

The female quest for enlightenment: Compassion and patience in transforming gender bias in Tibetan Buddhism, with specific reference to Western Tibetan Buddhist nuns and Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo.

by

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree

PhD

in the Department Biblical and Religious Studies at the

UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES

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August 2013

ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the nature of gender bias in Tibetan Buddhism and the specific role Western Tibetan Buddhist nuns have played in transforming such prejudice. The afore-mentioned gender bias pertains particularly to the unavailability of full ordination (bhikshuni ordination) for nuns in the Tibetan tradition.

The research highlights the specific contribution made by Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo, a British woman and currently the most senior Tibetan Buddhist nun. Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo attained fame for spending twelve years meditating in a cave in the Himalayas, and for her statement that she intends to attain enlightenment in a female body. She is also the founder and abbess of a Tibetan Buddhist nunnery Dongyu Gatsal Ling in India. Tenzin Palmo is particularly outspoken in her efforts to transform gender bias within the ranks of Tibetan Buddhism, and serves as an inspiration to countless lay and monastic Buddhist women worldwide.

The researcher postulates that gender equality has not yet been attained within Tibetan Buddhism. Androcentric record keeping, certain misogynistic meditation practices, and cumbersome decision making processes within the Tibetan ecclesiastic system have maintained gender bias within its institution, despite His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama's efforts to assist in the transformation of monastic attitudes.

The Dalai Lama, spiritual head of Tibetan Buddhism and one of its most learned scholars, has made his position clear as far back as 2007 when he expressed his full support for the establishment of the Bhikshuni Sangha in the Tibetan tradition. Two years earlier, in 2005, he had already urged Western bhikshunis to become more involved in the issue of full ordination in Tibetan Buddhism. Western nuns in particular have therefore played a leading role in their attempts to transform gender bias in a true Buddhist spirit of patience and compassion. His Holiness the 17th Gyalwang Karmapa has been equally outspoken on the issue. In 2010 in Bodhgaya, India, he made a commitment in front of an international audience to ordaining women as bhikshunis, and stated unequivocally that he was prepared to ordain these women himself. However, he did caution against expecting quick results, asking the audience to have patience.

In conclusion the thesis suggests that despite a favourable doctrinal attitude to women, ambiguity still characterises the Tibetan Buddhist approach towards females. There is tension between an underground tradition of highly accomplished female practitioners and the institutional preference for male practitioners. Institutionalised gender bias in Tibetan Buddhism therefore has no sound doctrinal basis in view of the fact that the Tibetan Buddhist pantheon is rife with female Buddhas, goddesses, dakinis, and other highly spiritual and enlightened women. Present times are characterised, especially in the West, by accomplished female academics and Tibetan Buddhist teachers, as well as prominent nuns. The *yogini-tantras* furthermore attest to the reverence and honour the male should afford to the female. Gender hierarchy and male dominance cause untold suffering and pain, especially devastating for female monastics, and is therefore both contradictory to Buddhist principles and to the norms of a progressive society.

KEY WORDS

Buddhism

Gender bias

Tibetan Buddhism

Western Buddhist nuns

Full ordination

Bikshuni Ordination

Enlightenment

Compassion

Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo

Misogynism

.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

- My supervisor, Dr. Jaco Beyers, for his continued support, interest, enthusiasm, and expertise.
- Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo, for her time and generosity in granting me a lengthy interview, and for perusing parts of the text for accuracy.
- The Western Tibetan Buddhist nuns who responded to the questionnaires, especially Venerable Bhikshuni Thubten Chodron and Venerable Bhikshuni Jampa Tsedroen who showed a keen interest in this research and generously provided additional information.
- Theo de Vries, for his fine-toothed editing, and words of encouragement.
- My children Alexander and Rebecca, for sacrificing time that could have been spent with them.
- My husband, Pieter, for fetching and carrying library books, for finding rare and interesting books, and for his abundant systems of support.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo who has served as an inspiration of wisdom, patience, and compassion in the female quest for enlightenment to thousands of women, Buddhist and non-Buddhist alike.

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CHAPTER ONE: SANDPAPER SISTERHOOD¹

We have to address the issue of structural violence, whether it has to do with the marginalization of ...women or dying people or people who are impoverished...We have a responsibility to engage in activities that are related to the transformation of our social and political system.

