain measure of autonomy and release from kitchen duty, she encouraged other young nuns to seek the same. Orgyan Chodrol was one such nun, and in his response to her we hear the voice of a manager attempting to address the conflicting concerns of the institution and the individual: “You are very young, but you are skilled at regulating the food and provisions. But we must assess your commitment, so you must work in the kitchen. The head cook and the steward need to cut down their external activities.”

Although a vivid image of select scenes from monastic life in Dolpo during the life of Orgyan Tenzin begins to emerge here, the larger picture is still far from clear. The size of his seat at Tadru, or of any monastery in Dolpo during the early eighteenth century, is difficult to gauge. The temples and monasteries in Dolpo were for the most part small, as can be seen from the remains today. It must be remembered that the total population of Dolpo today is only 4,000 or so, roughly the population of a single monastery in Lhasa during the late seventeenth century. In Orgyan Chokyi’s time, the great monasteries of central Tibet held thousands of monks, and often held vast estates in their control. Religious life was an altogether more humble affair in Dolpo. The monastic code for the monastery founded by Tenzin Repa lists some thirty monks and nuns.⁶² Orgyan Chokyi’s autobiography does not give specific numbers for Tadru, Nyimapuk, or the other places frequented by her; surely one hundred inhabitants would be at the high end of any estimate.

Religious Women in Dolpo

Three principal areas of women’s religious activity emerge from the hagiographic literature of Dolpo—monastic life, contemplative practice, and patronage. All three themes figure prominently in Orgyan Chokyi’s *Life*, and it will thus be useful to look at them more broadly.

In long-range terms, the women of Dolpo and Mustang might be considered the spiritual descendants of Lhay Metok, the daughter of King Yeshe O. The daughter of this famous Buddhist king became a nun and founded a nunnery at the end of the tenth century in western Tibet.⁶³ It is possible to assume that there were convents active throughout the first millennium of Buddhism’s florescence around Dolpo. Nuns are mentioned in passing in mythic histories of Tibetan culture—known as *mollas*—found in Dolpo monasteries.⁶⁴ There also appears to have been a tradition of nuns in the Bon tradition as it spread throughout the westernmost Tibetan cultural regions. A history of the Bon tradition notes four anis and three other women associated with Lama Yangton Bumje O, a Bonpo teacher active in lower Mustang.⁶⁵ Yet

at present it would be presumptuous to present a history of male monastic establishments in the western (or southern) regions of the Tibetan cultural area, much less of those establishments devoted in part or exclusively to women. For now, Lhay Metok must remain a name enticing those interested in historical tales to keep working backward toward her. Let us move some half a millennium forward, to life in central Tibet and Dolpo.

Although little information on the monastic population in Dolpo at the time of Orgyan Chokyi's entrance into religious life is available, it is nevertheless certain that populations were small compared to the larger institutions in the central Tibetan cultural regions. A census of 558 central Tibetan religious institutions carried out under the auspices of the fifth Dalai Lama and his Ganden government states that 39 institutions were nunneries, 38 were mixed monastery-nunneries, and 481 were exclusively monasteries for men.⁶⁶ The census records a total of 1,461 nuns. These numbers exclude the three great Gandenpa monasteries of central Tibet (Ganden, Drepung, and Sera), which held 1,100, 4,200, and 2,850 monks, respectively.⁶⁷ The regions of E in southwest Tibet and Tsang in west-central Tibet were the strongest areas for nunneries; over half of the convents surveyed by the Ganden government were in these two regions. Of the 38 nunneries listed in the census, only 3 could record abbesses in their abbatial lineages, 1 in E and 2 in Tsang. The remaining 35 nunneries were managed by male abbots.⁶⁸ From other sources we know that there were 6 nunneries around the Shekar region in southwest Tibet founded during between the years 1654 and 1677. The total population of these 6 institutions was 164 nuns.⁶⁹

Although it is fairly easy to perceive the presence of religious women in the medieval Nepal Himalayas, it is another matter entirely to glimpse their attitudes toward religious life and contemplative practice. What sort of contemplative education did anis receive in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Dolpo? Were they encouraged to undertake mediation retreats, and how were they trained when they were so encouraged? The religious leaders of Dolpo often mention their female students, though certainly not always.⁷⁰ One master appears to have had a number of female disciples, but he declines to say too much of them. After naming and describing each of his male students he laconically concludes: "There were also many nuns, but fearing [too many] words, their individual names are not elaborated."⁷¹

Others were more forthcoming. The religious career of Chokypal Palzang begins and ends with female figures, first with his mother's awareness of his unique spiritual qualities, and finally with the goddess Mandarava—the Indian consort of Padmasambhava—portending his death by visiting him in the form of a nun "clad in red religious robes and holding a begging-bowl and a staff in her hands."⁷² Beginning in the customary fashion with a description of his family, Chokypal Palzang describes his mother, Ponmo Palkyi, as being from a good family, as especially neat and tidy, and replete with good female qualities.⁷³ Unfortunately, he stops short of describing these qualities. He also tells us that his aunt, herself a nun, was his nanny.⁷⁴ She scolded him once, at which his mother chastised her and warned her that she would accumulate negative

karma by behaving like this to someone such as this boy, who was so clearly destined for religious greatness.⁷⁵

Chokyap Palzang spent much of his life working not in Dolpo but in the wealthier region of Mustang to the east. Here he had a number of female students, and founded at least two convents. His involvement with women's religious careers was integrally related to his political activities. From the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, the royal line at Jumla held an uneasy and difficult rule over much of the high western Himalayan region, including Dolpo, Mustang, and Muktināth. Sometime during the end of the sixteenth century, the king of Jumla called on Chokyap Palzang to mediate a feud at the village of Kangkar in Mustang. He and the Kangkar leaders met in the monastery of Gelung, where Chokyap Palzang integrated religious instructions and ritual initiations into a sort of peace process. After successfully settling this violent conflict, the local chiefs professed their strong adherence to the Dharma and asked him to set up several religious centers, including a nunnery. "In particular," complained the village chiefs, "the women are not models of religious action, but only of worldly action. So please cut the hair of many of them and establish a nunnery."⁷⁶ Is the chief suggesting that the local women were the source of the conflict that brought Chokyap Palzang from Dolpo to Mustang? If so, his comment on the religious capabilities of the women of the village takes on a sad irony, given the context of the present quarrel between male leaders and in light of the violent fighting and land disputes that had taken place at Kangkar in the 1540s. Decades before Chokyap Palzang's activity in Kangkar, another Dolpo master's family was abducted by the men of that village, and his uncle and cousins were publicly executed. The lama and his father—a local official in Mustang—managed to find shelter in a nearby fort and fend off their attackers for three days. After a complex series of peace-making efforts they were set free, though the ill feelings between the Buddhist master's family and the men of Kangkar remained.⁷⁷ At any rate, shortly after this Chokyap Palzang set up a monastery and another nunnery near the Mustang village of Gami, at which "many girls had their hair cut and entered the door to religion."⁷⁸ These institutions were to be long lasting, for a century later the Dolpo master Sonam Wangchuk could still minister to the nuns of Gami and Gelung during his travels in Mustang.⁷⁹

Orgyan Chokyi's elder contemporary Tenzin Repa taught many women, and seems in general to have been supportive of women's practice. Nuns were living at Shey Monastery, Tenzin Repa's establishment in northern Dolpo, for its monastic code includes a number of rules for women as well as men.⁸⁰ Yet his writings reveal a tension between this institutional support and his views on the nature of women. Though he did give teachings to women, he nevertheless held them to be heavily subject to desire, and associated them explicitly with *samsara*. The paradox that characterizes Tenzin Repa's notion of women was brought out powerfully in his reply to a noblewoman and others who wanted him to stay in Muktināth and presumably to settle down and marry. He refused, saying he was a yogi, and that he must stay away from women:

I, a yogin free of desire,
 Know that [women] are emanations of the beautiful goddesses,
 Daughters of gods, of Brahma and Indra.
 Still, I will not prolong samsara by amassing sins.
 Women are known to be receptacles for the seeds of samsara,
 The beautiful and desirous noblewoman is carried away by life.
 The seed of samsara, [she] spreads sloth and quarrel.
 I, a yogin, will head to the lonely mountain.⁸¹

The yogin of Tenzin Repa's verse is thus released from complicity in samsara: He merely wants to spend time in retreat, away from the "sloth and quarrel" spread by his admirers. Elsewhere, however, Tenzin Repa suggests that men are responsible for their own behavior toward women and their own desires. We see this humorously illustrated when he gave advice to his disciples who were going on a three- to four-year pilgrimage to central Tibet, Lapchi, and other holy places; amid discussions of holy places and proper prayers, he warned them: "Don't follow women around like dogs!"⁸²

Tenzin Repa noted accounts by women of their own standing in the religious life of the region. While staying at Drakmar, one of the most famous places along the Nepal-Tibetan border associated with Milarepa, Tenzin Repa listened to the troubles of a group of female meditators and bestowed upon them several teachings. The complaints of women who were struggling to practice meditation—yet who were frustrated with the social restrictions by which they were bound—shares much with the tone of Orgyan Chokyi's *Life*. It is remarkable in and of itself that Tenzin Repa felt compelled to include the words of several of his female disciples in his anthology of songs, and all the more so because of the content of one small passage: "When we hear the teachings of a great spiritual adept," the women of Drakmar said to him, "we are leaky chimneys; overpowered by the inability to do the right thing, we forget these arcane teachings, and so these days we have no certainty." They complained about the futility of their situation: "No matter what you do in this nun's body, there is suffering. Our parents are old, and we are not able to leave for very long, and even if we could go into retreat for a short time, we don't have anyone to remove obstacles and watch over us." Finally, they made a request: "Please give us a written instruction on how to meditate in calm abiding, on how to perform the Dharma, and bestow upon us a vow for a retreat."⁸³ This passage suggests that these women were self-critical of their gendered status. Much like Chokyi's prayers to be reborn as a man—a theme we will explore in chapter 4—the passage suggests an internalization of negative Buddhist conceptions of women. Yet as will be shown later, Orgyan Chokyi turned this misogyny on its head. Here there is more than simple misogyny, for the women of Drakmar make a social critique in this passage, as well. According to Tenzin Repa, these women expressed an open dissatisfaction with the family structures that inhibited their ability to practice. This is, of course, also a major theme in Orgyan Chokyi's life story.

The women taught by Tenzin Repa were also literate, for they specifically requested a written teaching. What is finally suggested by this passage is that these women were not part of a stable community of religious practitioners that effectively supported their efforts; they asked, they pled with Tenzin Repa—an itinerant yogin—for guidance and mentoring. But of course this is the second-hand report of Tenzin Repa (or a disciple acting as a scribe/editor), and thus the tone of the passage may represent a variety of competing perspectives.

If Tenzin Repa met with religious women on his travels, women also traveled to meet him. This accords well with accounts from other sources. Women traveled from all around Dolpo to meet their teachers, and they also traveled from Mustang, from Jumla, and even from Sikkim in the far east to receive Buddhist teachings and visit holy sites.⁸⁴ In 1696, Sonam Wangchuk gave teachings to nuns at Mustang, teachings that included the Great Seal esoteric meditation system.⁸⁵ In 1697, five nuns traveled from Sikkim to Dolpo in order to invite him to come to their homeland, though it appears that he did not accept the invitation.⁸⁶ Nuns from Mustang are said to have visited him in Dolpo, as well.⁸⁷

Women also traveled from places like Muktināth to Kathmandu on pilgrimage. Tenzin Repa mentions meeting at the Svayambhūnāth Stupa a nun from Muktināth who knew his mother.⁸⁸ Orgyan Chokyi tells us herself that she went on pilgrimage, of course, but this mention by Tenzin Repa suggests that it was not uncommon for women to make the long pilgrimage to the holy sites of the Kathmandu Valley. Tenzin Repa tells us of other religious women whom he met during his travels, as well. Orgyan Tsono was meditating at the cave of the famous Drukpa Kagyu master Gotsangpa at Sho Ar when Tenzin Repa came there. She brought him beer, and in turn he gave her a song on the benefits of the solitary life.⁸⁹ He gave the Great Seal teachings of the Kagyu school to more than one hundred male and female practitioners in the southeastern Tibetan region of Kham.⁹⁰ He also later fulfilled the request of four nuns who asked for a prayer to recite during their Great Seal meditations.⁹¹

Like Tenzin Repa, Orgyan Tenzin also promoted women's contemplative efforts. But he did much more than that. He instructed his female and male disciples in many aspects of life, from the details of human birth and death to meditation instructions to local history to basic ethical advice. He was, in fact, more than just a Buddhist master; he was their educator in a comprehensive sense. Being a nun or a monk under a lama such as Orgyan Tenzin was not simply a religious vocation. It was a program of broad cultural and practical education. From being exposed to Tibetan imperial history from works such as the *Mañi Kabum* or acquiring literacy to apprenticing in the fine art of dealing with patrons, the monks and nuns in his care received an education probably well beyond what they would have in any other social setting. In Dolpo, the temple and the monastery were the schools, and lamas such as Orgyan Tenzin the teachers. We will hear more from Orgyan Tenzin throughout subsequent chapters regarding specific teachings he saw fit to provide his female disciples—in particular Orgyan Chokyi. They were in all likelihood not

very different from teachings he provided for men, and it is common to find him giving teachings to groups of female and male yogins. For now let us develop a general picture of Orgyan Tenzin's instruction to anis and female contemplatives to gain some sense of his views on the character of such disciples.

It is clear that Orgyan Chokyi and her master had a close relationship of mutual respect, even if they did not always agree. Orgyan Tenzin at times refers to his female disciple as the "exceptional" Chokyi, while still mocking her in a zen-like meditation instruction. He held her back when she expressed a desire to write her life story, yet eventually supported her solitary retreat. He was her teacher when she was young, and grieved when his student died before him. He praised her with the following verse, which opens a teaching he gave to her at Nyimapuk:

Suffering has little power over you, and your character is mild.
 Your commitment is full, your demeanor kind and compassionate.
 Nun for whom all are alike, you quarrel and debate with no one.
 This old beggar is close to death, so listen to my instructions.⁹²

Although Orgyan Tenzin paid particular attention to Orgyan Chokyi, it appears that he also provided instruction and support for a number of female aspirants. There were certainly nuns at other temples in the mountains and valleys surrounding Dolpo, such as the faithful nun named Ani Shakya Palmo, whom Orgyan Tenzin met at Sandul Temple on his way to Dolpo. Such was her faith that this ani continually made offerings at the small temple.⁹³ Orgyan Tenzin taught a number of other women in Dolpo and nearby regions, and through these teachings it is possible to gain a sense of the religious instruction Himalayan Buddhist women were involved with in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁹⁴ In a song to Ani Kunga Chokyi and other women beginning a meditation retreat, or literally a "*mani* retreat," he elaborated on what it might mean to be a woman undertaking such religious hardships:

If you recognize yourself, you are a nun.
 If you realize unborn emptiness, you are a woman of intelligence.
 If you can sleep alone without friends, you are a clever woman.
 If you wander the empty unpeopled valley, you are a heroine,
 If you quell mistaken appearances and self-grasping, you are a
 dakini.⁹⁵

Each line of verse plays with a particular term denoting a particular category of woman: nun, intelligent woman, clever woman, heroine, and dakini. The terms are roughly arranged in a hierarchy of spiritual accomplishment, from the human form of a nun to the celestial being known as the dakini. It is also possible to read this verse as an outline of the *Life of Orgyan Chokyi*, for each task assigned to the would-be dakini finds a place in the *Life*.

On another occasion, Orgyan Tenzin gave the following verses of exhortation to a group of nuns who were apparently having trouble with their prac-

tice. As he writes, “Above the anis had no religion, below they had no worldly sense, and in between they wandered.” He begins his exhortations with a general picture of people creating suffering through their own acts of desire:

In the town of Appearance Country,
 The people of ignorant illusion
 Hate and lust for the enticements
 Of ephemeral desire. What a pity!
 In the spectacle of illusion of the six accumulations,
 Weary from choosing pleasure and rejecting pain,
 The people desiring without satisfaction
 Grasp at the self. What a pity!

After this imaginative description of human desire as a town, Orgyan Tenzin addresses the anis personally, encouraging them to consider their actions well:

Listen well now, great anis.
 Though you enter the Dharma with fresh faithful minds,
 You do not see that your friends with desirous minds
 Are rotten companions.
 You believe words other than the master’s,
 And delight in false dealings that distract from the holy Dharma.
 Though you engage in desirous acts, you find no satisfaction.
 Without knowing the causes of your unsatisfied misery,
 Even though you’ve entered the holy Dharma,
 It’s as if you only achieve lust and hatred.
 Even though you’ve come into the master’s presence,
 It’s as if you’re only meeting a common friend.
 Even though you have faith in the Buddha lands,
 It’s as if you’re going to the three bad rebirths.
 Alas, alas, you pitiable ones,
 These are the stories of backward, low-class folk.⁹⁶

Here he refers to his disciples as “great anis”—clearly a compliment. Yet he accuses them of hypocrisy, of not living up to the principles that they lay claim to. Despite the fact that they call themselves anis and have taken refuge under a qualified master, they are no better off than those who wander in the city of illusory appearances, captivated by the spectacle of samsara.

Following this rebuke, Orgyan Tenzin offers the anis an encouraging word. Anis should act like high-class people, for when one attains enlightenment male and female are no different. It is said in the sutras and tantras that women are of the dakini family, so the proper ani will not slander her “divine family” and risk taking a fall into a bad rebirth. Orgyan Tenzin exhorts his charges to follow in the footsteps of the great women of the Tibetan past, such as Yeshe Tsogyal and Macig Labdron. Anis of such a background should, in honor of their great heritage, “give up divisive words and lust and attain buddhahood.”

He concludes the song with a final call to practice with diligence, for the human life they have gained through good acts in previous lives is a great rarity:

This fortunate human life is like a daytime star,
 So work hard now, anis.
 Simply meeting the Dharma is not enough:
 Take to the mountain hermitage and work on your minds.
 Let go of this life with your mind and stay together,
 Practice the Dharma and maintain good friends.
 If you act like this you'll be happy in this life and the next.⁹⁷

In a similar vein, Orgyan Tenzin also directs a song to a nun at Drigung who appears to have had trouble keeping her vows. Here the notion of “degenerate times” is again evoked, suggesting that this ani’s troubles are endemic to this fallen age as a whole rather than innate to women:

Woman of degenerate times,
 If you do worldly work, you call it religion.
 If you practice the holy religion, you delight in arrogance.
 When I ponder such a woman’s tale,
 My mind is oh so sad.
 To great friends you are hateful,
 Today they are friends, tomorrow enemies.
 Shamelessly disturbing friends’ sleep,
 Ownerless one—what a pity!
 A child with no father—amazing!
 You’re not far from becoming an enemy.
 At even a little joy,
 A rain of suffering falls.
 In one with such bad stories like thunder
 Many afflictions are gathered.
 Ani with broken discipline,
 In this life and the next you’ll be discontent.

He concludes by entreating the ani to turn her ways around and set a good example for her sisters in religion:

May your example be a teacher
 For other anis to preserve their vows.
 If you practice morality,
 You will be reborn as a human and meet religion.⁹⁸

Like Tenzin Repa, Orgyan Tenzin represents his female disciples in mixed terms. At times they are dakinis—physical manifestations of enlightenment, and heirs to the great women of the past. They are spiritual heroines, hermits capable of wandering alone in desolate valleys, or philosophers able to realize the emptiness of the world as we know it. They are also children in need of

supervision, giddy girls breaking the rules and staying up late at night. At times they are hypocritical, desirous, and unable to follow even the most basic monastic guidelines. It is certainly significant that Orgyan Tenzin wrote for and about his female disciples at all, though the terms in which he describes them suggest that, like Tenzin Repa, he could be critical of their abilities as well. We will encounter this ambivalence again as we look further into Orgyan Tenzin's teaching relationship with his most prominent female disciple, Orgyan Chokyi.

Although women were thus clearly involved in the contemplative practices promoted in Dolpo and nearby Himalayan regions, they were not for the most part recognized as teachers in the great lineages linking living men with the glories of the past. They were not leaders of monastic institutions to any great extent, and they were not writers whose works were deemed worthy of reproduction—that is, except for Orgyan Chokyi. They do appear to have been ritual specialists, as when one of Orgyan Tenzin's female disciples was called upon to offer a ritual for the death of a patron,⁹⁹ or when a nun by the name of Dorje Osal performed a divination during a smallpox outbreak in 1562.¹⁰⁰ Yet aside from the fasting practice in Orgyan Chokyi's *Life*—which we shall explore fully below—reference to the ritual authority of women is limited in the Dolpo literature.

What is clear is that patronage was a major feature of women's religious practice in the western Nepal Himalaya. It is tempting to suggest that patronage was a favored practice precisely because other forms of activity were not available to them. It is perhaps in patronage that we may locate women's ability to influence their social and religious worlds. The sixteenth-century patroness Paldzom and four other women provided the impetus for the Dolpo leader Sonam Lodro to begin his career as a teacher.¹⁰¹ As a young leader he continued his relations with religious women, giving tantric initiations, reading authorizations, and teachings to female patrons in Mugu, the region to the west of Dolpo to which he would return again and again throughout his life.¹⁰² Yet even as his importance grew he wearied of his patrons. Once as he sought a place for secluded meditation he saw many women "chattering together in a group." Fearing that they might see him and disturb his meditations, he resolved to steal away unseen, only to be found out eventually. The women gathered around him asking for blessings and making offerings, but he put them off until the conclusion of his retreat. As Orgyan Chokyi has made clear, patronage is a mixed blessing for the mendicant, and even the most faithful patrons often impede the activities of lamas and hermits.

The theme of royal patronage by noblewomen is found throughout the *Lives* of masters from this region. Like his descendents two centuries later, Sonam Lodro had dealings with the royalty of the Jumla kingdom to the south. As he prepared to return to Dolpo from Mugu after quelling an outbreak of smallpox, he was paid a visit by the queen, or the "chief lady" of Jumla. Sonam Lodro showed considerable political acumen as he provided the queen an account of his activities. "Mindful of my duty to the king," he said, "I have reconciled these people of Mugu." In honor of his service she bestowed upon him a seal—a symbol of royal patronage in recognition of his good works in Mugu

under the auspices of the Jumla king.¹⁰³ This scene also suggests, incidentally, that female leaders from Jumla were endowed with the authority to establish writ law during the sixteenth century. Another example is found in the teachings of Taktse Kukye Mipham Puntsok Sherab, a Drukpa Kagyupa master active in Mustang at the end of the seventeenth century.¹⁰⁴ He gave teachings to a number of women, including nuns,¹⁰⁵ noblewomen,¹⁰⁶ and a queen,¹⁰⁷ and his collected works were printed in Mustang under the patronage of his disciple, the noblewoman Jetsunma Puntsok Lodro Tsomo.¹⁰⁸

Working for powerful patrons occasionally meant getting involved in both political and family intrigue. When Chokyap Palzang became the religious master of the royal houses of Mustang, the Mustang chief Olo took instruction from him, and was about to go into retreat when a message came from the noble lady of Lo, bringing bad tidings of relations with the southern Jumla kings. Olo returned to Mustang to deal with the political situation, and then returned some months later to Dolpo to continue his religious activities under his master. Upon his arrival, Chokyap Palzang appears to lay the blame specifically on the lady of Mustang for the chief's troubles.¹⁰⁹ It was probably this same woman who later traveled twice with a large entourage in Dolpo to take teachings from the master.¹¹⁰ One another occasion, when the noblewoman Ponmo Drolma prepared to leave Chokyap Palzang after receiving instructions, he had a clairvoyant vision and advised her to take the high road home, as several villagers who were feuding with her husband were planning to ambush her on the main road.

Despite Orgyan Chokyi's critique of patrons, she was one herself, though of a much humbler sort. If women were not known as writers of religious literature to any great extent in Tibetan culture during Orgyan Chokyi's time, then they certainly patronized such literature. Orgyan Chokyi herself participated in this economy by contributing to the printing of Tenzin Repa's works.¹¹¹ The names of over a hundred faithful donors from all walks of life are listed in his collected works. Lamas, officials, monks, nuns, lay patrons, nobles, nomads, and the queen of Mustang—all contributed money or goods to the printing of their master's words. They hailed from all parts of Dolpo, from the nomadic pastures to the north, and from his homeland in Muktināth.

Significantly, nearly one-third of the donors were women: nobles, royalty, and female renunciants. Of the eighty-some donors to the printing of his *Oral Instructions*, nearly one-quarter were women. Most of these were nuns, including Orgyan Chokyi. The *Arcane Life*—one of several biographical writings dedicated to Tenzin Repa—was also financed in large part by women. Twenty-eight out of seventy-one donors were women. It is likely that the majority were nuns, though the queen of Mustang was also a donor. Beyond the mere fact that women were patrons of religious works, these records of donation also show us that nuns had their own money. Most of the donations were in the form of the Indian coins then in circulation in Dolpo and Mustang. We also get some sense of the relative means of different women. The queen of Mustang donated sixteen Indian coins to the printing of Tenzin Repa's *Life*. Orgyan Chokyi donated a modest single coin. To the printing of his *Oral Instructions*,

Orgyan Chokyi gave five coins. Other women gave a yak, a horse, or—in an especially generous donation—one hundred sheep.

Finally we may note that women sponsored the activities of other women, as well. Two of the manuscripts of the *Life of Orgyan Chokyi* were sponsored by women. Both made personal wishes to gain a more favorable rebirth. One patron was a nun, suggesting that nuns had money or goods sufficient to pay for the production of a book of modest size. This further suggests that this life story was known and popular among women. It was part of an economy of female religious practitioners, and it was part of their prayers. In the next chapter we will look more closely at the *Life* itself.

2

The *Life* of the Hermitess

The religious world in which Orgyan Chokyi lived was as rich as it was difficult. Though she complained bitterly about the hardships around, she was also heir to an important—if limited—corpus of central Tibetan Buddhist teachings, as well as being a member of a thriving religious community. This chapter presents both the life of the hermitess and her *Life* as a work of Buddhist literature. Although the *Life of Orgyan Chokyi* notes the age of the hermitess only seven times, and contains only one specific date, the basic chronology of Orgyan Chokyi's life can be constructed by comparing the *Life* with the autobiographical writings of her teacher, Orgyan Tenzin. After drawing a rough sketch of the contents and structure of the *Life*, the chapter moves on to detail the circumstances of its creation. It also places the *Life* within the larger context of Tibetan hagiographic writing, primarily by comparing it and the circumstances of its creation to the influential *Life of Milarepa* by Tsangnyon Heruka. Exploring what later writers held to be significant about Tsangnyon Heruka's hagiographic efforts will aid in reading the *Life of Orgyan Chokyi* as a work of hagiography. This will also provide background for the discussion in chapter 3 of tears as a central theme in the *Lives* of both Orgyan Chokyi and Milarepa. Finally, this chapter will explore the lives of several Tibetan women of the past who figure in Orgyan Chokyi's *Life*, in an effort to understand the work not just as hagiography but also in the context of religious traditions of women in Tibet.

The Life of Orgyan Chokyi

Orgyan Chokyi was born to parents who did not want a girl. They were hoping for a boy, and when she was born her mother was depressed. Her mother was generally antagonistic toward her, often yelling at her and occasionally meting out physical abuse. Early in her childhood her father was stricken with leprosy, which caused him to act resentfully toward her. In Orgyan Chokyi's early life, roughly 1675–1690, we are confronted with scenes of a difficult high-mountain farming life, made no easier by parents who did not care for her. Descriptions of her early life center mainly around her tormented family and her work as a goat herder—both of which caused her profound grief—and her meetings with monks and nuns. Until age ten she was in the care of her parents and does not appear to have traveled far from home. In 1686, at age eleven, she became a goat herder and thus ranged through the hillsides of her homeland.

Conversations with monks and nuns were the only encounters that brought her solace as a youth. They intervened on her behalf when her parents beat her, and they complimented her early on for her sense of compassion. Orgyan Chokyi's outlook on life was no doubt influenced greatly by her early experiences of family dysfunction. Yet it appears that the presence of a few compassionate individuals also had a lasting effect on her feelings of empathy toward other beings. Initial complaints about the suffering she endured as a small girl give way in later chapters to lamentations for the nanny goats and mares who had lost their offspring.

As a teen she took ordination—she does not say specifically which vows she took—under Orgyan Tenzin, thus beginning a teacher-student relationship that would last until her death more than three decades later. In 1694, at age twenty, Orgyan Chokyi moved from herding goats to horses, working now for a monastic establishment rather than for her family. One year later she entered into a difficult and intensive period of study and meditation that lasted for much of her twenties. For the middle period of her life, Orgyan Chokyi concentrated primarily on her experiences in mental training, receiving teachings, pilgrimage, and housework. Her late twenties and thirties received little attention in the *Life*, although she must have undertaken the long pilgrimages to Kathmandu to the southeast of Dolpo and Mount Kailash to the northwest in this period.

As a young novice she worked as both horse keeper and kitchen servant, and received Nyingma teachings from her master. The major and continuing crisis of her life revolves around her intense desire to practice meditation in solitude and its conflict with the socially dictated requirement that she work in the kitchen of her village monastic complex. Orgyan Chokyi makes it clear that the domestic duty she is forced to perform is a major obstacle to her spiritual advancement. She spends considerable time describing the mental challenges of contemplative practice, and with a down-to-earth style details her many periods of question-and-answer with her master. It took years of pleading

with her master to gain release from the mind-numbing hardship of manual labor in order to advance her contemplative practice. That her request was unique is suggested by the fact that Orgyan Tenzin himself describes her urgent requests in his own *Life*.¹

The latter chapters of the *Life* dwell on Orgyan Chokyi's "joys"—her experiences in solitude at Nyimapuk and later at Tadru, where she eventually spent almost a decade in retreat. In her late thirties and early forties, she lived and worked at Nyimapuk—the “Sun Cave”—one of several religious centers developed by her master, Orgyan Tenzin. The last three years at Nyimapuk were spent in solitary retreat, but as the establishment grew it became more difficult to maintain her solitude. During this time she struggled through the meditative and visionary practices of the Great Perfection teachings. She describes her experiences of “direct crossing” contemplation (about which we will hear more in chapter 5), and the difficulties she has in interpreting these visions with her master.

Although she was personally involved in the teachings of the Nyingma school and called upon select masters within its ranks for inspiration, Orgyan Chokyi did not place herself within a coherent lineage of masters and disciples. She spends a great deal of time later in the *Life* describing her personal struggles within the master-disciple relationship and in the long process of meditative development. Yet she does not recount a litany of teachers in her lineage or the teachings she received—both characteristic features of men's descriptions of their early maturity. This is not uncommon in women's religious writings more generally, as for instance in early Hispanic women's *Lives*: “Most male religious writers recall a period of formal education in which they learned Latin, rhetoric, philosophy, and theology, followed eventually by the religious vocation.” This, in general terms, is the case with Tibetan *Lives* by men. “Women, by contrast, write about experiencing the divine without formal training beyond submission to a practice of the basic tenants of the faith.”²

But if Orgyan Chokyi does not evoke lineage as her source of authority, she does employ the past to give meaning to her present tale. Several great women of the past figure in the *Life* as her inspirational models, though they cannot be considered members of a historical lineage. These include Macig Labdron, Gelongma Palmo, and the two revenants and heroines of Tibetan folk literature, Nangsa Obum and Lingza Chokyi, all of whom we will look at in a moment. Orgyan Chokyi also describes her efforts at building a community with other nuns in southern Dolpo. Indeed, much of the narrative is taken up with dialogues with her primary female superior, the meditator Ani Sonam Drolma, or between Ani Sonam and her sisters in religion, and we will thus look more closely at this senior contemporary at the close of this chapter.³

In 1724, at age fifty, Orgyan Chokyi moved with her master to a more isolated retreat at Tadru. It was here that she spent the last years of her life in relative solitude, visiting nearby communities occasionally to perform rituals and spend time with her female friends. During one of these visits, as she

performed a fasting and prayer ritual with other nuns of her community, a timber fell on her head and fatally injured her. After eight days of attempts by her well-wishers to heal the wound on her head, she died at the age of fifty-five in the year 1729. By the end of her life she must have been fairly well known in the area, for her teacher Orgyan Tenzin—then an elderly teacher of seventy-two—notes the great sadness felt by the villagers of Tadru as they prepared her reliquary stupa.⁴ “The dakini Orgyan Chokyi vanished like an impermanent rainbow in the sky. The entire religious community of Tadru was overcome with tremendous grief. Her remains [were placed in] a stupa as external support, and in a gold statue of Tārā as inner support. This exists today at the monastery of Tadru.”⁵ By the time her *Life* was reproduced by faithful patrons such as the nun Ani Zangmo of Samten Ling, she was considered an emanation of Guhyajñānā herself—primordial wellspring of the Mahākaruṇika teachings.⁶

In looking at the *Life of Orgyan Chokyi* in more detail throughout subsequent chapters, it is good to keep in mind that Orgyan Chokyi and her contemporaries were not lost to oblivion in their native land. They were forerunners of traditions that continue to the present day. Tenzin Repa was instrumental in establishing the monastery of Shey in northern Dolpo,⁷ and it was his incarnation that Snellgrove met when he stopped at Shey in 1956.⁸ Orgyan Tenzin was a central character in the oral traditions of the region. Orgyan Chokyi was celebrated in Tarap in the 1970s with a yearly festival of dance and song,⁹ and is still remembered today. Her local renown is exemplified by the company she keeps in a verse of homage composed by Orgyan Rigzin sometime in the late eighteenth century:

Yeshe Tsogyal, Dorje Phagmo,
 Guhyajñānā, Macig, Tronak,
 Nangsa, Lingza, Gelongma Palmo,
 Noble Tārā and Orgyan Chokyi—
 To mothers, sisters, and dakinis I give praise in faith.¹⁰

So does Orgyan Rigzin praise his spiritual ancestry, or more particularly his female spiritual ancestors. Like Orgyan Chokyi herself, he creates a lineage of the most renowned female figures of the Tibetan Buddhist world, mothers and sisters whom Orgyan Rigzin places alongside his male masters in his verses of homage. Yeshe Tsogyal, famous as Padmasambhava’s wife; Dorje Phagmo, abbess of Samding monastery and nunnery; Guhyajñānā, enlightened source of the Mahākaruṇika teachings;¹¹ Nangsa Obum and Lingza Chokyi, and Gelongma Palmo—many of these served as exemplars for Orgyan Chokyi as well, and it is possible that Orgyan Rigzin gathered their names from her *Life*.

We will return below to a number of the details mentioned in this summary of the *Life* as we consider select themes. The remainder of the present chapter will consider the *Life* from the perspective of Tibetan literary history and place it within a broader tradition of Tibetan *Lives*.

Lives of Saints, Lives of Women

Orgyan Chokyi's story is at once a detailed account of a single woman's religious career at the end of the seventeenth century in a remote part of the Tibetan cultural world, and a generic prescription for a nun's life well lived. In this, the *Life of Orgyan Chokyi* accomplishes one of the primary goals of hagiography: to inspire listeners by adhering to a socially recognized ideal of sanctity. The study of Buddhism as a localized, historical, and social phenomenon in Tibetan cultural regions requires the use of works such as the life story of Orgyan Chokyi, for it is in such works that widespread practices and doctrines of Buddhism are expressed, appropriated, and contested in local settings. Given this fact, any effort to understand the nature of this broad category of Tibetan literature—and the terms with which this category is shaped—will enrich attempts to treat them as sources.

The era in which Orgyan Chokyi composed her life story was a period of rich development in biographical, autobiographical, and hagiographic writing. In order to appreciate her work in its time and place, it is helpful to consider the contrast between the *Life* of the hermitess as autobiography and the more complex works being written during the same period in central Tibet. Although both the work of Orgyan Chokyi and, for instance, the life of the fifth Dalai Lama may be called autobiography, the two are radically different. The Dalai Lama's *Life*—a massive work of over five thousand printed pages—is the product of a team of highly educated court scribes and scholars that chronicles the career of one of the most influential individuals in seventeenth-century Tibet.

The present section looks at Orgyan Chokyi's work and its creation in relation to the literary history of the *Life of Milarepa*, for this work is without doubt among the most influential *Lives* in Tibetan Buddhism along the Himalayas, and it is explicitly mentioned in the *Life of Orgyan Chokyi*. There are other choices that might be made for comparison. One could also look at *Lives* of Padmasambhava, for Orgyan Chokyi mentions a number of these, as well. However, the great thematic similarity of the *Life of Milarepa* and the *Life of Orgyan Chokyi*—and in particular their shared portrayal of profound suffering symbolized in great part by weeping and tears—make Milarepa's tale an ideal source for comparison.

The hagiographic tradition of Milarepa, arguably Tibet's best-known saint, reached its height with the writing of his most popular life story by Tsangnyon Heruka, the Madman of Central Tibet.¹² Tsangnyon was arguably the most influential hagiographer of the Kagyu schools of Tibetan Buddhism, and his *Life of Milarepa* was his most important work. In the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Tsangnyon and his disciples actively promoted their school, in large part by compiling numerous hagiographies of early Kagyu masters from the eleventh through thirteenth centuries. Their retellings of already popular hagiographies included *Lives* of Milarepa and his student Rechungpa, Lorepa, and Gotsangpa, as well as their Indian forerunners, Tilopa and Nāropa.

It is well known that in creating his hagiography of Milarepa, Tsangnyon

drew on a long literary tradition of an already important saint. If we can judge from Go Lotsawa's late-fifteenth-century work, Milarepa's hagiography (in what form, we do not know) was being used at the teaching center of Phagmodru in central Tibet by the mid-twelfth century, only decades after his death.¹³ In 1346, almost a century and a half before Tsangnyon's writing, it could be said that Milarepa was the most famous holy man in Tibet.¹⁴ In the mid-fifteenth century, festivals to Milarepa were being held in Kagyu monasteries such as Taklung, at which the faithful would gather to listen to his songs.¹⁵ In a fourteenth-century work it is rumored that there are 127 different life stories of Milarepa, suggesting the immense popularity that tales dedicated to Milarepa enjoyed even before the efforts of Tsangnyon.¹⁶ And Tsangnyon's promotion of Milarepa as a saint earned him renown throughout the Tibetan cultural world from the southwestern Himalayas to Amdo in the northeast. From the fifteenth to the nineteenth century, his telling of Milarepa's tale was carved in new woodblock editions no fewer than ten times, in southwest Tibet, Bhutan, Derge, Amdo, Mongolia, Lhasa, and Beijing.¹⁷ Moreover, his reputation was not limited to Kagyu circles; he was even considered to be a previous birth of the Gelukpa master Cankya Rolpay Dorje, in whose hagiography explicit mention is made of Tsangnyon's efforts at composing and printing the life and songs of Milarepa.¹⁸

Given the wondrous qualities attributed to Tsangnyon's *Life of Milarepa*, it is no wonder it was so popular. It was far more than a biography—it was a wish-fulfilling source of beneficent power, capable of transforming the lowly and inspiring the unfaithful. Tsangnyon's disciple and hagiographer, Gotsang Repa, writes of the benefits of Milarepa's *Life* and Tsangnyon's great efforts in promulgating this work: "There are currently many life stories and song collections of Milarepa. Still, since this extraordinary *Life* has not been a continuous tradition, it should be clarified and taught for the benefit of my disciples, for teaching its profound and vast dharma and spiritual instructions will surely lead to liberation."¹⁹ Those who encounter the *Life of Milarepa*—Tsangnyon's version in particular—will gather karmic merit for themselves, no matter what their social position; kings, ministers, and nobles who consider themselves great people, and commoners who have no time to practice in accordance with the Dharma, will benefit from Milarepa's life. Even those who do have the time and conceitedly think they are practicing the Dharma, who "have not taken the spiritual instructions into their experience" and are merely "stirring up bubbles with words," will be favorably influenced by contact with the *Life*. Most dramatically, those who are conceited enough to think that they are masters who have found the means to achieve the status of a Buddha in a single lifetime, "in whom virtue is lost," may still be rescued by considering the authoritative example of Milarepa. "If this life story of Milarepa were to be well known," Gotsang Repa avers, "sense pleasures and things desired in this life would become supports for undertaking ascetic practice, while entertainments in which one wanders would become supports for practicing single-pointedness." If Milarepa's *Life* were proselytized throughout Tibet, it would serve as a perfect example for those who doubt that buddhahood can be attained in a single

lifetime, or that they are meditating at the wrong time. Audiences of the *Life* “will have faith in the holy Dharma of certain meaning, and will be liberated in this life or in the intermediate state.” Even those of mediocre capacity “will have faith in those who are experienced and provide material support for them”—that is, they will patronize yogins acting like Milarepa. Yogins will redouble their efforts, and “with a pure vow they will go into retreat, gain meditative experience in the next life, and based on that they may gain liberation.” Even non-Buddhists and extremists will “give up backward views and develop extraordinary faith, and they will certainly come to the end of samsara.” Thus, Gotsang Repa concludes, printing Milarepa’s *Life* and thereby spreading it throughout Tibet will be beneficial to all beings.

Here in a sixteenth-century *Life*, Milarepa’s great hagiographer lays a veritable blueprint for hagiography. It inspires yogins to practice, kings to offer patronage, commoners to have faith, and heretics to convert. Milarepa’s life story should be engaging for different types of people and should encourage different responses, including everything from patronage to solitary retreat. In order to achieve this it must be spread, and this appears to have been among Tsangnyon’s great strengths. Gotsang Repa characterizes Tsangnyon as a reformer who used Milarepa’s life story to counteract hypocrisy and conceit in his day, yet he might be thought of as a great missionary, reworking an already well-known hagiography and capitalizing on its popularity to develop and extend a network of religious institutions. The wood-block prints of the *Life* created by Tsangnyon and his disciples were sent along with narrative paintings in the repertoire of Tsangnyon’s missionaries. Even in Orgyan Chokyi’s part of the Himalayas, paintings depicting Milarepa’s life were employed to teach his story.²⁰ Yet there is no doubt that Tsangnyon was not simply replicating his hagiographic predecessor’s labors. His is among the most finely crafted *Lives* in Tibet. Just what made his work so powerful? One possible answer will be considered in chapter 3, when we look at his use of tears and weeping in his *Life of Milarepa*—a trope that was to have great influence on the *Life of Orgyan Chokyi*.

To assume that hagiography is composed more to inspire or edify than to present a modern historical or biographical narrative is now commonplace. This is explicitly stated in the earliest lives of Christian saints from late antiquity. It is no different in Buddhist Himalaya. If we turn from Milarepa to Orgyan Chokyi for a moment, we see that the concluding verses of her own *Life* make this much clear. Read her story in awe and follow her example, if not in letter then in spirit. And her teacher, Orgyan Tenzin, could not be more explicit when he relates that the life stories of past masters brought solace and strength to his mind as he watched with horror the deadly fighting between the three kingdoms of the Kathmandu Valley in 1700.²¹

And yet edification and inspiration should not be seen as ideals without context or concrete application. They are manifest in a number of social activities, including ritual performance, meditation, donation and patronage, artistic tradition and innovation. Manuscript colophons, for instance, tell us that the life story of Orgyan Chokyi inspired the patronage necessary to reproduce

the hagiography itself, thus playing a role in the local religious economy of Dolpo. By the time a manuscript copy of her hagiography was reproduced by a nun from a nearby temple, she was considered an emanation of Guhyajñānā herself—and thus linked to the Great Compassion teachings associated with Avalokiteśvara.²² And by the time a laywoman commissioned another such manuscript, the patronage of Orgyan Chokyi's hagiography was held to aid one in being reborn in the heavenly realm of the bodhisattva of compassion. Orgyan Chokyi's *Life* was meaningful enough for women of financial means in Dolpo to pay for its reproduction. This inspirational focus is also borne out by the death scene in Orgyan Chokyi's hagiography and in the aftermath of her death as revealed in other sources. Chapter 5 will look at these final scenes of *Life* in more detail.

Yet if the *Life of Orgyan Chokyi* shares much in common with the *Life of Milarepa*—in both form and function, we may ask if there were similar precedents by or about women before Orgyan Chokyi. There were *Lives* of women in Tibet before Orgyan Chokyi, but remains of these are few and far between. Other than the *Lives* of Nangsa Obum, Gelongma Palmo, or Macig Labdron, the tales of Padmasambhava's consorts Yeshe Tsogyal and Mandarava, or such rare cases as the *Life of Chokyi Dronma*,²³ it is difficult to find *Lives* dedicated to women. A search for writings composed by women about their own lives reveals even less. We can appreciate the unusual quality of this woman's self-told life story—what some have ineloquently but accurately styled an auto-hagiography—if we consider that out of the over 150 Tibetan autobiographies currently known, only three or four are by women. Furthermore, among these few works by women, the *Life of Orgyan Chokyi* is the earliest women's religious autobiography that is currently available by some 200 years.²⁴ It was composed some 220 years prior to the well-known autobiography of Jetsun Lochen Rinpoche, who also spent much of her life in the Himalayas.²⁵ As the earliest datable Tibetan woman's autobiography, the *Life of Orgyan Chokyi* thus holds an important place among Tibetan autobiographies.

However, if the accounts of revenants such as Nangsa Obum and Lingza Chokyi who have traveled to hell and back may be considered autobiographical literature, then we might place the *Life* of the revenant Lingza Chokyi among the earliest Tibetan woman's autobiographies, for it appears to hail from the sixteenth century.²⁶ Her story is certainly told in the first person, and bears a strong thematic similarity with Orgyan Chokyi's work.²⁷ Tales of revenants such as Lingza Chokyi—whose *Life* was reproduced as far west as Zangskar in the eighteenth century—almost certainly influenced Orgyan Chokyi.²⁸ Although the focus of such works—namely, the trip to hell and the ethical message brought back for the sake of the living—sets them apart from autobiographies that relate the events of one's life in this world, the narrative traditions of the revenant need to be examined in relation to the biographical and autobiographical traditions as a whole. One other thing is important about these tales: Over half of revenants' *Lives* are by or about women.²⁹ The literature of the revenant is the only genre in the entire history of Tibetan literature in which women have written or been written about more than men.

Much as in the history of women's hagiography in the West,³⁰ the majority of women's life stories in Tibetan currently known are either entirely or in part owed to the efforts of male disciples or descendants. The *Life* of the first Dorje Pagmo incarnation, Chokyi Dronma,³¹ was the work of a close male student, although it does contain passages that are said to be the direct speech of Chokyi Dronma herself.³² The *Life* of Mingyur Paldrön—daughter of the great treasure finder Terdak Lingpa and renovator of Mindroling Monastery after the Dzungar invasion of 1717—is likewise the work of her disciple Khyungpo Repa.³³ Unlike the work of Jetsun Lochén—among the most extensive hagiographies by and about a Tibetan women currently known—Orgyan Chokyi's autobiography does not claim to have been initially composed by anyone other than herself. A twentieth-century autobiography by Sera Khandro Kunzang Dekyong Wangmo is also known to exist.³⁴ (Sera Khandro was perhaps the most prolific woman writer in Tibetan history, having authored a great deal of revealed literature as well as a biography of her husband).³⁵ Though writing by or relating to women is not unknown in Tibet, it is rare in the extreme.

A woman telling her life story within the context of a Tibetan man's *Life* is not always well received, as examples from Tsangnyon Heruka's *Life and Songs of Milarepa* show. Paldarbum, one of Milarepa's foremost female disciples, offers an account of her life as a woman, explaining that "through the force of bad karma [I] attained a bad body."³⁶ It is difficult for her to practice in such a body and in the social role she must play as a woman. "During the day I work much, and at night I fall asleep, exhausted. Day and night I am enslaved to [providing] food and clothing. I do not have the time to practice religion," she complains. But Milarepa is not convinced by her humility, and refuses either to condone or condemn her story. "If I praise this woman's tale of yours, you will become vain. If I disparage [it] you will get angry."³⁷ Rather than being praised for recounting her faults, she is critiqued for her wit, a skill that Milarepa ultimately finds shallow and lacking in the proper qualities, despite his own renown as a master of words. Nevertheless, Paldarbum succeeds under his discipleship and becomes a celestial dakini at death.

Writing the *Life of Orgyan Chokyi*

We come now to the creation of the Orgyan Chokyi's own *Life*. How was it that a woman living at the periphery of the Tibetan cultural world achieved what few women in Tibetan history did? Was autobiographical writing by women more common than we can now perceive in Tibet, or is the *Life* of Orgyan Chokyi truly an unusual work of literature? Partial answers to these questions may be gleaned from the *Life* by focusing on moments when Orgyan Chokyi and her editor discuss the act of writing itself.

The introduction to Orgyan Chokyi's story of her life contains an explicit testimony of the difficulties women encountered in merely trying to produce religious literature. Though it is abundantly clear that women have played important and varied roles in the religious life of the Tibetan cultural world,

they have rarely been in positions of social authority sufficient to contribute substantially to the traditions of writing in which men have so excelled. The introductory passage illustrates what might be a prototypical scene lying behind this imbalance. In the opening lines of the work, we find ourselves in the midst of a conversation between Orgyan Chokyi and her master, Orgyan Tenzin. The hermitess makes a request of the old man: "I have good reason to write a few words on my joys and sufferings. Therefore I pray of you master, write it down." From this request it might first appear that Orgyan Chokyi did not know how to write and that she was asking her master to compose her life story only because she was illiterate. But there is more to this request. Perhaps it was not her prerogative to write her own story, and this is in fact a request for permission to write about herself.

At any rate, her request does not meet with a favorable response, as Orgyan Tenzin scolds her: "There is no reason to write a *Life* for you—a woman." And thinking on this woman's words, he adds: "You must be silent!" Orgyan Chokyi is thus forbidden to write the *Life* precisely because of her gender. Dolpo was heir to a rich tradition of such works by men, and Orgyan Chokyi was introduced to the *Lives* of past masters by Orgyan Tenzin himself. And yet in his estimation there was simply "no reason" for a woman to write such a work. She might be qualified to live the life of a hermitess, but she was not authorized to write the *Life* of a hermitess—at least not yet.

Rather than acquiesce to Orgyan Tenzin's stricture, Orgyan Chokyi seeks an alternative form of authorization. What happens next is fascinating: She weeps, the first of many times in the *Life*, for she does not know how to write. "If I knew how to write," she writes (paradoxically), "I would have reason to write of my joys and sufferings." In spite of her master's command, she would not be quiet, and she did have a reason to compose a *Life*. Her joys and sufferings may not have included enlightenment, as did the tales of past masters, but they would provide inspiration for her readers to practice the basic Buddhist teachings prescribed at the end of the *Life*. The impression is given that she had to wait until very late in life to achieve the ability to compose the work. As she began to receive premonitions of her own death, a miracle occurred: She was visited by those muse-like celestial beings of Tibetan Buddhist myth, the dakinis, who gave her instructions. But more than this, the dakinis gave her the gift of writing. She was freed of the "impediment," illiteracy, and she could now carry out her wishes under the authority of the dakinis.³⁸

Thus, in violation of her master's wishes, Orgyan Chokyi began to write the story of her life.³⁹ Where localized personal authority failed to give her permission, Orgyan Chokyi sought leave to set down impressions of her life from an atemporal, translocal authority. She dared to write like a male monastic rather than weave like a woman, as tradition would have her do.⁴⁰ And how could her master refuse her when she claimed the permission of the dakinis, figures so important in the rhetoric of Nyingma literature as a whole? That he could not is evident in the very existence of her *Life*. Such appeal to a higher celestial authority is a not uncommon trope in the spiritual autobiographies of Western women. Madre María de San José (1656–1719), to cite one example

from Hispanic hagiographic literature, frequently stated that she did not know how to write. The translators of her life story suggest that “while these comments participate in formulaic claims to modesty and ignorance, they may also reflect María’s awareness of the gap between her own often vernacular style and that of more learned, polished texts published with ecclesiastical support.”⁴¹ Much the same can be said of Orgyan Chokyi: If there was no tradition of women’s writing upon which to base her *Life* and by which to justify the writing of it, then Orgyan Chokyi would subvert any claims to tradition by claiming to rise above the human social norms and write under the protection of celestial beings.

The troubles evoked at the beginning of the *Life of Orgyan Chokyi* may be fruitfully contrasted with the scene of composition portrayed in the work of her contemporary, Tenzin Repa. One of Tenzin Repa’s short autobiographical works was composed at the behest of his students as an inspirational model of perseverance against the misery of life. The introduction to the song evokes a typical beginning of an auto/biographical project. His disciple, Karma Tenzin, asks that his master’s teachings be anthologized and that he compose a small autobiography. “Wouldn’t these teachings spread if they were collected and written down?” asks Tenzin Repa’s disciple. But the master is reticent. “If I had them in mind, I would do so,” he says in excuse. Karma Tenzin persists: “Well, since very few of your teachings can be written down as examples, please give a summary of your ancestry, your family, your mother’s and father’s names and status, your homeland, and your life until you ventured toward the Dharma.” Tenzin Repa again demurs, assuring his disciple that any account of his life would be of little use to people: “Many other instructions and life stories have already been written. What’s the use?” After further cajoling, however, he acquiesces. “If we don’t ask for your life story now, there will be no opportunity later,” complains Karma Tenzin, “so please tell us your life in full to guide both myself and these other faithful. If your mind is tired, we really only need root verses.”⁴² Then the song begins, and the life of Tenzin Repa is added to those of his spiritual forefathers.

This passage provides vivid contrast to the introductory scene of Orgyan Chokyi’s autobiography. Whereas Tenzin Repa fights off the requests of his disciples to speak even a few verses of his life, Orgyan Chokyi must plead even to be allowed to write. Whereas Tenzin Repa complains that his life story will be just like those of the many masters of the past—but then goes on to tell of his life anyway—Orgyan Chokyi’s tale is cut short at the end because a scribe deems it too similar to one of the few woman’s life stories that precede it.

The opening verses of the Lhasa aristocrat Tsering Wangyal’s autobiography also stand in stark contrast to the humble beginning of Orgyan Chokyi’s *Life*. A central figure in eighteenth-century literary and political life around central Tibet, Tsering Wangyal begins his own story with this eloquent statement on suffering: “The trial of bearing suffering’s torment by those wandering without a break on the endlessly long path of life is beyond words.” The “honest tale” of his own travels on the path of life will “be a source of shame (for him) and mockery for scholars.” Yet despite this self-effacing posture, he

reluctantly agrees to “say something so that history may henceforth be correct.”⁴³ He writes that his life is but a trifle in comparison with the great suffering of existence, though he may as well record it for the sake of posterity. But this is false modesty, for he then proceeds to describe his education—among the the best that central Tibet had to offer—and his role in the power politics of the day in an ornate form of Tibetan, drawing on the poetic tradition of India. Tsering Wangyal is confident, so confident that he invites mockery from his peers. As one of the leading literati of his day, Tsering Wangyal had the luxury of modesty that Orgyan Chokyi could not afford.

Although Orgyan Chokyi claims ignorance of writing before the benevolent influence of the dakinis, she does mention elsewhere that she received instruction in reading from one of her senior nuns, Ani Drupchen Sodrolma. Orgyan Chokyi is self-critical of her intellectual abilities, making no claims to be a scholar: “Because I did not have a great intellect I had to make a great effort in my studies.” Indeed, the *Life* is composed in simple, colloquial Tibetan with little poetic flourish. There is nothing of the eloquent prose being produced during the same period by the elite of central Tibet. Occasionally she is apologetic for running long on certain subjects, especially suffering. “There are many tales of how great suffering arose,” she writes toward the end of Chapter Three, “but I will not write any more of it.”

The act of writing is mentioned only one other time in the *Life*. During a troubling period in the initial phase of meditation instruction under Orgyan Tenzin, her master orders her to write something on a long list of philosophical and soteriological notions: “Go and write something decent on the three and five poisons, the six aggregates, the pride of big minds and small, subtle and course consciousness, relative and ultimate truths, and the like.” She protests, arguing that writing would harm her meditative practice. “If I write a lot of words, my stillness will vanish.” And again she derides her own intellectual abilities, claiming that she has not the intelligence necessary to write on such matters. Her master does not give in, and charges her to complete her meditations and write all night, from evening until dawn the next day.

If Orgyan Chokyi’s story bares marked differences from the writings of men—both yogins from Dolpo and aristocrats from central Tibet—it is also different in other respects from the few available writings by or about Tibetan women. It is not a work of learned literature such as the biography of Chokyi Dronma. It lacks the poetic flourish of Jetsun Lochén’s long work,⁴⁴ or the eloquent and tradition-laden accounts of Mingyur Paldron’s previous embodiments.⁴⁵ It is not organized in terms of the exoteric-esoteric-arcane divisions of spiritual autobiography, as is the story of Sonam Paldren.⁴⁶ Orgyan Chokyi was not the daughter of a great teacher; she was not born into an aristocratic family. She was the daughter of farmers in the village highlands of the remote valleys of the Himalaya, and she was reared and educated in these same valleys. Her autobiography reflects her humble origins, and this is precisely its strength, for her story is replete with inspirational examples drawn directly from the lives of those who probably read it.

The *Life of Orgyan Chokyi* consists of ten chapters, an introduction, and a small conclusion. The chapter titles, provided at the beginning of the work itself, underscore the major concerns of the *Life*: how a mountain of suffering arose in her youth; how she cut her hair, herded horses, and impermanence arose; how she requested religious teachings and understood the stillness and movement of the mind, and so on. In chronological terms, the chapters progress as follows. Chapters One through Three are dedicated to Orgyan Chokyi's youth up to the period in which she entered monastic life. Chapters Four through Six detail her activities in midlife, including meditation, pilgrimage, and work at the monastic institution of Tarap. Chapters Seven through Nine highlight Orgyan Chokyi's success in later life, focusing upon her solitary practices and ascetic practice. Finally, Chapter Ten describes her death, funeral, and the distribution of her relics, and closes with a verse of exhortation. As the chapter titles suggest, suffering and impermanence are pervasive themes. Orgyan Chokyi describes suffering in social, bodily, and karmic terms. From the "mountain of suffering" that was her early family life to her untimely death, the pervasiveness of suffering and impermanence is brought home again and again.

The question of precisely what sources went into the development of Orgyan Chokyi's descriptions of suffering and of women is an open one. In general terms, I think that the *Life* and *Songs* of Milarepa, so popular among the faithful of the Nepal Himalayas, must have played a role.⁴⁷ The theme of weeping, for instance, is an integral part of both the *Life of Milarepa* and the *Life of Orgyan Chokyi*, as will become clear in the next chapter. Audiences of Orgyan Chokyi's *Life* may also have known Milarepa's tale from the oral performances of storytellers in Dolpo. Such people would display narrative paintings of Milarepa's life during festivals and retell his story to onlookers gathered around. For audiences familiar with the sufferings of Milarepa, Orgyan Chokyi's own tale of suffering and success would have certainly been reminiscent of that of the greatest of yogins.

At the close of Chapter Nine in the *Life* we leave the words of Orgyan Chokyi and move to her disciples' perspective on her last days, her fateful accident, and her death and commemoration. In the interstice between Chapters Nine and Ten the voice of an anonymous editor appears. The relationship between this voice and that of Orgyan Chokyi is not entirely clear. Was this editor also a scribe? Did he or she know Orgyan Chokyi personally? At any rate, the editor tells several interesting details about the *Life*. According to this short note, the foregoing work (Chapters One through Nine) has been a summary of the words of Orgyan Chokyi. Although the editor admits that some prose passages were rewritten as verse, he claims that nothing else was changed. One might suppose, then, that the songs punctuating the narrative were edited for effect.⁴⁸ Faintly echoing the discouraging words of Orgyan Tenzin at the opening of the *Life*, the editor then provides a rationale for editing the words of the hermitess to their present truncated form. If the full life of this dakini were to be told, it would merely be an imitation of the life story of

Nangsa Obum, the famous heroine of Tibetan folk drama.⁴⁹ This is a fascinating statement for a number of reasons that we will explore shortly.

As the *Life* draws to a close, it moves further beyond the voice of the hermitess. If the anonymous author of the final chapter provides an idealized version of the death of Orgyan Chokyi, the concluding lines provide us with clues to the role of the *Life* in the religious lives of those left behind. To gain a sense of the circumstances of textual production, we look, among other places, to colophons for details about donors, distribution, and the material conditions of making texts. One manuscript of Orgyan Chokyi's hagiography available to us was sponsored by women and contains two colophons, one by a laywoman and one by a local nun. One reads: "In this life may the patroness Khandro Chokyi be happy and live long, and in the next may she be born in a heavenly realm." Khandro Chokyi remains otherwise unknown; it is significant merely to know that she was a woman patronizing a woman's life story. The other colophon is more specific: "By the benefit of commissioning this life story of the Dakini Orgyan Chokyi, emanation of Mother Guhyajñānā, may the patroness Ani Chozangmo of Samten Ling be born in a pure land of skygoers, in the presence of Avalokiteśvara in the Potala."

Not only were women patronizing such work but nuns such as Ani Chozangmo also had the inclination and the financial means to pay for the reproduction of manuscripts. Such patronage, however, was not unusual for this region, nor was it restricted to writings by or about women; Orgyan Chokyi herself was among the patrons of a senior male contemporary's hagiography, as we have seen earlier. These lines also reveal something of the hopes placed upon Orgyan Chokyi's *Life* by its female benefactors. Both colophons pray for a favorable rebirth for the patrons. Ani Chozangmo, who most likely lived at the Samten Ling temple situated in Northern Dolpo, wished to be born in a pure land, and would stake her fortunes after death on the life story of a woman. In these brief lines the social history of women's religious activities in Dolpo begins to come into focus. Women actively promoted the production of hagiographic texts in Dolpo after the time of Orgyan Chokyi, most likely during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. If Orgyan Chokyi's example could not be duplicated—we know of no other *Lives* composed by women in Dolpo—her story could be reproduced by faithful women in the decades and centuries to come.

Now, after looking at the structure, content, and creation of the Orgyan Chokyi's life story, let us return to the background of her *Life*, and ask again about the relation between it and other hagiographic writings. Whereas the beginning of the present chapter looked primarily to the *Life of Milarepa*, we will now look more closely at the female figures of the past that Orgyan Chokyi—and her anonymous editor—explicitly count among her influences. The *Life* mentions eight saints of the past, including four women: Nangsa Obum, Macig Labdron, Gelongma Paldron, and Lingza Chokyi. We will look at several of these figures, beginning with the revenant Nangsa Obum.

A Tibetan Folk Heroine

Nangsa Obum is perhaps the most popular female Tibetan folk hero. The central character of one of Tibet's seven or eight dramas traditionally performed by troupes of male actors,⁵⁰ she epitomizes the struggle at the center of Orgyan Chokyi's *Life*—the search for self-determination in religious practice. Nangsa Obum's tale has been told in English half a dozen times throughout the last century. Yet because of the important role it plays in the *Life of Orgyan Chokyi*, it will be worth our while to hear it briefly again, so that the two stories may be easily compared. In most versions of the *Life of Nangsa Obum*, this woman is born into a wealthy family in the Tsang area of southwestern Tibet.⁵¹ Her parents, Kunzang Dechen and Nyangsa Saldron, are overjoyed at the arrival of their newborn girl, who pays homage to the goddess Tārā as soon as she takes her first sip of mother's milk. Young Nangsa has a happy childhood replete with loving parents, hard work, and the study of the Dharma. When she is fifteen, Nangsa Obum is chosen by the king of Rinang to be wed to his son, Drakpa Samdrup. She protests, but her parents will hear none of it and send her to Rinang. Seven years later she gives birth to the son of Drakpa Samdrup, Lhau Darpo. She is declared to be free of a "woman's five faults" (she is not indecisive, weak-willed, easily swayed by others, extremely greedy for food and wealth, and obstinate) and possessed of "an intelligent woman's eight qualities" (she does not act under delusion even without a man around, loves her spouse, bears many sons, is able-bodied, does not talk a lot, is level-headed, is steadfastly friendly, and is an excellent worker).⁵²

Because the king of Rinang and his son are both in love with Nangsa Obum, they decide to give the keys to the royal storehouse to her. But their affection for her proves to be her undoing as her place in the court becomes more and more tenuous. The storeroom keys had formerly been the privilege of the king's sister, Ani Nyemo, who becomes fiercely jealous and begins a campaign of intrigue and insult against the heroine. Nangsa Obum sings the first of her laments, bemoaning the fact that her present situation—and in particular her son, a "samsaric rope"—prevents her from entering the religious life. As Nangsa Obum shows favor toward a traveling yogin and begins to turn away from her domestic life, Ani Nyemo convinces the king that his daughter-in-law is being unfaithful to the family. In a rage he beats her and takes her son away.

Nangsa Obum dies, struck down by a fierce melancholia from the treachery that besets her.⁵³ In death she travels to the underworld and meets Avalokiteśvara in his wrathful form as the lord of the dead. Looking into the "karma mirror" he sees that she is a virtuous person, and thus sends her back to the world of the living to be a revenant and aid others in virtuous conduct.

With a new vision of human life, she returns to her family and, in a series of emotionally gripping songs exchanged with her son, she declares her newfound zeal to practice religion. She attempts to teach her husband, father-in-law, and aunt about impermanence, karma, and suffering, but is unable to

reach them due to their karmically habituated negative attitudes. Fearing only that she will seek retribution for their crimes against her, they attempt to placate her with a visit to her mother and father. Back at home she once again attempts to preach the Dharma to her family and their servants. She sings many beautiful songs to all who would listen, including a “loom song” to the weavers of her family’s compound, in which each part of the loom is likened to a point of esoteric philosophy. But her preaching through song succeeds only in angering her mother, who kicks her out of the house.

This final act of disparagement by her family convinces Nangsa to find a religious master and begin her Dharma practice in earnest. After a series of further trials, she is accepted as a disciple by Shakya Gyaltzen, a yogin in the tradition of Milarepa. Under this master she is granted many tantric instructions, is provided with a small dwelling for solitary meditation, and within three months achieves perfection in her contemplative experience.⁵⁴ Meanwhile, Nangsa Obum’s husband and father-in-law learn of her whereabouts and set out to attack the hermitage of Shakya Gyaltzen and retrieve “their woman Nangsa.” As the two men and their army destroy the master’s institution, capture him, and kill his disciples, Nangsa Obum—now a revenant and powerful yogini in her own right—emerges from contemplative reverie to rebuke her father-in-law for challenging the master. Angered at her insolence, the king of Rinang readies an arrow while his son lifts a sword, both fixed upon killing Shakya Gyaltzen. But at that moment the old yogin reveals his supernormal powers to the king by moving a mountain, bringing his slain disciples back to life, and flying up into the sky to deliver a song. He is followed by his foremost female disciple, as Nangsa Obum transforms her hermit’s robes into wings and soars above her men and their army. Dumbfounded at this display, the army retreats, the king and his son repent, and the family that had scorned her bows to Nangsa Obum’s higher status as the goddess Dorje Phagmo.⁵⁵

As the *Life of Nangsa Obum* comes to a close, the grand results of her desire to practice religion against all odds are manifest. The king and her husband promise to hand the kingdom over to her son, Lhau Darpo, who rules with the ten virtues and the sixteen laws, and supports the hermitage of Shakya Gyaltzen with generous patronage. Ani Nyemo leaves household life to become a disciple of Nangsa Obum and Shakya Gyaltzen, willingly giving up her power over the younger woman of her family. And our heroine may finally die a proper saint’s death, leaving footprints in the rocky walls of her meditation cave for all “up to the present day.”

In light of this story, what can be made of the editor’s claim that the *Life of Orgyan Chokyi* is merely a “copy” of the *Life of Nangsa Obum*? What was he or she trying to say about the relationship between the two? And when so many autobiographies and biographies of Tibetan men are but recapitulations of the forms of their teachers’ life stories, and those of their teachers before them, it is ironic that Orgyan Chokyi’s unique work was apparently cut short by an editor/scribe because of its perceived similarity with a work of the past. Why, then, did the editor make such claims?

Although there is thematic similarity between the stories of Nangsa Obum and Orgyan Chokyi, there is little narrative similarity. First, the tale of Nangsa Obum belongs to a group of narratives dedicated to people who have died, traveled though the land of the dead, and returned to impart ethical teachings to the living. Orgyan Chokyi's *Life* is clearly not a part of this genre; she is not a revenant. Second, Nangsa Obum differs in several significant ways from Orgyan Chokyi. She is from a noble family; she marries and has children before she enters the monastic life, and she struggles with her parents about her inclinations toward religious vocations throughout her life. Orgyan Chokyi, by contrast, leaves her poor parents at a young age, never speaks of marriage, and though she dreams of hell she never claims to have visited the fiery realm in a postdeath state. By the conclusion of the *Life of Nangsa Obum*, her story has become an epic tale in which adherence to the Dharma upholds the moral law of the land. Viewed from this perspective, it is perhaps more comparable in scope to the *Ramayana* than to the story of the hermitess from Dolpo.

Nevertheless, there are significant reasons why such a comparison might have been made. In general it seems clear that it is the ethical content of the two life stories that leads this anonymous editor to draw a parallel between Orgyan Chokyi and Nangsa Obum, rather than any similarity in the course of their respective life narratives. As a recent writer has insightfully suggested, "Hagiographic narratives produce effects in large part by means of generic expectation, but the genre is neither monolithic nor simple."⁵⁶ Orgyan Chokyi's story can be compared to that of Nangsa Obum only from a certain perspective. To say that it is similar to the story of Nangsa Obum is both a criticism and a source of its effectiveness, for not only is Chokyi using female predecessors as models but her life story also uses them intertextually. The reader can make constant reference to Nangsa Obum. "This is just like that scene in Nangsa Obum when . . .," one can imagine a traditional reader or listener saying. The *Life of Orgyan Chokyi* falls somewhere between Tibetan *Lives* of Buddhist masters and tales of revenants. It is a popularized version of a hagiography in that its overwhelming concern is to impress upon its readers the fundamental reality of suffering.

The second prominent female figure to whom the *Life of Orgyan Chokyi* refers is Macig Labdron. Like Nangsa Obum, this twelfth-century saint is famous throughout Tibet, though for very different reasons. She is best known for creating a set of ritual and contemplative practices known as "severance," in which the aspirant imagines making an offering of her or his body, piece by piece. Hagiographies of Macig Labdron are well known to contemporary audiences, and at any rate have less in common with the *Life of Orgyan Chokyi* than those of Nangsa Obum, so we will not dwell upon them.⁵⁷ What is important for our purposes about Macig Labdron is the fact that she is one of only two authoritative female masters to whom Orgyan Chokyi has recourse in Tibetan tradition—and the only Tibetan woman at that.⁵⁸ The other is the Indian female figure who stands at the beginning of fasting ritual lineages—Gelongma Palmo, to whom we now turn.

An Indian Nun's Fast

Gelongma Palmo, or Palmo the Nun, was traditionally held to be the founder of a fasting practice involving the worship of Avalokiteśvara. Orgyan Chokyi refers to Gelongma Palmo only once in the *Life*, though it is clear from the importance of fasting in her story that Gelongma Palmo's legacy looms large behind Orgyan Chokyi. The story of Gelongma Palmo was retold throughout the Tibetan regions of the Nepal Himalayas by such women *mañipas*, or storytellers, as Jetsun Lochen Rinpoche.⁵⁹ Her story is also important in the fasting rituals among the Sherpa of eastern Nepal Himalaya.⁶⁰

In order to understand this tradition and explain its relation to the life and practice of Orgyan Chokyi, let us turn to an early hagiography of Gelongma Palmo that appears to have been popular. This version of her life was composed in the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century by the central Tibetan hagiographer Jodan Sonam Zangpo.⁶¹ Sonam Zangpo states that he compiled scattered stories of Gelongma Palmo and members of the lineage that claimed her as its beginning and compiled them into a single work. It is thus possible that his is one of the earliest comprehensive accounts of this tradition of ritual fast. Sonam Zangpo's tale is admittedly far removed in time and place from the life of Orgyan Chokyi, but it nonetheless provides significant points of comparison for our study of Orgyan Chokyi's life and practice, and is a captivating story in its own right. At the beginning of the hagiography, Sonam Zangpo heralds Gelongma Palmo as the founding figure in a tradition of worship and ritual dedicated to Avalokiteśvara in his eleven-faced form. In fact, he writes, she heard the evocation ritual to Avalokiteśvara directly from the bodhisattva, and wrote his words down in the form that we know them today.

Gelongma Palmo was the sister of the Indian king Indrabodhi, a ubiquitous figure in tales of Indian tantric saints, whose story is well known from the *Tales of the Eighty-Four Adepts*, and who also happens to be the elder brother of another well-known female saint, Lakṣmīkarā.⁶² Though she was learned in the five arts and sciences (poetics, philosophy, practical arts, medicine, and the inner arts of Buddhism) and lived honorably according to the rules and vows, she became stricken with leprosy due to previous karmic acts. Her right hand was cut off at the wrist. Her visage became hideous, as if racked with terrible pain, and her skin was "like a spring flower struck by a freeze." When she ate and drank she did not know how to feed herself with her left hand, and thus became like a hungry ghost. Struck by such a terrible illness, an unfathomable suffering came to her mind that seemed without cure. Her community took her to an isolated thatched hut, where she sat and wept.

One night her brother, King Indrabodhi, came in a dream bearing a crystal vase, saying, "This is water that has been offered to Mahākaruṇika," or in other words to Avalokiteśvara. As he said these words, he sprinkled her head with water from the vase, whereupon her body, speech, and mind became comfortable and calm. He consoled her, assuring that "by virtue of this fierce illness of yours, you will develop the fortitude to attain the highest spiritual boon

quickly. Have great faith and devotion for the Eleven-Faced One, who is the essence of all the buddhas of the three times.” The following morning her illness caused her no suffering. Taking this as a sign of Avalokiteśvara’s beneficent influence, she began to make prayers to him, reciting the six-syllable mantra *om maṇi padme hūm* by day, and the spell of the Eleven-Faced One by night. She continued these practices for six months.

One day at dawn she was on the edge of sleep and thinking happily, “Now spiritual attainment will be easy for me. I do not need deities of little understanding. If I die with this terrible illness, I will be content.” As she lay thinking this, a vision appeared in her hut, filling it with white light. A young child mounted on a lion appeared in the midst of this light and spoke to Gelongma Palmo: “You must not stay here; go to Likharavarhi, where the essence of all buddhas of the three times, the thousand-armed, thousand-eyed Avalokiteśvara dwells. Recite the heart [mantra] in his presence and pay homage to him. Then your attainment will be easy.” After the young messenger gave her this command he placed a medicinal pill upon her tongue. Gelongma Palmo asked the young apparition who he might be, and he revealed himself to be Mañjuśrī, bodhisattva of wisdom and patron saint of the wise. Now knowing that she was in the presence of a great bodhisattva, she beseeched him to grant a spiritual boon. “This is the boon right now.” So saying, he gave her no more and faded away like a rainbow. Through this visitation by Mañjuśrī intense feelings of kindness and compassion overcame the nun, and single-pointed faith and devotion in the Great Compassionate One, Mahākaraṇika Avalokiteśvara, were born in her.

Inspired by her newfound faith, she set out for Likharavarhi. After seven days she took a rest under a tree situated on a river bank. As she tried to sleep, more supernatural beings appeared near her. First a bunch of nasty demons made a terrible racket and cause her great anxiety. She conjured up great faith in Avalokiteśvara, and her fear subsided. Then seven red dakinis wearing turbans of flowers appeared before her and said: “When you attain the supreme spiritual boon, we will bow at the front of your retinue. Preserve the word of the Buddha!”

Gelongma Palmo addressed the dakinis: “To which family [of deities] do you belong?”

“We are dakinis of the lotus family. We come from Orgyan. Tomorrow [you] should come to Orgyan and be the queen of the dakinis.”

“But I am charged to go quickly to Likharavarhi,” replied Gelongma Palmo.

The dakinis then blessed her with a gift and sent her on her way: “Carry this unsullied white cloth and travel under it.” That night, as she approached Likharavarhi, yet another dakini offered her rice in a white cloth.

Once in Likharavarhi, she remained in the presence of the statue of Avalokiteśvara, vowing not go anywhere until she had achieved the supreme spiritual boon of enlightenment. For one year she devoted her mind and body to praying to the bodhisattva of compassion, not even resting for a moment to eat or drink. After one year her faithful devotions bore results. The physical manifestations of disease on her body fell off “like tree-bark peeling away.”

Even her right hand was restored, and her body became more beautiful than it had ever been before. A deep calm arose in her mind, and when external obstacles such as demons arose she meditated on kindness and compassion. Her mind was thus firmly fixed upon enlightenment. She had become a bodhisattva. Buddhist guardian deities of the ten directions arrived to test her resolve, but to no avail. Steadfast in an attitude of compassion, she summoned them before her and subdued them. They agreed to be Dharma protectors for those practicing Great Compassion, and in particular the eight great serpent deities agreed to be the special Dharma protectors for eleven-faced Avalokiteśvara.

At the beginning of the Sagasari month she integrated all her obstacles into the mind of enlightenment. All her disease and impurity were purified, and she beheld the first bodhisattva level. On the first day of the Sagadawa month she saw noble Tārā, who prophesied that the “enlightened acts of the buddhas of the three times would come together in [Gelongma Palmo] herself.” In other words, Gelongma Palmo would achieve enlightenment. On the fifteenth day of the month she again beheld eleven-faced Avalokiteśvara in a vision, embellished with one thousand hands and one thousand eyes. On every single hair follicle she saw innumerable buddhas resting, in each hand the essence of the Buddha, and in the center of each palm a host of tantric deities. Avalokiteśvara taught her the Dharma, and an inconceivably deep calm arose in her mind. She thus beheld the truth of the eighth bodhisattva ground. Then for the sake all beings she performed the fasting ritual for three months.

After this she traveled to the “middle country,” where all the people remarked: “The Gelongma’s illness was severe! How will it be for those who are lazy in their studies and vows?” In order to counter the unfaithful, in the middle of a festival taking place in the market of Khasarpani she cut off her own head, stuck it upon her walking stick, and began to dance. All those who could bear this spectacle requested blessings from the nun and attained a boon. Though externally she was Gelongma Palmo, internally she was now no less than the goddess Vajrayoginī.

Jodan Sonam Zangpo concludes his tale of Gelongma Palmo’s faithful dedication to Avalokiteśvara and her eventual enlightenment by connecting her deeds with the Tibetan ritual calendar: “This Gelongma from a powerful royal family vanquished obstructing demons at the beginning of the fourth month, Sagadawa, because this is a time when one’s goals can be attained. Thus, these days followers who seek attainment also begin on the beginning of the fourth month, and they quickly achieve their goals with little obstruction.”

There are three principal reasons to compare the *Life of Gelongma Palmo* with the *Life of Orgyan Chokyi*. First, and most obviously, both are about women. This may sound like a platitude, but is probably the main reason they are connected at all in the *Life*. Second, both undergo suffering on their quest for liberation. Finally, both employ the practice of fasting as a means of purification and atonement. Gender, suffering, and penance—these are certainly central themes in Orgyan Chokyi’s *Life*, and the mere mention of Gelongma

Palmo provides her own tale of ascetic perseverance with a powerful link to the past. By bringing up Gelongma Palmo, the *Life* intimates that Orgyan Chokyi was in fact acting like the creator of the fasting ritual herself. This story provides a narrative rationalization of a rite that Orgyan Chokyi practiced to the end of her life.

Yet though the fact that the teachings on fasting are traced back to Gelongma Palmo might be heralded as a clear example of Buddhist teachings by and for women, this is not supported by the Tibetan lineages that passed down these teachings. After Gelongma Palmo herself, there is not a single woman in hagiographic compendia dedicated to the transmission lineages of the fasting tradition. In terms of the textual tradition, at least, it was men who claimed authority of transmission. Furthermore, there is little explicit mention of gender as either an obstacle or a benefit in Sonam Zangpo's *Life of Gelongma Palmo*. To be sure, Gelongma Palmo is expected to marry, much like Nangsa Obum. But the difficulties marriage presents for religious practice are not directly connected to Gelongma Palmo's gender by Sonam Zangpo. And Gelongma Palmo's story certainly does not contain the critique of men seen in the poems of Orgyan Chokyi.

There is nonetheless no doubt that the fasting practices associated with the worship of the eleven-faced form of Avalokiteśvara were important women's practices during the seventeenth century. The survey of Gandenpa monasteries compiled in the late 1690s by Sangye Gyatso specifically mentions that the fasting ritual was performed regularly in a number of nunneries. It was also clearly an important practice for Orgyan Chokyi and her companions, and the fact that a female saint stands at the beginning of the tradition surely had an influence upon its popularity among religious women. Even in the twentieth century, Orgyan Chokyi was associated with Gelongma Palmo and her fasting ritual by the inhabitants of Dolpo.

The central symbol of suffering in the story of Gelongma Palmo is leprosy. Leprosy was a powerful symbol of bodily suffering employed with some frequency in the lives of Buddhist saints, and perhaps saints more broadly. In medieval European hagiography, leprosy was also used as a symbol of suffering and an opportunity for ascetic practice.⁶³ In Tibetan hagiography, it also appears as a motif in the seventeenth-century life of Mandarava, the Indian female companion of Padmasambhava.⁶⁴ Yet the *Life of Orgyan Chokyi* does not develop the theme of illness to the extent that the *Life of Gelongma Palmo* does. Orgyan Chokyi does not claim to be able to make a practice out of illness. The leprosy her father suffered was not a means to make the most out of the worst situation; she merely states that she had to bury him far away from the village.

Related versions of Gelongma Palmo's hagiography form the introduction to a number of manuals that describe the practice of fasting, and it is likely that Orgyan Chokyi knew of it in some form, for her instructions for the ritual fast in Chapter Nine of the *Life* are directly related to such manuals. She performed the fasting ritual dedicated to Avalokiteśvara continually throughout the later part of her life, and it is not difficult to imagine the life of Gelongma Palmo being recounted in the opening ceremonies of the ritual. In contem-

porary Himalayan Buddhist communities, stories do serve as inspirational introductions to the actual fast, as in the case of the fasting rituals performed in Nyeshang just east of Dolpo, where the story of Milarepa is routinely told during such events.⁶⁵

What could the story of Gelongma Palmo have meant to women such as Orgyan Chokyi? Like hagiographies of Milarepa, Gelongma Palmo's tale was filled with marvels, visions, and death-defying acts of self-sacrifice reminiscent of the rebirth stories of the Buddha. Orgyan Chokyi's *Life* is mundane and downright unimaginative when compared to these hagiographies of distant masters. When Orgyan Chokyi evokes female figures of the past, it is most often to compare herself negatively to their tremendous accomplishments. "I am not able to act like Gelongma Palmo, Mother Macig, or Nangsa Obum—I am afraid of my own death." She just cannot compete, it appears, with Gelongma Palmo standing in the middle of Khasarpani and cutting off her head in order to inspire faith. Though she certainly experiences her share of samsara, she expresses inability to cope with it beyond seeking retreat. Gelongma Palmo becomes an inspiring figure whose example it is impossible to match, though essential to follow. "I must not regret in the end," Orgyan Chokyi decides as she contemplates the life, suffering, ascetic perseverance, and eventual liberation of Gelongma Palmo. "As I pondered such things I made a commitment, and I recited *mani* prayers and meditated."

A Female Mentor

As we move beyond the great female figures of the past to the women of Orgyan Chokyi's present we find figures that are no less intriguing. One of the most fascinating aspects of the *Life of Orgyan Chokyi* is its portrayal of female religious teachers who otherwise remain all but nameless in the literature. Orgyan Chokyi was a teacher in her own right toward the end of her life, and was certainly revered as one after death. Yet there are other female teachers in Orgyan Chokyi's story. The most important in her life was no doubt Ani Drupchenmo. With the exception of Orgyan Tenzin, her master throughout her religious career, Orgyan Chokyi relied on Ani Drupchenmo more than any other person for support. "When I was just beginning," Orgyan Chokyi relates, "Ani Drupchenmo Sonam Drolma instructed all the young nuns and monks in body, speech, and mind. She was of great benefit to my mind." It is not obvious exactly how old Ani Drupchenmo was when Orgyan Chokyi met her, though she must have been a nun of some authority by the time Orgyan Chokyi was in her teens.

The most significant encounters with Ani Drupchenmo occurred during Orgyan Chokyi's immersion in meditation. Ani Drupchenmo counseled her student to learn from Orgyan Tenzin meditation techniques to calm the mind. And although it was clearly Orgyan Tenzin who provided Orgyan Chokyi with the details of her contemplative practice, it was her female teacher who imparted practical instructions. At the order of Orgyan Tenzin, Ani Drupchenmo

taught the basics of meditation posture—the seven vital points of Vairocana—to Orgyan Chokyi. “Your body does not move,” Ani Drupchenmo counseled her young apprentice. “You do not speak, and your respiration is leisurely and self-composed. Mind does not sever impressions from the past, nor does it look to the future. Present mind is unfabricated, without planning, absorbed in relaxation. Look unmoving at the moving mind, without asking questions.”

As Orgyan Chokyi progressed in her meditation she occasionally sought further advice from Ani Drupchenmo, sometimes to clarify Orgyan Tenzin’s instructions, sometimes to confirm her experiences. In Chapter Four, Orgyan Chokyi asks Ani Drupchenmo to come quickly to her meditation cell. When she arrives, Orgyan Chokyi relates her progress: “Yesterday when the master gave me meditation instructions he said, ‘If you are able to view mind, the shining sun of joy will dawn.’ Now this joy comes naturally. Meditation is not perfected all by itself; in conceptuality there is a suffering I have not seen in the scriptures.” Ani Drupchenmo confirms her student’s interpretation of the initial stages of meditation: “You are right. It is like this for beginners. At first settling the mind was a mountain of misery for you. Now you should praise the master and ask him for the four tantric empowerments. Then look at the essence of whatever comes up without mistakenly seizing upon concepts. Without losing mindfulness, keep yourself at ease.” This exchange is punctuated with humor as Orgyan Chokyi attempts to describe her meditation further: “It is the wild thoughts that flow in the conceptual undercurrents that turn the wheel of conceptuality.” Ani Drupchenmo laughs in agreement at the younger nun’s insight, and brings their meeting in Orgyan Chokyi’s solitary meditation cell to a close with an injunction: “Set your mind in a relaxed state and keep this. If you are not in calm stillness, there can be no insight. When you are comfortable in calm stillness you need mindful awareness.” In these passages, Ani Drupchenmo is presented as a confident teacher, well versed in instructions for contemplative practice and eager to mentor her younger sister in religion.

It is clear that Orgyan Tenzin was Orgyan Chokyi’s master, the authority in her social world. Yet in the *Life* Ani Drupchenmo emerges as Orgyan Chokyi’s teacher, her mentor, and her companion. It is unclear exactly when Ani Drupchenmo died—the *Life* does not mention her passing. Fortunately, however, Orgyan Tenzin does note that she died between the years 1696 and 1706.⁶⁶ If Ani Drupchenmo died in the middle of the first decade of the eighteenth century, Orgyan Chokyi would have been approximately thirty. She would outlive her greatest female teacher more than twenty years, and achieve a reputation far outlasting the woman who transformed her from a young apprentice to an experienced nun and hermitess.

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3

Sorrow and Joy

Sorrow and Society

“I have good reason to write a few words on my joys and sufferings.” So begins the *Life of Orgyan Chokyi*. It is no wonder that one of its twin themes is suffering, given the tone of her master’s writing. “Death is the great path for everyone,” writes Orgyan Tenzin darkly. “Do you have encouragement for this path? If you do not, meditate again and again on impermanence.”¹

In many ways Orgyan Chokyi’s tale may be read as a commentary on these words. It is a meditation on impermanence, a lament for the death Orgyan Chokyi witnesses. The work lives up to its initial promise, providing ample sorrow as well as a good amount of joy. The *Life* contains over 125 distinct references to suffering, depression, lamentation, and pain, and nearly 40 references to tears and weeping. This amounts to nearly 3 references to suffering per manuscript page, in which it employs over 30 separate terms to describe the trials and sorrow-filled visions of the hermitess.² Much of her life story is dedicated to describing the various forms of social, mental, and bodily suffering that she endured during the course of her life, and which led her to the religious vocation. The topic of suffering—and its particular Buddhist partner, impermanence—are of course central to Buddhism, and it links the writings of this eighteenth-century woman to what is traditionally held to be the first teaching of the Buddha himself, the first of the four noble truths: the existence of human suffering.³ But if suffering is commonly linked to women in Buddhist literature, less often is so pronounced an equation made between the sufferings of women and the nature of samsara as in

the songs of Orgyan Chokyi. The issue of suffering and sexual difference will be explored in the next chapter.