(Mangahas 2012: 98)



1.1 INTRODUCTION

The research for this thesis was stimulated by the tail end of an interview with Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo which I saw on television. I was fascinated by this bald, eloquent British woman who spoke so calmly about living in a cave high up in the Himalayas in complete isolation for twelve years of her life! She often describes those twelve years as some of “the happiest years” of her life (Thompson & Cox 2003). I started researching the biography of Tenzin Palmo and in the course of my reading discovered that there are quite a number of Western² women who are ordained Tibetan Buddhist nuns. I also became aware of an intense debate surrounding the issue of full ordination for Tibetan Buddhist nuns. Full ordination for Buddhist nuns is currently available in the Chinese schools of Buddhism in Taiwan and Hong Kong (Thanissara, Jitindriya, & Day 2010:45), in the Korean school of Mahayana Buddhism (Han 2010: <http://www.koreatimes.co.kr>), and in the Vietnamese Zen tradition (Berzin 2007: <http://www.berzinarchives.com>), but Tibetan Buddhist nuns can only undergo a novice ordination. Many of them therefore seek full ordination in the Chinese tradition. The ordination remains valid even though they continue to practise as Tibetan Buddhist

¹ Ploos van Amstel 2005

² The term Western in this context refers to Europe and North America in particular.

nuns. What concerned me is the belief by some Buddhist monks that enlightenment is not possible in the female form, yet many Western women, who are by implication liberated women, choose Tibetan Buddhism. It is also well-known that Tenzin Palmo (a Western woman) has vowed on various occasions to attain enlightenment in a female body (Mackenzie 1999: 5, 125, 208; Thompson & Cox 2003).

I therefore identified a number of questions that begged investigation. Firstly, gender discrimination still seemed to be enshrined within the ecclesiastical ranks of Tibetan Buddhism, since *bhikshuni* ordination (i.e. full ordination) and its accompanying access to more advanced teachings were not available to nuns. Underlying this question were a number of sub-questions, namely what attracted *Western* women to Buddhism in the first place, and then specifically *Tibetan* Buddhism? Furthermore, why did they choose to become *nuns* as opposed to just practising Buddhism as lay women? What is the problem surrounding the issue of full ordination for nuns in Tibetan Buddhism? What has been done to oppose this discrimination? What can still be done to accelerate the process? Who is preventing this process from progressing? What role do Western nuns play here? Why is Tenzin Palmo such an important personality in the debate?

The Dalai Lama, spiritual head of Tibetan Buddhism and one of its most learned scholars, has made his position clear with a statement in 2007 at the *First International Congress on Buddhist Women's Role in the Sangha*, held at Hamburg University in Germany (<http://www.congress-on-buddhist-women.org/index.php?id=142&L=0&type=1>). He states that “after extensive research and consultation with leading Vinaya scholars and Sangha members of the Tibetan tradition and Buddhist traditions internationally, and with the backing of the Tibetan Buddhist community, since 1960s, I express my full support for the establishment of the Bhikshuni Sangha in the Tibetan tradition” (<http://www.congress-on-buddhist-women.org/index.php?id=142&L=0&type=1>). Two years earlier, in 2005, he had already urged Western bhikshunis to become more involved in the issue of full ordination in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition which led to the establishment of *The Committee of Western Bhikshunis* (Chodron: 2006 http://www.thubtenchodron.org/BuddhistNunsMonasticLife/the_committee_of_western_bhikshunis), of which Tenzin Palmo is a founder member. There are six Western nuns on the committee (<http://www.bhiksuniordination.net>).

His Holiness the 17th Gyalwang Karmapa has been equally outspoken on the issue. He astonished an international audience in the winter of 2010 in Bodhgaya, India, by making a commitment to ordaining women as bhikshunis, and stating unequivocally that he was prepared to ordain these women himself (Damcho 2010: <http://www.thebuddhadharma.com/>). However, he did caution against expecting quick results, asking the audience to be patient. The support of both these prominent Tibetan Buddhist leaders gives rise to the question of what, or who, is holding back the process?