Suffering is clearly a major and pervasive theme in the *Life*, perhaps even the central theme. But what does suffering connote in the *Life*? Suffering takes on a variety of forms for Orgyan Chokyi, the most general of which might be termed personal suffering, or suffering that occurs from the particular circumstances of her life. Such experience stems primarily from family, from labor, from friends lost and dead. Suffering in its various forms is distinguished in the *Life* from physical pain. Bodily pain is mentioned only when the hermitess receives her fatal injury.⁴ She experiences a pain in her head after the roof beam falls on her. But bodily pain does not figure significantly in the picture of human suffering developed by the *Life*. The suffering evoked in the *Life* is existential suffering—the suffering inherent to samsara, including but transcending physical pain.

Suffering in the *Life of Orgyan Chokyi* is portrayed primarily by the repeated use of three terms: suffering, sorrow, and weeping.⁵ The relation between the three can be summarized simply: The perception of suffering gives rise to sorrow, which in turn manifests physically as weeping and tears. Suffering plays a fundamental role in Buddhist ethics, cosmology, and soteriology, and systematic accounts of it are found in any number of Tibetan works to which Orgyan Chokyi had access. Yet the response of sorrow and weeping as developed in the *Life* shares more in common with the life stories of saints such as Milarepa than with systematic treatises of Buddhist canonical literature. The suffering of beings trapped by their own karmic acts in the endlessly spinning wheel of samsara is given vivid expression in *Lives* such as that of Milarepa, as we shall see shortly when we look more closely at the role of weeping in Milarepa's *Life*.

It is likely that Orgyan Chokyi developed the image of suffering and sorrow in the *Life*—with its relentless accounts of anguish, misery, and melancholia—in conversation with several works listed in Chapters Four and Nine, including her own master's *Self-Luminous Dharma Realm of the Profound Essence*, one or more renderings of the *Life of Milarepa*, and a host of *Lives* from the hagiographic collections of the Kagyu schools known as *Golden Rosaries*. She also mentions Gampopa's *Jewel Ornament of Liberation*, a didactic work that provides a convenient summary of suffering and its corollary, impermanence, with a liberal helping of quotes from classical Indian Buddhist sources.⁶ These two central notions form part of the long-standing Buddhist scheme describing all objects under three central characteristics: suffering, impermanence, and not-self (that is, no objects possess an essential self). Although these three notions form the underpinning of many Buddhist ontological theories,⁷ it is the former two that concern Orgyan Chokyi, and we may thus briefly look to the *Jewel Ornament* for what Gampopa says about suffering and impermanence.

According to Gampopa, “concentrated attention to the significance of impermanence is the remedy for attachment to sensuous experiences in this life.”⁸ His instructions for meditating on impermanence follow canonical models, and conclude with a vivid account of death in which the meditator is asked

to imagine a formerly healthy relative become ill, suffer a painful death, and be sent to the cremation grounds. “He is laid down on a stretcher, bound and tied crosswise, and the corpse carriers take him out; some people of his household embrace the corpse and pretend affectionately to cling to it, others weep and pretend to be dejected, others again fall to the ground in a faint, while still others say that the body is but earth and stone and that you, acting in such a way, have little sense.”⁹ It is not difficult to imagine that this passage formed a broad backdrop to the debates about grieving and sorrow in the *Life of Orgyan Chokyi*. Gampopa divides the unavoidable suffering stemming from impermanence into three distinct types: the suffering of conditioned existence, the suffering of change, and the suffering of suffering. In this he again follows a long-standing Buddhist scheme.¹⁰ The general point is that suffering is a pervasive part of human life, from the brief encounters illustrated in the Orgyan Chokyi’s *Life* to the very fabric of existence, conceived as a perennial state of flux conditioned by causes and effects.

Suffering was a popular subject of poetry throughout the Tibetan cultural world and all along the Himalayas, from eighteenth-century Bhutan to contemporary Nepal, where Tamang women north of Nepal tell tales of their joys and sufferings.¹¹ The verse of the great Bhutanese writer Śākya Rinchen—ninth Great Abbot of Bhutan—eloquently attests to the poetry of lament in the Himalayas. Composed as a song of suffering at the loss of his master, it evokes a feeling of personal sorrow of samsara. Śākya Rinchen uses natural imagery to symbolize the transience of human existence and to lend emotive connotation to Buddhist theoretical musings on impermanence:

The sun—Master—my only all-good friend,
Sets impermanent, obscured by the mountain.
In this world, a degenerate age obscured by torpor,
Who can find a happy place?

Before, the flowers were fresh,
Now they are aged by the frosts of time.
I, an old ascetic whose youth has passed,
Lament, not knowing when the lord of death will come.

I’ve protected dearly my body with food and clothing, making efforts
day and night.

Through the four seasons, the years, months, and days I’ve been
hurled to the other side.

In this life, lived like driftwood tossed everywhere on moving waves,
There is no safe place, so drink the nectar of the holy Dharma—only
friend in the next life.¹²

In a more humble style, the Himalayan folk heroine Achay Riktong Gyalmo sings of impermanence to those who have strayed from the Dharma, stating simply: “Life is impermanent, like dew on the grassland.”¹³ The poetry of Orgyan Tenzin speaks to the same concerns. Death strikes all—a platitude Buddhism has insisted upon since its inception—and in the high Himalayan world

of Dolpo it strikes hard in the form of war, pestilence, and ill-fated accident. Orgyan Tenzin wrote often of death from various perspectives, from fearful thoughts of one's own death to the visionary meditations one should undertake after another's death. In the following song he writes simply of the pervasive presence of death and dying in Dolpo—in Orgyan Chokyi's village of Tadru:

Seeing, hearing death.
 Each day I'm hearing death
 In this place of Tadru.
 Each year I'm seeing death.
 In death, no age or youth.
 In death, no proper time.
 In death, no mountain wandering.
 In death, no prayer to speak.
 It cannot be won by royal might.
 In cannot be ransomed by rich men's wealth.
 It cannot be seduced by beauty.
 It cannot be healed by medical know-how.
 It cannot be fixed by the Master.
 It cannot be surrounded by an army.
 Like Kunga Lekpa's prayer of death,
 One night there—the next night gone.¹⁴

Such existential suffering is, in typical Buddhist formulation, the result of desire. Desire drives human life, death, and rebirth, as Orgyan Chokyi vividly illustrates in the *Life* primarily through animal allegories. The fact that the cow is milked at Yeshe Drolma's home means that the calf will go without milk. Humans desire milk, and thus the cow suffers. And all the while the bull just trots around, unconcerned by the plight of the calf. Orgyan Chokyi could not bear this scene: "Thinking that all this suffering was a result of desire, my mental anguish was immeasurable." Orgyan Chokyi implies that tales of such "great suffering" could go on at length, though she assures the reader at one point that she will write no more of it. What the *Life* is adamant about, however, is that although suffering may be pervasive, "the suffering of life comes to females as a matter of course."

Orgyan Chokyi's early family life is a scene of much suffering—a "mountain of suffering" as the *Life* puts it. When she was born, her mother was depressed because she had not given birth to a male child. Her father's leprosy left him miserable and "at the end of his rope." At times she describes her sorrow to be without measure as family members revile her or her father beats her. Her mother chastises her for creating unnecessary suffering for herself rather than learning practical skills such as weaving. When she finally relates the "long sad tale" of her family situation to a sympathetic nun and a monk, they remark on the suffering that has befallen her. And as she takes refuge in their comforting attentions she weeps both for the joy of finding friendship among monks and nuns and the suffering of her ill-fated childhood.

Much of Orgyan Chokyi's *Life* is centered upon longing for something different, something beyond the menial tasks of day-to-day life. This something is, of course, the Dharma. A classic Buddhist form of suffering is separation from the Dharma, from the Buddhist teachings themselves. It is—at least in the first chapters of the *Life*—a panacea that will cure her from suffering. Orgyan Chokyi's mentor, Ani Drupchenmo, makes this clear as she encourages the young girl to become a nun. "You must persevere in the Dharma, for if you were to do worldly work in Peson, you would be forced into corvée labor spring, summer, winter, and fall without rest. As a corvée laborer you would carry water and work all the time. Meet the Dharma, take refuge, study: then you will not suffer."

Orgyan Chokyi (or her editor) often expresses her sorrow in great part through poetic songs. Ten of the thirteen songs in the *Life* are laments. She laments when her mother is cruel to her, when she watches her animals die, when she is trapped in the drudgery of menial labor, and when she reflects upon the sorry lot of humans around her. In Chapter Two the *Life* moves from her own sorrows to the sorrows of others. Scenes of goat-herding function primarily as occasions to lament the lives of beings fated to lowly rebirths. Ignorant and weak, goats have no ability to protect themselves, and thus are subject to painful deaths at the hands of humans and other predators. Non-Buddhist "lowlanders" from Jumla take them to offer in sacrifices to the gods, and even the people of Dolpo—Orgyan Chokyi included—must use the goat for their own subsistence, be it for milk, meat, or leather clothing. Orgyan Chokyi laments this intractable situation:

Alas, the hand of this girl's body.
Virtue is not in this hand. Sin is in this hand.
Taking mother's milk from the mouth of her kid,
My mind is sad, though I do need the milk.
In this human body, I need milk.

For the good Buddhist, the sufferings of goats, horses, and other animals exemplifies of the general state of affairs in samsara. As Orgyan Chokyi relates to her master the untimely death of a foal and its mother's subsequent agony, he first weeps, then goes on to turn the episode into a lesson. "From the very beginning, throughout every lifetime living beings suffer like this. For us the suffering of the mare should be an example, and we must concentrate diligently on the Dharma." Orgyan Chokyi takes this to heart. She "watched the mare suffer for about twelve days. Everyone staying at the monastery was terribly sad. For my own part, great impermanence arose, the likes of which I had never known, and I wept a great deal." Even the minutest creatures could cause Orgyan Chokyi to become sad and mournful, as did an anthill she chanced by on the path from Yeshe Drolma's home. People wasting their chance to reap the benefits of the solitary life were also a cause of anxiety for her. She became "immeasurably sorrowful" as she beheld meditators in a dazed stupor at Tadru.

As life as a nun progresses, Orgyan Chokyi becomes dissatisfied with her

lot in the monastery, where she labors for her master and his patrons. She compares the kitchen to samsara itself, where people labor under delusion, only bringing themselves more suffering. “In the kitchen of mistaken conventional reality, with no leisure day or night, I was saddled with the work of food and drink. Such sadness did my mind experience that it would take too many words to tell, so I will not write more of it.” She attempts to convince herself that working for master and patrons is “good and virtuous work,” but to no end. Her mind suffers “of its own accord,” and is naturally saddened by the labor that prevents her from engaging in solitary practice:

Outside, much worldly work,
 Inside, no time to practice the holy Dharma,
 In between, food and wealth torment the mind—
 Thinking of these my mind is naturally sad.

Sorrow compounded by sorrow appears again as she says goodbye to a friend heading off to Sikkim. “Sadness came naturally to my already sad mind,” she complains. And in the midst of this dark mood her thoughts overtook her as she entered a dark and depressed mental state: “Thoughts came to me with no rhyme or reason. ‘When is my time of dying? Will my religious brothers and sisters remember me?’ I wandered about in a depressed state of mind.”

Continual requests by patrons for food and drink left her heart heavy. As her master, Orgyan Tenzin, refused again and again to release her from the duties of monastic labor, she became distraught, “for I felt I was not able to apply myself to finding the mind.” Orgyan Chokyi eventually asked Orgyan Tenzin if the constant bustle of the monastery and the ever-present patrons making requests did not cause him sorrow. As in other moments in the *Life*, he replied with practical sensibility. It is a lama’s job, he explained, to teach religion and to perform rituals for people. How could he suffer when he was just doing his job? He counseled Orgyan Chokyi to do the same and continue working at the monastery.

“Great suffering” is related “great impermanence,” an evocative use of the classical Buddhist notion of impermanence, which is routinely used in the *Life* of Orgyan Chokyi to refer to moments of great tragedy. Orgyan Chokyi relates the following tale of great impermanence: “Once I was taking a cheerful mare from Dechen Thang to Yura Tangtong. As we walked along this cheerful mare was swept away by the current of the river. Great impermanence arose.” This brutal example of the inherently impermanent nature of life led her to sing a lament to the lost horse. Impermanence also reared before her as she bade farewell to her sisters and brothers traveling to Sikkim.

Even later in life, as she sat in her solitary meditation cave, a profound sense of the transience of life would overcome her: “Little by little all the people who had died in all the Tibetan valleys were set in a row in my memory.” And as she remembered her mother and her passing, she could only weep and think of impermanence. Her deep understanding of this basic Buddhist premise came to be a central feature in her descendants’ memory of her. Though she may not have been a scholar or a great leader, “impermanence continually

rang in her heart” as she “took pity especially on those who were needy and weak.” The death of the hermitess can surely be seen as a moment of suffering, and the later chapters of the *Life* turn her passing into a lesson in impermanence.

Orgyan Chokyi’s sorrow over the death and suffering of animals was not always met with social approval. Once when the village head, Senge Kyapa, and she were leading three mares along a trail at dusk, a leopard leapt out of nowhere and killed one. Senge Kyapa met this death with indifference. For him it was simply a part of life—nothing to be particularly sorrowful over. He explained his reaction to Orgyan Chokyi by stating that the old mare would have been eaten by vultures soon anyway. On another occasion Jampa the meditator and Chokypal Zang the patron tried in vain to convince Orgyan Chokyi to stop lamenting and give up her desire for solitude. “Be content just asking the master for religious instructions,” they advised her. “Do not put on this sad appearance, Ani!” For Orgyan Chokyi the suffering around her could not be ignored; it was a ubiquitous symptom of dark times, of the “degenerate age” in which she lived. Yet even her close companions could not endure her lamentations as she swore, “Now whatever I see, whatever I hear, it is this [degenerate age]. If I were to die right now it would be a pleasure!” Her friend, Yeshe Drolma, criticized her for engaging in “useless worries.”

At the sight of suffering beings Orgyan Chokyi is often moved beyond sorrow to feelings of melancholia, a state from which she found it difficult to emerge. In later years even Orgyan Chokyi’s prayers and meditations often provided little defense against the overwhelming suffering that she perceived around her. “Seeing the joys and sorrows of great, middling, and lesser beings I went about sad and mournful, thinking of impermanence, pitiable creatures, and the uncertainty of the time of my own death.” Having spent a lifetime reflecting on the suffering of others, even in solitude she was unable to look away and find a moment of peace. “The fruits of the actions of this life of mine have come to naught. The creatures of the mountains and valleys, the dependent and humble people, dogs, bugs, little birds, all of their suffering comes to me.” She could not but help contemplate the death of people she had known and found herself “on the verge of depression.” Wherever she looked she beheld only impermanence. In every moment of social life she could see nothing but sorrow, with no hope of improvement. “Whatever I looked at I saw the nature of impermanence. When I beheld the joys and sorrows of people, I thought that nothing was going to come of them. The rich become fewer and fewer. The poor become more and more. If one is without food, they beg for food. If one has no clothes, they beg for a torn-up cloak. Year after year people just keep coming.”

Faced with such overwhelming emotions, Orgyan Chokyi comes before her master, despondent. She seeks counsel from her master, asking him “What are these thoughts of mine?” In response to this, Orgyan Tenzin laughs and asks her what benefit comes from creating all this suffering. Even for Orgyan Tenzin there is a limit to the usefulness of sorrowful contemplations of suffering, despite the fact that he earlier agreed that the sufferings of animals

should be examples of samsara for his young apprentice. He provides her with a meditation practice to combat her melancholia, instructing her to visualize herself as Avalokiteśvara, “with light from the heart of Avalokiteśvara spewing from your mouth.” As the bodhisattva of compassion, perhaps she can muster the courage necessary to face samsara. “Call on the buddhas for reinforcements,” he advises, for the buddhas and bodhisattvas will act as witnesses to her labors in solitary contemplation.

Tears of a Saint

If suffering is a pervasive concern in the *Life*, weeping is the most common image of suffering employed in the hagiography. Tears are a common motif in the lives of saints. Saints weep for the sorry state of humanity, for injustices perpetrated on the lowly, for their own negative past actions, or (if Christian) for the sufferings that Jesus Christ incurred on behalf of humanity. Medieval Catholic writers on Mary Magdalene characterized her famous tears as the witness to her sorrow over past sins.¹⁵ The fifteenth-century English saint Margery Kempe made a career of weeping a “well of tears” to Christ, to the extent that her autobiography thematizes even public reactions against her vociferous laments much as in Orgyan Chokyi’s *Life*.¹⁶ The seventeenth-century French Catholic saint Margaret Mary Alacoque (1647–1690) wrote in the opening pages of her own autobiography: “I spent the nights as I had the days, shedding tears at the foot of my crucifix.”¹⁷ Her mother wept at the thought of her daughter becoming a nun, and Margaret Mary in turn wept because she had no familial support for her noble calling. She wept out of disgust for her own failings, and she wept when Jesus forgave her for her failings in visionary encounters. Tears, in fact, were for Margaret Mary the only possible response to the loving kindness of Jesus: “I shed an abundance of tears on seeing that His only revenge for my sins . . . was an excess of love. [It was] . . . impossible for me to speak to him except by my tears.”¹⁸ In each of these examples from disparate times and places in Christianity, tears and weeping are presented as a discourse that supercedes all others.¹⁹

If frequency is any indication, weeping is also a supreme form of communication in Orgyan Chokyi’s *Life*. References to weeping, wailing, or tears falling like rain occur some twenty-five times in the story as Orgyan Chokyi weeps for herself, for her animals, for her religious brothers and sisters, and ultimately for all who find themselves in samsara. And others weep for her, much as we can imagine the audience of her hagiography weeping for her. But is the ubiquity of tears in the *Life of Orgyan Chokyi* representative of Tibetan literature? Yes and no. Tears are a common response to witnessing suffering in Tibetan popular literature. In the story of the folk hero Gesar’s journey to hell, for instance, the heroine Atak Lhamo’s eyes are ringed with tears as she beholds the suffering of sinful beings in hell.²⁰ Yet tears and weeping are not universally accepted as a positive attribute. According to the *Tibetan Book of the*

Dead, the sounds of weeping and wailing are not good for the departing soul, to whom the Tibetan book of the dead is read.²¹ Doring Paṅḍita's autobiography states that no benefit comes from crying like a woman or a child.²² Even Queen Tritsun—Nepalese queen of the great Tibetan emperor Songtsen Gampo—is chastised for weeping when her plans to build a temple are interrupted.²³ And in the *Life of Lingza Chokyi* the tears shed by Lingza's relatives at her death cause her immense suffering and send down a hail of pus. Yet these warnings could not be more at odds with the importance of weeping in hagiographic scenes of death. Thus we find differing views of weeping in different contexts.

Tears connect the *Life of Orgyan Chokyi* with the tale of Milarepa, for suffering is given outward expression in tears not only in Orgyan Chokyi's tale but also in his spiritual epic. Tsangnyon Heruka's *Life of Milarepa* contains more than eighty instances of weeping, tears, and mourning. Entering the religious life after weeping over the terrible sadness and triumph of Milarepa's life was a common element in the lives of Orgyan Chokyi's contemporaries. In both hagiographies, the tears of the holy person inspire the listener to revulsion from samsara, devotion to one who has borne so much suffering, and emulation of what practices one can take up.

In his *Life of Milarepa*, Tsangnyon Heruka provides us with one clue to an Indian Buddhist source for this emphasis on tears when he mentions the bodhisattva Sadāprarudita. Sadāpradutita, whose name can be translated as "Eternally Weeping," is eager to learn the Perfection of Wisdom teachings from a certain teacher, Dharmodgata.²⁴ Yet because he is terribly poor he has no means of paying for these teachings, and he decides that the only thing he has of worth is own body, so he stands in the middle of a market and puts his flesh up for sale. This great act of sacrifice for the sake of the Buddhist teachings does not go unnoticed: Māra, lord of death, desire, and passion, becomes nervous that Sadāprarudita might actually succeed in selling his body, learning the Perfection of Wisdom doctrines, and attaining enlightenment, thus eluding Māra's grasp. Māra then contrives to make all the villagers in the market deaf to Sadāprarudita's words. The would-be bodhisattva is distraught. He wails and sheds tears, lamenting: "Alas it is hard on us that we do not find a buyer even for our body, so that we could, after selling our body, honor the Bodhisattva Dharmodgata."²⁵ Sadāprarudita's weeping lament catches the ear of the god Śakra, who appears in the market to ask him the cause of his tears. Upon hearing his tale, Śakra allows Sadāprarudita to make his offering and continue his quest for teachings. It is his tears, then, that make the difference. If the gods would not take notice of verbal entreaties, they would hear pleas in the form of weeping. Where words fail, tears are used as a more potent method of persuasion.

The tears of Sadāprarudita also caught the attention of Tsangnyon Heruka as he composed Milarepa's *Life*.²⁶ As Milarepa reads the story of Sadāprarudita, he reflects that this Indian aspirant "who was also without money, gave his body and his life for religion. He would have torn out his heart and sold it, he would have cut it into pieces. Compared to him, I have given nothing for

religion.”²⁷ In the *Life* of Milarepa, people weep when others die. People weep when they ponder their own death. People weep for joy; people weep for sorrows suffusing the human condition. The following summary makes clear the extent to which images of tears pervade Tsangnyon’s Heruka’s *Life* of his favorite saint, and will serve to compare with the tears of Orgyan Chokyi.

Tsangnyon Heruka’s *Life of Milarepa* tells the story of an exemplary yogin as he ventures from household life to discipleship to solitary contemplation, and ultimately to enlightenment and sainthood. Seen in relation to other Tibetan *Lives*, it is an epic story with a gripping beginning, harrowing middle passage, and a pyrotechnic grand finale—a story that perhaps has more in common with tales of the great Tibetan folk hero Gesar and his battles than with the somber life story of an abbot. Tsangnyon Heruka casts the story in the form of a dialogue between Milarepa and his close disciple Rechungpa. Rechungpa asks him to relate the story of his life, and after some coaxing Milarepa reluctantly begins to tell his tale. The theme of suffering pervades the *Life of Milarepa* from beginning to end. Milarepa’s family suffers at the hand of abusive relatives, and Milarepa’s students suffer from the loss of their master and the dashed hopes of obtaining for themselves any his relics. The tale is framed by its ability to provoke emotion, for as Milarepa quips to his interlocutor, Rechungpa, in an attempt to avoid prolixity: “To say more than this would only cause weeping and laughter.”²⁸

As a youth Milarepa enjoyed the good life of a well-to-do farming family. His father was respected, his mother kind, his sister beautiful. This came to an end when his father died, his aunt and uncle stole his family’s estate, and he, his sister, and mother became their destitute dependents. As onlookers beheld this treachery, all “those with feeling . . . shed tears.”²⁹ Milarepa highlights the suffering they experienced as their relatives betrayed them: [My] mother, “weeping . . . fell and rolled on the ground. We children could do nothing for her but weep. . . . People of the village, who loved us, said they felt sorry for us and there was not one of them who did not weep. The others present sighed deeply.”³⁰ At one point during this ordeal, Milarepa became drunk with a certain teacher and broke into a song of drunken joy. When his sister rebuked him for ignoring their grave circumstances, he lamented that “her weeping brought me to my senses. Then I too shed many tears. We rubbed our mother’s hands and called her name. After a moment she came to herself and got up. Then, fixing her tear-filled eyes on me she said . . . ‘When I think of it, I, your old mother, am consumed by despair and can only cry.’ Then, lamenting loudly, all three of us began to weep.”³¹ As the scene closes, we return to Rechungpa’s side as he emphasizes the effect that Milarepa’s tale has upon his audience, for “as he said these words all the listeners were deeply moved and, with grief in their hearts, remained silent for a moment, shedding tears.”³²

Disillusioned by family treachery, Milarepa begins his tutelage under the great teacher Marpa, only to find an obstinate and ill-tempered man who seems only to want to subject Milarepa to the worst physical hardships for no apparent reason. As his body labors and his mind suffers, Milarepa despairs of ever

learning anything from Marpa. He seeks consolation from the kind attentions of the master's wife, Dakmemma. Yet all the while Marpa is in fact preparing Milarepa for discipleship by working off the negative karma he accrued as a sorcerer in his youth, and secretly sheds tears himself for the trials of his young apprentice.³³ Milarepa's faith in his master increases during these trials, a faith manifest in tears.³⁴ Marpa scolds him for this emotional outburst: "What do you expect to gain from me by these tears? Get out!"³⁵ As Milarepa begins to doubt both his own ability and his master's harsh methods, he finds strength as he reads the story of Sadāprarudita in the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutra in Eight Thousand Lines*.³⁶ As the trials continue, Milarepa considers leaving Marpa. When the master hears this news he privately bursts into tears at the thought of losing Milarepa as a disciple. Milarepa learns of his master's feelings, and hopes that his close relationship to Marpa is confirmed by tears: "If it were really true that he had shed tears . . . I would be completely happy."³⁷ At the close of chapter 2 we leave the narrative of the struggle between master and disciple for a moment to return to Rechungpa. In the interstice, Tsangnyon Heruka again highlights the emotional effects of the story upon its audience, for as Milarepa relates this part of his life to Rechungpa and the others "there was no one who was not sobbing tearfully. Some of them were overcome by grief and fainted."³⁸

Finally convinced of his disciple's fortitude and sincerity, Marpa formally accepts Milarepa as his close protégé, and bestows upon him the meditative techniques he has accrued during his travels in India. In time Milarepa learns all that his master could teach him, and sets out to put these teachings into practice in the solitary wilds of the Himalaya. Over the course of a decade or so, Milarepa devotes himself to meditation in remote caves, far from either village or monastery. Throughout this period he nevertheless encounters a number of people who happen upon his cave, and these meetings become occasions for Milarepa to sing poetic songs extolling the joys of the yogin's freedom from convention and critiquing the vanities of social life. His fiancée Zesay and sister Peta weep for his sorry state as an ascetic mountain hermit, naked and malnourished.³⁹

Tears still flow from the yogin in retreat as Milarepa finds himself weeping both in and out of dreams. One night in his meditation cell, he has a dream in which he returns to his homeland after many years, only to find his house in ruins and his mother and family dead. "I called to my mother and sister by name and wept." The weeping of his dream follows him to the waking world as he wakes to find his pillow wet with tears. He takes this dream as an omen that he should return to his family estates.⁴⁰ When he finally returns to his ruined home he again weeps, almost faints, and sings a tearful song to his past.⁴¹ Again a chapter break pauses the narrative of Milarepa's ascetic trials, giving Tsangnyon Heruka the chance to comment upon the audience's response. One listener, Shiwa O Repa, wept at the tale—not for Milarepa, but for himself—"despairing that he would never have the fortitude in meditation evinced by his master."⁴²

As the end of his life draws near, lay devotees from Nyanang and Dingri begin to worry about Milarepa's impending death and, more significantly, their fate after the death of their master. "Tearfully beseeching him in this way and overcome with intense veneration, they clasped his feet, uttering cries and groans."⁴³ At the moment of death Milarepa creates a doppelganger of himself, so that both communities may commemorate his body after his passing. In one of the most elaborate accounts of a saint's funeral proceedings in Tibetan literature, Tsangnyon Heruka brings back Milarepa to instruct his disciples no fewer than five times. While lamas and laypeople mourn their loss, they also rejoice at the prospect of obtaining for themselves a share of their master's relics. When the dakinis threaten to take Milarepa's cremated remains for themselves, leaving the earthly faithful with nothing, Rechungpa invokes his master beyond the grave with tears of sadness and disappointment, mournfully begging him for some relics for his human disciples.⁴⁴ The dakinis chastise him and others for their worldliness, and whisk the remains away to another realm. "The disciples, monks, nuns, and lay people were heartbroken at having no share of the sacred relics. Mournfully they cried out in heart-stirring prayer."⁴⁵ In his final song from beyond, Milarepa responds to the emotional debate over his relics by exhorting his disciples to give up their attachment to his physical remains. Yet he nevertheless encourages them to worship his stupa with tears: "If you can make invocations from the heart, then break out in sincere tears."⁴⁶

Tears of sorrow, tears of faith, tears of embittered feelings of revenge, tears for others, tears for oneself, tears of joy and frustration, public, private, and secret tears—all find a place in the *Life of Milarepa*. Tsangnyon Heruka is occasionally reflective about the reasons for tears, and at one point prescribes the proper occasion for weeping in Marpa's admonition to his wife, Dakmema: "Dakmema, why do you weep? Because Mila has obtained the instructions of the oral tradition from his lama and because he is going to meditate in the barren mountains? Is that any reason for tears?" The proper cause for tears, Tsangnyon will tell us, runs much deeper than mere physical hardship. "A true cause for tears is the thought that all sentient beings who are potential buddhas are still not aware of it and die in misery; and what is especially a cause for tears is the thought that once they have reached the human condition, they still die without the Dharma. If it is for this you cry, you should cry unceasingly."⁴⁷

The *Life of Milarepa* is described by Tsangnyon Heruka as at once a source of joy for those who would understand the experience of enlightenment claimed for Milarepa and a cause of lamentation for those emotionally wrapped up in the events of the narrative. As Rechungpa comments to Milarepa about the nature of his life story, "Master, there is nothing more marvelous than the essence of your life which is indeed a matter for joyous laughter. But its outer form gives cause for unhappiness and tears."⁴⁸ The constant weeping punctuating the scenes of the *Life of Milarepa* is an ephemeral feature that fails to affect the "essential" teachings. Yet despite this caveat it is still tears that define the tone of the story.

Tears of a Hermitess

It is almost certain that Orgyan Chokyi read a *Life of Milarepa*, and it is reasonable to assume that the trope of tears made an impact on the woman from Dolpo. There are nearly 40 references to tears or weeping in the *Life of Orgyan Chokyi*, and more than 120 references to sadness, suffering, depression, or pain.⁴⁹ The suffering of samsara is a pervasive theme in the work. The various emotive states that Orgyan Chokyi evokes are the result of her profound encounter with samsara, and tears are the most prominent external symbols of this encounter. Orgyan Chokyi weeps for any number of reasons. She weeps when her master forbids her to write her life story. The tears that fall from her eyes in these first lines of the *Life* are perhaps what draw the dakinis to Orgyan Chokyi, for she is immediately blessed with the ability to write after weeping.

Weeping is most prominent in the stories of her young life, in which she endured a “mountain of suffering.” Almost every scene involving her parents in the *Life* brought tears. An evil person took on the family’s two *dzo* away, and she “wept a great deal” for the separation of the mother from her child. Her mother threw a spindle at her head when she proved a poor weaver, and she wept. And when Kunga Pendar the monk and Ane Paldzom the nun finally listened to her woes, they both wept for her sufferings, and Orgyan Chokyi wept for the sorrow of her life and the joy of finding empathetic companions. As a young animal herder, she found much to weep for. Whether caring for goats, sheep, or horses, she could not but see the harsh fate of animals as symbolic of existence in general. When a nanny goat lost her kid to an eagle, Orgyan Chokyi wept along with the grieving animal. When she beheld many kid goats being carried off by the lowlanders of Jumla for sacrifice to the gods, she wept and wept.

As the years move forward, the tragedies in the *Life* shift from animals to humans, and Orgyan Chokyi finds new reasons to weep. The coming and goings of those who are able to travel on pilgrimage to Sikkim are a particular source of grief for the young ani. The parting scene in Chapter Six is one of particular sadness, not least because Orgyan Chokyi would not be making the journey herself. “Tears fell from her eyes like rain” as she bids farewell to her friend, Ani Tsering Kyapa, so sad are they to part. As her brothers and sisters leave Dolpo to make their way through the Nepal Himalaya east to Sikkim, Orgyan Chokyi “comes to know great impermanence.” The departing friends are transformed into vivid examples of the transient nature of human life. Left at home, Orgyan Chokyi can only lament her fate—to remain in the kitchen and work. Another nun consoles her, but offers a practical critique of her dissatisfaction. To travel to a foreign land is to forsake one’s patrons and thus risk losing financial support, Ani Darpo tells her. It is better just to stay put and leave dreams of Sikkim to others.

Orgyan Chokyi never did fulfill her desire to undertake the pilgrimage to Sikkim, and when the travelers returned to her to tell of their journey she received bad news. One monk, a “brother who thought about things a lot like

me,” had died on the journey. Orgyan Chokyi was distraught. When he had first left on the journey he had taken her hand, wept with her, and encouraged her to follow quickly in his footsteps. She promised to follow him, and had harbored hope amid the drudgery of kitchen duty by a confident faith in his example. Now she was told that he had died on the journey. “The sadness I felt was immeasurable,” she cried as she held him in her memory.

As an older nun, well established as a hermitess and long since finished with either herding or pilgrimage, she has time to dwell on the impermanence that had so motivated her early life. Living alone affords her the chance to read, to study, and to contemplate the great lessons of her tradition. In particular, the *Life* relates that she looks to the life stories of the great masters of the past for inspiration. Perhaps she refers here to the *Lives* of the Kagyu masters she mentions elsewhere, in which she would have encountered tales of great sacrifice and hardship for the sake of the Dharma by the descendents of Milarepa. Such stories affect her greatly, and her comprehension of impermanence becomes greater. As ever, she can only lament the suffering portrayed in these stories: “Hearing and seeing the suffering and death of all beings, I had to weep and weep.”

Inspired by stories of the great Buddhist saints, Orgyan Chokyi finds reason to weep in the memories of people departed. Reminiscing on her parents one day, she feels them to have faded from her life “like the illusions of a magician.” And she reflects in sorrow that just as her parents had passed, so would all beings. It is also an incontrovertible fact that even those who come to her in dreams and memories are probably suffering in purgatory for their karmic offenses, and many tears fall from her eyes on their behalf. As she ruminates on these dark matters, her friend Jangchub Zangmo comes to call with beer and food for the hermitess. When she asks why she is weeping, Orgyan Chokyi responds in despair: “I remembered my mother. I could only cry and think of impermanence.” If memories are a cause for sorrow and reflection upon impermanence, so are those people around her who have forsaken the Dharma. “When I see some men and women meet with the Dharma and then turn away from it, I have pity for them. I weep for them.”

The flood of tears shed by Orgyan Chokyi is often considered excessive by those around her. As she beholds the goat whisked away by the eagle and weeps, several other herders tell her not to weep, as it is a natural occurrence: “Every year a kid is carried away by an eagle.” The village chief Senge Kyapa has a similar reaction to her lament over a dead horse. Orgyan Chokyi is aghast that the chief does not grieve, but he responds with a stark realism: “Ani,” he said, “this horse is old. One night it would have eventually been eaten by vultures.” Orgyan Chokyi cannot agree with her elder, and responds to his callous disregard for the tragic events that have befallen before their eyes, events no less significant because those affected were not human. “When horses are sold, mother and child are separated,” she tells the chief, “this is a great tragedy, and my tears are not few. When mother and child are separated, I pity them greatly, and many sad thoughts come to me.”

Kunga Palzang the monk tells her not to weep for the fate of animals as

well, but for a very different reason: weeping “disturbs the mountains,” meaning presumably that local spirits will be angered by her outburst of tears. This reminds us of the Dolpo proverb: “When the people are not happy, the god is not happy; when the people are disturbed, the god is disturbed.”⁵⁰ On another occasion, Orgyan Chokyi and two other nuns are weeping at the accidental death of a *dzomo* when a monk comes up wishing to know the cause of their distress. When he hears that their tears are merely for a *dzomo* he rebukes them: “What will come of this crying?” the monk asks. “You should go tell the master about this.”

If many around her look askance at her tears, some see them as a sign of her deep empathy with other beings and her great potential to live up to Buddhist principles. When Lhawang Rinchen of Jatang sees her weeping, he remarks: “This girl knows mercy. If she were to practice the Dharma, she would preserve compassion in her mind.” In this instance tears become a symbol for the pinnacle of Mahayana ethics. Such scenes of are evoked in the *Life* to illustrate ubiquitous Buddhist themes, bringing life to more abstract formulations of suffering.⁵¹ When a mare’s foal is killed by a leopard, the mare lets out a great cry of anguish, causing a commotion around the meadow in which Orgyan Chokyi is working. The mare wails through the night, so on the following morning Orgyan Chokyi sets out to search for the corpse of the foal. She finds it above a spring, carries it back, and sets it down before the mare. “I thought to offer it to the vultures, though the mare continued fill the meadow with her wailing neighing. Tears ran down the creases in my hands like rain.” When she tells Orgyan Tenzin of the foal’s fate, he is far more sympathetic than Kunga Palzang might have guessed. The master weeps too, thus confirming Orgyan Chokyi’s reaction. He then uses the episode to make a point about human suffering: “From the very beginning, throughout every lifetime living beings suffer like this.” Even the suffering of a horse should be a cause for the faithful to “concentrate diligently on the Dharma.”

Joy and Solitude

Orgyan Chokyi’s continuous expressions of sadness often appear to leave little room for hopefulness and joy. But this is clearly not the case for her *Life* as a whole. There is most certainly joy in her story, as promised at the beginning of the tale. Joy takes on several concrete forms in the *Life*, but there is one prominent form of Buddhist joy that is conspicuously absent: nirvana. The ultimate goal of Buddhism, the final end to the suffering incurred due to impermanence, is nowhere to be found in Orgyan Chokyi’s tale.⁵² The joys of the hermitess are more humble—they are largely concerned with the potential of pleasure within the social world, even if they still retain the sense of release from suffering. A song in Chapter Eight of the *Life* catalogs several forms of happiness, each related to the theme of freedom. At dawn one day she sits on her cot unseen by anyone and sings:

Giving provisions to those departing,
 Preparing food and beer for those arriving,
 Dividing up food for the many staying here;
 These I have put behind me, and I am happy.
 This happiness is the kindness of the master.
 To repay this kindness I meditate and recite *manis*.

Large crowds of crooked and deceitful people,
 Defending compassion and kindness, yet faithless,
 Remembering desires large and small,
 These I give up, and I am happy.
 This happiness is the kindness of my religious brothers and sisters.
 To answer that kindness I repay them with a pure mind.

Rising at dawn and boiling vegetables,
 Reluctantly beginning work after calm meditation,
 Kitchen boys preparing water and wood,
 When I think of [leaving] these, Chokyi is happy.
 This happiness is the kindness of Orgyan Chodrol.
 To answer her kindness I pray that she become like me.

Release from work, release from bustle, release from dawn drudgery—these are the freedoms that solitude affords Orgyan Chokyi. It is the freedom of solitude itself that forms her joy, and the nirvana that some might seek with such solitude is a distant possibility, unmentioned in the *Life*. Rather than ephemeral soteriological terms, the hermitess lists the names of those who have given her this joy. Orgyan Tenzin, religious brothers and sisters, Orgyan Chodrol who replaced her in the kitchen—these people are the face of joy, the personalized face of liberation for Orgyan Chokyi.

The overriding theme of the *Life's* later chapters is the search for autonomy, for independent living and self-determination. In the search for autonomy, Orgyan Chokyi is not alone in the Himalayan Buddhist world. It appears that a search for greater social independence was a primary motive for Sherpa women of the eastern Nepalese Himalayas to enter convents in the mid-twentieth century, as well.⁵³ Such independence took on a number of forms, from the ability to enter the life of Dharma to the freedom to live by herself. Merely to be able to devote her time to retreat was an unqualified success for her, and she spent some time describing the pleasures of her retreat cave. The freedom to sequester herself in retreat was the culminating success of her life; indeed she had been working toward autonomy for most of her life. Orgyan Tenzin made specific reference to Orgyan Chokyi's request for solitude, an encounter dating to between 1706 and 1722: "Then I went to Nyimapuk. The exceptional Chokyi said to me: 'Now I need to give up the bustle. I need to stay in a sequestered mountain retreat.'"⁵⁴

From the vantage point of her rocky cave, Orgyan Chokyi tells of the simple and basic freedoms that her new life in retreat afford her. "Before, when I was tending the kitchen fire, I had to get out of bed by lamp before dawn," she writes of her early life. "Now I do not have to get up at dawn if I do not want

to. If I want to take soup, I am free to do so when I am hungry. I am free to eat when I think of it. I can wear clothes on the path, and I can go naked when I am in my cell practicing. Self-serving, self-empowered, I have escaped people. I have attained autonomy."⁵⁵ The songs in the later chapters of Orgyan Chokyi's *Life* speak of solitude made possible by autonomy, and of beauty, nature, and its welcoming comforts. Chokyi praises her cave, the trees, and the rich and fertile valleys around her, all of which become symbolic of her newly acquired status as an independent meditator.

Yet Chokyi was by no means alone in writing Buddhist nature poetry. The most famous nineteenth-century yogin, Shabkar Natsok Rangdrol, is renowned for his odes to the natural surroundings of his contemplative endeavors. A song by Shabkar illustrates that Chokyi participated in a tradition of poetic expression that spanned the Tibetan cultural world from Dolpo in the southwest to Amdo in the northeast. In the following, Shabkar contrasts the natural beauty of the flora and fauna around his cave with the social entanglements of the lay patron, echoing Orgyan Chokyi's musings on her patrons:

When the lion is on the white glacier—content.
 When the vulture is above red rock—content.
 When deer is on the gentle plain—content.
 When the fish is under water—content.
 When the tigress is in the forest deep—content.
 When I the yogin am on the lonely mount—content.
 Above, a sturdy cave—content.
 Below, a bluegrass seat—content.
 Between, the illusory body of the yogin—content.
 Song sings from voice, so I am content.
 Experience and realization dawn in mind, so I am content.
 Is the patron with his circle content?⁵⁶

As in the songs of Orgyan Chokyi, natural surroundings come to symbolize Buddhist themes. And like Orgyan Chokyi, Shabkar can be critical of his patrons, gently chastising them to explore their apparently comfortable social situation. In a song composed while begging for alms, Shabkar extolls the beauty of his mountain hermitage:

E ma! In this lonely mountain hermitage,
 During summer and during autumn,
 Multicolored meadow flowers,
 Give sweet support for swarms of bees.
 Trees with budding branches grow beautiful,
 Small birds give voice, flapping their wings.
 Fountain pools, cool and fragrant,
 Quench pangs of thirst for those who drink.
 In the lakes and in the ponds,
 Float lovely sweet-voiced geese.

In the vast pleasant fields,
 Deer roam about at ease.
 In this supreme and lonely place—
 So lovely, infinitely wondrous—
 On a gentle bluegrass seat,
 At times I lay down to sleep.⁵⁷

To Shabkar's lighthearted song we can compare Orgyan Chokyi's praise to her rocky cave, her "supreme and lonely place." Both hermits speak of their joys as well as their sufferings; both speak of a love of their natural surroundings; yet the two hermits seek solace from different aspects of their respective social worlds. Whereas Shabkar flees from the responsibilities of life as a Buddhist master, Orgyan Chokyi makes it clear that for her freedom is release from domestic duties, from the kitchen and all the petty interpersonal misery that made up her life before she was able to sequester herself in the meditation cells of Tadru. She sings here in praise of her small cave:

This pleasant nook of mine, my rocky cave,
 Is a small place for meditation and reciting *manis*.
 There is neither rain nor snow, no bad things here—
 They are cut short by this one-cornered cave.
 Above, no thunder—what a joyous place.
 In front, clear blue water, like offering water,
 Many trees, like a banquet display,
 Water and trees aplenty—a joyful, auspicious place,
 From east to west, Tibetan valleys replete with food.
 Whatever I ponder here, my spiritual experience is elevated.
 Solitary, alone, and looking after reality,
 Free from the chatter of the common people,
 Serving religious women of a similar faith—
 These are mine, Chokyi's signs of joy.
 Far from the kitchen of the residence hall,
 Free of the cross speech of the jealous kitchen mistress,
 Here, the melody of *mani* prayers—
 These are the signs of joy for this beggar, myself.⁵⁸

The joy experienced by Orgyan Chokyi in meditation is perhaps less definable than the more social (or antisocial) forms of happiness described elsewhere in the *Life*, though it is no less important to the narrative of the *Life*. Indeed, it is the goal of the meditative practices that are ostensibly the point of maintaining solitude. Yet the enlightened epiphanies of other Tibetan hagiographies are tempered in Orgyan Chokyi's tale. We hear of her contemplative joy as she asks Ani Drupchenmo to come quickly to her meditation cell. As she arrives, Orgyan Chokyi relates her experience to the elder nun who has encouraged her. "Yesterday when the master gave me meditation instructions

he said, 'If you are able to view mind, the shining sun of joy will dawn.' Now this joy comes naturally." She remarks on the struggle she has undergone to overcome ordinary habits of thought and to get to this point where joy, not suffering, comes to her spontaneously. "Meditation is not perfected all by itself; in conceptuality there is a suffering I have not seen in the scriptures." As her meditations progress, she hones her ability to relax her mind and loosen her grip on the conceptual thinking that had caused her unhappiness. Now she meditates, telling herself, "Mindful of whatever arises, rest in relaxation." At last she breaks through in her meditations to a blissful place, "A blissful, clear, nonconceptual experience arose—crystal clear, naked, unhurried, relaxed, and wide-eyed. Now I felt that I understood meditation . . . and a pervasive joy lit upon my mind." She sings a verse to mark this moment, much as she has done for the many moments of sorrow throughout her life.

Hearing the teachings of the Master and Buddha,
 Gaining experience with this beggar woman's strong faith,
 Experiencing the joy of nonconceptual radiant bliss—
 These are mine, Chokyi's joyous spiritual experience.

Joy could come spontaneously, or perhaps we should say miraculously, to the hermitess, as well. While on pilgrimage to Mount Kailash with her master, Orgyan Tenzin, she stopped to make prayers to the Kochar Buddha statue. As if out of a Tibetan painting, the entire body of the Buddha became surrounded by rainbow light. The statue then made contact with Orgyan Chokyi: "An unbearable ray of light shone from the center of the Buddha and struck me." This miraculous light of blessing from the Buddha transformed, if only for the moment, her vision of the world. "The appearances of this life were obscured, and a joyous, spontaneous awareness came over me." She told no one of this blissful experience at the time, waiting some years to reveal this important event even to her master. Nevertheless, this gift from an image of the Buddha near Kailash was to aid her meditation in years to come.

The last type of joy in the *Life* stands quite apart from the bliss of meditation. It has less to do with solitude than with the social world. In verses toward the conclusion of the *Life*, Orgyan Chokyi makes a series of prayers for her future lives that have little to do with any esoteric bliss, with rebirth in a heavenly realm, or much less with nirvana. She wishes to be born with good female friends around her:

I pray that I may meet
 Women friends with a similar religion.
 May I not meet for even a moment,
 Those who are lazy in religion.

If the story of Orgyan Chokyi is anything, it is a story of Buddhist women in community, the story of "women friends with a similar religion." Over a dozen women are mentioned by name, and several women occur regularly throughout the story. Orgyan Chokyi's life was punctuated by friendships and

beneficial encounters with the women of her village and her nunnery. Her education, her mental well-being, her ritual life, her death—all aspects of her life were developed within a community of women. The “women friends with a similar religion” were not merely something abstract to pray for in future lives. Female community constituted an essential part of her existence in Dolpo, and one of the few refuges against the sufferings of life. With the important exception of Orgyan Chokyi’s mother, no woman is portrayed negatively in Orgyan Chokyi’s story. Descriptions of women in the *Life* make clear what is only implied in the above verse. “Those who are lazy in religion” are almost certainly not women. The last line of this verse is a muted critique of those male practitioners whose hypocrisy is the object of criticism throughout the autobiography. Female friendship was, as much as solitude, one of the few true joys in life for her.

Orgyan Chokyi recounts numerous conversations with the women of her life on topics ranging from kitchen work to meditation, from the drudgery of herding to death itself. Throughout these encounters, a number of which are told in only a sentence or two, it becomes clear that talking with other women was perhaps the principal form of support for her religious practice. In a conversation with her lifelong friend while working animals in the pastures of Dolpo, she expresses concern about her abilities to practice Dharma. Kunga Drolma in part chastises her, and in part offers herself as an example. “I am able to herd cattle, study, and take refuge [at the same time],” Kunga Drolma declares. “But I do not have intelligence like you,” Orgyan Chokyi replies in a self-deferential tone. “I need to do my herding, refuge prayers, and studying one at a time.” This early difficulty managing work and religious practice, expressed here in casual conversation with Kunga Drolma, would of course impel her toward solitary retreat.

As an older woman she mused with Jangchub Zangmo over the meaning of a dream she had experienced, in which her close friend Kunga Zangmo appeared. “Last night sister Kunga Drolma kept appearing in a dream. She took me by the hand and said, ‘Ani, be happy.’ Then she left. What was this dream?” Jangchub Zangmo opined that the dream was an omen indicating Kunga Drolma’s imminent arrival. Descriptions of encounters with other women in Dolpo span a full emotional spectrum, from laughter and lightheartedness in youth to bittersweet scenes of parting to grave moments between old friends later in life. Orgyan Chokyi’s entry into the Buddhist community was overseen by a senior nun, Ani Drupchenmo, a woman who was to be a mentor for years to come. Her first understanding of the refuge prayer to the three jewels, Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, came from lessons under Ani Drupchenmo. It was also under Ani Drupchenmo that she first learned to read and write.

Orgyan Chokyi paid regular visits to a young woman named Yeshe Drolma, who appears to have been a nun living in the village of Tadru. Each month in the summer she went into the village to visit young Yeshe Drolma at her home. These visits to the village and to the homes of friends became, as with so many other scenes in the *Life*, platforms from which to proclaim the sufferings of

human life. As she saw a calf crying because his mother's milk had been taken by humans, she lamented the inevitable suffering in this situation. "Thinking that all this suffering was a result of desire, my mental anguish was immeasurable." Distracted at this average village scene, which for her became a samsaric spectacle, she cut her visit short to return to the refuge of her meditation cell. Yeshe Drolma pleaded with her to stay: "If you stay, Ani, I will be happy," she said. "But if you go to Tadru, I will be unhappy." Orgyan Chokyi became philosophical at her friend's request. "I do not know when I will die, so I must go recite *mani* prayers and meditate. These calves are pitiable. You stay in happiness." If the friendship of women could be a source of comfort, it could also be a cause of dark reflection for the hermitess.

The comings and goings of friends to and from Dolpo meant bidding farewell, and Orgyan Chokyi's *Life* takes these moments as occasions to reflect on the nature of impermanence and suffering. The most intimate moment between close friends is at once a chance to wax eloquent on the strong emotional bonds between religious sisters, as well as on the fundamental human predicament, suffering caused by impermanence: "We were so sad at parting, and tears fell from my eyes like rain," Orgyan Chokyi writes as her sister in religion, Ani Tsering Kyapa, prepares to leave on a long journey to Sikkim. Ani Tsering "took me by the hands. 'Do not cry,' she said. She put her forehead in my hand. 'Well, go quickly,' I said. And she and the others left. At this I came to know great impermanence, and I shed many tears."

Yet certainly not every meeting in the *Life* ends in a soliloquy on samsara. Humor could also play a part in encounters with her women friends. On one occasion she asks her mentor, Ani Drupchenmo, what she should do with her life after she finished herding horses: "I am no good at milking. I am not a meat eater. What will become of me with these horses?" Ani Drupchenmo's sarcastic reply brings peals of laughter from the other nuns present: "Well, if you cannot herd horses, you could herd dogs," she says. "[You would say] 'Ah! The dog has shit!'"

As a hermitess in retreat, Orgyan Chokyi still relied upon her sisters. In fact, if it were not for the support of the women of the monastery at Tadru it is doubtful that she would have been able to sustain her solitary meditations at all. It is clear that her food and provisions were provided by the nuns of Tadru. "I do not have to grind the grain," she reflects contentedly. "Woven and dyed things come to my ani friends, so I do not need rhubarb. The young nuns bring water." The basics of life, food, clothing, and water, were thus all provided to this elder member of the community by her junior companions.

In her later years, after she had attained some degree of authority and autonomy for herself, Orgyan Chokyi made efforts to encourage the younger women in her community at Tadru to go into retreat themselves. It appears that this may have caused some dissension in the community, for she was causing unrest among the monastery workforce, the younger nuns. Orgyan Chokyi knew this work only too well, and had spent years trying to extricate herself from it. Now, as an elder among the community, she could try to influence people such as Ani Drupamo Palden Drolma—who "had to work for the

many visitors and make a lot of beer”—to claim a retreat space for herself. “Ani, your eyes are not good,” she said to Palden Drolma. “The hearth is poison. Ani, take a retreat in solitude and recite *manis*.” She assured her young friend that her provisions for retreat would be provided by the monastery. Apparently this encouragement struck a chord in Palden Drolma, for she then made a successful request to one Lama Palden, and followed Orgyan Chokyi away from kitchen duty and into life as a hermitess.

Another woman soon sought to follow the example of Orgyan Chokyi and Palden Drolma, but apparently there were limits on the number of female anchorites the monastic establishment at Tadru would or could tolerate. Orgyan Chodrol made a request to the master, but was met with a mixed response. “You are very young, but you are skilled at regulating the food and provisions,” the master complimented her. “But we must assess your commitment, so you must work in the kitchen. The head cook and the steward need to cut down their external activities.” Here the interventions of Orgyan Chokyi did not make the crucial difference in young Orgyan Chodrol’s position in the monastery, though the older hermitess gave words of encouragement to her junior. “I left after three years,” Orgyan Chokyi consoled her. “Drupamo also left. The master speaks a great deal about life and death, and gives the wealth offered by the faithful from high to low to virtuous activities. I have confidence in you. Work hard. Work hard!”

As the years went by, Orgyan Chokyi remained close to the women of Tadru, despite her increased solitude. When she was a middle-aged woman of perhaps fifty years she made a pact with her fellow nun, Ani Kunga Drolma, not to die. “We felt that when one dies, one does not have the leisure to practice the Dharma.” However, Orgyan Chokyi was most likely the one to break this religiously motivated pact, for she died prematurely from an accident during a ritual. As death grew near, Orgyan Chokyi relied upon her female companions as before. On her deathbed she gave a sort of last will to her companion, Orgyan Chodrol. “Orgyan Chodrol,” she whispered in a faint voice, “in that box there is some old yellow clothing. Please give those to the important people. There must not be any controversy among the other people. The Buddha said that death comes like lightning, and that is what has happened.” It was thus this woman’s duty to equitably divide Orgyan Chokyi’s belongings among the community. As she lay in pain and dying, another companion, Drupamo Orgyan Kyapma, embraced her to ease her suffering. Orgyan Chokyi remained close to her female companions until the moment of her cremation. After her corpse was wrapped in white cotton, it was carried to the funeral pyre on the back of another nun. Her final companion in this body was Ani Kunga Drolma, who bore her old friend’s lifeless and enshrouded body to the flames. Lamenting the death of her friend and religious sister of three decades, Kunga Drolma waited by the crematory for Orgyan Chokyi’s relics, wondering whether her friend would leave any precious remains or, as in final moments of Milarepa’s life story, the dakinis would speed them away for their own purposes.

4

Women, Men, Suffering

Women and Samsara in Tibetan *Lives*

Several of the songs in the *Life of Orgyan Chokyi* offer rich statements on the relationship between gender and suffering. Simply put, according to the *Life* suffering is partly determined by sexual difference. As will become clear, the very nature of suffering is explicitly associated with the female body in the *Life*. This is one of the most important points that can be drawn from this work in terms of the broader study of Buddhism and gender. But her words should not be heard in isolation; we must ask if this gendering of suffering is unique to Orgyan Chokyi, or if it is found across a range of Tibetan Buddhist writings. I suggest that the strong equation of suffering with the female body is characteristic of Orgyan Chokyi's writing as a woman. In short, the *Life* characterizes suffering differently from the *Lives* of her male contemporaries precisely because it portrays the perspective of a Buddhist woman.

Before looking to Orgyan Chokyi's *Life*, it will be useful to sketch a brief picture of the possible ideological background against which Orgyan Chokyi's comments are made. What might the author of the *Life* have been "up against" in terms of Tibetan literary portrayals of women? The context of Orgyan Chokyi's *Life* is at once more broad and more limited than life in Dolpo, for it finds a place in the ongoing Buddhist discussions on the nature of suffering, and in particular on the relationship of suffering to gender, as well as soteriology—freedom from suffering—in relation to gender. The first part of this chapter thus looks to Tibetan literature that may well have influenced Orgyan Chokyi directly, with a particular focus on hagiographic literature, while bearing in mind the difficulties in-

herent in trying to make broad claims about social ideology from a limited selection of textual material.

The assumption of a close relationship between women and suffering has long standing in Buddhism. Early Buddhist literature presents a list of unique features of women's suffering; the *Samyutta Nikāya* names five of these: leaving relatives to marry; menstruation; pregnancy; giving birth; and waiting upon a man.¹ The presence of misogynist passages in sutras and other types of Indic Buddhist literature is well attested. As several writers have noted, women were often associated symbolically with the evils of samsara.² The impossibility of women achieving any exalted status is routinely stated in scriptures from the early Nikāyas to late Mahayana works. "It is impossible that a woman be an Accomplished One, Wheel-turning Monarch, Sakka, Māra, or Brahmā," claims the *Bahudhātuka Sutta*.³

Buddhaśrī's *Introduction to the Victor's Path* offers a scathing criticism of the evils of women. The work of this twelfth-century Indian scholar who traveled to Tibet exemplifies the extreme of misogynistic Buddhist writings. In a general introduction to Buddhist thought and practice, Buddhaśrī places women in a list of evils to be avoided by the good male practitioner—right after desire and lust and just before beer and sloth.⁴ He holds nothing back, attributing to women almost every social fault. Women are the root of bad rebirths, and they bring the world to ruin. They hanker after meaningless things, are quite agitated and greedy, their conversations are laughable, and they are evil for men. "Just as the bee eats the flower's honey and flies away, so does woman use up the wealth of man and casts him away!" He concludes the chapter with the following advice to male aspirants: "Women are generally sinful. They hold tight the treasury of samsara. Since they are the source of all that is inharmonious, they must be totally abandoned by those wishing for liberation."

Along similar lines, Tibetan *Lives* can portray family life in dark terms, as does the *Life of Orgyan Chokyi*. Sons are deceitful, wives are demons, and relatives will steal from you when you are at your lowest. In Tsangnyon Heruka's *Life and Songs of Milarepa*, the famous saint offers a criticism of wives to a pair of would-be patrons: "At first the wife is a goddess with a [fine] figure and you can't get enough of looking at her. In middle age she is a demon with the eyes of a corpse. If you say one word she'll attack you with two. . . . Her demon eyes eat at your heart. These antagonistic devils should be avoided."⁵ And when speaking of daughters, he takes women to be "the source of trouble."⁶

Similar claims about the nature of women are made in the *Five Testaments*,⁷ an important fourteenth-century mythic history of imperial Tibet compiled by Orgyan Lingpa,⁸ famous hagiographer of Padmasambhava.⁹ In the *Testament of the Queen*,¹⁰ the renowned Tibetan translator Vairocana receives unwarranted advances from one of King Trisong Detsen's wives, Queen Tsepongza. Angered at his refusal, the queen exacts vengeance by accusing the celibate Buddhist monk of accosting her. Distraught by her treachery, Vairocana flees the palace, but sends a serpent deity to inflict the queen with a disease, thereby turning

her heart away from the desires of the flesh and toward religion. Various means are proposed to cure the ailing queen, but in the end the only cure is a full confession of her sins in the presence of that great progenitor of Buddhism in Tibet, the Indian yogin Padmasambhava.¹¹

In the midst of this tale, Orgyan Lingpa makes a number of comments about the essentially debased nature of women. King Trisong Detsen has searched high and low for his insulted translator, Vairocana, to beseech him to return to the castle. When the king finally catches up with him, Vairocana claims innocence: "I do not even have the seeds of desire in my mind; how can I have them in my body?" He then delivers the following diatribe against womankind. The deeds of women, according to Vairocana, are "demon's poison," for whoever drinks of them will die. Women are the demons of karma, for beings around them are confused and die. They are like a hellish mire, for beings around them are caught in muck. They are samsara's prison house, for it is impossible to gain liberation for those defiled by them. They are a demon's bane, for whoever associates with them experiences unmitigated suffering.¹² When Padmasambhava arrives on the scene he continues the theme: "Unending samsara is woman!" "Women are the rope of the lord of death, for if you trust it you are ensnared by death." And if that is not enough, he concludes that women are "black-headed demons who give birth to the molten coppers of hell," in which people boil, burn, and suffer. They are "the pit from which the molten coppers of hell overflow to the skies."¹³

Women are also associated with the seeds of samsara in Samten Lingpa's seventeenth-century hagiography of Mandarava, Padmasambhava's Indian female consort. As Mandarava gazes from the confines of her palaces she witnesses a group of pigs in a variation on the four visions of Shakyamuni Buddha, in this case birth, sickness, and death. "Then the princess thought, a female form is a basis for suffering in samsara. Even the mother of these piglets must endure the suffering of birth, yet due to her confusion she remains attached to the very cause of her suffering. Everything is determined by karma, yet few have the thought to repay the kindness of others."¹⁴ She goes on to say that "women establish the seeds of samsara by hankering after ordinary pleasures. No matter how beautiful you may be, your beauty and youth are illusory. By even the smallest condition you can fall to a lower realm."¹⁵ (There is also incidentally, a powerful rhetoric against marriage in Mandarava's tale, reminiscent at times of the *Life of Nangsa Obum*.)

To what extent was Orgyan Chokyi aware of these claims about gender and suffering in the literature of Buddhism? From what literary sources might she have fashioned her presentation of these issues? It is possible that she knew of Orgyan Lingpa's *Five Testaments*, for manuscripts of it did circulate in the Himalayan regions such as Kyirong,¹⁶ and we read elsewhere that Orgyan Lingpa's *Life of Padmasambhava* was taught in Dolpo during Orgyan Chokyi's lifetime.¹⁷ Among the literature that her *Life* explicitly mentions there are several literary sources that may have contributed to her presentation of women and samsara. Gampopa's *Jewel Ornament of Liberation* contains no explicit critique of women, though it does contain an excruciatingly detailed description

of the sufferings undergone by beings in the womb, which may be considered an implicit association of women and suffering. But Orgyan Chokyi does not explicitly address childbirth. More important for our purposes are the *Lives* of Padmasambhava mentioned by Orgyan Chokyi. She is frustratingly vague, writing laconically at the beginning of Chapter Four and again in Chapter Eight only that she received three *Lives* of Padmasambhava. It is difficult to identify these, as tradition holds that there were as many as fifty *Lives* of this master.¹⁸

Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to look at one of these, for it contains a wealth of material on Tibetan prescriptions of gender roles. In the well-known hagiography of Padmasambhava by Nyangral Nyima Ozer, the great master is credited with a number of teachings specifically addressing both religious and lay women. Nyangral's twelfth-century work is an epic myth of the founding of Buddhism in Tibet, the hero of which is none other than Padmasambhava. In the closing chapters, the master gives a series of final instructions to thirteen social groups of Tibet, including kings, ministers, monks and nuns, meditators, lay men and women, physicians, patrons, and Buddhist masters.¹⁹ These same instructions are also included in Nyangral's great history of Tibet.²⁰ Monks, he prescribes, should participate in a long-standing tradition. They should "receive the vows and the precepts . . . from learned monks who bear witness to the code of a preceptor and teacher." They should avoid attachments, remain in the monastic community sequestered from lay households, and they should keep away from women, even mothers and sisters.²¹ His advice to nuns differs from his advice to monks in several important respects. "Women who have cast off samsara and become nuns," he begins, "because of your low rebirth due to bad actions, it is inconceivable that you will become learned." Nevertheless, there are limited goals to which the religiously oriented woman should aspire:

Sever your attachment to men, and uphold the precepts fully.
Do not go to where householders dwell, but stay in a nunnery.
Study the teachings and accrue what virtue you can.
Recite prayers and be energetic in circumambulation and prostration.
Uphold your vows without hypocrisy or deceit.

"The nun who goes astray is despised in this life, and falls to hell in the next," Nyangral warns. "Therefore, develop strength of mind and uphold pure conduct."²²

It is a given, according to Nyangral, that women will not be able to succeed in religious careers to the same extent that men will. Women have achieved a low birth in female bodies due to karma. But if they may not be scholars, they should nevertheless try to amass virtue through prayer and prostration. Other Himalayan sources present these and related practices as the customary religious activities of women. In the *Life of Metok Saldron*, King Drakpa Taye explains the place of women in religion to his daughter as she seeks his leave to become a nun. "In general, the appropriate religious duties of women are: protecting one's people as if [they] were sons, offering prayers to the three jewels, giving alms to beggars, [and] thinking compassionately toward all be-

ings.” “You will do as is customary, without thinking otherwise,” the king commands Metok Saldron as she weeps in yearning for the Dharma.²³ Even if women enter the monastic life, their activities may be limited. The unfaithful nun will be reborn in hell for her transgressions—a fate that presumably applies to monks as well, though Nyangral sees fit to make this explicit only in the case of nuns.

The different instructions to lay men and women in Nyangral’s work are also telling, and they provide us with an early Tibetan description of socially defined gender roles.²⁴ Laymen—and here Nyangral appears to be speaking primarily about rulers—should keep the laws of the king, protect their oaths, lead armies, protect others, and thereby achieve wealth, property, and fame. If the good layman is diligent, he can accomplish anything. Laywomen, by contrast, are first of all described by Nyangral as the source of samsara. In more domestic terms, they are the basis for the home, so they must keep the house clean. Women should listen well to whatever the good husband tells her, and accept the bad husband as simply a result of her past karmic actions. Since one’s father and elder brothers are the backbone of the family, women should worship them like gods.²⁵ Since women are singled out, they must keep up a pleasant demeanor. Women who talk too much cause rumors, and therefore the good woman should not move her lips too much. She should go to sleep late and awake early, work hard and complete all her labors. She should be kind and caring to the cattle and the guard dogs. She should make faithful offerings to the three jewels—Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. If the Tibetan laywoman acts in this manner, Nyangral (in the voice of Padmasambhava) assures us, she will fulfill the proper secular behavior and accumulate virtue for this life and the next.

If Nyangral provides us with a detailed presentation on women’s relationships to husbands, family, and domestic duty, he does not say anything about motherhood. We can, however, look to another hagiography for an idealized portrayal of motherhood. Lhadzin Yangchen Drolma, mother of the famous Nyingmapa master Lochen Dharmaśrī, is one of a handful of women in Tibetan history to have had a biography written of her. The introductory verses of Yangchen Drolma’s biography suggest that gender is superfluous to her identity: She is merely putting on the illusion of female form in this world with her supreme wisdom. This form is nothing more or less than “the playful, self-aware, nonconceptual wisdom of the dakini in the Dharma realm,” or the dramatic act put on by a highly realized being for the sake of humanity.²⁶ Yet the rest of the biography moves from the esoteric to the mundane as it describes her activities in female form. It goes on to list the qualities of this ideal matron. She was a “dakini, an enlightened female with pure vow who appeared in the form of a woman and became the mother of the victor,” Lochen Dharmaśrī. She held all the qualities of a woman. She had single-pointed faith in the master and the three jewels, Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. She was skilled in meting out wages to her servants. She was kind and loving to the poor and the helpless, and she had the greatest enthusiasm for virtuous endeavors.²⁷ Despite the fact that she is praised in the introductory verses, the remainder

of the biography centers around one theme, the birth of her children. In her relatively short life of thirty-four years she gave birth to seven children, all between the years 1646 and 1659. She is known almost exclusively as a mother, not as a religious expert.

Suffering Society

Moving to Orgyan Chokyi's day, we find that Tenzin Repa—by now a familiar figure to us—has much to say about suffering.²⁸ Both Orgyan Chokyi and Tenzin Repa employ the passage from suffering to freedom as a theme around which to organize their autobiographies. Both describe the traditional themes of hardship and mishap as crucial moments in the spiritual quest. Both are part of a tradition of religious poetic song that seeks to express the human experience in tangible and moving ways, a tradition whose greatest hero is of course Milarepa. However, whereas Orgyan Chokyi portrays suffering primarily in terms of the female body and domestic life, Tenzin Repa's representation of suffering is offered in general social terms, and emphasizes social hypocrisy on a large scale and the inevitability of death.

It is useful to read the songs of both Orgyan Chokyi and Tenzin Repa in the context of fundamental Buddhist teachings on suffering, the Four Noble Truths. The first of these describes a basic existential predicament of human life—there is suffering and suffering is the result of craving and change: “This is the noble truth of suffering: birth is suffering, aging is suffering, sickness is suffering, dying is suffering, sorrow, grief, pain, unhappiness, and unease are suffering; being united with what is not liked is suffering, separation from what is liked is suffering; not to get what one wants is suffering; in short, the five components of psychic and physical life and their obsessions are suffering.”²⁹ Tenzin Repa's characterizations of suffering resonate with this definition, formulated some two millennia before him. He finds inspiration for songs and teaching in meditations on the inevitability of death and the uncertainty as to when it will occur. He dwells upon aging, sickness, and death in vivid terms:

Some die as they leave their mother's womb,
Some die old and infirm, some in their prime.
Some are burned by fire, some swept off by floods,
Some are killed by enemies, some struck down by thieves,
Some of little faith pass away in despair.
Who does not die once they are born?³⁰

Here Tenzin Repa rapidly lists several images of suffering. They are employed rhetorically—that is, the verse is both instructional and inspirational. Tenzin Repa relates how he himself found strength and mental clarity from the stories of the suffering endured by Milarepa—the archetypal “cotton-clad” yogin—and the other Kagyu masters of the past as he was tormented by zom-

bies in a delirium of sickness.³¹ So too his own story of perseverance in the face of human misery is meant to inspire his students. The dramatic conclusion to his autobiography emphasizes this point:

Until I was twenty years old,
I cannot remember a single moment of happiness.
If I were to speak in detail of this,
Even my enemies would be brought to tears.
Such is the life story of a cotton-clad.³²

So he lamented to his students as he told them of his young life. Amid tears they listened as he related the sorrows that he bore, sorrows that had two overwhelming and intertwining goals: to practice Dharma and to visit the great masters of Buddhism in central Tibet.

Tenzin Repa's perspective on suffering also reaches to the social and political. On several occasions he laments the hypocrisy of religious scene in central Tibet with a mixture of sarcasm and sadness, contrasting it with the serenity of his retreat in Dolpo, Crystal Mountain Dragon Roar, Shelri Drukdra:

While those bastions of religion in Central Tibet make merry,
And temples are plundered for the sake of their estates,
Disputes of petty philosophical sophistry flourish.
As I beheld these ways my heart longed for solitude,
To Dolpo, to Dragon Roar I fled.

Royal families rage in evil with their armies,
Dukes just lust for wealth by exacting tax—
Commoners and serfs are struck down by plague.
As I beheld these ways my heart longed for solitude,
To Dolpo, to Dragon Roar I fled.³³

Although Tenzin Repa was not interested in scholarly debates, he was not without companionship—even if his friends were less verbose than those in central Tibet. In the winter days of retreat in Tsari, Tenzin Repa found a more worthy conversation partner in a hungry bird looking for food on the snow-covered ground. It is this—the sorrowful and vivid drama of life as a cotton-clad yogi in the Himalaya—that he left his disciples in his autobiographical songs and stories. In verses that transform the first noble truth—the truth of suffering—into an aesthetic vision, he sings:

Little bird, don't speak, you're looking sad,
Listen now to this beggar's song.
My sorrow in this human visage
Seems just like the misery of your life, little bird.
When snows of New Year fall,
I brood and ponder the pain of this world.
I meditate and conviction rises from within:
How sad are the beings of these realms of existence.³⁴

Here the perspective is different from that of the songs of Orgyan Chokyi; where Tenzin Repa is concerned with being kidnapped by crooked traders, the timeless inevitability of death for all beings, or the pan-Tibetan hypocrisy of religious life in this degenerate age, Orgyan Chokyi is concerned with smaller, more local and personal forms of misery. She cries over the fate of a young calf, she laments the fact that her parents wished for a son but only got a daughter, and, most significantly, she equates samsara—the realm of suffering itself—with her own body, with the female body. The scope of Tenzin Repa’s concern encompasses the translocal network of institutional religion, extending from his home all the way to the great monasteries of central Tibet. He looks outward to the political structures that impede spiritual practice. He speaks of far-away places, places connected to his local religious scene only indirectly. This is quite the opposite of Orgyan Chokyi’s interiorized and microsocial lamentations, as we will see.

Suffering Sexual Difference

The *Lives* of both Orgyan Chokyi and Tenzin Repa employ suffering as a theme to tell their life stories and to inspire their followers. But the differences between the two are the nevertheless significant. I have argued that Tenzin Repa’s *Life* and his songs are concerned principally with social suffering, or rather suffering incurred due to social circumstances. Suffering is not particularly gendered for him, and the very fact that this does not come up for him is an indication of the gendered status of his remarks; the fact of being male as opposed to female simply is not a cause for suffering, nor a powerful rhetorical tool to instruct about it.³⁵ Orgyan Chokyi’s portrayal of suffering in strong bodily terms contrasts with Tenzin Repa’s social critique. Unlike her male contemporary, Orgyan Chokyi thematizes gender. The female body is among the most significant symbols of suffering in the *Life*, figuring as prominently as her tears. Yet in the *Life of Orgyan Chokyi*, the female body is not merely a symbol of samsara, nor receptacle for the seeds of samsara. It *is* samsara.³⁶ To be female, according to her *Life*, is to be samsara embodied. This powerful theme is perhaps one of the principle reasons the story of Orgyan Chokyi has been able to speak so strongly to her descendants, for she speaks, as it were, not from books but from her body.

The relationship between gender and writing figures in the opening pages of the *Life*, in the now familiar statement: “There is no reason to write a liberation tale for you—a woman,” Orgyan Tenzin condemns Orgyan Chokyi. “You must be silent!” From this introductory scene to her final days in solitude, Orgyan Chokyi’s tale thematizes her gender, contrasts men and women in religious life, and differentiates suffering on the basis of whether it is experienced by male or female beings. The initial chapters of the *Life* highlight the notion that daughters are less desirable than sons. For being born a girl she is named Kyilo, “Happiness Dashed”—a name that contains part of her monastic name, Chokyi, and rings of poetic invention. With her early yearning for the

contemplative life, young Kyilo is chastised by her parents for lamenting her given social role: “Learning spinning and weaving is for you.” her mother tells her. “Do not create this mental suffering.” And in the first chapter of the *Life*, Orgyan Chokyi can only agree with her: “ ‘Mother is right,’ I thought.” But this internalization will not last long, as subsequent chapters emphasize Orgyan Chokyi’s developing sensitivity to the sufferings experienced by women due to sexual difference.

Although it is clear that in the Buddhist tradition both men and women are subject to the miseries of samsara, women—according to Orgyan Chokyi—must suffer precisely because of their bodies. On several occasions she employs stories of animals to emphasize this point. Her early experiences herding goats and sheep fostered in her a profound feeling of empathy for the beasts she looked after. Sold to butchers, eaten by wildcats, lost over the cliffs of the Dolpo mountain highlands—the sufferings of animals became for the young working nun symbolic of the sufferings of all beings. According to the *Life*, the sale of horses for human use brings suffering to both the mare and the calf. “This is a great tragedy,” Orgyan Chokyi proclaims, “and my tears are not few.” The suffering brought on for mother and child through separation strike the nun, moving her to pity even though the *Life* nowhere suggests that she herself considered motherhood. Just as the mare gives to her calf even in the face of loss, in death the mare gives her body—this time to the vultures who feed on her corpse. “Mothering” is giving, in life and death, and this notion links the mare to the bodhisattva. “I think the mare manifests the enlightened mind,” Orgyan Chokyi declares. “The mare’s flesh sits in the vulture’s body,” and perhaps “by flying and seeing all around the sky . . . the mare [may] attain the body of a god.” Here she also comments on passing that she would prefer to see human corpses given to vultures or burned rather than buried, perhaps alluding to her early experience of burying her leprous father.³⁷

The sufferings of female sheep provide especially poignant circumstances for lamenting the misery of mothers. Orgyan Chokyi sings the following song after witnessing a ewe trying to save her lamb from the attack of a mountain lion. The rescue fails and both mother and child are killed. Orgyan Chokyi is distraught, and she begins her sorrowful song, mourning the loss of her sheep. But she takes the scene one step further, allegorizing the ewe’s fate as a powerful commentary on the fate of all women, all mothers. Yet even here she does not stop; the intimacy with which female beings encounter suffering links them closely to samsara itself, so that for Orgyan Chokyi the female body—human or otherwise, it makes no difference—in fact is samsara. The verse makes the equation clear:

Humans, horses, dogs, all beings,
 Male and female all think alike,
 But the suffering of life comes to females as a matter of course.
 I could do without the misery of this female life.
 How I lament this broken vessel, this female body.

I could do without this female body with its misery.
 Ranting thoughts dwell in this woman's body.
 From within the body, spreading outward,
 From the center of the mind misery comes unchecked.
 Like the yak protecting her calf,
 They give up life for their children.
 This female body is itself samsara—the round of existence.
 May I attain a male body, and keep the vows,
 May I never again be born in the body of a woman!³⁸

As a natural outgrowth of the equation of female bodies with samsara, Orgyan Chokyi includes several prayers to be reborn a male. This is not an unusual request among Buddhist nuns in the Himalayas. Even nuns living at Bigu Nunnery in Nepal during the 1970s expressed such a wish.³⁹ In a song about herding in Chapter Three of her *Life*, Orgyan Chokyi laments the fate of the horses she herds, chastising the stallions for their indifference to their mates, and championing the hardships of mares. “The steed follows yet another mare,” she sings, and prays that “the mare not be born as a mare.” Yet the song is of course only nominally about animals. It more concerned with human men and women’s bodies and the suffering wrought by their encounter:

When I ponder our female bodies
 I am sorrowful; impermanence rings clear.
 When men and women couple—creating more life—
 Happiness is rare, but suffering is felt for a long time.

In the end, she prays that the mare may be reborn a stallion, perhaps as a sort of karmic twist in which the mare achieves the freedom and autonomy of the stallion. And just as Orgyan Chokyi wishes for the mare, so would she have for herself—rebirth in a male body.

When acts of desire are committed, suffering must follow.
 When I see the mare suffering, melancholia flares.
 Behold us with mercy, Lord of Compassion.
 Let me not be born a woman in all lives to come.
 When I ponder the suffering of beings, melancholia flares.⁴⁰

The prayer to be reborn a man comes up again in the chapter on pilgrimage. Indeed, other than a list of places at which she prayed, this prayer forms the central element of her account. Here she prays fervently while walking around the great stupas of the Kathmandu Valley, Bodhnāth and Swayambhū: “At the close of *Samantabhadra Prayer* or whatever prayer I knew [I would pray]: May the sins and obscurations of all six classes of beings—beings who have ever been my kind mother and father in the unending samsara of rebirth—be purified, and may they complete the two accumulations” of wisdom and merit. The final line of her prayers could not be more explicit: “May I never

be born in a female body in any rebirth. Having attained a male body, may I be able to sustain pure conduct."⁴¹

In these songs and prayers Orgyan Chokyi may at first appear to internalize all that has been negatively claimed of women in Buddhism. Yet more is going on here than than simple internalization: a subtle use of gender transformation that actually extols women's ability to practice the Dharma. As in the case of religious women's religious literature in medieval Europe, where "marginal and disadvantaged groups in a society appropriate that society's dominant symbols and ideas that revise and undercut them,"⁴² in the *Life* the goal of rebirth as a man is turned on its head. Orgyan Chokyi's suffering as a woman allows her to see and teach more directly. If, as she states, the very nature of a woman is suffering, then perhaps women know best about its nature and how to eradicate it. Women are experts in suffering, she might say, and who better than a woman like Orgyan Chokyi to explain its workings?

Further, Orgyan Chokyi criticizes the actions of men in marriage while at the same time praying to be reborn as a male: "When I see the shamelessness of men [I think,] 'May I be born in a body that will sustain the precepts.'" From elsewhere in her work it is clear that a male body is implied here. And yet she does not merely pray to be reborn as a male; she would be a male "who is capable of sustaining the precepts," the ethical and spiritual teachings of Buddhism. The implication of this paradox is clear. With her intimate knowledge of suffering from the perspective of a woman—embodied in the samsaric female form—she would use a male body better than the men around her in the spiritual quest. Knowing what she knows, she would not waste the opportunity a male body provides, as so many horselike men do; her prayer to be reborn a man thus contains a scathing critique of the inability of men to use their advantage in the practice of Dharma. Her message thus addresses both male and female readers and listeners, though one can only wonder how her thinly veiled animal allegories struck the men of her religious community.

If men are the subject of criticism of the *Life's* songs, they are merely the principal example of a more fundamental aspect of human life—desire—as the following episode illustrates. As Orgyan Chokyi travels to visit her friend Yeshe Drolma, she beholds a cow being milked. This banal domestic scene becomes for the hermitess a symbol of the suffering inherent in the very fabric of life, for as the cow is milked the calf is robbed of its rightful sustenance. What is more, the male beast acts in complete disregard for this scene: "The bull just trotted around," ignorant of the theft from mother and calf. Orgyan Chokyi uses the image of this unfeeling bull-man to fashion an allegory about desire. "Thinking that all this suffering was a result of desire, my mental anguish was immeasurable." In another song she is clearly speaking about sexual desire between men and women. "Just as the moth desires the light of the lamp, so do men desire women's bodies. To men, women are demons; to women, men are demons."⁴³ This verse in fact comes from her master, Orgyan Tenzin's work on Great Perfection contemplative practice. In saying this, Orgyan Tenzin is participating in a long tradition, for similar instructions are found in early Nyingmapa contemplative literature.⁴⁴ Yet where Orgyan Tenzin

is speaking only of the relationship between male and female practitioners of tantric yoga, Orgyan Chokyi's verse is not restricted to this limited context. She makes a general claim about gender relations, transforming an esoteric point of tantric practice into an "exoteric" social critique about sexual relations.

As Orgyan Chokyi enters into her later years, autonomy is highlighted as the single most important goal for women, and the hermit's life was a principal means to accomplish this. "The pain of working the barley, wood, and water I am free to do for myself. Self-serving and self-empowered, I have escaped people. I have attained autonomy." To be a hermit was, for Orgyan Chokyi, to be free of the social world that her *Life*, and the *Lives* of so many Tibetan saints, criticizes. Yet while she wishes for solitude, for "an empty valley with no people," she also prays to "meet women friends with a similar religion." The *Life* is critical of the monastery, and Orgyan Chokyi would rather have the empty valley than the monastery kitchen. But the social world she critiques is the world of men. She is perfectly happy to live in community with women. Providing service to "religious women of a similar faith" is in fact one of the supreme joys Orgyan Chokyi lays claim to. "I do not need to heed the opinions of bad friends. If I have food, I am free to ask the master or my religious friends. I have found happiness." Given this context, her prayer "not to meet for even a moment those who are lazy in religion" is a wish for independence from male social worlds, for it is—if we relate her prayers to her animal songs—the "bulls" that are indifferent to suffering. It is the "stallions" who are heartless. It is men who look on uncaringly as the sheep are lost or sold to samsara.

A further commentary on sexual difference may be discerned in the *Life*—at once more subtle and perhaps more subversive. This is a muted critique of her male masters through the absence of praise. A conventional feature of Tibetan spiritual autobiographies is the effusive praise of one's masters. Name upon name is recounted in prayers or lists of teachings received. Orgyan Chokyi records many meetings with her master, Orgyan Tenzin, when she first becomes a nun. Nevertheless, she is all too restrained in her descriptions of their encounters, and he is often represented as either mocking her or being somewhat elusive. Given that her story begins with her master forbidding her to write at all, it is little wonder she does not expend many words in his favor. Orgyan Chokyi faces further deprecations from her master as she stumbles in the first steps of contemplative practice. "Your woman's mind does not understand great philosophy," Orgyan Tenzin tells her. "You are like an old woman who needs a lesson on how to get started!" Orgyan Chokyi recoils at this, and thinks to herself that her master is wrong. She is not an "old woman," and the reason for this is that she has no "burning desire," hallmark of women according to a number of Tibetan *Lives*, as we have seen. Her words are strong against her master: "He speaks falsely," she thinks, treading a fine line between independent thought and outright offence against Orgyan Tenzin. As the years go by, Orgyan Tenzin grows tired of his disciple's constant requests for release from work duty. He resorts to a bit of folk wisdom in answer to her pleas at one point. "You are wrong to be unhappy at the kitchen," he tells her, quoting

a verse: "Men are just right for the field, Women are just right for the kitchen." Her request is denied, and she is sent back to the kitchen for one or two more years to live out the message of the verse. In the context of Tibetan autobiography, the muted tone she adopts with regard Orgyan Tenzin hints at a relationship of antagonism, a relationship about which she occasionally had mixed feelings.

The *Life of Orgyan Chokyi* makes rhetorical use of the perceived lower status of her gender.⁴⁵ Throughout the verse and prose sections of the autobiography it uses gender as a teaching aid to emphasize the first noble truth, to emphasize impermanence. The work accomplishes this through the most personal and concrete example Orgyan Chokyi can use: her own body. Her greatest weakness in doctrinal terms is in fact a great strength in terms of the persuasive rhetoric of the *Life*—her suffering as a woman allows her a powerful insight into the nature of the first noble truth, and a powerful inspirational rhetoric of suffering. Recent writers on the *Lives* of Spanish nuns have suggested that "while taking part in the rhetoric of humility and ignorance on the one hand, women's reiteration of this 'lack' on the other hand had a strategic benefit, pointing up how formal education had not interfered with or tainted the visionary's experience an intuitive knowledge of God."⁴⁶ As the final verses of the work show, the lesson of her life lies precisely in its ability to encourage others to ever more involvement in the religious life. The effectiveness of the *Life of Orgyan Chokyi* may well lie in its emphasis on the suffering body. "Ordinary men differ from saints in their attitude toward the body, not in their orientation toward heaven. No man owns heaven, but every saint has a body. Is the body a problem for ordinary men? Only to the extent that it can be sick; otherwise they carry on unawares. For the saints, though, it becomes a constant obsession."⁴⁷ If Orgyan Chokyi suffers her body in saintly fashion, she suffers doubly her female body.

Yet though her story may be subtly critical in its portrayal of the relation between gender and spiritual efforts, it also upholds the value of traditional Buddhist practices. Her autobiography is, in the end, one long exhortation to practice, in which the scenes of her life offer the reader or listener a powerful model to emulate in the ongoing struggle to live according to the Dharma. If this is the case, was the *Life* subversive in any real social sense? Or was its rhetoric integrated into the larger framework of Buddhist discourse promoted by Orgyan Tenzin and others? Was the *Life of Orgyan Chokyi* a "voice of opposition," that represented or provoked any real change in the status of religious women during or after Orgyan Chokyi's time, or simply an "alternative voice," easily usurped by her master or other lamas?⁴⁸

Regardless, at the end of the *Life* her success as a religious woman is worthy of stating explicitly: "I am a woman who has done what is right in religion." Her good acts should serve as both inspiration and example for the audience of the *Life*, and her independence is noted: "If you can act even a little independently, that is the best. In the future you, the community, must uphold pure conduct." The next chapter will explore what the *Life* refers to when it speaks of conduct.

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Religious Practice

Much of the ritual and contemplative practice that Chokyi writes about can be traced directly to the writings of her master, Orgyan Tenzin. In light of the close connection between Orgyan Chokyi and her teacher, we may usefully look to his songs to elaborate upon the *Life*. This also provides an opportunity to see how Buddhist traditions of meditation, ritual, poetry, and imagery are passed on between teacher and pupil in a local setting. Orgyan Tenzin was a prolific writer, authoring two collections of verse, the *Brief Life Story of the Old Beggar Orgyan Tenzin*¹ and *Songs of Meditative Experience in Mountain Retreat*,² as well as a work on Nyingmapa esoteric practice. Drawing on Orgyan Tenzin's works and others, this chapter will highlight five categories of religious activity that are central to understanding the place of the *Life* in the Buddhist culture of Dolpo and the Himalaya more broadly: fasting, pilgrimage, meditation, visionary experience, and finally relic veneration. Before each of these is treated separately, let us look at Orgyan Chokyi's general comments about Buddhist practice.

Body, Speech, and Mind

“ ‘When I was just beginning,’ I thought one day, ‘Ani Drubchenmo Sonam Drolma instructed all the young nuns and monks in body, speech, and mind. She was of great benefit to my mind. Now I myself have fulfilled body, speech, and mind.’ ” The classic Buddhist triad of body, speech, and mind, is an essential element of the *Life of Orgyan Chokyi*. A general description of human activity in its most basic forms, the triad is the system by which all of the religious

practices undertaken by Orgyan Chokyi are organized and understood. The hermitess constantly applies herself to practice in these three realms, from her first steps in meditation, in which her master encourages her to “settle the mind in stillness with unwavering body, speech, and mind,” to the concluding verses, which exhort readers of the *Life* to practice as Orgyan Chokyi did before it is too late: “Day and night apply body, speech, and mind to virtue. Look at this *Life*, dharma practitioners, for when your eyes become blind you will not see the scriptures.” These three principal arenas of human life remain important for the hermitess even in death, as relics emerged from the crematory fires in the form of “small pieces of her body, speech, and mind” to be placed in a stupa honoring her good works.

The later chapters of the *Life* offer reflective moments on the religious practice Orgyan Chokyi had undergone in her career. “Having given rise to great impermanence, I avoided cause and effect. I chose virtue and shunned sin. I contemplated the significance of learning the Dharma. Learning, contemplation, and meditation are a necessity for me.” The process of learning the Dharma and reflecting on its importance through contemplating the great themes of Buddhism—suffering, impermanence, the lack of a permanent self—were coming to an end for the hermitess. And as the *Life* moves on, she emphasizes the virtues of meditation. “Meditation was the most important thing for me to do. I went to meditate, and I did not rise from meditation even when it was difficult. If I did not meditate, I would not become powerful.” Her meditations were supported in its three aspects by a related triad—the body, speech, and mind of the Buddha. Here the three terms refer not to the Buddha himself but to statues, scriptures, and stupas that are said to embody the enlightened power of the Buddha. As Orgyan Chokyi meditates, she uses these physical objects to support her practice. “By night I made the body, speech, and mind of the Buddha supports for unwavering mind, and I meditated. If my mind wavered, the image was not clear. When my mind was unwavering, the image was very clear with a shimmering emptiness.” And as she held fast to these symbols of the Buddha, her own body, speech, and mind came to emulate his example: “It was like my body was in mid-air. Body did not want to move. Voice did not want to speak. Mind became tranquil.”

Yet meditation was not simply an affair of the mind, for “in the all the sayings of the victorious Buddha it is taught that one must meditate with the three doors,” she writes. These three doors are none other than the triad of body, speech, and mind. Meditation is only part of a larger regiment, in which Orgyan Chokyi sought to “combine virtue and practice,” or the practice meditation with the virtue of ethical action. To successfully combine ethics and meditation she recommends using body, speech, and mind in very particular ways: “In terms of my body, I will confess and act accordingly on auspicious days such as the eighth, the twelfth, the fifteenth, the thirtieth, during the Gutor ritual of expelling sins, and on other holidays.” She continues, giving depth to the categories of speech and mind. “In terms of my speech, I will pray to return for the benefit of all beings. In terms of my mind, I will dwell in all three doors with emptiness and compassion.” Confession (and its attendant practice, fast-

ing), praying, meditative equipoise: these are the practical tools for working on body, speech, and mind—the human being considered as a whole. By performing these practices, and in particular by preserving the vows she had made as a nun and hermitess through confession and fasting, Orgyan Chokyi was confident that when death came she would have no regrets, nothing to repent. She prayed that through them she would be reborn in the celestial realm of Avalokiteśvara, Potala. In a way the first of these three—the ritual of confession and fast—was the most important practice for the hermitess, for it supported the others: “I had great faith in this teaching, which preserved good conduct in body, speech, and mind.”

The ritual of fast and confession is in fact what the *Life* would have her remembered for. It is the practice that she sees fit to claim as her own. In Chapter Nine, a veritable manual for fasting and confession, she speaks of their benefits, assuring her audience that “If you are able to perform this fully with body, speech, and mind, beings will live with joyous hearts. In this degenerate age, if all men and women are not able to keep fully body, speech, and mind, all the commitments and vows will come to an end. If you are able to preserve them, even at death you will have no regrets.” She exhorts those among her readers who have taken monastic or tantric vows to maintain vigilance against the “fourteen root downfalls”—the classic scheme of offenses that break religious vows, thus banishing the offender to unwanted rebirths. Chapter Nine of the *Life* shows that Orgyan Chokyi had become well known for just such vigilance, as she wonders how she should improve her practice. She goes before her master and suggests that she could do more: “I think I should perform a meditation retreat or a purification ritual,” she says to him. But Orgyan Tenzin assures her that she had done enough for this life. “You do not need to practice austerities anymore,” he replies. “With body, speech, and mind you have fully protected your commitment and vow, and now life is passing on.” Despite this praise, she apparently pays no heed to her master, for immediately after this encounter she performs yet another purification ritual with her sisters.

Fasting

If the *Life* of Orgyan Chokyi is any indication, the ritual life of Dolpo women largely involved the fasting and purification ritual known in Tibetan as *nyung-nay*. This fasting ritual appears to have been as important in late-seventeenth-century Dolpo as it is today throughout the Himalaya. From the Everest region of Nepal, where Sherpas routinely engage in fasting rites, to the high mountains of Ladakh and Zaskar in northern India, where fasting is an important feature of nuns’ ritual practice, the tradition of fasting tracing back to Gelongma Palmo is ubiquitous.³

The Tibetan fasting ritual is probably an elaboration on the long-standing Buddhist ritual of *uposatha*, a fortnightly event in which members of the Buddhist monastic community recite the monastic code and perform confession

of faults.⁴ An essential aspect of maintaining community coherence, *uposatha* is also an occasion for the laity either to make donations to monastic institutions or to take vows themselves, hear instructions from monks and nuns, and participate directly in the life of the monastery. Among Tibetan communities in the Himalaya, the fasting ritual has been among the preeminent means by which members of laity and clergy alike could confess sins, engage in atonement through ascetic practice, and thus positively effect their karmic situation. Stan Mumford's account of the fasting ritual among the Gurungs of Nepal highlights this feature of participation: "As a select group, we would take a vow . . . to set ourselves apart to live a faultless day . . . to "wipe out" . . . our past demerits through a rigorous series of prostrations and to accumulate merit . . . for the future through turning prayer wheels, counting rosaries, and circumambulating the Gompa [temple]."⁵

From a doctrinal standpoint, the soteriological benefits promised to those who practice the fasting ritual are profound, as Jodan Sonam Zangpo tells us at the close of his *Life of Gelongma Palmo*. By reciting the spell a single time, even the four downfalls of the "solitary realizer"—a sort of second-rate claimant to enlightened status—will be purified. The sin of one lifetime will be purified. The habitual formations of the bodhisattva will be whittled down. Undertaking the fast once reduces the time spent cycling in the endless round of rebirth by forty thousand eons. All karmic blemishes will be cleared up. The qualities of the six perfections will all be attained, and one achieves status as a bodhisattva who will not backslide into samsara again. The patron of a fast need not fear another bad rebirth, and will also attain bodhisattva status.

The fasting ritual may also be described in terms of the threefold rubric of body, speech, and mind. Fasting purifies bodily pollution and prevents one from being reborn as a hungry ghost. Reciting the fasting prayer out loud purifies verbal pollution and prevents one from being born an animal. Finally, repeating the fasting spell in one's head without verbalizing it purifies the mind and insures that the practitioner will not be born in one of the hells.

Sonam Zangpo also states explicitly that this practice is beneficial to women: "If a lowly woman performs the fasting ritual once, when she dies she will be reborn as a bodhisattva who dwells on the first level, and will turn her back to samsara."⁶ And yet even here the success of women is held to be less than that of men; according to Sonam Zangpo, if a male animal hears the *dhārāṇī* spell associated with this ritual three times he will be reborn in Sukhāvati heaven, skipping the human state altogether. But if a female animal hears the same, she will not go straight to Sukhāvati, but be reborn as a human.⁷ This emphasis on the benefits of the ritual to women is born out in other works as well, suggesting that its current popularity among women has a long-standing doctrinal background.⁸ Yet there were variant viewpoints on the relative benefits of the ritual for men and women. Another fasting manual is diffident about gender: If one praises Avalokiteśvara through the fast, "then whether one must be born as a man or a woman, in that and all future births one will accomplish what is necessary for transcending the world."⁹

Orgyan Chokyi provides some idea of the season in which public perform-

ances of the ritual were undertaken. In 1729, all the residents of Tadru performed the fast from the tenth to the fifteenth day of the second month of the Tibetan calendar, or roughly at the end of March. They might also perform it in the first month of the year. It is not clear precisely which ritual manual Orgyan Chokyi used, though she does mention at one point that the practitioners of Tadru performed a ritual according to a manual composed by a student of the Nyingmapa master, Guru Chowang. Orgyan Chokyi relates that she performed the fasting rite on the eighth day, the fourteenth, fifteenth, and thirtieth days of the Tibetan month. She also performed it on holidays such as the Gutor purification festival occurring on the twenty-ninth day of the final month of the year.¹⁰ This extended schedule was perhaps the prerogative of the nuns at Tadru and not tied to the annual performance of the villagers.

The *Life of Orgyan Chokyi* does more than simply speak about the fasting ritual; it provides concise instructions for its performance. In fact, the liturgy included in the *Life* is found in numerous manuals for the fasting ritual.¹¹ It is no less than the central prayer of the rite, comprising the fundamental vows of Buddhism. It begins with an entreaty to the three jewels, Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha: "I pray to all the buddhas and bodhisattvas to think of me. Master, I pray that you think of me. Noble Avalokiteśvara, I pray that you think of me. From this moment until I attain the secret heart of enlightenment I, Orgyan Chokyi, take refuge in the Buddha, supreme person. I take refuge in the holy teachings, supreme among those free of desire. I take refuge in the noble religious community, supreme among gatherings."

Following this, the actual commitment to fast and maintain vows is made, prefaced by a long list of the praiseworthy activities of enlightened beings: "Just as in the past the tathāgathas, arhats, totally perfect buddhas . . . maintain their vow with purification so that they may achieve the benefit of all beings, that they may be of service, that they may work uninterruptedly, that they may work without desire, that they may perfect the teachings of enlightenment." This leads to the actual prayer made by the ritual performer, in this case Orgyan Chokyi: "May I, Orgyan Chokyi, thinking of the benefit to all beings and as an offering to the master and the Buddha, take the perfect commitment of confession and purification from this time until the sun shines tomorrow." The pledge to undergo confession for a twenty-four hour period is thus characterized as the act of a bodhisattva, a person seeking enlightenment only in order to benefit others. The prayer then moves to a verse passage in which the eight precepts taken by Buddhist laymen and monks alike are listed: "(1) I will not take life. (2) I will not take another's wealth. (3) I will not engage in sex. (4) I will not speak false words. (5) I will give up alcohol. (6) I will not sit on a high seat. (7) Likewise, I will give up snacks, (8) adorning myself with perfume and jewels, and dancing and singing as well." The ritual then prompts the performer to recite the spell of pure conduct twenty-one times: *om amogha śīla saṃvara saṃvara vara vara mahā śuddha sattva padma vibhūṣita dhara dhara samanta avalokite hūṃ phaṭ svāhā*. Referring of course to Avalokiteśvara, this spell has been translated as: "Om maintain effective morality, maintain, maintain. Being of great purity, lotus-bearing, hold, hold with your hand. Look down

continuously *hum phat svaha*.”¹² The recitations close with a classic dedication of merit toward the benefit of others: “By the merit obtained through preserving moral conduct, may all sentient beings quickly attain the state of the powerful Sage.”

Orgyan Chokyi links her continuous performance of the fasting ritual with her impending death and, ultimately, her future rebirths. “I thought that if I preserved my vow and commitment day and night I would not have to repent when death came.” She places great faith in the efficacy of the ritual for maintaining her vows and purifying her karma. For her it is a complete ritual encompassing body, speech, and mind, much as Sonam Zangpo described centuries before her. As the ritual instructions included in the *Life* draw to a close, Orgyan Chokyi exhorts her companions—and those who may read her story—to practice the fast with the promise of a better life and death without remorse: “If you are able to perform this fully with body, speech, and mind, beings will live with joyous hearts. In this degenerate age, if all men and women are not able to keep fully body, speech, and mind, all the commitments and vows will come to an end. If you are able to preserve them, even at death you will have no regrets.” The inclusion of fasting recitations suggests that the *Life* as a whole be understood as one long exhortation to practice this popular ritual. Yet this view is perhaps too narrow, for the *Life* promotes a host of related performances, including the most strenuous of practices, pilgrimage.

Pilgrimage

Pilgrimage is a ubiquitous part of Tibetan religious life. It is an intensely physical performance in which one can work off the sins of the past and strive for merit in the future.¹³ For the faithful in the western regions of the Tibetan cultural world, there is no greater place of pilgrimage than the trek to and around Mount Kailash. For Orgyan Tenzin, Mount Kailash held a perennial place in the Buddhist tradition. It was prophesied by the Buddha, a holy place of Padmasambhava’s treasure, and an all-around “great place for eremitic yogins of India and Tibet.” It was, however, a long trek to the mountain, and even a good Buddhist might think twice. The trail was vague at times, and travelers could be caught unawares in stormy weather.¹⁴ As Orgyan Tenzin prepared to go to Kailash in the summer of 1704,¹⁵ he provided reasons to go on pilgrimage to a number of men and women who showed some reluctance, afraid perhaps of robbers from the lowlands, such as Taktshang Repa met on his journey to the mountain a century before.¹⁶ “First of all,” Orgyan Tenzin tells them, “there is an oral tradition that if you want to attain a high meditative state you must go to visit such a blessed mountain.” Second, one’s experiential understanding of Buddhist principles (referred to simply as “view”), meditation, and practice are strengthened by going on a mountain retreat without hatred. “Third,” he tells his reluctant audience, “most people in this degenerate age act selfishly toward place and friends, and thus bind themselves with delusion.” Orgyan Tenzin urges his group to rise above the times and join him. The person who

does make it to the mountain is part of a select group, fortunate to participate in a long tradition of mountain worship. “Whoever is able to prostrate around this great place is a noble person as explained in the sutras.”

After this motivational speech it appears that a number of faithful—primarily monks and nuns, it seems—decide to travel with him, and they set out from Dolpo. The master and his group travel via Jumla, stopping at Omlo Lungpa, or Humla, in the far northwest corner of Nepal. Along the way people at Laon, Tsangtsha, Romtse, and Rimi receive them with hospitality. The “great king” Vikramśāh and all the Jumla royalty donate provisions.¹⁷ Then they travel by way of Purang and onward toward the mountain.¹⁸ When the master and his disciples first set their eyes upon the mountain, Orgyan Tenzin sings praise to the mountain and its environs. “Kailash; great place, Beautiful, amazing, a great spectacle, like a conch set against the sky! The mountains and cliffs all have the shape of receptacles for the body, speech, and mind of the Buddha. All passes and valleys are ‘secret paths’ of the dakinis.” He prays to the mountain on behalf of his disciples “that all impurities, negative karma accrued through ignorance and delusion will be purified,” and he encouraged them to make offerings to the mountain.

Five years earlier, in 1699, Orgyan Tenzin and twenty disciples went from Dolpo on pilgrimage to another center of Buddhist activity—though of a very different sort—the Kathmandu Valley. It is possible that this is when Orgyan Chokyi made her journey as well. The trek from their homeland to the valley was over two hundred miles, and must have taken several weeks to complete. The master and disciples visited the two great stupas in the valley, Svayambhūnāth and Bodhnāth, both of which had been integral to the history of Tibetan Buddhism around the valley for centuries.¹⁹ For Orgyan Tenzin, these holy sites of Kathmandu were bound up with the founding moments of Buddhism in central Tibet as well. According to him, Bodhnāth was the site of a prayer festival founded by no less than King Trisong Detsen, Padmasambhava, and Kamalaśīla.²⁰ To travel to Svayambhūnāth and Bodhnāth was, as with journey to Kailash, to participate in a tradition that was linked with both the Tibetan imperial past and the Indian Buddhist past.

Yet a trip to the Kathmandu Valley was not simply a peaceful pilgrimage to Buddhist holy sites. It was also, at the dawn of the eighteenth century, a venture into the battlefield of warring kingdoms. Orgyan Tenzin and his disciples traveled through the valley just decades before the unification of the valley under the Shah regime.²¹ The battles were great in the eyes of this Himalayan yogin, who witnessed death and destruction amid skirmishes between the valley’s three kingdoms—Kathmandu, Patan, and Bhaktapur. As he beheld this suffering, he took solace in the *Lives* of Tibetan saints. He reflected upon the life stories of the great masters and translators of the past, who each underwent great hardship for the sake of the Dharma. Although there is little evidence that Orgyan Tenzin played a role in such political events, the efforts of his predecessors in the Kathmandu Valley make it clear that such Tibetan religious figures—even those known as reclusive yogins—were concretely involved in the social life of the valley. The travels of Lhatsun Rinchen Namgyal—

disciple of the Milarepa's greatest hagiographer, Tsangnyon Heruka—offer a more detailed view of the valley as seen by Tibetan travelers than do the songs of Orgyan Tenzin.

Sometime in the late 1530s, hundreds of Tibetan Buddhist pilgrims gathered in Kyirong, a mountain village on the southwest border of Tibet, and prepared to make the journey of some one hundred miles directly south through the Himalayas to the Kathmandu Valley. Their goal was the stupa of Svayambhūnāth, located on the western outskirts of the city of Kathmandu. They were afraid to make the trek into foreign territory, afraid of what the trail might hold for them, but they were joined by their leader, a prominent religious figure in southwestern Tibet, Lhatsun Rinchen Namgyal, who assured them that their journey was worth the effort.

The pilgrims were not disappointed by the landscape of the Kathmandu Valley or the cityscape of Kathmandu itself. "The houses are beautified with various colors," writes Lhatsun's hagiographer. "There are lattices in the archways, and hanging bells resounding. From the latticed windows the scent of incense drifts. From the palace, fluttering with beautiful jeweled banners raised, lovely musicians carrying all sorts of instruments skillfully make offerings of drama and dance." He comments on the people of the cities as well, noting that "the Newars of this land wear fine clothing and bring offerings of flowers and incense, heaps of rice, sugar, and honey." Lhatsun and his disciples were awestruck at natural beauty of the valley. "The land is covered with blue-green pastures. In the expansive woods with many different kinds of trees, amid drooping blossoms of many flowers are cuckoos, parrots, and sweet sounding birds. The pilgrims were wide-eyed, smiling and amused. In the canopy created by a web of dense trees all kinds of multicolored birds and monkeys play." They remained by the stupa for twelve days, during which the Tibetan teacher performed rituals and granted teachings to his fellow pilgrims.²²

Visiting the stupa of Svayambhūnāth was an act that would bring to pilgrims great merit in this life, and rebirth in a pure land for the next. Yet for Lhatsun the journey to the Kathmandu Valley was about more than gaining merit. He was far more involved with the stupa of Svayambhūnāth—and Nepalese religious and cultural life in general—than this band of pilgrims with whom he toured, for he was responsible for restoring this stupa on no fewer than four separate occasions.²³ For religious leaders such as Tsangnyon and Lhatsun—and possibly even Orgyan Tenzin more than a century later—the journey to Kathmandu was both a political and a religious venture. They journeyed south as pilgrims expecting merit from paying homage to the embodiment of the Buddha, the white-domed stupa. They worked as shamans maintaining good relationships with the gods, overcoming evil, and fostering order. They journeyed as cultural ambassadors forging and maintaining links with the Newar Buddhists of the valley. They also journeyed as political mediators, acting as bonds between the various secular rulers of southwest Tibet, the Himalayan regions, and the Kathmandu Valley. Svayambhūnāth Stupa was

more than a center of religious power, a place for pilgrims to gain merit. It was also a center of political, economic, and cultural exchange.

Was the pilgrimage to the Kathmandu Valley any of this for Orgyan Chokyi? Not according to her *Life*, though she was certainly the beneficiary of Lhatsun's labors at Svayambhūnāth, and she walked in the footsteps of Lhatsun's disciples from Kyirong. Chapter Five of the *Life* provides only a résumé of the places she visited, as well as the prayer that she recited at the foot of the stupas (see Chapter Four). The list of holy places is laconic, though it is interesting for one primary reason: it is almost exactly the same as the list given in another guide to the valley's Buddhist hotspots, the 1680 work of Nelung Ngawang Dorje, a student of the seventeenth-century Kagyu master Rangrik Rechen.²⁴ There are a number of reasons why this might be the case. First, it is possible that either Orgyan Chokyi or Orgyan Tenzin possessed a copy of Ngawang Dorje's work, used it as a pilgrimage guide, and subsequently used it to compose Chapter Five of the *Life*. Perhaps both works are related to a yet older common source. It is also possible that the editor used an older guide to the valley to fill out Orgyan Chokyi's account. At any rate, the similarity between these two works exemplifies the intertextuality of Tibetan literature, even in hagiography. It also suggests that in the early eighteenth century there was a relatively stable pilgrimage route traveled by the faithful as they made their way around the holy sites of the Kathmandu Valley.

There was one place of pilgrimage to which Orgyan Chokyi was not able to travel, no matter how desperately she wanted to—Sikkim. Perhaps she wished to go to “the hidden land in which beings living in the end times are protected by Guru Rinpoche,” as it was described some half a century before her by Lhatsun Namkha Jigmay.²⁵ Perhaps she wanted the chance to travel with her friends. Whatever the case, she was refused the opportunity by her master, Orgyan Tenzin, and had to content herself with meditations at home. It is to this aspect of her *Life* that we now turn.

Meditation

As Chapter Four of Orgyan Chokyi's *Life* illustrates, the student-teacher relationship could be time-consuming and perhaps even frustrating. Here she returns again and again to Orgyan Tenzin for clarifications on the meditation teachings he had imparted to her. Orgyan Chokyi laments the difficulties she encountered trying to understand her master's instructions, and the doubts she fell into as she struggled to put these instructions into practice. For his part, Orgyan Tenzin spoke humbly about the meditation instructions he gave his disciple. His “direct introduction [to mind], a teaching on the vital points of your body,” may have been based upon the Great Perfection teachings of old, but he insisted that “there are no great ideas in this introduction at all.”

And it is true that many of Orgyan Tenzin's teachings were simple and direct introductions to Buddhist practice. Indeed, there is very little in his songs

that one could not find elaborated elsewhere, in more expansive works such as Patrul Rinpoche's *Words of My Perfect Teacher*. What is significant for our purposes is that Orgyan Tenzin gave most of the teachings considered here to local women and men of Dolpo in response to specific situations. The nuns at Drikung are not doing so well, so he exhorts them to practice. The yogins around Tadru are about to go into retreat, so he gives them a small text to take with them. This is local religion, and Orgyan Tenzin's songs show just what manner of Buddhism the practitioners of Dolpo in the early eighteenth century were exposed to. In the following song, Orgyan Tenzin lays out the basic components of Buddhist practice for his disciples, including faith, correct view, and practice. He begins by emphasizing the need to reflect on the suffering of samsara:

Turning your back on the appearance of this life,
 Work to know and understand the great purpose of the next.
 Listening, reflecting, and meditating
 On the great purpose of the next life, act!

He then counsels his audience to have faith, which makes the study of Buddhism and the implementation of its ideals possible.

First, with the three faiths,
 Listen to the instructions of the master much.
 Look to the story of the victorious Buddha,
 And at many sutras and treatises.
 Look and reflect upon the supreme teachings,
 Consider well the evils of samsara,
 And learn to discern cause and effect.
 Have faith in the masters,
 Be pure to your religious brethren,
 And be kind to all beings.

With a firm grounding in the scriptures, the disciple may begin to contemplate the nature of the mind. The essence of mind, Orgyan Tenzin continues, is empty, luminous, and "playfully aware." And each of these qualities may be likened to a specific aspect of the buddhahood conceived in cosmic terms. The empty mind is the Dharma body of the Buddha, the luminous mind is the "enjoyment body," and the playfully aware mind is the Buddha's "emanation body." Here Orgyan Tenzin draws on a long tradition of Nyingmapa Great Perfection philosophy.²⁶

And where is the disciple to undertake these contemplations? In mountain retreat, of course, for as Orgyan Tenzin says, it is the "fatherland of the meditator."²⁷ The village, by contrast, is a pit of samsara to be avoided by all hoping to practice religion. In 1703 he gave instructions to Ani Palden Drolma and other women and nuns for just such a retreat. Here he summarizes an entire religious path in a few lines:

Without bringing shame to yourself, take refuge, foster the mind of enlightenment, practice your vow, meditate on the mandala and recite the hundred-syllable mantra, pray with guru yoga, and create the world and its inhabitants as a mandala and deities. In the perfection phase take the great seal into your experience. Perform creation and completion phases diligently four times a day. First meditate on impermanence and compassion and afterward dedicate the merit. The critical point in wrapping it all up is to renounce this life. Cut the cord to the mind, give up the hundred acts of this life, and bring an end to appearances as naked emptiness.

Orgyan Tenzin concludes the instruction with a litany of descriptions for working to calm the mind. “Look at the mind in this way: settled unfabricated; settled in clarity; settled in nonactivity; settled in freedom; settled without effort or searching; recognizing its own appearance; without conceptualizing the clarity; without grasping at that clarity as an object; with the sediment settled; in equanimity; in a naked staring state.”²⁸

A number of specific activities are mentioned here, all of which have long standing in Indian and Tibetan contemplative practices. The principle practice he recommends is the “creation and completion” yoga, which involves imagining oneself as celestial being. On another occasion Orgyan Tenzin gives more detailed instructions for meditating upon oneself as Avalokiteśvara to the patroness Tsering Mingtri. “This human body in heaven,” he writes, “is a supreme body, difficult to acquire. When we contemplate this torrent of birth, old age, and death it brings sorrow. Meditate on this ordinary body of flesh and blood as the body of Avalokiteśvara. Make your form the body of the Noble One and purify the pollution of the body.” The meditation would not be complete, however, if it only involved the imaginative transformation of one’s body. Speech and mind must also be imagined as the compassionate bodhisattva by chanting the prayer *oṃ maṇi padme hūṃ*. “Recite *maṇi* prayers and consider every sound and word to be the voice of the Noble One. This purifies negative actions speech. Make the concepts of your mind the mind of the Noble One. This purifies the mind.”²⁹

The recitation of this popular prayer was by no means conceived of as the mumbling of empty sounds. For ritual experts such as Orgyan Tenzin, each syllable is assigned a specific content in a symbolic code. While giving teachings to a group reciting the prayer at Drikung Monastery in Dolpo, Orgyan Tenzin explains the symbolic correspondence of the syllables of the of *maṇi* prayer. “*Oṃ* is the assembly of all Buddhas, the precious master. *Aḥ* is the assembly of all Dharma, the precious deity. *Hūṃ* is the assembly of all the Sangha, the precious dakini. *Hriḥ* is the unchanging three jewels; one’s own mind.” Each of the six principle syllables also possesses a particular power associated with one of the six classes of beings: “From *oṃ* white light tames deities. From *ma* green light tames nondeities. From *ni* yellow light tames people. From *pad* blue light tames fallen beings. From *me* red light tames animals. From *hūṃ* black light tames hell beings.” Orgyan Tenzin con-

cludes by emphasizing to his disciples that in these ten syllables all mantras are complete.³⁰ Such mapping of particular attributes upon the six-syllable mantra of Avalokiteśvara is a common exegetical practice; a similar scheme is found, for instance, in the twelfth-century *Life of Padmasambhava* by Nyangral Nyima Ozer.³¹

The hermitess was certainly among the audience in Dolpo for teachings such as these. Chapter Four of the *Life* is dedicated to Orgyan Chokyi's education, early ritual activities, and progress in meditation under Orgyan Tenzin. At the beginning of her formal training, her master imparted several well-known Buddhist works to her along with the requisite initiations, without which she would not be authorized to practice the teachings contained therein. The *Testament of Mañi* is among the most popular collections of myth and ritual dedicated to the patron bodhisattva of Tibet, Avalokiteśvara, containing in particular extensive lore on the six-syllable mantra, *om mañi padme hūm*. Likewise, the *All-Liberating* cycle of the *Northern Treasure* is also a collection of rituals dedicated to Avalokiteśvara. Orgyan Tenzin's own *Self-Luminous Dharma Realm of the Profound Essence* is a commentary on his master Garwang Dorje's collection of rituals, philosophy, and technical contemplative instructions of the Nyingmapa Great Perfection tradition.³² Orgyan Tenzin taught the *Self-Luminous Dharma Realm* frequently around Dolpo, and it is likely that Orgyan Chokyi based much of her meditation practice upon it.

The description of her first steps in the practice of meditation under Orgyan Tenzin is one of the most fascinating passages in the *Life*, for it allows us to see how a nun with limited education might have approached a contemplative program. Orgyan Chokyi's early meditation is for the most part centered around a single task, namely, understanding the relationship between the movement of the mind and conceptual thought.³³ During a lengthy period of practice, which includes a one-hundred-day intensive retreat, she undertakes to fulfill Orgyan Tenzin's exhortation: "Search for the mind!" This she does in alternating periods of meditation and question-and-answer periods with her master. As she comes to him for instruction, often puzzled and confused about her experiences in meditation, Orgyan Tenzin often refuses to give a direct answer, but instead riddles her with further questions. Is the movement of the mind identical to the ideas which might seem to be moved? Is what one might perceive as the mind's movement simply the endless stream of concepts that pass in and out of one's attention? Is there any difference between the thought and the thinker? What is the color of the mind? And the shape?

This method of instruction is well known in the Nyingmapa traditions, finding eloquent expression in the Shabkar Natshok Rangdrol's *Flapping Wings of the Garuda*. Like Orgyan Tenzin, Shabkar's "introduction to the mind" is a series of questions with which the disciple must grapple.³⁴ At first Orgyan Chokyi appears overwhelmed by this process, and more generally at the prospect of investigating her own mind. Yet she perseveres as Orgyan Tenzin encourages her to continue, for "if you know the mind you are a Buddha." As Orgyan Chokyi begins to grasp the relationship between the movement of the

mind and conceptual thought, Orgyan Tenzin introduces a related triad of terms into her practice: stillness, movement, and awareness.³⁵ Part of the basic Buddhist *śamatha* meditation as presented by Nyingmapa traditions, the terms stillness and movement refer to two states of the mind—stillness being the mind at rest and movement being the mind in agitation. The practitioner is asked to develop awareness of the movement of the mind, and consequently to allow this movement to subside, leaving stillness.

A similar discussion of these terms appears again in *Flapping Wings of the Garuda*.³⁶ Shabkar asks the meditator to look at the movement of conceptual thought,³⁷ all the while knowing that at a fundamental level this is not distinct from the enlightened awareness that forms the basis for all consciousness, according to Great Perfection thought. Orgyan Chokyi begins to understand this fundamental tenet of Great Perfection praxis as she succeeds in relaxing her mind, and as Chapter Four of the *Life* draws to a close she moves from the *śamatha* meditation of calm stillness to the *vipāśyana* meditation of insight into the nature of the mind.

The discussions with both her master—and Ani Drubchenmo as well—continue, in accord with Orgyan Tenzin's statement in his *Self-Luminous Dharma Realm* that the disciple must scrutinize the experiences of meditation by constantly posing questions to the master.³⁸ After one hundred days in meditation retreat, Orgyan Chokyi begins to feel some measure of success. She asks her mentor, Ani Drupchenmo, to come to her meditation cell to confirm her experiences, which for the first time in her practice consist of joy, not suffering. Some time later she had a further breakthrough. At the close of Chapter Four of the *Life*, Orgyan Chokyi beholds visions of deities, miraculous apparitions whose appearance she attributes to the twin teachings of the Kagyupa Great Seal and Nyingmapa Great Perfection traditions.

Visions

During the greater part of her adult life, from the 1690s to the 1720s, Orgyan Chokyi experienced visions. Some of these were connected with her meditation practice, some were not. A river in hell, a luminous deity, a dream of friends departed—all were part of her religious imagination. Such visions are pervasive in Tibetan *Lives*, and it seems that no account of a holy person's life is complete without at least passing reference to dream visions. Visions of deities, demons, and celestial realms were an integral aspect of meditative practice in the Great Perfection tradition in which Orgyan Chokyi was trained. An absolute distinction between dreams in sleep and waking visions is not made in these traditions. Always a powerful metaphor in Buddhism for the illusory nature of the physical world, dreams are extolled in Tibetan esoteric literature as principal occasions in which to contemplate the relation between human consciousness and external appearances. The practice of lucid dreaming—the ability to have a dream in which one is self-conscious that one is dreaming—is

held to be a powerful means to gain insight into the fundamental principle underlying Great Perfection theory, namely, that reality is in fact nothing more or less than the self-expression of a primordial awareness pervading reality.³⁹

Orgyan Chokyi's *Life* describes six separate visionary experiences. The first occurred during an intensive period of meditation practice. The second came to her when she was on pilgrimage to Mount Kailash. The last occurred when she was close to death, contemplating both her fate in the next life and the sufferings of her friends. Her visions can be grouped into three categories: positive visions of deities, which portend favorable experiences in the future or act as signs of spiritual progress; visions occurring in dreams or meditation; and visions of purgatory in which the hermitess beheld the sufferings of her friends and other people.

The first vision described in the *Life* occurs at the close of Chapter Four and takes place within a dream. Four months after a breakthrough in her meditation practice, Orgyan Chokyi has a dream that leads her to ask for teachings in Great Perfection meditation from her master. Then back in a dream she experiences visions of both lights and deities as they occur in what she refers to as the "four visions," probably alluding to the Great Perfection presentation of the process of self-realization.⁴⁰ In this dream state she also encounters peaceful deities such as Avalokiteśvara, as well as others arranged in an orderly fashion: "In white light was a white deity. In gold was a gold deity. In red light was a red deity." Some of these she claims to recognize, some she does not. In the end she attributes her success in achieving the "mixture of appearances and mind" that made up these visions to her training in two principal traditions of meditative praxis, the Great Seal of the Kagyupa lineages and the Great Perfection, both of which had been thoroughly integrated into a synthetic tradition by her time.

It was during a visit to the temple of the Kochar Buddha near Mount Kailash in the late 1690s that her second miraculous vision occurred. As she stood in front of the statue, its entire body was surrounded by rainbow light. From this multicolored aura a ray of light emerged from the center of the Buddha, shot toward her, and struck her. This profound connection with the enlightened light of the Buddha had an immediate effect upon the young nun. The everyday world faded into the background as a feeling of joy swept over her, and she felt her normal consciousness give way to the awareness of the Buddha. The vision was to benefit her contemplative practice for years to come, having given her a taste of her goal, enlightened awareness. Such visions were, however, open to suspicion, and she decided to keep it to herself. It was not until seven years later that she told Orgyan Tenzin about the life-changing event. He agreed that it was indeed a blessing, though he cautioned her to continue keeping her experience secret.

Orgyan Chokyi was not entirely certain that her visions were authentic. It was possible, she thought, that they may have been demons instead of deities, obstructions to practice instead of aids from such patron saints as Padmasambhava. Troubles with visions beset her while she practiced dream-based meditation in solitude, as she relates in Chapter Seven. Because of her strenuous

efforts in meditation, “things started to dissolve, I had nothing to grab a hold of, and my sleep became light and troubled. I would just grasp a dream, and then I would not be able to transform the dream. Sometimes I would think I had retained the dream, but my memory was blocked. I went on as if I had not slept at all. The morning after I could not hold on to the dream, and I had some doubts.” Such dreams were interspersed with luminous appearances, which Orgyan Chokyi did not recognize at first. After contemplating them further she realized that what she was experiencing as a dream state was no less than the intermediate state between life and death.

In her later years of solitary practice, Orgyan Chokyi experiences further visions. The most important of these is her vision of the mythic progenitor of the Nyingma school, Padmasambhava. Better known as Guru Rinpoche, he often appears to masters of this tradition, and Orgyan Chokyi’s vision does not depart radically from other accounts. As her meditation practice develops she undertakes one of the highest practices, “direct leap” meditation. As she sits in contemplation, a fiery throne appears next to a lamp flame. Seated upon the throne is Padmasambhava, patron saint of the Nyingmapa. To his left stands Avalokiteśvara, and to his right White Tārā. These three principal figures are surrounded by a host of other deities, some of whom Orgyan Chokyi recognizes and others whom she does not. All of these visionary apparitions “flicker and totter like lamps.” She notes the great relevance of this vision to herself, and only later relates to her master the encounter with the progenitor of their tradition. He is pleased, yet as in the case of her experience at the Kochar Buddha temple near Mount Kailash, he cautions her to keep her experiences to herself: “This great perfection is a special teaching,” he said. “It is the experience of keeping the lamp. Whether these dreams are good or bad, do not speak of them to anyone.”⁴¹

The last type of visionary experience found in the *Life of Orgyan Chokyi* explores the dark and ominous limits of the Tibetan ethical imagination—the hellish purgatory to which all who forsake positive karmic activity in life are banished for eons. The literature on purgatory in Tibet is rich, and the descriptions of various purgatorial realms are among the most vivid passages of any Tibetan presentation of basic Buddhist cosmology and soteriology.⁴² According to Buddhist cosmological theory, all beings have spent time in these realms due their negative karma; all have experienced the suffering of the hot and cold hells. In fact, throughout each person’s long course through samsara they have felt the pains of hell more than anyone can conceive, so much so that “the tears we have wept from cold, hunger, and thirst when we were without food and clothing . . . would make an ocean larger than all the great oceans surrounding the world. Even the amount of molten copper we have swallowed in the hells would be vaster than the four great oceans.”⁴³

Orgyan Chokyi integrated only a fraction of these grotesque visions into her account of a dream in which she beheld a river in purgatory. In 1726 the hermitess was meditating in her secluded rocky cave, content with her practice. Her master had recently told her that he had nothing more to teach her, so she decided to dedicate her remaining days to preparing for her next life. One

night during this period she had a terrifying dream. There were many people, naked, trapped in the currents of a great river in hell. As she beheld them they filed out of the river and toward a great fire. Just as these naked, pitiful beings were about to leap into the fire, Orgyan Chokyi awoke to find herself back in her cave. Shaken by this vision, she cast burnt offerings and recited the *Prayer of Samantabhadra* for the benefit of the beings she beheld in her dream. She found out later that at this time a number of people in the region had died of smallpox, intimating that her dream was a premonition of this tragic event in the external world.

It is possible that Orgyan Chokyi's vision of hell is based upon the *Jewel Ornament of Liberation* of Gampopa, for she mentions it by name. Gampopa goes into great detail describing the different purgatorial realms that await those who act unethically. The typical set of eighteen fiery or icy hell-realms are grouped under the more general rubric of the sufferings experienced by all living beings. The eight hot hells located below the human world are all named for their particular tortures. The wretched inhabitants of the heating hell are repeatedly covered in molten bronze that incinerates their internal organs. In the fourth of the ancillary hells that surround the eight hot hells in the cardinal directions there flows a boiling river of ashes, at the bank of which stand the minions of the lord of death, ready to kick those who try to escape back into the river.⁴⁴

Orgyan Chokyi's account of hell is also reminiscent of Nangsa Obum's visit to hell and accounts of such realms in the stories of revenants—those who have died and returned to life—more generally. Although Orgyan Chokyi did not have to die to witness purgatory, the implicit message about the less-than-desirable consequences of negative karmic acts is comparable to that of the revenant stories. As we have seen, the revenant Nangsa Obum died from a beating by her husband. During her funeral proceedings her consciousness traveled the intermediate realm between death and birth, where she encountered the Lord of Death directing traffic at a sort of mystical crossroads. Those who had been good in life were directed to the heavenly realms, while those whose karmic records were spotty were diverted to one of the lowly purgatorial realms. In these hells people cook in black pots or freeze as if on a mountain top.⁴⁵ She sees that “standing on a hot iron ground, beings were boiled in a stream of burning lead and that they were enduring numerous types of suffering by heat.”⁴⁶ Such horrors compell her to pray to the goddess Tārā, at which point the Lord of Death reveals himself as Avalokiteśvara in wrathful form. The gentle compassion of Avalokiteśvara and the unsparing punishment of the Lord of Death are seen to be two sides of the karmic process. If Orgyan Chokyi does not endure a postdeath journey to the underworld herself, she draws upon well-known themes from the literature of revenants. It may be that this is another reason why the editor drew explicit comparison between the *Life of Orgyan Chokyi* and the *Life of Nangsa Obum*.

The broader ethical significance of the brief account Chokyi gives of hell is also suggested by the popular tales of *Benefits of the Diamond Sutra*, from which we have already heard in chapter 1 above. This collection of fifteen short

stories extolling the benefits of reciting the *Diamond Sutra* is found throughout the Himalayas, and there is every reason to think that it was known in Dolpo. The basic message of each story is simple: unethical acts in life will most certainly land one in one of the hell realms, where he or she will be judged by Yamantaka, Lord of Death and the great arbiter of karmic justice, and sentenced to unthinkable sufferings for many eons. The Lord of Death grants mercy, however, to those who have chanted, copied, mumbled, or even patronized the printing of that most powerful of Buddhist sutras, the *Diamond Cutter Sutra*. The *Diamond Cutter* is one of a host of Indian Buddhist sutras that revels in glorifying its own importance. It is a sutra that self-consciously advertises the merits of having anything to do with sutras, and in particular with itself. As the Buddha says to his disciple Subhuti: "If someone were to fill the world with seven treasures and offer it to the Buddha . . . and if someone were to apprehend just a single verse from this Dharma teaching and present it widely to others, the merit produced from this would be incomparably greater than the former."⁴⁷

The *Benefits of the Diamond Sutra* is often styled a sutra itself (in which case it is titled the *Sutra on the Benefits of the Diamond Sutra*). So effective were the message of the *Sutra* and the tales of its benefits that both were often copied numerous times in a single continuous manuscript by Tibetan faithful, hoping that through the patronage of such reduplication they might be saved the torments of the hells described therein. Often such manuscripts would be costly products, with gold and silver ink upon large indigo paper. In other cases they would be humble affairs in shaky, untrained scripts.⁴⁸ In any case, the merit derived from the scripture and its ancillary stories were both held to be powerful enough to keep the Lord of Death away. In the following story, a householder is saved from a pool of molten copper boiling in the fiery realm. The story is worth recounting in full, for it offers an expanded view of purgatory merely hinted at in Orgyan Chokyi's *Life*.⁴⁹

A certain householder was stricken down by illness and traveled to the world of Yamantaka, lord of Death. The man saw one monk and many other people there. Then Yamantaka, the Dharma king, spoke to the monk: "You have entered the door of religion, but what virtuous acts have you performed?"

The monk said: "I have recited the *Diamond Cutter*." And no sooner had he said this than the Lord of Death rose from his throne, folded his palms, and prostrated before the monk. "You are the glorious son of a god," Yamantaka said. "Go from here."

As soon as he so commanded, a cloud of many colors appeared in the sky, and within that cloud appeared a throne of all sorts of precious jewels. The monk rested upon the throne and went into the sky.

Then many demons wielding sharp weapons seized each person who had traveled to the world of Yamantaka. They would call out the name of one person, and Yamantaka said: "What roots of virtue did you fashion when you had a human rebirth?"

The person said: "I studied many non-Buddhist astrology texts, and I also gave names and lent money. And I also recited the *Diamond Cutter*!" The other

people nearby said: “Because you studied and practiced non-Buddhist astrology, your virtue amounts to nothing!”

But the Dharma king Yamantaka replied: “In this realm there is such tremendous pain unlike that of the other hells. Look behind you!” As the man looked on he beheld a body some five hundred leagues long in a pool of boiling molten copper. The head of this body was covered with one hundred thousand heads of all kinds of sentient beings—animals, birds, and others. The head said something, and the other heads laughed, jeering and mocking him. Then even his eyeballs sunk into the molten copper. The man looked on at this, muttering pitiful sounds.

Then the Dharma king Yamantaka said to this man: “That being used to be a human. But he profited in great measure by practicing non-Buddhist [trades] and mocked people. He gave other names and slandered people, and because of these sins he experiences torment such as this. Because of your merit [accrued] from writing the *Diamond Cutter* I cannot but send you to the human realm. But leave off giving names, mocking, astrology, and the other non-Buddhist [activities] and practice virtue!” So saying, Yamantaka sent the man away. This man returned to the human world of Rose-Apple Island, and forsook the non-Buddhist practice of giving names and recited the *Diamond Cutter* with singular intent. When he passed from life he was reborn in the land of the thirty-three gods.

The sufferings witnessed by Orgyan Chokyi in her dream of the river in hell were, from the perspective of the *Life*, probably incurred by such “non-Buddhist” practices as are described in this story, as well as more general unethical actions resulting from a lack of compassion. The salvific power of the *Diamond Cutter Sutra* promoted in the tale here is, however, replaced in the *Life of Orgyan Chokyi* with works such as the *Prayer of Samantabhadra* or the fasting rite, both of which are employed to improve one’s karmic balance and ensure a pleasant rebirth, far away from the fires of purgatory and the accusing eye of the lord of death. In the tales of the *Diamond Cutter*, the principal function of descriptions of hell is to encourage people to recite the sutra itself. In other tales of people who have traveled to hell and returned to tell of it, the Lord of Death advocates different sets of practices. When the twentieth-century revenant Dawa Dronma describes an audience with Yamantaka in her *Life*, she extolls the benefits of a number of popular Tibetan practices, including the displaying of prayer flags, reciting the *maṇi* prayer, (*om maṇi padme hūm*), carving *maṇi* stones, pilgrimage, prostration, and the fasting rite.⁵⁰ Despite the different practices promoted, the point of the *Diamond Sutra* tales and the revenant tales is the same; practice good works—however such works are defined—and forestall one’s own audience with Death. Analogously, the principal function of Orgyan Chokyi’s dreams within the context of the *Life* may be linked to Chapter Nine, in which the hermitess provides practical instructions for the performance of the fasting rite, and its associated confession are provided. The link is clear, if only implicitly stated: perform the fasting rite faithfully and regularly and be saved from the hellish realms of Orgyan Chokyi’s visionary dreams.

One night toward the end of her life Orgyan Chokyi had dream in which her close friend Ani Kunga Drolma came to visit her. She took the hermitess by the hand, implored her to be happy, and disappeared. Kunga Drolma's dream visitation was not to keep Orgyan Chokyi happy. She was revisited by the "great impermanence" that so concerned her in earlier years. Yet this time it was her memory of people now gone that brought her to contemplate the stark reality of suffering that lies at the heart of Buddhist understandings of life. As she contemplated her past, "little by little all those people who had died in all the Tibetan valleys were set in a row in my memory." Her response to this vision was grim, darkly illustrating the *Life's* rhetoric of suffering: "I tried to count them, but I was unable."

Relics

In the final sections of the *Life*, Orgyan Chokyi herself becomes part of the religious landscape of Dolpo. The funeral rites dedicated to her were part of localizing the "holy death"⁵¹ through ritual mourning, building monuments, producing relics, and identifying Orgyan Chokyi with generic female figures known throughout the Tibetan cultural world such as the dakini and the goddess Guhyajñānā. Here Orgyan Chokyi shares with nearly every other Tibetan holy person the last—and perhaps most important—requirement for being remembered as a saint. A brief overview of the literary and historical background of Tibetan saints' holy remains will aid in appreciating the importance of the last scenes in the *Life of Orgyan Chokyi*. A few examples serve to illustrate that it is perhaps in death that the hermitess from Dolpo shared her closest ties with Tibetan masters of the past. In death she became one of them, along with Yeshe Tsogyal, Padmasambhava, and Milarepa. As the miraculous events required of Tibetan holy people at death became grafted on to her tale of suffering and sexual difference, she became a saint.

Relics of the Buddha himself were certainly important in the Tibetan Buddhist world. They were evoked as sources of authority in founding narratives of the old Tibetan empire such as the *Testament of Ba*,⁵² or sent as gifts to accompany letters to the Yongle Emperor of China (reigned 1403–1424) by Tibetan masters such as Kunga Tashi.⁵³ Yet it is the remains of Tibetan masters that feature prominently in *Lives* and religious histories. Yogins and scholars alike produced relics at the time of their death, and in the early centuries of Tibetan life writing we find such accounts from members of all schools. Relics are crucial to the development of saints' traditions, and thus accounts of death, cremation, and relics are among the most vivid and evocative components of their *Lives*.

The range of death, cremation, and relic accounts in Tibetan literature is wide and not limited strictly to *Lives*. They are found throughout a variety of Tibetan literary types sometimes treated as separate genres, including religious histories, abbatial histories, pilgrimage guides to holy places, and inventories of temples, monasteries, or stupas. Such accounts are ubiquitous. There are

approximately two hundred references to funerals, relics, and remains in the Go Lotsawa Shonu Pal's famous *Blue Annals* alone. And holy women other than Orgyan Chokyi are also said to have produced relics. Mingyur Paldron, daughter of Terdak Lingpa and a Nyingma teacher in her own right, was cremated, her bones had inscribed with various deities and syllables inscribed upon them, and her ashes made into effigies and installed in a stupa.⁵⁴

Such accounts are rich narratives, sensuous in their combination of realistic details and marvelous imagery. Smoke wafting from funeral shrouds transmutes into divine beings, apparitions of the deceased holy person appear to king and commoner alike, flowers pile up ankle deep on the ground as they rain around the funeral pyre. Remains of holy people become gods before the eyes of the faithful, or fly to India to fend off Turks attacking Buddhist monasteries. Scattered ashes protect places from hail,⁵⁵ faces of dead saints are traded for objects said to belong to other saints, and anything from skulls to ladles become objects of contention in sectarian rivalries. Death accounts are occasions for hagiographers to both display and direct the immense faith that followers had for a certain holy person and, just as important, to persuade readers of the faith-inspired financial and material support they should provide for the institutions associated with the holy dead.

The veracity of relics and miracles in the lives of saints was not accepted uncritically by all Tibetan writers,⁵⁶ and it is possible that *Lives'* explicit claims to authenticity by appeal to public witness were motivated by critiques of relics and miracles. Such phenomena have been subject to debate from at least the thirteenth century up to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when the nineteenth-century hagiographer Lakla Sonam Chodrup included a lengthy defense of relics in his *Life* of the great fourteenth-century Nyingma scholar Longchen Rabjampa.⁵⁷ Although it is accepted that the Buddha himself left relics for his disciples, polemic attacks on relics issuing from the bodies of Tibetan holy men claim that most cases in the present are forgeries, created only to deceive the public.

The great thirteenth-century scholar Sakya Paṇḍita offers the most powerful critique of relic production in Tibet. He agrees that "the *ringsel* relics of the three noble ones—buddhas, pratyekabuddhas, and arhats—emerge through the power of their enlightened qualities and become supports by which humans can gain merit. These are like gems that come from a (genuine) source such as the ocean or a goldmine." But not all relics are derived from such holy beings. "Some *ringsel* relics are made by demons in order to deceive people, and some arise through the being submerged in the four elements, earth, water, fire, and wind. It is also possible that some *ringsel* relics are emanated by deities who delight in the teachings to induce faith toward the departed in people." Despite the fact that past saints have produced relics, Sakya Paṇḍita is skeptical about the relics created in his own day, remarking disparagingly that "these days most of the relics are fabricated deceitfully such as a hollowed-out rock, the fruit of a sealwort, a fish eye, or remains fashioned by Nepalese, and must be analyzed by scholars. The difference [between true and false relics] must be analyzed by scholars." As every scholar should know, certain types of

relics have no basis in the canonical literature: “The emergence of hearts, tongues, and divine bodies are not spoken of in the Buddhist teachings, and all hearts and tongues pulled unburnt from a fire or images carved out of bones by artisans are generally fakes.” Ultimately caution should be exercised when considering the veracity of any relic, for “even if it one were to consider whether one is genuine and not made by an artisan, there is no scriptural explanation as to whether these are good or bad, nor is there a way to infer certainty, so it is difficult to tell whether [relics] are good or bad.”⁵⁸ Sakya Paṇḍita’s critical comments give us some idea of how relics were produced and shows that relic production was a craft with its particular expertise.

Who created Orgyan Chokyi’s relics? This is difficult to know. It is not something about which *Lives* are generally forthcoming. There is no mention of any controversy surrounding Orgyan Chokyi’s relics in the *Life*; the fact that a woman should produce such relics appears to have been unremarkable. At the end of her life she was without doubt well known in Dolpo. Her teacher Orgyan Tenzin notes the great sadness felt by the community as they watched her body burn on the funeral pyre, prepared her reliquary stupa, and distributed her relics throughout the region’s four corners: “Dakini Orgyan Chokyi faded in impermanence like a rainbow in the sky. All at Tadrü were greatly sorrowful. Her ashes were placed in a stupa as an outside holy object, and in a statue of Tārā as an inside holy object. These are at Tadrü Monastery today.”⁵⁹ Orgyan Chokyi’s relics—her remaining and continuous physical presence—are also said by the anonymous author of the *Life*’s final chapter to remain in a stupa at Tadrü even in the present day. From a historian’s perspective it is frustrating not to know when the present day is; our manuscripts have no date. But the ambiguity that may frustrate us is in fact a feature of the hagiography’s effectiveness, its ability to inspire action. The “present day” is precisely when someone reads or hears the tale. The tales of Milarepa, for instance, may apply equally to the king, the commoner, the monk in a major institution in eastern Tibet or Orgyan Chokyi, a hermitess in the middle of Dolpo.

Compared with death accounts such as the operatic finale of Tsangnyon Heruka’s *Life of Milarepa*, the death scene in the *Life of Orgyan Chokyi* is a humble affair. The hermitess does not return from beyond the dead to impart esoteric instructions, nor do dakinis steal her relics away. It nevertheless contains all the necessary features: miraculous signs of sainthood, a cremation amid the mourning faithful, the production of relics, the distribution of these relics to various institutions, and finally the placement of these relics in stupas and statues. As Orgyan Chokyi dies, the miracles that attest to her advanced status appear. A rainbow appears that resembles folded silk, and a rain of flowers falls. While her body remains in the meditation pose of Vajravaharī, Orgyan Tenzin and his disciples at Tadrü construct a mandala and perform a ritual on her behalf for fourteen days. At the close of the rituals, her corpse is wrapped in white cotton and carried by her friend Kunga Drolma to the crematory. As mourners look on, Orgyan Chokyi’s body is given to the fire, which has miraculously come to life by itself. “It did not need much ritual wood, nor was much kindling required.” This is surely no match for the spectacle of

Milarepa's cremation fires, whose actions were self-conscious and elaborate, but the *Life of Orgyan Chokyi* nevertheless creates a vivid image: "The sound of the flames was amazing, like a victory banner raised high, or like a parasol unfurled. The fire was five different colors as it rose up around the corpse in a great spectacle." As the cremation proceeds it begins to snow, which the *Life* takes as a good omen for the region. It is also the beginning of planting season, and the cremation of a holy person will surely benefit the crops. On the morning that her corpse is cremated a great snow begins to fall, and there are a number of indications that they should open the crematory.

As the cremation comes to a conclusion, Orgyan Chokyi's long-time friend Kunga Drolma remarks that there is a small opening at the peak of the crematory. "Perhaps her remains have been taken by the dakinis," muses Kunga Drolma—surely be an allusion to the *Life of Milarepa*, in which the dakinis steal the master's relics from the crematory, leaving his human devotees with nothing of his body.⁶⁰ But all is well, and as the crematory is opened small pieces of her "body, speech, and mind" are removed. Unlike Milarepa, Orgyan Chokyi will bestow relics upon the faithful. There are several types of remains. The "naturally broken and white" bones removed from the crematory are given to her brethren at local monasteries such as Nangkhong, Bantshang, and Tshung. The ashes and embers are carried to the middle of the big river. Small relics are collected and placed in a golden statue of Tārā as an inner support. Finally, a stupa is constructed for what is left of the corpse and her remains. Orgyan Chokyi's few personal effects are also divided among the institutions of Dolpo. Some are set aside for the monastery at Tadru itself, and the rest are donated to temples at Yezer, Balungmen, Tarap, and "all the masters from Tsarka below to Drikung above." The *Life* ends its death account in both miracle and mourning, as "all virtuous religious brethren from the four corners of Dolpo" lament her passing and a rain of flowers falls for forty-nine days.⁶¹

Orgyan Chokyi's tears had fallen like rain, a torrent that gave way to a miraculous rain of flowers at her death—an almost mandatory event in the death of a Tibetan holy person. Yet the emotionally laden trope of tears in the hagiography also bore physical results, for upon Orgyan Chokyi's death her master commissioned a statue of the bodhisattva Tārā—a goddess born from the tears Avalokiteśvara shed upon the plains of Tibet⁶²—in which he placed relics of Orgyan Chokyi, and this despite the fact that Orgyan Chokyi nowhere mentions Tārā herself. And despite his refusal to assist her in writing her life story, it was no doubt of economic benefit for Orgyan Tenzin to promote the shrine of his most important female student as a significant local pilgrimage and festival site associated with translocal bodhisattvas, thus increasing patronage for his growing religious center.

With characteristic eloquence, Peter Brown has suggested that in the *Lives* of saints in Late Antiquity, "the hagiographer was recording the moments when the seemingly extinct past and the unimaginably distant future had pressed into the present."⁶² As the hagiographer of her own life, Orgyan Chokyi wrote the past of Milarepa's ascetic heroism and the distant utopia of Avalokiteśvara's heavenly realm into the joys and sorrows of her own time and place so suc-

cessfully that her body was pressed into the landscape in the form of relics, stupas, and statues; her practice was impressed upon local society in the form of annual festivals in her honor; and her story was pressed onto paper in the form of newly patronized manuscripts for centuries to come. The fact that in the late twentieth century Orgyan Chokyi was still remembered and celebrated in the villages near her shrine in the form of dances, fasting prayers, and oral retellings of her tale is a sign of her *Life's* enduring local relevance. If in life she suffered, in the *Life* Orgyan Chokyi of Dolpo enjoys a status few women have in the history of the Tibetan cultural world, or indeed in the Buddhist world as whole. She has become a saint. She has lived a *Life*.

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PART II

*The Life of Orgyan
Chokyi*

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Introduction

The Chapters

The life story of Orgyan Chokyi contains ten chapters. One: How a mountain of suffering arose in her youth. Two: How she was a goatherd and was sorrowful. Three: How she cut her hair, herded horses, and impermanence arose. Four: How she requested religious teachings and looked at stillness and movement. Five: How she went on pilgrimage to Kathmandu and Tise offering prayers. Six: How she worked in the kitchen and was in mental anguish. Seven: How she quit herding, meditated, and recited *om maṇi padme hūm*. Eight: How she lived in solitude and joyous experiences dawned upon her. Nine: How she preserved the commitment and vows and opened the three doors. Ten: How she pointed out impermanence through death. These are the ten chapters which will be written.

A Request to Write

“I have good reason to write a few words on my joys and sufferings,” I said some time ago. “Therefore I pray of you master, write it down.”

When I said this [the master] said, “There is no reason to write a liberation tale for you—a woman.”

And thinking on this woman’s words he added, “You must be silent!”

Many tears fell from my eyes, for I did not myself know how to write.

“If I knew how to write,” I said, “I would have reason to write of my joys and sufferings.”

Later, when I was dying, amazing omens of my death arose, and I thought, “I have been struck with the spiritual instruction of the dakini.”

The impediment of not being able to write disappeared, and I wrote.

Editor’s Note

In the *Dakini Tantra* it says “If one has the marks . . . one is the of the diamond dakini family.” And in the *Ten-Thousand Signs of the Dakini* it is said: “The Buddhist dakini has facial marks on the face.” So is it for the woman of this class. The signs of a dakini are spoken of at length.

So externally Orgyan Chokyi was replete with the signs on her body, internally she had great faith and compassion, and in arcane terms she had little of either the three or the five poisons.

Chapter One

Sufferings of Youth

Born a Girl

Father's name was Drangsong Puntsok. His ancestry was Sepa. His place was Zolung. He was a Buddhist, but he practiced Bon. In terms of exoteric, esoteric, and arcane qualities he was a scholar.

When all the patrons had faith and reverence, my consciousness was residing in father's body and then went into my mother, Kunga Zangmo's womb. My mother's ancestral line was Gyamo. Her place was Peson.

Nine months later they were hoping for a boy, but a girl came. Mother was depressed. They gave me the name Kyilo, "Happiness Dashed."

Then father was stricken with leprosy. [I] sang this song of mother's suffering:

Homage to Father, Omniscient Master, and Avalokiteśvara.

A nun, I'm not leaving the door of religion.
But if I was a lazy troublemaking son with no religion,
Would mother want this boy instead of my religion?

In so many bad stories it is a daughter that comes:
"Great yogin, fantastic lord Drangsong Puntsok,
Boasting of drawing up the channels and vital winds: look
at this girl!

The shame and depression are unbearable" [said mother].

A nun, I'm not going among the masses.
This girl will not show herself to people, but take refuge in
the mountain crag.

Many such sorrowful songs did I sing.

Sufferings of Youth

Now I will speak of the sufferings of youth.

Mother said she hated me.

“Girl, you tell awful stories!” she would say to me.

The people said that I did many unkind things, and because of this untold mental anguish came [to me]. As I remember now, from five to ten years of age there was suffering, yelling, unnecessary beating, and the food was not good. Untold mental anguish came [to me].

Father Drangsong was covered with leprosy and was at the end of his rope. He was miserable. He said he hated me. Everybody saw this.

“What a pity!” said many people.

Now, father had two *dzo*, a mother and a calf. Some bad person took [them] away, and [I] wept a great deal. Now thinking about what was best, [I] went to father, and got hit. Dirt got in my mouth and my hair, and then a rock went down my mouth.¹ I thought about going to mother, that demoness, but she was very terrifying, and untold anguish came [to me].

I went to Peson, but mother was not there. In Shapku the monk Kunga Pendar and Ani Paldzom saw me.

“Kyilo girl, come here!” they said.

They gave me some soup which was like water. They both wept [when I told them my tale].

“What suffering has come to you, girl!” they said. I told them a long sad tale.

“What a pity!” they said.

Ani Paldzom drew a washing tub for my face. “Girls should not suffer in mind so!” she said.

I then said, “May [I] never be born into laziness and strife² in all [my] future lives.”

She brought solace to my mind. I was feeling both joy and sorrow, and I wept a great deal.

Learning to Weave

Father was covered with leprosy for about five years. One night he was hitting me. Dolma the monk and Puntsok the yogi saw this.

“Drangsong, this girl is not the cause of your leprosy,” they said. “Do not act like this. Be kind.”

Untold mental anguish came to me.

Then there was no one to carry father’s leprous corpse away, so [somebody] said, “In the little valley make an offering house and bury him secretly.”

Mother worked like a donkey. Her woolen [clothes] were filthy and covered with manure.

“Carry them!” [she] said [to me].

So I threw the pile of wool in the fire. Well, mother heard this, and said, “If a low-born girl does not know how to work with wool, from where will happiness come to you?”

Then she threw a spindle at [my] head and I was sad and wept a great deal.

Being around father had been miserable, [but now] I thought, “Mother now will still not be nice to me.” I was in mental anguish.

Ani Paldzom then said to Mother, “You should not hit a small girl like that. Be kind, go slowly. You need to teach her how to work with wool.” Then she left.

I then learned how to weave. I could not remember [anything], however, and mother threw a weaving shuttle at my head. Much mental anguish came [to me]. Then I learned something of working with wool, but I didn’t know anything about weaving. Since my body was not strong³ I couldn’t even work in the fields well. I did not know what to think.

One day mother looked at me. “Learning spinning and weaving is for you.” She said. “Do not create this mental suffering.”

“Mother is right,” I thought.

These are a few tales of the mountain of suffering that arose in my youth.

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Chapter Two

Herding Goats

Chapter Two relates how at age eleven I became a goatherd and suffering arose for me.

Goats and Sheep

One day I went to Ratso Ruri. As I was going through the thick woods, a thorn became stuck in my leg and I stopped to remove it. A nanny goat had had a kid, and it was about seven days old. Suddenly an eagle swept out of the sky and carried the kid away. The nanny goat looked into the sky and wept. I also looked into the sky and wept.

“Every year a kid is carried away by an eagle,” said some herders. “Don’t weep.”

Then one day I was going from Dolpo to the border of lowlander territory when a nanny goat was carried away into the sky. I wept for the mother and the kid.

Kunga Palzang the monk came over. “Do not weep,” he said. “The mountain will be disturbed.”

On another occasion many goats and sheep were killed up on the mountain. I was distraught. I saw many kid goats being carried off by the lowlanders for sacrifice to the gods, and I had to weep a great deal.

Lhawang Rinchen of Jatang saw me weeping and said, “This girl knows mercy. If she were to practice the Dharma, she would preserve compassion in her mind.”

I witnessed the fallen state of the lives of these lowborn goats

and sheep. Sad in mind and thinking only of the pitiable kid goats in the offerings, I sang this lament:

To the low, fallen being, the goat and the sheep,
Look with the eye of compassion, Avalokiteśvara.

You goats and sheep who live in pain,
Pulled by rope through mountain and valley,
Become food for carnivores over and over.
As the lowlanders and carnivores spread,
The life of a goat becomes short.

When the meat of sheep and goats is tasty,
There is nothing permanent in your life.
Suddenly bought so many times,⁴
There is nothing certain in your life.

When I think of the fallen state of the goat's life,
And that all living beings die,
I am heartbroken.

May I quickly be free of goat herding,
And meet with the holy Dharma.

I fashioned these disconnected words into verse because they brought peace to my head.

There were other times when I was sad being a goat herder, and there are stories aplenty of my mental anguish. One time I was collecting milk from the nanny goats, [and I sang this song:]

Hold this girl in compassion, Avalokiteśvara.

Alas, the hand of this girl's body:
Virtue is not in this hand. Sin is in this hand.
Taking mother's milk from the mouth of her kid,
My mind is sad, though I do need the milk.
In this human body, I need milk.

Goat's milk is tasty on the tongue, yet it is sinful food.
I sit on a goat's hide seat, yet it is a sinful seat.
I wear a goat's hide jacket on my back, yet it is a sinful jacket.
Goat butter moistens my food, yet it is sinful butter.
When I put goat's meat to my mouth, my mind is sad.
Set in this human condition, we need food.

May all beings be led by the Lord of Compassion.
Circling long embodied in this evil land of filthy, violent lowlander
towns,

May we wander toward the Buddhist teachings.
In this human vessel may I now walk toward the Dharma.

Entering Religious Life

I thought then that if I did not take up the Dharma quickly I would sink in the mire of the world of samsara.

“I must enter the religious life,” I said to my mother.

“Well, then you must enter the religious life in the presence of Lama Orgyan,” she said.

Then my hair was cut, my body changed,⁵ and I was given the name Orgyan Chokyi—“Delighting in the Dharma of Orgyan.”

Under Ani Drupchen Sodrolma I studied reading and the refuge prayer. Because I did not have a great intellect I had to make a great effort in my studies.

One night Ani Drupchenmo said, “You must persevere in the Dharma, for if you were to do worldly work in Peson, you would be forced into corvée labor spring, summer, winter, and fall without rest. As a corvée laborer you would carry water and work all the time. Meet the Dharma, take refuge, study: then you will not suffer.”

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Chapter Three

Herding Horses

Chapter Three relates how impermanence arose when I herded horses.

Dog Herding

From the age of twenty I herded horses.

One day I thought to myself, “At first herding goats was sad and miserable. Now that I am herding horses I will not be able to ask for refuge and study [the Dharma].”

“I am able to herd cattle, study, and take refuge [at the same time],” my friend Kunga Dolma said.

“But I do not have intelligence like you,” I replied. “I need to do my herding, refuge prayers, and studying one at a time.”

“After I finish herding horses, what will become of me?” I asked Ani Drupamo, “I am no good at milking. I am not a meat eater. What will become of me with these horses?”

Ani Drupchenmo smiled. “Well, if you cannot herd horses, you could herd dogs,” she said. “‘Ah! The dog has shit!’ [you would say].” And she, Ani Tsuga, Ani Tsering Kyabma, Ani Nyishar, and I all had a good laugh at this.

Foals and Leopards

Then one day I went to sell horses at the meadow of Dechen Thang near Cholung Bum Monastery. I spent the nights in the temple, during which time a foal was born to a golden mare.

Fifteen days went by, when one night a leopard came from nowhere and killed the foal. The mother let out a great cry of anguish. I came to the door as she neighed loudly, causing a commotion in the meadow. She continued to neigh, so on the following morning I went out to search for the corpse of the foal.

I found it above a spring, carried it back, and set it down on the meadow above the monastery. I thought to offer it to the vultures, though the mare continued fill the meadow with her wailing neighing. Tears ran down the creases in my hands like rain. We gathered together around the corpse of the foal, and as we beheld this immeasurable suffering, all of us had to weep, [sounding out] *dzi ri ri ri!*

I told my master [Orgyan Tenzin], and even he wept.

“From the very beginning, throughout every lifetime living beings suffer like this,” he said. “For us the suffering of the mare should be an example, and we must concentrate diligently on the Dharma.”

I then watched the mare suffer for about twelve days. Everyone staying at the monastery was terribly sad. For my own part, great impermanence arose, the likes of which I had never known, and I wept a great deal. Then in sadness I sang this lament:

When I ponder our female bodies
 I am sorrowful; impermanence rings clear.
 When men and women couple—creating more life—
 Happiness is rare, but suffering is felt for a long time.
 May I not be born again in a female body.
 May the mare not be born as a mare.
 The steed follows yet another mare.
 When I see the shamelessness of men,
 [I think:] May I be born in a body that will sustain the precepts.
 When acts of desire are committed, suffering must follow.
 When I see the mare suffering, melancholia flares.
 Behold us with mercy, Lord of Compassion.
 Let me not be born a woman in all lives to come
 When I ponder the suffering of beings, melancholia flares.

Three *Dzomo*

Then the rearing season came. At Ugur Monastery, Ani Dzompa Kyi and I milked the horses during the day and the *dzomo* in the morning and at night.

Now, there were three *dzomo* calves and the mother. One day one the calves wandered onto a cliff where there was a predator. The calf’s mother ran onto the cliff after, and both of them fell and were killed.

Ani Kunga Chokyi, Ani Dzompa Kyi, and I all watched as the *dzomo* and her calf were killed, and we were stunned. The three of us were wailing and weeping when Drolzang the monk came upon us.

“Why are you three weeping?” he asked.

“A *dzomo* and her calf fell off of the cliff and are now a jumbled mass of flesh and bone. They’re gone!” we replied.

“What will come of this crying?” the monk said. “You should go tell the master about this.”

“But in a certain place people have been stricken with smallpox, and the master is now releasing the consciousness of those who have died,” we said.

Ani Drupamo was staying in the monastery. We went to her, bringing the remains of the *dzomo* and her calf with us. Finally we gave the meat to the villagers.

Then great impermanence arose, and I sang this lament:

Alas, Bodhisattva of Mercy,
 May you look upon all beings with compassion.
 Three days past this yak was here; today, gone.
 I look at this, and melancholia flares bright.
 The enemy of four-legged beasts leapt up, and
 Life wrested from this mother yak and calf.

Humans, horses, dogs, all beings,
 Male and female all think alike,
 But the suffering of life comes to females as a matter of course.
 I could do without the misery of this female life.
 How I lament this broken vessel, this female body.

I could do without this female body with its misery.
 Ranting thoughts dwell in this woman’s body.
 From within the body, spreading outward,
 From the center of the mind misery comes unchecked.
 Like the yak protecting her calf,
 They give up life for their children.

This female body is itself samsara—the round of existence.
 May I attain a male body, and keep the vows,
 May I never again be born in the body of a woman!

Horses Lost

One time lowlanders took several horses, and mother and child were separated. Seeing the suffering of the mare, I lamented. On another occasion a snow lion killed a colt, and again I lamented. Another time still a leopard killed both mother and child. There are many tales of how great suffering arose, but I will not write any more of it.

Once I was taking a cheerful mare from Dechen Thang to Yura Tangtong. As we walked along this cheerful mare was swept away by the current of the river. Great impermanence arose, and I sang this lament:

Golden mare, like the lion's mane,
 In an instant swept up by the Lord of Death:
 All embodied beings are swept up like this.
 The teachings of the Victor say to contemplate impermanence.
 Death comes like lightning, so he said.

I doubt not the words of the Buddha.
 In every life, in birth upon birth,
 May I taste the nectar of the Victor's teachings.

Wherever I look, be it to human or beast, I am saddened.
 Noble Avalokiteśvara, lead me on the path.
 May each and every mare be reborn a stallion.

Then one summer . . .⁶ Senge Kyapa the village head and myself were leading three mares along when, close to nightfall, a leopard killed one. When she was dead, Senge Kyapa did not even grieve.

"Ani," he said, "this horse is old. One night it would have eventually been eaten by vultures."

I was saddened at this, and wept and wept. "Do not cry, Ani," said Senge Kyapa.

"I have seen horses die in front of me," I replied. "When horses are sold, mother and child are separated. This is a great tragedy, and my tears are not few. When mother and child are separated, I pity them greatly and many sad thoughts come to me."

I then pondered what Senge Kyapa said about his mare being eaten by vultures, and I was struck by many thoughts. I sang this song as it came to my mind:

Oṃ maṇi padme hūṃ hrī!
 Homage to noble Avalokiteśvara.

The mare gives her body, cast to the vultures.
 I think the mare manifests the enlightened mind.
 The mare's flesh sits in the vulture's body:
 By flying and seeing all around the sky,
 May the mare attain the body of a god!

The flesh of humans, horses, and dogs,
 Is food for the vultures and beasts.
 Encircled by black birds' wings,
 And inviting many vultures,
 Flesh and bone are eaten until they are gone.

Seeing dead bodies such as these,
I wish for human bodies not to be buried.
When future people die,
May they be able to give their bodies to vultures,
Or consumed in the fire god's mouth.

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Chapter Four

Looking at Mind

Chapter Four relates how I requested teachings from my master and watched my mind work.

Teachings Received

I received many teachings from my master, Orgyan Tenzin: instructions of the *All-Liberating* cycle of the *Northern Treasure* and the *Self-Luminous Dharma Realm of the Profound Essence*, the first and second parts of the *Testament of Mañi*, and three red volumes⁷ of the *Life of Padmasambhava*.

Preliminary Practice

After he blessed me with effective initiations, I gradually began to practice these liberating instructions. From the ordinary and extraordinary teachings, I began with the ordinary. First, I contemplated the difficulty of obtaining this human condition, the uncertainty of death, the evils of samsara, the effects of karmic acts, and I actualized these.

Second, I took refuge in the extraordinary teachings: developing the mind of enlightenment; one hundred letters; mandalas, visualizing the master, and the like. As preliminary practice I purified the accumulations [of negative emotions] for seven days. Four times a day I would make one thousand offerings [to the master]. I would perform prostrations, the mind of enlightenment, one hundred letters, mandalas, or offerings to the master as appropriate, and at the

end of each one [the master] would grant me long teachings as he saw fit. That is generally how it would go.

Then I would do the actual practice: After the creation and completion of yogic practices the master granted me [teachings on] purifying the foundation of creation together with explanations, though I do not know these teaching divisions. He granted me many teachings, such as instruction on seeing [the deity] completely with instant recognition; propitiating the created vision of Avalokiteśvara, hymns for offering, recitations, vajra recitations, and condensed creation stage [yogas].

Beginning the Search for Mind

At the beginning of the creation yoga, the master [Orgyan Tenzin] granted me teachings on searching for the mind.

“First the external and internal preliminaries—the ordinary preliminaries such as [contemplating] the difficulty of attaining this fortunate human life and so forth—last for seven days,” he said. “Then the extraordinary [preliminaries] last seven days. For fourteen weeks in [total you will undergo] an experiential instruction that purifies sin and obscuration.

“Then it is time to search for mind. The lord of the teaching, the Precious Sage said:

If you understand the mind, you are a Buddha.
Do not look elsewhere for Buddha.
You must meditate correctly on consciousness.

This means that if you know mind, you are a Buddha. If you do not, you are a sentient being. If you know mind, you are blissful. If you do not, you suffer. If you know mind, you are liberated from suffering. If you do not, you wander in samsara.

“In this profound Buddhist teaching on enlightenment in a single life there are three points: the search for mind; stabilizing [the experience]; and direct encounter [with mind]. First, you need to search for mind, so go and search for the essence of what is called mind.”

As he said this I shrank with fear. But then I prayed intensely to the master, “Bless me that I might be capable of getting to the heart of mind.”

Question and Answer

Then I went off to search for mind, but all that came to me was a jumble in which nothing at all appeared. I went to ask my master about this.

“In the midst of that jumble is the mind,” he said. “Go and search for mind!”

Now I thought that this [jumble] was like a coat. I searched for mind, but wherever I searched I was not able to find anything. I went to ask the master.

“Well then, you must be dead!” he said, laughing. “Is your body a corpse? Check to see if you are dead or not. If you are a corpse, you are dead. And when you are dead your mind leaves the body. If you are not dead, you have mind. Go and consider well whether the mind is inside the body or outside the body.”

At these words I was distraught, for I felt I was not able to apply myself to finding the mind.

Movements of Mind and Conceptual Thought

[The mind’s] movement and conceptual thought would arise together and move hither and thither. I would look at whether or not these were mind. So I went to ask the master.

“Are movement and conceptual thought identical or separate?” he asked. “Go see if they are two different things.”

Then I looked at both movement and conceptual thought, and when movement appeared clearly a conceptual thought also appeared clearly. I went to ask the master about this.

“You have intuited movement and conceptual thought,” he said. “Now, it is said that one should first look at where mind arises, then at where mind stays, and finally at where mind goes. So, if movement and conceptual thought are both mind, look at which one they are: arising, staying, or going.”

So I looked for where mind arises, stays, and goes. I could not understand where mind resided and to where it departed. Movement and conceptual thought were the same thing in my body. Now I thought movement and conceptual thought were identical, so I went to ask the master about this.

“You do not know from where mind comes and to where it goes?” he asked. “Well, your consciousness came from the lower cavities of your mother and father. Now it stays in your body, and when you die consciousness departs from your body. Some go to heaven; some go to a lowly rebirth. Go now and look well: Is this the arising? Is this the staying? Is this the going? Or is it not?”

Doubts

At this point I wondered, “Is this a Dharma college or a place for meditation?” In answer the master said, “It is a paradox. One’s own arising, residing, and departing—it is a conundrum.”

I considered this. Then I held up my mind and looked at it. Movement and conceptual thought increased. Yet even though I analyzed the extent of mind’s arising, abiding, and abating, I did not understand their division very well. I went to ask about this.

“Your woman’s mind does not understand great philosophy,” the master said. “You are like an old woman who needs a lesson on how to get started!”

“I am not an old woman,” I thought. “I have no burning desire, so he speaks falsely.”

The Color and Shape of Mind

Three days later my master said, “Go and look at what the color, form, and shape of mind are like.”

I looked at what the color, shape, and form were like. Conceptual thought increased, I was nervous and jumpy, and I had a lot of doubt. There was no form at all to mind. There was also nothing to fix upon as a shape. There was not even any color—no white, red, or anything. I went to ask the master about this.

“Ha ha! Ha!” he laughed a great deal. “Your conceptual thought has increased. That is indeed the color and the shape of mind. Hold up your mind and look!”

Then I looked without diversion at mind, and from within a clear emptiness a distinct conceptual thought arose. I considered what color and shape were like, and as I looked minor movement and conceptual thought disappeared. I went to ask the master about this.

He sat without saying anything for a moment, and then said, “To settle the affair you must search for mind, and at this point you need powerful methods.”

Meditation Instructions from Ani Drupchenmo

“Teach the sevenfold dharma of Vairocana to Orgyan Chokyi,” he said to Ani Drupchenmo.

“I memorized the seven vital bodily points of Vairocana and have kept them hidden,” Ani Drupchenmo said to me. “Now I will teach them to you. They are: (1) legs crossed; (2) spine straight; (3) neck slightly bent; (4) hands resting; (5) shoulders extended out; (6) eyes focused on tip of nose; (7) tongue touching roof of mouth.

“These are the seven dharmas of Vairocana. Your body does not move, you do not speak, and your respiration is leisurely and self-composed. Mind does not sever impressions from the past, nor does it look to the future. Present mind is unfabricated, without planning, absorbed in relaxation. Look unmoving at the moving mind, without asking questions.”

Then I went to meditate with these vital bodily points. I looked unmoving at movement and conceptual thought. [I saw that the mind’s] movement was guided by all my previous activities. Unclear conceptual thoughts became clear, and then disappeared. I looked unmoving, but I was not able to stop my movement by myself. I went to ask about this.

“You do not need to cease conceptual thought,” the master said. “Wrap it up and let it go. By doing this you recall the movement, hold it, and look.”

So I was mindful and looked unwavering [at mind], and a naked emptiness in which there was neither movement nor conceptual thought arose. Then, with unwavering mindfulness I looked at the mind [and saw that] sometimes conceptual thought increased, sometimes an experience would instantly dawn that was empty feeling. In that state I looked at those two things called stillness and movement.

The Stillness and Movement of Mind

“This nonmovement is like stillness,” I thought. I went to ask about this.

“Stillness, movement, and awareness come,” said the master. “When there is stillness, is there movement? When there is movement, is there stillness? Look with awareness at whether stillness or movement are the same or not.”

In a calm state I saw that movement itself is still, and stillness is movement. Stillness and movement are identical. I went to ask about this.

“Look at what is called awareness,” said the master.

So I looked at awareness, stillness, and movement.

“Is the viewer itself awareness?” I asked.

“Well, look at what is called mindfulness,” the master replied.

So I looked again, but my conceptual thought increased.

“I do not understand the divisions of stillness, movement, and awareness,” I said.

“Well,” he said, “Pure items such as Buddha images, scriptures, or stupas can be supports [for meditation]. Impure items such as a small piece of wood can also offer support. So look at a piece of wood set before you while not moving the mind at all. At night use a little statue with the letter “A” or the like upon it. Make that the support for an unwavering mental state.”

By day I placed a stick before me, made it a support for unwavering mind, and developed stillness. By night I made the body, speech, and mind of the Buddha supports for unwavering mind, and I meditated. If my mind wavered, the image was not clear. When my mind was unwavering, the image was very clear with a shimmering emptiness. It was like my body was in midair. Body did not want to move. Voice did not want to speak. Mind became tranquil.

Undercurrents of Conceptual Thought

I went to ask about this, and the master said, “From what you say, this is a conceptual undercurrent, and is greatly mistaken.”

“What is this ‘conceptual undercurrent’ you speak of?” I asked.

“When you are thinking and the mind remembers some movement but does not hold onto it, a slight memory comes,” replied the master. “You say, ‘Wow, what is that?’ You then compare it to something else and thus your mind tightens. This is a conceptual undercurrent, and it is known as the thief of meditation. So, if unwavering mindfulness is moving, you must identify it as

movement. If it is stationary, you must settle it as highest wide-open awareness.”

I felt very doubtful now. Yesterday I did not know anything in my unwavering state. The abider is movement itself. The mover is abiding itself. Awareness is mindfulness. From mindfulness emerges awareness. From the moment of mindfulness itself emerge stillness, movement, awareness. Movement was there, though with mindfulness I did not get tangled in movement for a long time. I went to ask about this.

“To get to the bottom of this, search for mind,” said the master. “To settle the matter, settle the mind in stillness with unwavering body, speech, and mind. Now, this is the highest introduction [to the mind]. Those that you have known earlier will fade away.

“Now you should do a little writing. Go and write something decent on the three and five poisons, the six aggregates, the pride of big minds and small, subtle and coarse consciousness, relative and ultimate truths, and the like. Come to some resolve about stillness, movement, and awareness!”

“If I write a lot of words, my stillness will vanish!” I thought. “Even though this is what my master says, I still have to do everything with my own intelligence.”

“I don’t have the intelligence to do this,” I said to him.

And without thinking about it he answered, “Today after meditating you most go and write until dawn.”

Introduction to Mind

I looked at the mind with each of its characteristics—desire, hatred, confusion, the five poisons, the pride of a big mind, the wandering of a small mind, and the like—all the mistaken concepts [arising] from nonawareness.

Now I went to ask the master to remove doubts about what he had said.

“Well I will give you a direct introduction [to mind], a teaching on the vital points of your body,” he said.

“It is necessary to be directly introduced [to mind] on the basis of many examples. There are no great ideas in this introduction at all. You should not cut off past impressions or plan for the future: Set the present, undisturbed mind at rest.”

After a long period of unwavering equipoise, the master said, “The moving mind is conceptuality. In that recognition of movement and conceptual thought is primordial awareness, the enlightened body of Dharma. That is the intent of the buddhas of the three times. In the *Sutra of Primordial Awareness of the Daka* it says:

If you realize mind, you are a Buddha.
Do not search elsewhere for Buddha.

“All objective appearances of the six aggregates are mind. Mind is emptiness. Emptiness is great bliss. Great bliss is beyond thought. The three poisons

are the three enlightened bodies. The five poisons are the five primordial awarenesses. Movement above stillness is self-recognizing, and stillness above movement is self-apprehending. Stillness, movement, and awareness—these are identical. Meditate in this unwavering mindfulness. This is known as the Great Seal.

“In order to sever doubts, apply yourself to searching for mind. The means for settling the three doors without wavering is the method of being still in deep concentration.

“This is the direct introduction to being free of misery. If you know the view of mind and emptiness, the shining sun of joy will dawn.

“Now, go into meditation retreat.”

Then I performed a one-hundred-day meditation retreat, meditating unwaveringly day and night. Thus neither conceptual thought nor memory entered at all into my still mind.

Further Instructions from Ani Drupchenmo

I asked Ani Drupchenmo to come quickly to my meditation cell. She arrived and I told her, “Yesterday when the master gave me meditation instructions he said, ‘If you are able to view mind the shining sun of joy will dawn.’ Now this joy comes naturally. Meditation is not perfected all by itself; in conceptuality there is a suffering I have not seen in the scriptures.”

“You are right,” she said. “It is like this for beginners. At first settling the mind was a mountain of misery for you. Now you should praise the master and ask him for the four tantric empowerments. Then look at the essence of whatever comes up without mistakenly seizing upon concepts. Without losing mindfulness, keep yourself at ease. It is said, ‘If mind is unfabricated, it is bliss: If water is not stirred, it is clear.’ Therefore, do not make conceptual undercurrents.”

“It is the wild thoughts that flow in the conceptual undercurrents that turn the wheel of conceptual thought.” I said.

Ani Drupchenmo laughed loud. “Nonmeditation is meditation,” she said. “To produce experience and realization you need to meditate for a long time. Set your mind in a relaxed state and keep this. If you are not in calm stillness, there can be no insight. When you are comfortable in calm stillness you need mindful awareness.”

So saying, she left my meditation cell.

Meditation Breakthrough

Then I set my mind in a relaxed state. I looked unwaveringly at whatever movement arose. Earlier I clung mistakenly to concepts. Now I could produce no unhappiness. Now I meditated, thinking, “Mindful of whatever arises, rest in relaxation.”

Then, in contrast to previous times, all movement and conceptual thought were laid bare. A blissful, clear, nonconceptual experience arose—crystal clear, naked, unhurried, relaxed, and wide-eyed. Now I felt that I understood meditation.

“Finally, everything that comes [to my mind] is meditation itself,” I thought. And a pervasive joy lit upon my mind.

Then, after some ten days I went to question my master, but the unpleasantness [in meditation] that began the other day came up. On the advice of Ani Drupchenmo, I went to ask the master about methods to produce calm stillness.

“It is said that the first stillness is like a steep mountain, the second stillness is like a pleasant waterfall, and the third stillness is like the ocean without waves,” he replied. “It will come to you like that. It is said that when you look at the way you perceive, you are scrutinizing the mind. In the muddy ocean of calm stillness the fish of insight darts about. From calm stillness the experience of nonconceptual clarity and bliss is born. This is called insight. Now you must remember your subsequent meditation experiences, foster those, and meditate.”

Visions of Deities

Then after some four months I had a certain dream. I then requested [teachings in] the Great Perfection. In accordance with the way in which the lights and gods are arranged in the context of the four visions, I met the peaceful deities—as realized mind—such as Avalokiteśvara. In white light was a white deity. In gold light was a gold deity. In red light was a red deity. I met many such peaceful and wrathful deities that I recognized, and some that I did not recognize.

Due to the benefits of the Great Seal and the Great Perfection teachings I approached the mixture of appearances and mind.

Chapter Five

Pilgrimage to Kathmandu

Chapter Five relates how I went on pilgrimage to the Kathmandu Valley and Mount Kailash.

A Travel Itinerary in Nepal

After arriving in the Kathmandu Valley I first visited the great stupa of Svayambhūnāth. Then I visited the blessed stupa created by Jadzimo, Bodhnāth. On the top of the Vindya Mountain I saw the thrones of Śāriputra, Maudgalyāyana, the meditation cell of Master Nāgārjuna, Sangeṣa the Buffalo, the place of Hanumān the monkey, the river at which King Suvarṇavarman made a vow, the meditation cell of Tilopa, Phagmo Ngalchu, the meditation cell and water of Nāropa, the self-arisen [stone] a cubit [in size] where Nāgārjuna subdued demons.

In Yambu [Kathmandu] [I visited] the White Matsyendranātha, Mahākāla, a stone thrown from the peak of Vindya Mountain by the Buddha, Śāriputra, Maudgalyāyana, which was once in the center of the city of Yambu. [I visited] the cremation ground of Ramadoli, the “Speaking Tārā” of Bhaktapur, and the meditation caves of Milarepa such as Nyeshang Gurti and Takmo Lujin.

In Yerang [Patan] I saw the Mīnanātha and [Red] Matsyendranātha [images], and the “one thousand Buddhas” replica of Vajrāsana. I saw the meditation cave of Padmasambhava called Yanglesho as well as the white and black serpents, and Phagmo Sungjon. I also saw the rocky cave of Asu.

Praying at the Great Stupas

In the presence of both stupas, Svayambhūnāth and Bodhnāth, I prostrated, made circumambulations, and offered prayers of aspiration.

“I, Orgyan Chokyi . . .” I would say, and make prayers to the gods, the three jewels, and the stupa.

Then, at the close of *Samantabhadra Prayer* or whatever prayer I knew [I would pray]:

May the sins and obscurations of all six classes of beings—beings who have ever been my kind mother and father in the unending samsara of rebirth—be purified, and may they complete the two accumulations [of wisdom and merit].

May I never be born in a female body in any rebirth. Having attained a male body, may I be able to sustain pure conduct.

May I be born as a great bodhisattva possessed of the ten perfections.

May I be able to lead all beings in the three bad rebirths to a heavenly realm.

May all offerings come to all needy people.

May all beings, beyond food and wealth, be able to give generously great offerings to the three jewels.

I gave this aspiration prayer at all the holy sites of the Kathmandu Valley.

Miracle at Mount Kailash

After that [I went to Mount Kailash]. At the mountain, the lake, and in front of the Khochar Buddha I made prayers as before and did prostrations and circumambulations as I was able.

In particular, when I beheld the Kochar Buddha, its entire body was surrounded by rainbow light. An unbearable ray of light shone from the center of the Buddha and struck me. The appearances of this life were obscured, and a joyous, spontaneous awareness came over me. This greatly benefited my meditation.

For some seven years I told no one of this. Later I told my master about what had happened when I beheld the Kochar Buddha.

“This is good,” he said. “But do not speak of this to anyone.”

Chapter Six

In the Kitchen

Chapter Six relates how I stayed in the kitchen and suffered mental anguish in the bustle.

Religious Activities in Dolpo

There were many religious activities in Dolpo: the building of the temple at Dechen Palri, the construction of the temple at Sandul, the making of paintings of deities at Drikung, and the twelve volumes of scriptures such as the *Lotus Sutra* at Kok. There were artisans creating many religious supports for the enlightened body, speech, and mind of the Buddha here, as well as many people requesting teachings. In this bustle my body and mind suffered.

“It is good and virtuous work,” I thought.

But my mind suffered of its own accord. Beyond that, in the kitchen of mistaken conventional reality, with no leisure day or night, I was saddled with the work of food and drink. Such sadness did my mind experience that it would take too many words to tell, so I will not write more of it.

In particular, at Drikung my mind was sad, and I sang this lament:

Outside kings and petty princes,
Inside taxes and the cost of living,
In between, lowlanders coming to collect debts—
Thinking of these my mind is naturally sad.
I beseech and pray that I may wander the mountains alone.

Outside, endless streams of visitors,
 Inside, preparing and serving food and drink,
 In between, bent over in the kitchen—
 Thinking of these my mind is naturally sad.
 May I quickly be alone and meet with meditation.

Outside, many people dying,
 Inside, my own death uncertain,
 In between, much suffering from disease and illness—
 Thinking of these my mind is sad, so sad.
 I pray for solitude and spiritual practice.

Outside, much worldly work,
 Inside, no time to practice the holy Dharma,
 In between, food and wealth torment the mind—
 Thinking of these my mind is naturally sad.
 May I quickly go to Sikkim.

Wishing to Travel to Sikkim

The master, his disciples, and I were thinking of going out visiting. We went to Barbung by way of the Tangshok Valley. About ten monks were to set out to Sikkim. I followed those far-traveling monks in my mind, and I wept a great deal. We went on to Tarap. Those who were going to Sikkim were sad at parting from the master and his disciples. They lingered, cried and moaned, and finally left.

Well, after a short time and after traveling just a short way three of them turned back. [One of them] grabbed the master's horse by the bridle and said, "Precious master, we have left already. The master and his disciples must leave [with us]."

"Listen to me Orgyan Chokyi, for two years now you have asked the master if you could go," [he said]. "You must come."

We were so sad at parting, and tears fell from my eyes like rain. Ani Tsering Kyapa took me by the hands.

"Do not cry," she said. She put her forehead in my hand.

"Well, go quickly," I said. And she and the others left. At this I came to know great impermanence, and I shed many tears.

Noisy Retreats

Then my master and his disciples traveled to Mekhyem Monastery, where faithful patrons paid us a great deal of homage. In particular, [the master told them that] drinking liquor leads to loosing one's prosperity in this human life.

"Now I must go into seclusion," the master told Kami, Uchung Darpo, and Chogyal Tsen the patron.

“When you go to the monastery it will be solitary,” they and Yumbu Lolek said to him. But when we got to the monastery we found that it was not at all solitary.

Then I asked the master if [I could go] to Sikkim like those who went last year. “What is your answer, master?”

“You must give up going to Dechen [Sikkim] for now,” he replied.

So I was not allowed to escape Takyu and go traveling. Then I was very sad. My eyes shed many tears.

Ani Darpo asked, “Ani, why do you weep? Don’t cry, Ani. If you forsake faithful patrons and go traveling, your patrons and students will pay you back for it. Put off your plans to leave.”

Then the master was invited by the residents of Tingkyu and we went to stay in Dralung. There was a retinue of many patrons, and my mind was sad. I had a heavy heart. There were many people asking for religious teachings. Day and night there was so much bustle—boiling tea, serving meat, serving liquor. At night I had no chance to lie down and sleep. In the day I had no chance for any rest. My mind was so, so sad.

I said to Jampa the meditator and Chokyap Palzang the patron, “I asked permission of the master, and I need to go into solitary retreat.”

“Be content just asking the master for religious instructions,” they replied. “Do not put on this sad appearance, Ani!”

Then I asked the master, “Is not now my time to go traveling? Master, doesn’t being in the middle of this bustle make your mind sad?”

“It is a master’s job to explain the Dharma and perform empowerment ceremonies,” the master replied. “What suffering can come to me? You need to give up going to Sikkim.”

Once the people of Tingkyu were offering us a gift of three measures of yak meat and butter, when all those offering began to talk loudly and urgently.

“What is it now?” the master asked.

Some meditators from Lower Mustang had traveled here to request Dharma teachings. “The master’s disciples who traveled to Sikkim have returned,” they told us.

Now my opportunity for travel [to Sikkim] was lost.

The Master in Retreat

Then the master, together with a large entourage of one hundred escorts, journeyed once again to Mekhyem Monastery and stayed some time.

One night the master and two disciples were nowhere to be found. Some three days later I received news that they had gone to a retreat in Langpu called Lhalungma.

“He has decided to leave the bustle and go into solitary retreat!” I thought. “Now I should request the same thing, and go to meditate alone in a solitary retreat.”

The master thus established a monastery in Langpu. The people of Lang offered a lot of timber and a dormitory was constructed.

“Now I must undertake a strict one-hundred-day retreat,” said the master.

A Friend Dies

Then my religious brothers and sisters who had traveled to Sikkim returned, and they related much news to me. One brother who thought about things a lot like me had died on the journey. When he had first left on the journey he had taken my hand and wept.

“Orgyan Chokyi, you must go traveling quickly,” I remembered him saying.

This made my heart miserable, and I wept a great deal. I remembered that I had made a promise to follow him. Due to confidence [in him] I was diligent. The sadness I felt was immeasurable.

Sadness came naturally to my already sad mind, and thoughts came to me with no rhyme or reason.

“When is my time of dying? Will my religious brothers and sisters remember me?” I wandered about in a depressed state of mind.

“From when [my friend] was a child he never quarreled with his family or his religious companions,” I thought. “He died, and may I also quickly die.”

So I recited prayers like that of Samantabhadra. I cast offerings and performed what rituals I knew [for him].

Last Time in the Kitchen

Then I worked [more] in the kitchen. I brought an offering of two ale, a good scarf, and a full gourd of brew and I told the master of my wish not to tend the kitchen.

“You are wrong to be unhappy at the kitchen,” he replied,

“Men are just right for the field,
Women are just right for the kitchen.

Therefore, you will look after our guests for one or two years.”

Then there were many guests at Nyimapuk, the Sun Cave. There were many nomads from Amdo and Kham everywhere. Once again the bustle became great, and sadness came naturally to my already sad mind.

Once again I offered one ale, a scarf, and a strong *dzomo*, and asked his permission [to go into solitary retreat].

“Now you are ready,” he said. “I will appoint Drupamo Palden Drolma to the kitchen. You must apply yourself to interior and exterior offerings and to meditations. Go do whatever is good for the animals in the mountains.”

My thoughts were overjoyed.

Then I said to the master, "Now I am an elder. Let me not be around too many people. Let me not work in the kitchen. Let the little ones engage in the bustle. The work at the monastery is no different from mundane work. If this is an insult [to you], may evil befall me.

"If one becomes a buddha by the wealth of beer, meat, and butter with no heart and idle thoughts, then worldly people would all be buddhas!" I said much to him, and my mind was hurt. I had lost all hope of my own place before dying.

Then I went to visit Chowangmo and told her that I needed to immerse myself in prayer and meditation. After that I went to visit Kunga Dolma.

"I must live alone in retreat," I said to her. "How is solitude possible at the monastery with people all around?"

"The instructions of all masters and teachers say that one must not shun the master or the religious family and leave," she replied. "Ani, you must sequester yourself near the monastery, and do all of your work here."

Then I thought, "If I do not listen to the advice of my master, my religious brethren, and my patrons, I will reap their retribution. I must listen to what they say."

Still, the time had come for me to leave those jobs that made me so unhappy.

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Chapter Seven

Leaving the Bustle

Chapter Seven relates how I gave up the kitchen and stayed in meditation reciting prayers.

Seven Years at Sun Cave

I lived at Nyimapuk for seven years. For four years I tended the kitchen. For three years I built a small meditation cell, and now I have no need for the work of this life.

I have seen and heard people dying regardless of whether they are young or old. These are signs of my own quick death. I am not able to act like Gelongma Palmo, Mother Macig, or Nangsa Obum—I am afraid of my own death. I must not regret in the end.

As I pondered such things I made a commitment, and I recited *mani* prayers and meditated.

It eventually became noisy with people at Nyimapuk. “This monastery has grown in seven years,” the master said, “so I must leave. The victorious Buddha said many times, ‘When the yogin is pestered by people and dogs it is time to go. Each month, each year change your retreat. The risk of death comes like lightning.’ Now I must go to the empty valley of Nechen Tadrü.”

“If you go, I would also go,” I said. “The signs of life and death are not good. What should I do?”

“You should come to Tadrü,” the master said.

A New Retreat at Tadru

Then the master traveled to Nechen Tadru, and I went there as well. I set up a small cave and remained in retreat reciting *mani* prayers and meditation.

Great meditators have only a hat, a meditation cord, and a belt. I had little food. I had one *dzomo* and one *drimo*. Ah le! Did I get a lot of milk from those two! “The master’s disciples should eat little,” I thought, “for to eat a lot is a sin.”

If I had not run from being a kitchen servant, I would have none of this. First I renounced tending the kitchen and herding, now I lived alone. Each day I looked at the life stories of the great masters of the past, and each day impermanence became greater and greater to me. Hearing and seeing the suffering and death of all beings, I had to weep and weep.

Visiting Yeshe Drolma

Each month in the summer I went into the village to visit young Yeshe Drolma. [One time] a mother [cow’s] milk was stolen from the mouth of the child, causing great sadness, while the yak and the bull just trotted around. Thinking that all this suffering was the result of desire, my mental anguish was immeasurable.

“I have come to visit,” I said to Yeshe Drolma, “but now I must return to my refuge in the meditation cell.”

“If you stay, Ani, I will be happy,” she said. “But if you go to Tadru, I will be unhappy.”

“What you say is right,” I replied, “but I do not know when I will die, so I must go recite *mani* prayers and meditate. These calves are pitiable. You stay in happiness.”

Then I left her. On the path I saw bugs on the backs of animals and an anthill on the ground, and I was sad and mournful.

Depression and Aspiration

Once when I was at Nyimapuk I and some five others requested secret teachings on method and path from the great meditator Drolma. For five or six years now each meditator had encountered obstacles [in their practice of this teaching].

“This profound secret Dharma is a genuinely powerful Dharma and of great profit yet very dangerous,” I thought, “but it is like going into the land of the demons alone, like drinking good beer and climbing to the top, or like poison mixed in delicious food.”

Then when I was at Nechen Tadru, I saw several meditators in a dazed

stupor, my mind was immeasurably sorrowful. Young Yeshe Drolma was in the village.

“Yeshe Drolma, this very time is the degenerate age itself,” I said to her. “Now whatever I see, whatever I hear, it is this. If I were to die right now it would be a pleasure!”

“Ani, why do you engage in such useless worries?” said Yeshe Drolma in response to this.

Then I heard the obstacles come to the religious, and I sang this lament:

Kyema! Kyihu! In this degenerate time,
 For each and every religious person
 It is difficult to encounter the supreme Dharma.
 Bliss is slim but desire grows,
 And the mind always suffers.

Just as the moth
 Desires the light of the lamp,
 So do men
 Desire women’s bodies.
 To men, women are demons; to women, men are demons.

Consider this well, my friends and anis.
 When death comes, you need your full commitment.
 I practice religion to gain my release;
 If I were to die now, I would have no regrets.

Such did I say to Yeshe Drolma.

Again I applied myself to *maṇi* prayers and mediation. But seeing the joys and sorrows of great, middling, and lesser beings, I went about sad and mournful, thinking of impermanence, pitiable creatures, and the uncertainty of the time of my own death.

I brought the master a full gourd of beer, offered it to him.

“What are these thoughts of mine?” I asked him. “The fruits of the actions of this life of mine have come to naught. The creatures of the mountains and valleys, the dependent and humble people, dogs, bugs, little birds, all of their suffering comes to me.”

The master laughed. “What benefit is there in creating all this suffering?” he said. “This is what you should do: Visualize yourself as Avalokiteśvara, with light from the heart of Avalokiteśvara spewing from your mouth. Call on the Buddhas for reinforcements.

“Make a request like this and cultivate a strong aspiration:

‘I, Orgyan Chokyi am not happy. I will do whatever compassionate acts are right. All the buddhas and bodhisattvas, behold the suffering of myself and every living being. Buddhas, may you work compassionately.’

“Concentrate your mind single-pointedly on all beings of the six classes, and spread light rays upon them. Recite *maṇi* prayers, wrap yourself in meditation, and then make a vow to do what good you can.”

Then I set about single-pointedly to produce this aspiration: With body, speech, and mind I benefit all beings as I am able. In particular, I was kind to dogs and other animals that came to the entrance of my cell.

Patrons and Silk

One day I went to visit the master, and some important people were there: the chief of Pingdring, Chowang and a companion, Kunga Drolma, the master of Dechen Palri and his brother, the chief lady of Changtsa, Chang Palmo, Lady Karchung, and Lhamo Butri. They immediately began giving me provisions.

“I have no need to be given anything,” I said. But these important people kept asking if they could give me precious things and bolts of silk.

“What did you say?” they asked.

“Keep quiet!” the master said to me. “Just read some scripture for them, and recite some long-life spells. This is how meditators must behave.”

I felt a little bit tired in mind.

Some days later I offered the master these words:

Homage to the master.

Please be patient as I offer this verse.

The faithful offer things this way,

The faithless take them away.

Rich people offer things this way,

Poor people take them away.

In the midst of this offering back and forth,

I know about food, drink, bolts of silk, and cordial relations.

But if the mind of enlightenment is so great,

There is no reason to ask for these things.

Delighting in those who donate,

But not delighting in those who beg:

Such a master is incredible.

How could one offer to such a master?

The big people offered to me,

And I got a little silk.

Today I ask only this—

To offer confession of my former deeds.

Because I said this, the master spoke. “Now, you think that bolts of silk should not be given,” the master said in response to this. “At first some better Kashmiri silk will come, and then some demon food, red and green tobacco. And then it is all left behind. The silk of the east and the cotton of the west will fade and disappear. Yet, even though they give us bolts of silk, we are not joined at the neck [thinking the same thing]!”

As he said this I was remorseful.

Meditating in Dream and Sleep

After that I put great effort into meditating. As a result things started to dissolve, I had nothing to grab hold of, and my sleep became light and troubled. I would just grasp a dream, and then I would not be able to transform the dream. Sometimes I would think I had retained the dream, but my memory was blocked. I went on as if I had not slept at all. The morning after I could not hold on the dream, and I had some doubts.

My dreams were mixed with luminosity. When I recognized this for what it is for a lengthy period of time, the previous clear awareness and pliant meditation came. If a memory in a dream came, I then thought, "Now I recognize this as awareness in the intermediate state." Then I had no doubts at all.

Death and Depression

I would also think that I was going to die quickly.

"If I do not die I would be happy," I would think briefly. "I should eat something."

I would hope that my master and friends had good health, and that I died first. When I would repent and recite homage prayers, I would make this wish:

May I die before my master and my male and female religious brethren. May I die first. May they know the Three Jewels. May my hopes be fulfilled.

When I thought about all the people dying, young and old, I was so sad, and I was on the verge of depression. Whatever I looked at I saw the nature of impermanence. When I beheld the joys and sorrows of people, I thought that nothing was going to come of them. The rich become fewer and fewer. The poor become more and more. If one is without food, they beg for food. If one has no clothes, they beg for a torn-up cloak. Year after year people just keep coming.

I had such fierce thoughts that I became unable to bear it. When I was struck by these thoughts I was ashamed of myself, for these were mistaken and useless ideas, ineffective thoughts.

"It would be better, I thought, "to recite *manis* and make aspiration prayers."

For the welfare of all beings I applied myself in good conduct, recitation, and meditation.

Encouraging Women to Go into Retreat

At Tadru, Ani Drupamo Palden Drolma now had to work for the many visitors and make a lot of beer.

“Ani, your eyes are not good,” I said to Drupamo. “The hearth is poison. Ani, take a retreat in solitude and recite *manis*. Flour will be provided from the monastic center. You are a good friend.”

She said nothing then, but she later went to see master Palden.

After that Orgyan Chodrol [also went to request a retreat, but the master said], “You are very young, but you are skilled at regulating the food and provisions. But we must assess your commitment, so you must work in the kitchen. The head cook and the steward need to cut down their external activities.”

She came back to me, and said, “I can and I cannot [go into retreat]; I must wait a year.”

“I left after three years.” I replied. “Drupamo also left. The master speaks a great deal about life and death, and gives the wealth offered by the faithful from high to low to virtuous activities. I have confidence in you. Work hard. Work hard!”

Chapter Eight

Solitude and Joy

Chapter Eight relates how joyous experiences dawned upon me as I lived in solitude.

Teachings Obtained

Now I am about fifty years old. I may die quickly, so I must live by myself.

Earlier, from the age of twenty-one, I requested many religious teachings and listened well. I heard many instructions, including the word of the victorious Buddha in the *Mother Sutra*, both sections of the *Maṇi Kabum*, three life stories of Padmasambhava, collected sutras, a golden rosary of the Kagyu, four volumes of life stories and songs from Lord Milarepa and his spiritual sons, and the *Jewel Ornament of Liberation*. I also obtained the reading transmissions and empowerments from many large and small volumes. All of these did I obtain.

Body, Speech, and Mind

Having given rise to great impermanence, I avoided cause and effect. I chose virtue and shunned sin. I contemplated the meaning of hearing the Dharma. Hearing, contemplation, and meditation are a necessity for me.

Now, in all the sayings of the victorious Buddha it is taught that one must meditate with the three doors [of body, speech, and mind] unwavering. Meditation was the most important thing for me

to do. I went to meditate, and I did not rise from meditation even when it was difficult. If I did not meditate, I would not become powerful.

“I must combine virtue and practice,” I now thought. “In terms of my body, I will confess and act accordingly on auspicious days such as the eighth, the twelfth, the fifteenth, the thirtieth, during the Gutor ritual of expelling sins, and on other holidays. In terms of my speech, I will pray to return for the benefit of all beings. In terms of my mind, I will dwell in all three doors with emptiness and compassion.”

Independence

“Before, when I was tending the kitchen fire, I had to get out of bed by lamp before dawn,” I thought. “I had to cook the food. Now I do not have to get up at dawn if I do not want to. If I want to take soup, I am free to do so when I am hungry. I am free to eat when I think of it. I can wear clothes on the path, and I can go naked when I am in my cell practicing. I do not have to grind the grain. Woven and dyed things come to my ani friends, so I do not need rhubarb. The young nuns bring water.

“The pain of working the barley, wood, and water I am free to do for myself. Self-serving and self-empowered, I have escaped people. I have attained autonomy. I do not need to heed the opinions of bad friends. If I have food, I am free to ask the master or my religious friends. I have found happiness.”

So one day at dawn, unseen by anyone, I sang this joyful song:

Master, the precious source of all refuge,
Patron deity Avalokiteśvara,
This beggar praises you from the center of her heart.
I, this beggar, beseech you to bless me.
Compassionate one, gaze upon me, Chokyi.

Giving provisions to those departing,
Preparing food and beer for those arriving,
Dividing up food for the many staying here,
These I have put behind me, and I am happy.

This happiness is the kindness of the master.
To repay this kindness I meditate and recite *manis*.

Large crowds of crooked and deceitful people,
Defending compassion and kindness, yet faithless,
Remembering desires large and small,
These I give up, and I am happy.

This happiness is the kindness of my religious brothers and sisters.
To answer that kindness I repay them with a pure mind.

Rising at dawn and boiling vegetables,
Reluctantly beginning work after calm meditation,

Kitchen boys preparing water and wood,
 When I think of [leaving] these, Chokyi is happy.
 This happiness is the kindness of Orgyan Chodrol.
 To answer her kindness I pray that she become like me.

This I sang on my bed.

Singing in Praise of Her Cave

Now, in this rocky cave of mine I am unbothered by snow and rain. I do not hear the noisy sounds of birds and bees. This rocky cave of mine is not lit up by the kitchen fire. There is no rock like this one in the meditation cells of Tadrü.

I thought that I needed to offer a hymn of praise to this cave. I sang this song of praise to my own little cave:

I pay homage to the guru, the deities, and the dakinis.
 May this not be the time when Beggar Woman Chokyi dies.
 Noble Lord of Compassion, look upon me with mercy.
 I offer these three words of praise to this rocky cave.

This pleasant nook of mine, my rocky cave,
 Is a small place for meditation and reciting *mani* prayers.
 There is no rain, no snow, no bad things here—
 They are cut short by this one-cornered cave.

Above, no thunder, what a joyous place.
 In front, clear blue water, like offering water,
 Many trees, like a banquet display,
 Water and trees aplenty, a joyful, auspicious place,
 From east to west, Tibetan valleys replete with food,
 Whatever I ponder here, my experience is elevated.

Hearing the teachings of the Master and Buddha,
 Gaining experience with this beggar woman's strong faith,
 Experiencing the joy of nonconceptual radiant bliss—
 These are mine, Chokyi's joyous spiritual experience.

Solitary, alone and looking after reality,
 Free from the chatter of the common people,
 Serving religious women of a similar religion—
 These are mine, Chokyi's signs of joy.

Far from the kitchen of the residence hall,
 Free of the cross speech of the jealous kitchen mistress,
 Here, the melody of *mani* prayers—
 These are the signs of joy for this beggar, Chokyi.

Visions in Meditation

Then one day I maintained the direct leap of the Great Perfection. At night, off to the side of a lamp flame I maintained a fiery throne, and as in a dream in the center was Padmasambhava with a white body. To the left was Avalokiteśvara with a white body. To the right was White Tārā. Above, below, and all around them were gods I knew and gods I did not know. They were all flickering and tottering like lamps.

“This is a great vision,” I thought. And then I woke up. Some days after that I asked the master about this.

“This Great Perfection is a special teaching,” he said. “It is the experience of keeping the lamp. Whether these dreams are good or bad, do not speak of them to anyone.”

Visiting Yeshe Drolma

Then I went to visit Yeshe Drolma in her retreat cave at Yarka. While I was there I said, “Look up, Yeshe Drolma. The mountain that this lonely cave is on is bountiful. Look at the happy state of the many blue sheep. The lord of our land is a blessed man. He is equally kind to all beings. Others push them aside. When I look at the happy experiences of these two or three hundred blue sheep, I feel like laughing.”

“What did you say, Ani?” a steward asked. “From Dukla above to Pangdri below there are about five hundred blue sheep. Up to where the lord resides there are no hunters. There is no happiness from him.”

At this I thought, “Everything is momentary. I see everything as if it were an illusion in a dream. There is nobody who lives without dying. Everything is a portent of death.”

Young Yeshe Drolma then told me that she had had good dream.

“What happened?” I asked.

“If I were to explain it to you, it would not be good,” she said.

“Well, I am a sign of sickness,”⁸ I said. I did not go there after going to the village after that.

Dreaming of a River in Hell

When I reached the age of fifty-two, I stayed here in my rocky cave as before. I was happy. I did not go to the residence hall to request teachings in the winter. In the summer I descended from my valley. I asked for teachings in accordance with my age.

“You do not need to hear much at all,” the master said. “In all the sayings of the victorious Buddha it is generally said that all bodies are impermanent. You must now work for the next life. Work for the next life!”

Now I had cast off doing things that would lead to a quick death. Above my rocky cave there was another humble cave. I went up there to meditate.

One night in a dream there were many naked people in a great river in hell. One by one they went from the river to a fire. All those naked people were about to leap into the fire, but then I woke up.

In the morning I cast burnt offerings and recited the *Prayer of Samantabhadra*. During a time of illness many people died of black smallpox.

Remembering Mother

During this time Ani Kunga Drolma and I made a pact not to die. For we felt that when one dies one does not have the leisure to practice the Dharma.

Once as I was thinking I remembered vividly the impermanence of my father and mother. In particular, from this my mother's death up this time I had cast burnt offerings to her body. All her bones were made into *tsatsas* and thrown into the river.

"The deeds of my mother and father have gone like a magician's illusions. So is it for everyone." I was greatly sorrowful.

"Even those who come in dreams suffer in hell," I thought. Many tears fell from my eyes, and I was depressed.

Jangchub Zangmo then came along carrying a full jug of beer and provisions. "Why do you cry, Ani?" She asked.

"I remembered my mother. I could only weep and think of impermanence," I replied.

"You turned your back on the head of your family and met with the Dharma," Jangchub Zangmo said to me. "It is said that you must practice the Dharma, for to attain a human body is [as rare as] a daytime star. Ani, may you always grant me religious advice. I prostrate to you, Ani."

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Chapter Nine

Religious Commitment

Chapter Nine relates how I upheld my religious commitment with body, speech, and mind.

Taking Vows

Coming once again to my rocky cave, I sent out pure thoughts. The causes of being born in hell are not tending to the profound [teaching of] cause and effect and, in particular, breaking one's religious commitment and vows. In all of the sayings of the victorious Buddha there are discussions of the commitments and vows.

When I requested the four [tantric] empowerments, my master asked, "Do you think you have the ability to uphold the three vows and the commitments?"

"I have the ability," I replied.

"For each empowerment there is much that you must accept," he said. "If you are able to uphold your commitment you will attain awakening. If your commitment is broken, you will surely go to hell."

For example, in the life story of Lingza Chokyi, Yamantaka the Lord of Dharma says to all those who have broken their commitment, "Look into the mirror of karma." All of those karmic actors looked into the mirror of karma, and those who had broken their commitment or performed bad actions had to burn in hell for a very long time. Those who had preserved their vow and commitment were sent up to a Buddha realm.

A Vow of Purification

Now, I thought that if I preserved my vow and commitment day and night I would not have to repent when death came. I had great faith in maintaining the vow through purification. I had great faith in this teaching, which preserved good conduct in body, speech, and mind.

On the eighth day, the fourteenth, the fifteenth, the thirtieth, the Gutor purification day as well as other holidays, I took this vow of purification:

I pray to all the buddhas and bodhisattvas to think of me. Master, I pray that you think of me. Noble Avalokiteśvara, I pray that you think of me.

From this moment until I attain the secret heart of enlightenment I, Orgyan Chokyi, take refuge in the Buddha, supreme person. I take refuge in the holy teachings, supreme among those free of desire. I take refuge in the noble religious community, supreme among gatherings.

Just as in the past the tathāgathas, arhats, totally perfect buddhas, who understand as a fine horse does, who do the work of elephants, who having attained their own goal forsake their own burden and are active in all worlds, who are totally complete with perfect speech and minds liberated, with the wisdom of wonderful liberation—just as they maintain their vow of purification so that they may achieve the benefit of all beings, that they may be of service, that they may work uninterruptedly, that they may work without desire, that they may perfect the teachings of enlightenment, that they may attain precious and perfect unexcelled enlightenment, may I, Orgyan Chokyi, thinking of the benefit to all beings and as an offering to the master and the Buddha, take the perfect commitment of confession and purification from this time until the sun shines tomorrow.

I will not take life.
 I will not take another's wealth.
 I will not engage in sex.
 I will not speak false words.
 I will give up alcohol,
 Which supports many faults.

I will not sit on a high seat.
 Likewise, I will give up snacks,
 Adorning myself with perfume and jewels,
 And dancing and singing as well.

Just as the arhats
 Never kill, and so forth,
 So do I give up taking life.

May I quickly attain unexcelled enlightenment.
 May beings bewildered by suffering
 Be released from the ocean of existence.

Say this three times. Then recite the spell of pure conduct the twenty-one times:

*Oṃ a mo gha shi la / si bha ra shi bha ra / ba ra ba ra / mahā sha du
 dho sa to padma / bhi bhu tī dza / bhun dza / da ra da ra / sa man ta /
 a wa lo ki te hūṃ phaṭ swā hā.*

You should also recite such prayers as:

May my conduct be faultless. . . . May I become endowed with a portion of the conduct of a noble spiritual friend. May all beings be endowed with perfect happiness, unfettered by the anguish of negative emotions.

By the merit obtained,
 Through preserving moral conduct,
 May all sentient beings,
 Quickly attain the state of the powerful Sage.

Dakini Orgyan Chokyi said, “This upholding of the vow is my own profound dharma. If you are able to perform this fully with body, speech, and mind, beings will live with joyous hearts. In this degenerate age, if all men and women are not able to keep fully body, speech, and mind, all the commitments and vows come to and end. If you are able to preserve them, even at death you will have no regrets.”

How to Preserve a Vow

According to the fourteen root downfalls, if the vow is broken you must prepare a great feast for your master and religious friends. Do this according to the fourteen root downfalls. You must request an empowerment. You must mend the fault of your words of commitment. You must study fully with body, speech, and mind. You will not be ashamed of yourself. Your mind will be uplifted. Awareness will be expansive and clear. Now you will have no regrets, even at death.

However, if you break your commitment, you will commit inconceivable sin when you are born as a demon, taking the life of all beings. When burned as a demon you will be reviled by all. If you lust for people or things, you will live as a demon.

When I see some men and women meet with the Dharma and then turn away from it, I have pity for them. I weep for them.

“Those who turn from the Dharma are mad!” I thought, and I sang this lament.

om maṇi padme hūm hrī!

I pray that the Supreme Lord, the great Compassionate One gaze upon me.

Those who attain a human body in a good time and place and sin,
Are like those with eyes who leap into a great chasm,
Like tasty food mixed with poison,
Like this woman's body, a ground for samsara.

May I not meet people who sow the seeds of samsara.
May I not meet anyone who leads me to samsara.
May I not meet anyone who will lead me to a bad rebirth.

May I, Orgyan Chokyi, a beggar with no wants,
Be born healthy and active,
Rebirth upon rebirth,
In an empty valley with no people.

I pray that I may meet
Women friends with a similar religion.
May I not meet for even a moment,
Those who are lazy in religion.

I pray to be able to complete my commitment.
Bless me with the full power of body, speech, and mind.
May I work for the welfare of all beings.

Now my time of death is uncertain.
In one year are twelve months,
In each month, every eight days,
And four auspicious days I will definitely practice purification.
In this cleansing, thanksgiving, and conscientiousness I delight.

May I die with body, speech, and mind complete.
May my soul be carried
To Potala, to Copper Mountain, to a Buddha realm.

Dreams of People Passed

Then, in the first month of the year, all the practitioners of Tadru were performing a fasting ritual composed by a student of the great adept Guru Chawang.

I said to Jangchub Zangmo, "Last night sister Kunga Drolma kept appearing in a dream. She took me by the hand and said, 'Ani, be happy.' Then she left. What was this dream?"

"It is a sign that she will come in the morning," Jangchub Zangmo replied.

Well, one night great impermanence arose. Little by little all those people who had died in all the Tibetan valleys were set in a row in my memory.

I tried to count them, but I was unable.

Instructions to the People of Tadru

“When I was just beginning,” I thought one day, “Ani Drubchenmo Sonam Drolma instructed all the young nuns and monks in body, speech, and mind. She was of great benefit to my mind.

Now I myself have fulfilled body, speech, and mind, and I pay homage to all the men and women of the great religious center of Tadru, to all my religious companions who keep the commitments, and in particular the monastic leader. To you, Dakpo Gampopa, Drupchen Padmasambhava, and Guru Chowang, I pay homage.

I am a woman who has done what is right in religion. If you can act even a little independently, that is the best. In the future you, the community, must uphold pure conduct.

If you strive in retreats and in meditation, you will be of benefit to humankind. With no confusion in your minds, please do whatever benefits beings. All people will have faith. The joys of times passed are gone: Now you must concentrate on meditation.

Repaying Patrons

One day I was struck by a thought, “The patrons of Tarap and Bantshong, and in particular Jatang Kali, Master Orgyan and his steward, Chowangmo, Yumbu Lolek, the master and his brother, Master Kunga, Tenzin Zangmo, and also my kind religious brothers and sisters gave me provisions such as vegetables, clothing, meat and fat, a water pot, and salt during the entire time I stayed in retreat at both Nyimapuk and Tadru. And yet they had no reason to give me anything.

“I must apply myself to reciting *mani* prayers and meditation to give thanks to them,” I thought.

No More Teachings

One day all the religious brothers and sisters were summoned together. I wondered what I should do. “I should go ask the master,” I thought.

“I think I should perform a meditation retreat or a purification ritual,” I said to him.

“You do not need to practice austerities any more,” he replied. “With body, speech, and mind you have fully protected your commitment and vow, and now life is passing on.”

Then myself, Jangchub Zangmo’s mother, and Tenzin Wangmo performed a purification ritual.

Editor's Note

The above are the many words spoken by the dakini herself. This is a condensed written account. Some prose passages were set into verse. Nothing else was modified. If the *Life* of the dakini were written down from the beginning, it would be nothing more than a copy of the *Life of Nangsa Obum*, so it was not written.

Chapter Ten

Death and Impermanence

Chapter Ten relates the manner of her death.

An Accident

From the tenth day to the fifteenth day of the second month of 1729, the Bird Year, all the residents of Tadru were performing a fasting ritual. A beam fell from the ceiling and hit the dakini on the head. A great deal of blood flowed from her head.

“Put a fire around her head,” some people who had experience [in these matters] said, “and she will not die.”

But there was no one who knew how to do this. Eventually after seven days the pain in her head had subsided.

Eight days later the dakini said, “There is a darting pain in my forehead, between my eyes and downward. What do you think it is?”

A doctor was called, but he did not arrive in time. A rite to eliminate difficulty was performed, but it did no good. A long-life ceremony was performed, but it did no good. Everything was tried, but nothing made any difference.

“Orgyan Chodrol,” she whispered in a faint voice, “in that box there is some old yellow clothing. Please give it to the important people. There must not be any controversy among the other people. The Buddha said that death comes like lightning, and this is what has happened.”

Drupamo Orgyan Kyabma embraced the dakini. Her pain was great. Time was revolting against her.

People all around her cast their bodies to the ground. Some wept, while some wondered, “What will we do? What will we do?”

After two days of this her mind faded into the Dharma realm. At age fifty-five Orgyan Chokyi ended her life.

Miracles at Death

As is explained in the all the tantras of the Great Perfection:

As a result cutting through and leap-over meditations, when this person ends life, external signs are visible. The Dharma body is symbolized by a cloudless sky. The enjoyment body is symbolized by a long rainbow. The emanation body is symbolized by clouds of flowers falling.

So it was for this dakini who lived in virtue from a young age.

She knew how to delight in preserving the commitments and vows. She was faithful and of pure appearance to her master and her religious family. She had great compassion and a sense of protection for all beings great and small. She took pity especially on fallen beings like dogs, as well as those who were needy and weak. Impermanence continually rang in her heart. Within her both the three poisons and the five poisons were miniscule, and she strove toward virtue.

She therefore lived through a fatal injury for two days. On the third day after being struck by this fatal injury the sky was clear and calm. There was an amazing rainbow that looked like folded silk. A rain of flowers fell, and finally she died.

Cremation

She remained with her body in the posture of Vajravārāhī for seven days.

Then the master and his disciples at Tadru constructed a mandala of peaceful and wrathful deities, including Avalokiteśvara, and performed a ritual for fourteen days without interruption. After this the Dakini's corpse was wrapped in white cotton, and her friend Kunga Drolma carried her on her back.

With their faces looking eastward, everyone gathered together playing music and wearing golden garlands. With her body in white cotton and silk scarves, they assembled a cremation box upon a small mound and set her there. They performed peaceful burnt offerings according to the all-liberating Avalokiteśvara [rituals], and offered things to the fire. Then they gave her corpse to the fire.

From the east a wind came like a shooting arrow, and the fire thus came ablaze by itself. It did not need much ritual wood, nor was much kindling required. The sound of the flames was amazing, like a victory banner raised high, or like a parasol unfurled. The fire was five different colors as it rose up around the corpse in a great spectacle.

Then on the morning that her corpse was being cremated a great snow began to fall, and there were a number of indications that they should open the crematory. This was also the season for the farmers to plant after the dry season, and [the cremation] was of great benefit for planting and raising [the crops].

Relics

Then a friend of the dakini, Kunga Drolma, said, “At the peak of the crematory there is a small opening. Perhaps her remains have been taken by the dakinis.”

The crematory was then opened, and small pieces of her body, speech, and mind were removed. All of the bones were naturally broken and white, and were considered relics of Vajrasattva, and they resided in a stupa.

The small remains were taken as a relic shares by the greatly virtuous religious brethren of Nangkhong, Bantshang, and Tshung. All of the ashes and embers were carried to the middle of the big river. A stupa was constructed for the corpse and her remains were placed in it. Small relics were collected and placed in a golden statue of Tārā as an inner support.

As for the personal effects of the dakini: After about two measures were kept back for the monastic residence, they were offered as a small connection to Yezer, Balungmen, the masters of Tarap, and all the masters from Tsarka below to Drikung above.

All virtuous religious brethren from the four corners of Dolpo heard [of her death] and mourned her. After the forty-nine-day mourning period a rain of flowers fell in every region of Dolpo.

Her interior and exterior supports reside in the great place of Tadru even today.

Verses of Exhortation

Though death comes to all,
 Seeing a death such as hers is amazing.
 Those who were close came to delight in the Dharma.
 Even in those without Dharma faith was born.

This body and time is a great opportunity for enlightenment.
 Having crossed well the ocean of samsara,
 Those who travel in Buddha realms,
 If you practice well the Dharma of cause and effect,
 You will see samsara and its mistaken appearances purified into an
 enlightened realm.

If you preserve view and meditation with body, speech, and mind,
 When you die you will not falter.
 Those who die are many; those who die like this are rare.

All embodied beings living on this earth,
 Are like summer flowers, gone without a trace.
 If you cannot practice the holy Dharma during youth,
 You will have no discipline when you are old.

All those who practice Dharma, amass it for the end.
 Day and night apply body, speech, and mind to virtue.
 Look at the life story above [now], Dharma practitioners:
 When your eyes become blind you will not see the scriptures.

Though you may amass friends and fine wealth,
 When death comes you cannot take it with you.
 Apply all you have to virtue.

Dedications by Manuscript Patrons

In this life may the patroness Khandro Chokyi be happy and live long, and in the next may she be born in a heavenly realm.

By the benefit of commissioning this life story of the dakini Orgyan Chokyi, emanation of Mother Guhyajñānā, may the patroness Ani Chozangmo of Samten Ling be born in a pure land of sky-goers, in the presence of Avalokiteśvara in the Potala.

Appendix

Characters in the *Life of Orgyan Chokyi*

Orgyan Chokyi the hermitess
Orgyan Tenzin the master, chapters 1–5

Family

Drangsong Puntsok father
Kunga Zangmo mother
Kyilo childhood name of Orgyan Chokyi

Nuns

Ani Paldzom chapter 1
Ani Drubchen Soldrolma/Ani Drubchenma/Ani Drubpamo chapters 2, 3, 4, 9
Kunga Drolma chapters 3, 6, 8, 9, 10
Ani Tsuga chapter 3
Ani Tsering Kyapma chapters 3, 6
Ani Nyishar chapter 3
Ani Dzompa Kyi chapter 3
Ani Kunga Chokyi chapter 3
Ani Dzompa Kyi chapter 3
Drubmo Palden Drolma chapters 6, 7
Chowangmo chapters 6, 9
Yeshe Drolma chapters 7, 8
Orgyan Chodrol chapters 7, 10
Jangchub Zangmo chapters 8, 9
Tenzin Zangmo chapter 9
Drubpamo Orgyan Kyapma chapter 10

Monks and Yogins

Puntsok	yogin, chapter 1
Kunga Palzang	monk, chapter 2
Kunga Pendar	monk, chapter 1
Drolma	monk, chapter 1
Drolzang	monk, chapter 3
Jampa	meditator, chapter 6
Drolma	great meditator, chapter 7
Chowang	chapter 7
Kunga Drolma	chapter 7
Master of Dechen Palri	chapter 7
Master Kunga	chapter 9

Patrons and Laypeople

Lhawang Rinchen of Jatang	chapter 2
Senge Kyabpa	village chief, chapter 3
Kami	chapter 6
Uchung Darpo	chapter 6
Chogyal Tsen	patron, chapter 6
Yumbu Lolek	chapters 6, 9
Chokyab Palzang	chapter 6
Chief of Pingdring	chapter 7
Chief Lady of Changtsa	chapter 7
Chang Palmo	chapter 7
Lady Karchung	chapter 7
Lhamo Butri	chapter 7
Jatang Kali	chapter 9
Khandro Chokyi	colophon
Ani Chozangmo	colophon

Saints of the Past

Gelongma Palmo	chapter 7
Mother Macig	chapter 7
Nangsa Obum	chapter 7
Padmasambhava	chapters 8, 9
Milarepa	chapter 8
Lingza Chokyi	chapter 8
Guru Chowang	chapter 9
Dakpo Gampopa	chapter 9

Notes

INTRODUCTION

1. I use the term *nun* loosely in this book to refer to women with some affiliation to a religious institution, who appear to have taken vows of celibacy. It is often unclear precisely what type of vows either women or men took in the history of Himalayan Buddhism, and attention to terms in historical and literary works from specific times and places is crucial. Religious women are described in literature from Dolpo as nuns (*jo mo*, *btsun ma*, *a ni/a ne*), laity, patrons (*yon bdag ma*), noblewomen (*dpon mo*, *btsun mo*), queens (*lcam mo*, *rgyal mo*), and practitioners (*rnal 'byor ma*, *grub chen ma*). The term *dge tshul ma*, “novice nun,” is rare in works from northwest Nepal. We find, for instance, a *dge tshul ma* patronizing a work on meditation: Bstan 'dzin ras pa, *Rnal* f. 9a.2. It would appear that this woman is Chos skyong bzang mo; *ibid.*, f. 9a.5. She also appears in the donor colophon of Bstan 'dzin ras pa's *Arcane Biography* (*Gsang ba'i rnam thar*). See also the letter given to “male and female Dharma practitioners” (*chos byed pho mo*); Bstan 'dzin ras pa, *Gzhi* f. 12b.5. The term *jo mo* does not occur in O rgyan chos skyid's *Life*, and *btsun ma* only infrequently. *A ne* is the term of choice. Not surprisingly, I have yet to see the term *dge slong ma*, “fully ordained nun,” used to refer to any woman other than the Indian nun and folk hero Dge slong ma Dpal mo, in works from the Himalayas. The specific vows taken by women in these regions during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are not clear yet, and I have used the term *nun* in a broad sense, much as we use the term *monk* to refer to a wide variety of male religious practitioners. See Karma Lekshe Tsomo (1999), p. 178, for a discussion of these terms in Ladakh, as well as Samuel (1993), pp. 275, 287, and Havnevik (1989), p. 44.

2. Jest (1975), pp. 306–307.

3. O rgyan chos skyid has, to my knowledge, been briefly mentioned only once in modern scholarly literature other than in Jest (1975): Ehrhard (1998), p. 9 and p. 13 n. 20.

4. Karma blo bzang, *Mkhas*, f. 60a.4–60b.3; Mathes (1999), pp. 77–78; Mathes (2001), p. 173 n. 37.
5. Anonymous, *Bod*, f. 1b; Aziz (1980), p. 23.
6. I have in mind here the stories presented in March (1983) and (2002), which share common themes with Orgyan Chokyi's tale.
7. Gyatso (1998a), p. xi.
8. Aris (1979), p. 4.
9. Gyatso (1998a), p. 105.
10. Weinstein and Bell (1982), p. 159.
11. Weinstein and Bell have not been without their critics; see Kleinberg (1992), pp. 13–16.
12. Kleinberg (1992).
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 149–153.
14. Geary (1994), p. 23.
15. I have in mind here the critique by Makley (1997).
16. Perkins (1995), p. 105.
17. This issue is explored in Lewis (1994).
18. Smith (1970), p. 1 n. 2; Jackson (1984), p. 19; Ehrhard (1996), p. 69 n.26.
19. Bde skyid sgrol ma, *A chung*, or Padma 'od gsal. *Mkha'*, for instance.
20. Strong (1992), p. xi.

I THE RELIGIOUS WORLD OF THE HERMITESS

1. Zurick and Karan (1999), chapter 2.
2. Snellgrove (1989), pp. 70–163.
3. Other recent contributions to the historical study of Buddhism in Dolpo include Ehrhard (1996) and (1998), Mathes (1999) and (2001), and Schicklgruber (1996). Photographs of many of the religious structures of Dolpo can be found in Jest (1974) and (1975), Snellgrove (1967) and (1989), Mathes (1999), and Valli and Summers (1987). Jest (1981) provides an overview of Tibetan Buddhist monuments of the Nepal Himalayas, though it excludes Dolpo. Bauer (2004) details contemporary social-environmental changes occurring in Dolpo.
4. Stearns (1999), pp. 11–13.
5. Dpal ldan 'tsho byed, *Bdud*, f. 28b.
6. Samuel (1993), pp. 322–324.
7. Anonymous, *Dol po*. Jest (1975), p. 369, notes that the mythic histories known as *mollas* were recited in the 1960s. See also Jackson (1984), pp. 31–32, n. 8.
8. O rgyan bstan 'dzin, *Sprang*, p. 126.6.
9. Bstan 'dzin ras pa, *Rje btsun bstan 'dzin*, f. 20.
10. Tucci (1956), p. 122.
11. Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho, *Rgyal*, pp. 324, 393.
12. Chos kyi dbang phyug, *Bal*, f. 22a.3–4
13. Schuh (1993–1995), pt. 1, p. 78.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 76–77.
15. Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho, *Thams*, p. 538.9.
16. Translated in Schuh (1993–1995), pt. 1, pp. 73–75.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 74.
18. Petech (1984), p. 102.
19. Ehrhard (1998), pp. 5–6.

20. Karma blo bzang, *Mkhas*, ff. 70a.3–71a.4.
21. Anonymous, *Phags pa shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa rdo rje gcod pa'i phan yon'* ff. 29b.5–30a.5.
22. O rgyan bstan 'dzin, *Rnal*, pp. 92.2–99.2.
23. The Thakali are centered primarily in the Kali Gandaki Valley to the east of Dolpo. Tukucha (Tukche) has been the seat of Thakali culture since the nineteenth century; Vinding (1998).
24. Jest (1998), p. 73.
25. O rgyan bstan 'dzin, *Sprang*, pp. 88.2–90.2.
26. Patrul Rinpoche (1998), p. 43.
27. Huber and Pedersen (1997), pp. 583–588.
28. O rgyan bstan 'dzin, *Rnal*, pp. 233.1–235.4.
29. Jest (1975), pp. 305–306.
30. O rgyan bstan 'dzin, *Sprang*, pp. 5–35, is largely an autobiographical résumé. At p. 35 the songs switch to philosophical and contemplative matters, with historical and biographical notes interspersed. Ehrhard (1998) brought these works to the attention of contemporary scholarship.
31. O rgyan bstan 'dzin, *Sprang*, p. 9.4–6.
32. *Ibid.*, pp. 16.6–17.2.
33. Ehrhard (1998), pp. 4–5.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 5; p. 10 n. 7.
35. Gar dbang rdo rje, *Zab*.
36. O rgyan bstan 'dzin, *Bka'*.
37. Ehrhard (1998), pp. 6–7.
38. O rgyan bstan 'dzin, *Sprang*, pp. 25–26.
39. *Ibid.*, pp. 28–29.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 32.4.
41. *Ibid.*, pp. 33.3–34.4.
42. The following account is based on O rgyan bstan 'dzin, *Sprang*, pp. 174.5–179.3.
43. Possibly the cremation instructions in Rgod kyi ldem 'phru can, *Phags*.
44. O rgyan bstan 'dzin, *Sprang*, p. 177.4.
45. *Ibid.*, p. 182.
46. Snellgrove (1967) announced his desire to undertake a full study of this figure, though his plans were apparently never realized. Snellgrove (1989) discusses the task of finding and having copied the collected works of Bstan 'dzin ras pa. Aris (1979) mentions him briefly as a treasure finder in Sku thang.
47. Ehrhard (1998).
48. Mathes (1999) discusses Bstan 'dzin ras pa's activities around the holy mountain of Shel gyi ri bo 'brug sgra.
49. Bstan 'dzin ras pa, *Rnal 'byor gyi dbang phyug bstan*, f. 63b.1.
50. Schuh (1993–1995) translates the genealogical section of one of his autobiographies and discusses the history of his family estate, Rab rgyal rtse, the fortified castle of Rdzong, ruins of which still stand in the Muktināth valley. Photographs of the castle of Rdzong can be found in Snellgrove (1979), figure 15, and Jest (1981), figures 38 and 39. Jest (1981), p. 68, mentions a statue of Bstan 'dzin ras pa on the main altar of the temple atop the ruins of Rab rgyal rtse, but I was unable to locate this statue when I visited the temple in March 1999.
51. Bstan 'dzin ras pa, *Rje btsun rnal 'byor*, f. 1b.

52. Bstan 'dzin ras pa, *Rnal 'byor gyi dbang phyug bstan*, f. 50a.5. Ehrhard (1994) discusses Bstan 'dzin ras pa's comments on the sacred landscape of Muktināth.
53. Compare with Lhalungpa (1977), p. 3.
54. Smith (2001), p. 222.
55. Bstan 'dzin ras pa, *Rnal 'byor gyi dbang phyug bstan*, f. 52a.3
56. *Ibid.*, f. 29a.5.
57. *Ibid.*, f. 40a.5.
58. See also his self-deprecating song composed at Tadru: O rgyan bstan 'dzin, *Sprang*, pp. 139.6–141.1
59. *Ibid.*, p. 92.1–5.
60. Lhalungpa (1977), pp. 155–169.
61. This patron is also mentioned at O rgyan bstan 'dzin, *Sprang*, p. 27.2.
62. Anonymous, *Shes sgon*, f. 13.
63. Vitali (1996), p. 114: “[Ye shes 'od's] daughter Lha'i me tog was also ordained. She built Kre wel dbu sde as if this gtsug lag khang lha'i me tog was her sras tshab (“adopted child”). As she established a community of nuns [there], she provided all that was required for its maintenance.” The Tibetan passage from the *Mnga' ris rgyal rabs* is found in Vitali (1996), p. 60. According to Vitali (1996), p. 274, this is the only reference to a nunnery at the turn of the millennium in western Tibet (specifically in Gu ge Pu hrang). He suggests (p. 236) that Lha'i me tog's entrance into religion took place sometime close to 988, and cautiously puts forth (p. 274) that this is probably one of the earliest nunneries of the later spread (*phyi dar*) of Buddhism in Tibet.
64. Blo gros dbang phyug, *Rgyas 'bring bsdus gsum gyi rnam par phye pa mo gtam zab mo lo rgyus gter gyi kha sbyang*, f. 6b.6. Blo gros dbang phyug's commentary (*'grel pa*) to this work deals with cosmology, astrology, linguistics, the life of the Buddha, and early Buddhist development, as well as western Tibetan and Sa skya history. The work offers a fascinating glimpse of historical writing in Dolpo, and bears comparison with Don dam Smra ba'i seng ge's encyclopedic *Bshad mdzod yid bzhin nor bu*, on which see Smith (2001), chapter 15.
65. Anonymous, *Dong*, p. 467.7: Lcam mo phug pa mo, Jo lcam Dbyings skyong, A ne Gar dga', A ne G.yung drung skyong, A ne Bdud rtsi, A ne Gnyan mo, Jo mo Bzhi ba skyong.
66. Sangye Gyatso, right-hand man of the fifth Dalai Lama and leader of the central Tibetan government from 1679 to 1703, records population statistics for Buddhist monasteries of central and western Tibet in his 1698 history of the Gandenpa (Gelukpa) School: Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho. *Dpal*, pp. 143–345. See also Dung-dkar blo bzang 'phrim [sic]-las (1991), pp. 73–75 for a summary of the surveys.
67. Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho. *Dpal*, pp. 97.9, 137.14, 142.22.
68. *Ibid.*, pp. 205, 256, 262.
69. Wangdu and Diemberger (1996), p. 96.
70. It is unfortunate for the present project that the biography of the early-sixteenth-century master Rnam grol bzang po (b. 1504) contains nothing of relevance on the religious activities of women during his era: Bsod nams blo gros, *Mkhas*. For a study of the teaching traditions to which Rnam grol bzang po was heir, see Ehrhard (1996).
71. Snellgrove (1967), v. 1, pp. 216–217; v. 2, p. 219.
72. *Ibid.*, v. 1, p. 177; v. 2, p. 90.
73. *Ibid.*, v. 1, p. 130; v. 2, p. 79.

74. Ibid.
75. Ibid., v. 1, p. 130; v. 2, p. 80.
76. Ibid., v. 1, p. 153; v. 2, p. 120 (my translation differs from that of Snellgrove).
77. Ibid., v. 1, pp. 88–92.
78. Ibid., v. 1, p. 154; v. 2, p. 122.
79. Ibid., v. 1, p. 266.
80. Anonymous, *Shes sgon*, ff. 7b, 9b, 10b, 11a. This work was probably put into writing sometime during the late eighteenth or early nineteenth centuries.
81. Bstan 'dzin ras pa, *Rnal 'byor gyi dbang phyug bstan*, f. 21b.1.
82. Ibid., f. 62b.5.
83. Ibid., f. 42a.5.
84. The autobiographies of Padma don grub (1668–1744), Padma dbang 'dus (b. 1697), and O rgyan bstan 'dzin (1708–c.) (1767) (This master is different from the teacher of O rgyan chos skyid) all contain numerous references to nuns, laywomen, and patronesses.
85. Snellgrove (1967), v. 1, p. 262; v. 2, p. 275.
86. Ibid., v. 1, p. 262; v. 2, p. 276.
87. Ibid., v. 1, p. 264.
88. Bstan 'dzin ras pa, *Rnal 'byor gyi dbang phyug bstan*, f. 19a.6.
89. Ibid., f. 30b.7.
90. Bstan 'dzin ras pa, *Rnam* f. 1b.2.
91. Bstan 'dzin ras pa, *Sku bstod smon lam gyi rim pa*, f. 2b.4.
92. O rgyan bstan 'dzin, *Rnal*, p. 322.2.
93. O rgyan bstan 'dzin, *Sprang*, p. 84.4.
94. See for instance his teaching to a noblewoman, *ibid.*, pp. 149.6–150.3.
95. O rgyan bstan 'dzin, *Rnal*, pp. 139.3–141.2.
96. Ibid., p. 29.5.
97. Ibid., pp. 29.5–31.5.
98. Ibid., pp. 242.5–244.2.
99. Ibid., p. 102.2.
100. Snellgrove (1967), v. 1, p. 192; v. 2, p. 183.
101. Ibid., v. 1, p. 112, styles her as a servant of Bsod nams blo gros. The Tibetan text has *yon bdag mo*, which I take to mean patroness.
102. Ibid., v. 1, p. 112; v. 2, pp. 57–58.
103. Ibid., v. 1, p. 118; v. 2, p. 66.
104. Jackson (1984), p. 150.
105. Mi pham phun tshogs shes rab, *Bya btang stag rtse sku skye'i mgur*, f. 4a.3: Jo mo Rmang kha ma; f. 7.6: Jo mo Sangs rgyas.
106. Mi pham phun tshogs shes rab, *Bya btang stag rtse sku skye'i mgur*, f. 27b.1: Bdag mo Dpal 'dzin dbang mo; f. 27b.4: Bdag mo Nor 'dzin.
107. Mi pham phun tshogs shes rab, *Bya btang stag rtse sku skye'i mgur*, f. 30a. 1: Rgyal mo Khri mdzes.
108. Mi pham phun shogs shes rab, *Mngon*, f. 7b.4–5. More than half of the colophons in *Stag rtse sku skye's* some thirty works mention this woman.
109. Snellgrove (1967), v. 1, p. 167; v. 2, p. 146.
110. Ibid., v. 1, pp. 168–169.
111. These various works were printed at different times, but it is likely that the collection of some 206 printing blocks that David Snellgrove viewed at Shey Monastery in 1961 was assembled shortly after Tenzin Repa passed away in 1723.

2 THE LIFE OF THE HERMITESS

1. O rgyan bstan 'dzin, *Sprang*, pp. 29.6–30.1. This episode occurred sometime during 1706–1722: pp. 27.4, 33.3.

2. Myers and Powell (1999), p. 313.

3. There are at least ten different nuns (*a ne*) mentioned by O rgyan chos skyid. Other women, primarily patrons, are also discussed at length (see Appendix).

4. O rgyan bstan 'dzin, *Sprang*, p. 34.4. This passage allows us to date O rgyan chos skyid: She died when O rgyan bstan 'dzin was seventy-two, seventy-two, in 1728/1729. In her autobiography the year of her death is said to be a *bya* year, which can only be 1729. She lived fifty-five years by Tibetan reckoning, or fifty-four in Western terms, and thus she can be dated 1675–1729.

5. O rgyan bstan 'dzin, *Sprang*, p. 34.4.

6. O rgyan chos skyid, *Mkha'* (L667/3 only), f. 57a.

7. Anonymous, *Shes sgon*.

8. Snellgrove (1989), p. 137.

9. Jest (1974), pp. 306–307.

10. O rgyan rig 'dzin, *Sprang*, ff. 9.3, 54.3.

11. Roerich (1988), p. 1,026.

12. Smith (2001), chap. 5; Schaeffer (forthcoming).

13. Roerich (1988), p. 707; Gzhon nu dpal, *Deb*, vol. 1, p. 618.3.

14. Kun dga' rdo rje, *Deb*, p. 79.21.

15. Ngag dbang rnam rgyal, *Brgyud*, p. 470. Mention of this occurs in the story of the twelfth abbot of Stag lung, Ngag dbang grags pa dpal bzang (1418–1496).

16. Rang byung rdo rje, *Rnal 'byor*, vol. 2, p. 553. This work appears to have been based upon a work by the third Karma pa Rang byung rdo rje, rather than properly authored by him. This requires further investigation.

17. Smith (2001), pp. 70–73; Eimer and Tsering (1990). Note that Eimer and Tsering's edition "J" of the *Mi la'i mgur 'bum*, a "Xylograph in the British Library, formerly belonging to Heinrich August Jäschke (1817–1883)" (pp. 71–72), appears to be a print of the blocks carved by Gtsang smyon's student Lha btsun pa Rin chen rnam rgyal in the 1550s.

18. Blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma, *Khyab*, pp. 43–44. The full *rnam thar* of Gtsang smyon is located at pp. 38–45. Blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma used Rgod tshang ras pa's *rnam thar* to write this summary: *Lcang*, p. 45.911. See Smith (2001), chapter 11, for more on this *rnam thar*.

19. Sna tshogs rang grol, *Gtsang*, p. 137.7. The following is based on Sna tshogs rang grol, *Gtsang*, pp. 137.7–138.7.

20. Dolfuss (1991).

21. O rgyan bstan 'dzin, *Rnal*, p. 105.1–4.

22. O rgyan chos skyid, *Mkha'* (L667/3 only), f. 57a.

23. Author unknown, *Ye*.

24. Gyatso (1992), p. 470 n. 20; Havnevik (1997), p. 357. Gyatso (1998a), p. 282 n. 10, cites Tashi Tsering, who mentions a "post-twelfth-century" autobiography by one Sonam Paldren. This is most likely the three-part autobiography of Bsod nams dpal 'dren. All of three of these were written in collaboration with one Rin chen dpal, who integrates his questions about Bsod nams dpal 'dren's experiences with her responses.

25. Havnevik (1997), p. 356.

26. Epstein (1982), p. 80.

27. Gling za chos skyid, *Gling za chos skyid*, pp. 410–411.
28. Tshul khirms 'byung gnas, *Dpal*, p. 185.3
29. If we add the story of the twentieth-century revenant Dawa Drolma (Dawa Drolma) (1995), to the list of fourteen *Lives* of early revenants in Epstein (1982), we find that nine out of fifteen or roughly 60 percent of the works concern women.
30. Mooney (1999), p. 7.
31. Author unknown, *Ye*, f.2b, gives her birth year as a *stag* year. According to the late-sixteenth-century *Bo dong chos 'byung* of 'Chi med 'od zer, translated in Diemberger and Wangdu (1997), p. 111, she died at age thirty-four. We know that she was present at the death of Bo dong pañ chen Phyogs las rnam rgyal (1375–1451), and thus the *stag* year would seem to be 1422.
32. Our copy of the *Rje btsun ma chos kyi sgron ma'i rnam thar* is missing the last two folia, and thus the colophon. Nevertheless, the author refers to himself as "I" (*kho bo*, f. 2a.3) and reports the words of Chos kyi sgron ma in which she uses the feminine pronoun *kho mo*. Still, by far the largest portion of the biography is the work of the male author. See Diemberger and Wangdu (1997), pp. 32–37 and pp. 110–114, for a recent summary of the Rdo rje phag mo lineage.
33. 'Gyur Meol 'od gsal *Rje*, pp. 234–237.
34. Havnevik (1997), p. 357 n. 25, citing an unpublished paper by Tashi Tsering.
35. Bde ba'i rdo rje, *Skyabs*.
36. Gtsang smyon Heruka, *Rje*, f. 50b.7; Chang (1999), p. 143.
37. Gtsang smyon Heruka, *Rje*, f. 51a.4; Chang (1999), p. 144.
38. O rgyan chos skyid, *Mkha'* (E2933/4), f. 2b.
39. Jetsun Lochen Rinpoche also encountered strictures against writing: Havnevik (1998), p. 101.
40. March (1983) discusses weaving and writing as symbols of gendered social roles among contemporary Tamang communities.
41. Myers and Powell (1999), p. 312.
42. Bstan 'dzin ras pa, *Rnal 'byor gyi dbang phyug bstan*, f. 46a.3.
43. Tshe ring dbang rgyal, *Dī*, pp. 229.2–230.1
44. Havnevik (1997), p. 361; Chos nyid bzang mo, *Gangs*, pp. 318–319.
45. 'Gyur med 'od gsal, *Rje*.
46. Bsod nams dpal 'dren, *Ye*.
47. See, for instance, the story of Mi la ras pa's female disciple Dpal dar 'bum in Chang (1999), pp. 136–148.
48. O rgyan chos skyid, *Mkha'* (E2933/4), ff. 78b–79a.
49. *Ibid.*, ff. 77b–79a.
50. Anonymous, *Snang*, is included with seven other dramas.
51. The following summary of *Snang sa 'od 'bum's* tale is based primarily on the rendition by Gelek Namgyal and Pheobe Harper contained in Allione (1984), pp. 66–128, and that of Duncan (1955), pp. 175–271, with select references to the Tibetan text of Anonymous, *Snang*. This modern Tibetan edition is for the most part consistent with the texts that must have formed the basis for the Duncan and Allione translations. The abridged version based on a manuscript collected in Darjeeling by Waddell (1895), pp. 554–564, as well as the version recounted by Cunningham (1940), are also largely the same tale. The version of the tale in Bacot (1924), however, is significantly different from either of these. It is largely devoid of miraculous events, most conspicuously Nangsa Obum's death and underworld journey and the final supranormal battle between the king and the yogin.
52. Anonymous, *Snang*, p. 59, 7–8. The *bud med kyi skyon lnga* and the *mdzes*

ma'i yon tan brygad are not listed in the *Life*, and are here taken from Ha'u wun zhon, *Bod*, pp. 293, 491.

53. Anonymous, *Snang*, p. 78.13. Note that the term that I have translated here as melancholia, *snying rlung*, is the same that appears in the *Life of Orgyan Chokyi*.

54. *Ibid.*, p. 121.4.

55. *Ibid.*, p. 131.7.

56. Hahn (2001), p. 5.

57. Kollmar-Paulenz (1998); Martin (forthcoming), and references cited therein.

58. It is also interesting to note that a unique manuscript *Life of Macig* was located in Dolpo: Edou (1996), pp. x, 194 n. 28. In this work Macig is called *ani* by her companions (p. 197 n. 64), much like Orgyan Chokyi, though it appears to be essentially concerned with miraculous events in the teaching career of a famous Tibetan saint, (pp. 102, 175 n. 3).

59. Havnevik (1998), p. 89.

60. Ortner (1989), p. 181; Ortner (1978), chapter 3.

61. The following account is based on Bsod nams bzang po, *Smyung*, ff. 1b–11b, as well as Ratnaśrī, *Zhal*, pp. 93.1–100.4. See Martin (1997), entries 98, 109, 295, 385.

62. Robinson (1979), pp. 150–153, 250–254.

63. McNamara (1999).

64. Lama Chonam and Sangye Khandro (1998), p. 93.

65. Watkins (1996), p. 232.

66. O rgyan bstan 'dzin, *Sprang*, p. 27.1–2.

3 SORROW AND JOY

1. O rgyan bstan 'dzin, *Rnal*, 62.4–64.1.

2. The most common terms used in the *Life of Orgyan Chokyi* to express suffering involve *sdug*, “suffering,” or *skyo*, “sadness.” Terms stemming from *sdug* include: suffering (*sdug bsngal*), suffering of life (*srid pa'i sdug bsngal*), great suffering (*sdug bsngal chen po*), miserable state (*sdug pa'i ngang*), mountain of suffering (*sdug ri*), joy and sorrow (*dga' sdug*), mental anguish (*sems sdug*), song of suffering (*sdug glu*), sad tale (*sdug gtam*), and unhappy (*mi 'gu rang sdug pa*). Terms and phrases using *skyo* include: sad in mind (*sems skyo*), suffering (*skyod shad*), song of lament (*skyo glu*), distraught (*sems skyo lhang ba'i ngang*), mind suffering of its own accord (*sems skyo mo rang byung*), mind naturally sad (*sems nyid skyo rang grags*), “sadness came naturally to [my] already sad mind” (*sems skyo ba thog tu skyo ru rang song*), suffering (honorific of *sems skyo*) (*thugs skyo mo*), and sad appearance (*sems skyo snang*), sad and lamenting (*sems skyo cho nge ba*). Others include: pain (*zug gzer*), depression (*yi mug*), melancholia (*snying rlung*), tormented mind (*sems tsher*), heavy heart (*snying mi dga' ba mang po*), miserable heart (*snying mi dga'*), useless worries (*don med kyi thugs khral*), cry of anguish (*tsher skad*), great impermanence (*mi rtag pa chen po*), and “impermanence rang in her heart” (*mi rtag pa snying la 'chang ba*).

3. Lichter and Epstein (1983) develop a useful analysis of suffering, happiness, impurity, and purity in their study of *karma* as presented in popularly oriented literature, drawing largely on Patrul Rinpoche's *Words of My Perfect Teacher*.

4. Bodily pain: *zug gzer*.

5. Suffering (*sdug bsngal*), sorrow (*sems skyo*), and weeping (*ngu ba*).

6. Bsod nams rin chen, *Dam*, pp. 43–86; Khenpo Konchog Gyaltzen (1998), pp. 81–110.

7. Collins (1998), p. 140.
8. Bsod nams rin chen, *Dam*, p. 44.7–8; Guenther (1986), p. 41; Khenpo Konchog Gyaltsen (1998), p. 80.
9. Bsod nams rin chen, *Dam*, pp. 57.17–58.4; Guenther (1986), p. 49; Khenpo Konchog Gyaltsen (1998), p. 90.
10. Collins (1998), p. 140.
11. March (2002), p. 36.
12. Śākya rin chen, *Śākya'i*, p. 7.
13. Anonymous, *A lce*, p. 72.3.
14. O rgyan bstan 'dzin, *Sprang*, pp. 97.3–99.2.
15. Jansen (2000), p. 207.
16. Atkinson (1983), pp. 58–66.
17. Alacoque (1986), pp. 24–25.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 83.
19. In an essay on medieval literary representations of pain, Esther Cohen includes weeping as one of four nonverbal expressions of pain: bodily motion, stigmatization, weeping, and screaming. According to Cohen (2000), p. 63: “[Tears] could be used by both saints and by simple folk; when used by the saints, their application was restricted to religious grief, rather than personal physical pain; other people, however, could cry for their own pain.”
20. Anonymous, *Dzam*, p. 27.18.
21. Freemantle and Trungpa (1975), p. 34.
22. Bstan 'dzin dpal 'byor, *Dga'*, pp. 795, 1,144.
23. Sørensen (1994), p. 264.
24. Conze (1973), pp. 277–290; Khenpo Khonchog Gyaltsen Rinpoche (1998), pp. 74, 340–347.
25. Conze (1973), p. 284.
26. Snellgrove (1987), p. 60, notes that “To my knowledge this great bodhisattva disappears in later tradition.” See now Blo bzang grags pa'i dpal, *Byang*. Was Tsangnyon Heruka drawing this story from the *Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines*, or from an independent narrative of Sāprarudita circulating in Tibet during the fifteenth century, or even in Milarepa's day?
27. Lhalungpa (1992), p. 59.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 12; de Jong (1959), p. 26.22. “Weeping”: *ngu*.
29. Lhalungpa (1992), p. 18; de Jong (1959), p. 32.14. “Shed tears”: *mchi ma 'chor*.
30. Lhalungpa (1992), p. 20; de Jong (1959), p. 34.15.
31. Lhalungpa (1992), p. 23; de Jong (1959), p. 37.4. “Lamenting loudly”: *smre sngags 'don*.
32. Lhalungpa (1992), p. 21; de Jong (1959), p. 35.17. “Shedding tears”: *mchi ma 'don*.
33. Lhalungpa (1992), p. 55; de Jong (1959), p. 65.5.
34. Lhalungpa (1992), p. 50; de Jong (1959), p. 60.22.
35. Lhalungpa (1992), p. 58; de Jong (1959), p. 68.1.
36. Lhalungpa (1992), p. 59; de Jong (1959), pp. 68.31–69.4.
37. Lhalungpa (1992), p. 60; de Jong (1959), p. 69.18.
38. Lhalungpa (1992), p. 70; de Jong (1959), p. 79.25.
39. Lhalungpa (1992), p. 125; de Jong (1959), p. 134.11.
40. Lhalungpa (1992), p. 89; de Jong (1959), p. 98.14.
41. Lhalungpa (1992), pp. 102, 105; de Jong (1959), pp. III.1, II.16.

42. Lhalungpa (1992), p. 143; de Jong (1959), p. 153.21.
43. Lhalungpa (1992), p. 160; de Jong (1959), p. 169.22.
44. Lhalungpa (1992), p. 186; de Jong (1959), p. 195.26.
45. Lhalungpa (1992), p. 194; de Jong (1959), p. 204.4.
46. Lhalungpa (1992), p. 193; de Jong (1959), p. 203.10. “Break out in sincere tears”: *kha zhe med pa'i mchi ma khrug* (reading *'khrug* rather than de Jong's *khru*l).
47. Lhalungpa (1992), p. 95.
48. *Ibid.*, p. 146.
49. There are several terms used for tears and weeping in the *Life of Orgyan Chokyi*. Orgyan Chokyi most often “weeps” (*ngu ba*; *ngu shor*) and occasionally “cries” (*shum pa*). Tears fall from her eyes (*mig nas 'chi ma mang po btang*; *'chi ma 'babs*), and tears fall from her eyes like rain (*mig nas 'chi ma ltar babs*). Others cry, though the term used is an honorific (*spyang chab gtang*). Related terms include “weeping and anguish” (*ngus gdung*) and “shedding tears from the eyes” (*mig nas 'chi ma shor*).
50. Schicklgruber (1996), p. 120.
51. Epstein (1982), p. 34.
52. Collins (1998), p. 155.
53. Ortner (1996), p. 131.
54. O rgyan bstan 'dzin, *Sprang*, pp. 27.4, 33.3, and 29.6–30.1.
55. O rgyan chos skyid, *Mkha'* (E2933/4), f. 70a.
56. Sna tshogs rang grol, *Rang*, vol. 1, p. 180.
57. *Ibid.*, p. 181.
58. O rgyan chos skyid, *Mkha'* (E2933/4), f. 63b.

4 WOMEN, MEN, SUFFERING

1. Harris (1999), p. 54.
2. Wilson (1996), p. 4: “[Buddhist] hagiographies tend to represent entrapment in *samsāra* . . . as a male dilemma while gendering *samsāra* itself as feminine, as a prison in which women themselves are the agents of incarceration.”
3. Nāṇamoli and Bodhi (1995), p. 929.
4. Chapter 13 of *Buddhaśrījñāna*, *Rgyal*, pp. 419.4–420.6.
5. Gtsang smyon Heruka, *Rje*, f. 41b; Chang (1999), p. 120.
6. Gtsang smyon Heruka, *Rje*, f. 41b; Chang (1999), p. 121.
7. O rgyan gling pa, *Bka'*; Martin (1997), entry 78.
8. Gu ru bkra shis, *Bstan*, pp. 407.25–410.20; Dudjom Rinpoche (1991), pp. 775–779; Blondeau (1980); Kapstein (2000), p. 166.
9. Martin (1997), entry 87.
10. Edited and translated into German in Laufer (1913).
11. The complex literary history of this mythic motif has been analysed in Kvaerne (1980). These scenes are only alluded to in O rgyan gling pa, *O rgyan*, p. 439.9–12; Yeshe Tsogyal (1978), vol. 2, p. 460; Dudjom Rinpoche (1991), vol. 1, p. 548.
12. O rgyan gling pa, *Bka'*, pp. 251.17–252.2; 254.6–15; Laufer (1913), pp. 58, 155.
13. O rgyan gling pa, *Bka'*, pp. 287.13–288.7; Laufer (1913), pp. 96–97, 212.
14. Bsam gtan gling pa, *Za*, p. 118.4; Lama Chonam and Sangye K'handro (1998), p. 92.
15. Bsam gtan gling pa, *Za*, p. 139.6; Lama Chonam and Sanyye Khandro (1998), p. 106.
16. O rgyan gling pa, *Bka'* (1985). This handwritten manuscript reproduces a

printing colophon from Dga' ldan phun tshogs gling, the printing house of the Dga' ldan pho brang government situated at the base of the Potala (p. 652).

17. Snellgrove (1967), vol. 1, p. 264.
18. Blondeau (1980), p. 45. The bibliography in Yeshe Tsogyal (1993), pp. 223–230, contains fourteen *Lives* of Padmasambhava.
19. Yeshe Tsogyal (1993), chapters 24–36.
20. Nyi ma 'od zer, *Chos*, pp. 361–376; Martin (1997), entry 18.
21. Yeshe Tsogyal (1993), pp. 160–161.
22. Nyi ma 'od zer, *Slob*, pp. 547.5–548.2; Nyi ma 'od zer, *Chos*, pp. 364.17–365.2; Yeshe Tsogyal (1993), p. 161.
23. Anonymous, *Las can*, pp. 124–125.
24. Yeshe Tsogyal (1993), pp. 172–173. The following is based primarily on Nyi ma 'od zer, *Chos*, pp. 369.20–370.15.
25. Nyi ma 'od zer, *Chos*, p. 370.6. This line does not appear in the translation contained in Yeshe Tsogyal (1993).
26. Anonymous, *Rje btsun*, p. 346.2–3.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 347.2–4.
28. The following remarks are based upon an overall reading of the some one hundred songs and autobiographical writings contained in Bstan 'dzin ras pa's collected works.
29. Gethin (1998), p. 59.
30. Bstan 'dzin ras pa, *Rnal 'byor gyi dbang phyug bstan*, f. 19b.6.
31. *Ibid.*, f. 9b.3.
32. *Ibid.*, ff. 46a–47a.
33. *Ibid.*, f. 52a.3.
34. *Ibid.*, f. 11a.3.
35. Compare Myers and Powell (1999) on medieval Hispanic spiritual autobiography, p. 329: “There is no gender-linked ambiguity about the man’s worthiness to be a subject. In general, men’s accounts do not employ sex as a category for establishing the significance of the story or its outcome. Gender is not even discussed. . . . Accepted as normative, the male subject’s masculinity is literally unremarkable. In narratives about women, by contrast, gender is a central concern. In fact, much of the drama in these narratives—and the justification for taking time to attend to a woman’s life, whether one’s own or someone else’s—derives from the amazing spectacle they present of a woman managing to live a praiseworthy life in spite of her sex.”
36. Wilson (1996), p. 71, argues that in early Indian Buddhist narrative “similes constitute *samsāra* as feminine and entrapment in *samsāra* as a male dilemma.” This is not the case in Orgyan Chokyi’s equation of *samsara* and the female body; she is not concerned with the dilemmas of men, but with her own spiritual dilemma.
37. Martin (1996a) offers the most comprehensive recent work on “sky-burial” practices in Tibet.
38. O rgyan chos skyid, *Mkha'* (E2933/4), f. 17a.
39. von Furer-Haimendorf (1976), pp. 136, 148; Havnevik (1989), p. 163.
40. O rgyan chos skyid, *Mkha'* (E2933/4), f. 15a.
41. *Ibid.*, f. 38a.
42. Bynum (1991), pp. 16–17.
43. O rgyan bstan 'dzin, *Bka'*, p. 160.
44. Padmasambhava, *Zhus*; Padmasamdhava, p. 56.

45. I do not want to say that the trials portrayed are simply a matter of pedagogical rhetoric. The cautions of Bynum (1991), p. 235, are relevant here: “We must never forget the pain and frustration, the isolation and feelings of helplessness that accompanied the quest of religious women. For all her charismatic empowerment, woman was inferior to man in the Middle Ages; her voice was often silenced, even more frequently ignored. Not every use of the phrase ‘weak woman’ by a female writer was ironic; women clearly internalized the negative value placed on them by the culture in which they lived.”

46. Myers and Powell (1999), p. 313.

47. Cioran (1995), p. 24.

48. I allude here to the brilliant discussion of dissent literature in premodern Bhutan in Aris (1987)

5 RELIGIOUS PRACTICE

1. O rgyan bstan ‘dzin. *Sprang*.

2. O rgyan bstan ‘dzin. This work was sponsored by the patron Bu chung ngag dbang and the patroness Dpal ‘dzom; O rgyan bstan ‘dzin, *Rnal*, p. 473.2–4.

3. See the literature cited in Gutschow (1999).

4. Lewis (1997), p. 328; Wijayaratna (1990), pp. 123–124.

5. Mumford (1989), p. 112.

6. Bsod nams bzang po, *Smyung*, f. 9a.6.

7. Bsod nams bzang po, *Smyung*, f. 10a.2–5.

8. Anonymous, *Snyung* [sic].

9. Jackson (1997), p. 287.

10. Compare Havnevik (1989), p. 112.

11. Jackson (1997), p. 280–281; Losang Kalsang Gyatso (1995), p. 29.

12. Jackson (1997), p. 281.

13. Huber (1999).

14. Aris (1975), p. 60.

15. O rgyan bstan ‘dzin, *Rnal*, p. 181.5.

16. Schwieger (1996), p. 92.

17. Ehrhard (1998), p. 6.

18. O rgyan bstan ‘dzin, *Rnal*, p. 181.

19. von Rospatt (2001); Ehrhard (1989, 1991).

20. O rgyan bstan ‘dzin, *Rnal*, p. 102.2.

21. Stiller (1995), chapter 4.

22. Anonymous, *Dpal*, pp. 348–349.

23. In his 1816 history of the Brag dkar rta so Monastery, Brag dkar rta so Sprul sku Chos kyi dbang phyug credits Rin chen nram rgyal with four renovations; Chos kyi dbang phyug, *Grub*, f. 29a.5–29b.1; Anonymous, *Rnal*, ff. 3a.3–4a.1, 4b.3, 8a.5. Rin chen nram rgyal’s renovation efforts are noted in von Rospatt (2001), p. 206.

24. Ngag dbang rdo rje, *Bal*, f. 8b [Wylie (1970), p. 47]. Compare *ibid.*, ff. 5b–7b [Wylie (1970), pp. 45–47] with chapter 5 of O rgyan chos skyid, *Mkha’*. This and Or-gyan Chokyi’s guide differ in arrangement from Bstan ‘dzin Chos kyi Nyi ma’s guide, which presents the holy sites of the valley in an idealized clockwise circumambulation around the Swayambhunath Stupa: MacDonald (1975), pp. 93–95, and MacDonald and Dvags-po Rin-po-che (1987), pp. 104–105. Ngag dbang rdo rje, *Rje*, pp. 327.6, 329.4, suggests that Rang rig ras chen traveled to Kathmandu, though this brief homage prayer provides no details.

25. Nam mkha' 'jigs med, *Sku*, p. 459.1–2.
26. Germano (1992), pp. 832–839.
27. O rgyan bstan 'dzin, *Sprang*, pp. 112.4–114.2.
28. O rgyan bstan 'dzin, *Rnal*, pp. 175.1–176.5.
29. *Ibid.*, pp. 222.1–223.5.
30. *Ibid.*, pp. 254.2–255.5.
31. Yeshe Tsogyal (1993), p. 194.
32. Gar dbang rdo rje, *Zab*.
33. Movement of the mind: 'gyu ba; conceptual thought: *rtog pa*.
34. Sna tshogs rang grol, 'Od, pp. 12.3–16.2; Ehrhard (1990), pp. 154–159; Dowman (1994), pp. 85–87.
35. Stillness: *gnas pa*; movement: 'gyu ba; awareness: *rig pa*.
36. Sna tshogs rang grol, 'Od, pp. 56.2–58.1; Ehrhard (1990), pp. 222–225; Dowman (1994), pp. 113–114. See also Rang rig ras chen, *Rje*, pp. 268.1–269.2, for a similar discussion of *gnas pa*, 'gyu ba, and *rig pa*.
37. Zhabs dkar alternates between 'phros pa and 'gyu ba, which I take to be synonyms meaning “movement.”
38. O rgyan bstan 'dzin, *Bka'*, p. 125.2.
39. Germano (1997), pp. 298–302.
40. Dudjom Rinpoche (1991), vol. 1, p. 371; vol. 2, p. 139. Germano (1992), bk. 1, pp. 125–127.
41. On “direct leap” (*thod rgal*) in the autobiographical poetry of 'Jigs med gling pa (1730–1798), see Gyatso (1998a), pp. 202–206.
42. Patrul Rinpoche (1998), pp. 63–76.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 62.
44. Khenpo Konchog Gyaltsen (1998), pp. 97–101.
45. Allione (1984), p. 91.
46. Pommaret (1997), p. 505.
47. Anonymous, 'Phags pa shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa rdo rje gcod pa, p. 249. Conze (1957), p. 74.
48. In a cursory search of the Tibetan holdings at the Nepal National Archives during the summer of 1999, I located more than fifty separate listings for manuscripts and blockprints of the *Diamond Cutter Sutra*, and almost twenty for the *Benefits*. These exemplars originated from monasteries and temples across the Nepal Himalayas. A thorough study of these would certainly tell us much about the Buddhist cult of the book in the Himalayas. See Martin (1996b), p. 183.
49. The following is based on Anonymous, 'Phags pa shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa rdo rje gcod pa'i phan yon, ff. 12b.3–16b.2.
50. Delog Dawa Drolma (1995), p. 51.
51. Brown (1981), p. 86.
52. Sba Gsal snang, *Sba*, pp. 50.22, 53.22. Kapstein (2000), chapters 2–4, offers an in-depth discussion of the *Sba bzhed*. See Martin (1997), entry 1, for more information.
53. Kun dga' bkra shis, *Ta'i*, f. 3b.
54. Khyung po ras pa *Rje*, p. 230.1–5.
55. Bstan 'dzin pad ma'i rgyal mtshan, *Nges*, p. 157.13–14.
56. Martin (1994) discusses of Tibetan debates over relics and miracles at length.
57. Bsod nams chos 'grub, *Kun*, pp. 150.13–156.12.
58. Martin (1994), pp. 286–287; Rhoton (2002), pp. 167–168. Sa skya Paṇḍita,

Sdom, p. 318.1.3–7, contains several annotations that I have included in the present paraphrase.

59. O rgyan bstan 'dzin, *Sprang*, pp. 34.5–35.1.
60. Schaeffer (forthcoming).
61. Cuevas (2003) discusses Tibetan rituals of death more generally.
62. Sørensen (1994), p. 113.
63. Brown (1981), p. 81.

PART II THE LIFE OF ORGYAN CHOKYI

1. L122/5, f. 4a.2; L401/3, f. 4b.3; E2933/4, f. 6a.1–2: translation tentative.
2. L122/5, f. 4b.1–2; L401/3, f. 5a.3–4; E2933/4, f. 6b.4–5: translation tentative.
3. L122/5, f. 5a.7; L401/3, f. 6a.4; E2933/4, f. 8a.5: translation tentative.
4. L122/5, f. 6b.5; L401/3, f. 7a.6–7b.1; E2933/4, f. 10a.6: translation tentative.
5. L122/5, f. 7b.5; L401/3, f. 8a.5; E2933/4, f. 12a.1: translation tentative.
6. L122/5, f. 12a.4; L401/3, f. 12a.5; E2933/4, f. 19a.3: translation tentative.
7. L122/5, f. 13a.7; L401/3, f. 13a.5; E2933/4, f. 21a.1: translation tentative.
8. L122/5, f. 45a.4; E2933/4, f. 66b.2: translation tentative.

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