Janet Gyatso (2010: 47), Hershey Professor of Buddhist Studies at Harvard University's Divinity School, states quite unequivocally that image, respect, and prestige underlie the very nature of Buddhist monasticism. She continues to point out that the Buddhist sangha was intended specifically as an example of the optimum religious way of life. Its survival depends on the generosity of the lay community. The lay community's support of the monastic community depends on its conviction that the monastic community is "maintaining its purity and the highest standards of behaviour and wisdom" (Gyatso 2010: 47). In the light of the women's liberation movement and the fact that a number of Western women have been ordained as Buddhist nuns, "the best path and the best values in the world [therefore] favour gender equality and the elimination of patriarchy and misogyny" (Gyatso 2010: 47).

The concept of enlightenment and how it is achieved also needed to be clarified. *Enlightenment* is perhaps better translated as *awakening* (Fischer-Schreiber & Diener 1994: 102). It seems to be an awakening to clarity and accuracy, and a realization of true reality which is an awakening to the oneness of everything (Fischer-Schreiber & Diener 1994: 102). Enlightenment, awakening, or liberation also seems to suggest a final and total release from cyclical existence (Snelling 2000: 11). The Dalai Lama (Gyatso 2006: 137) defines enlightenment as embracing three principles, namely the determination to be freed from samsara, the correct view of emptiness (awakening), and the altruistic mind of enlightenment. In Tibetan Buddhism there is an extensive array of spiritual practices intended to transform "the afflicted and ordinary mind into the pure and omniscient mind of a Buddha" (Farber 2003: 117). Fundamental to all spiritual practice is the selfless motivation to attain enlightenment for the advantage of all living beings (Farber 2003: 117). If this is so, does the altruistic enlightened mind of the male

monastic exclude altruism towards nuns? If not, why has the instatement of full ordination for nuns become such a complicated political and ecclesiastical affair?

The third Paramita³ is known in English as patience or tolerance and is one of the factors needed for the attainment of enlightenment (Palmo 2011b:1). The issue of patience is therefore a very important one for bringing the Dharma into the daily life of a Buddhist. Palmo (2011b: 1) explains that “in order to cultivate patience there needs to be something that irritates us!” She continues to say (Palmo 2011b: 1) that we need people in our lives who create problems for us, who irritate and upset us, because these challenges teach us how to be patient. This does not mean that we have to fall victim to abusive situations. One can rise above the abusive situation, extricating oneself with compassion from such a condition (Palmo 2011b: 1). Tenzin Palmo has been true to her own advice in the way she has conducted herself in her quest for enlightenment and in her campaign to overcome institutional gender bias within Tibetan Buddhism.

She has become a role model and torch-bearer (Mackenzie 1999: 206) for spiritual women the world over. She has risen to legendary status. “She is an icon” (Mackenzie 1999: 206). Younger Western nuns are in awe of her (Mackenzie 1999: 206), and her words of wisdom are an inspiration to lay and ordained people alike. She is a woman who has proved many conservative male counterparts wrong: she survived in a cave, all alone, for twelve years, practising strenuous meditation without breaking down or losing sight of her purpose – to gain enlightenment (Mackenzie 1999: 206). She lectures all over the world in order to raise money to sustain the nunnery, Dongyu Gatsal Ling, she established in the Kangra district in northern India. Neilson (2007 <http://www.ascentmagazine.com/articles.aspx?ID=114&issueID=4>) writes that Tenzin Palmo “is a dynamic incarnation of the emerging and powerful feminine principle in Buddhism.” Tenzin Palmo embraced the gender issue in Tibetan Buddhism right from the start. Mackenzie (1999: 6) quotes her as saying that Buddhism, not just Tibetan Buddhism, was “testosterone heavy.” She was enormously frustrated after she was ordained as a novice nun by the difficulty in obtaining the same training as the monks: “Really, it was such a male-dominated situation. It was as though I had entered a male club. The monks were very kind to me, but on a deeper level there was resentment” (in

³ The paramitas are six kinds of virtuous practices required for skillfully serving the welfare of others and for the attainment of enlightenment.

Mackenzie 1999: 53, 54). The ultimate in women's liberation would therefore surely be an enlightened woman, a female Buddha (Mackenzie 1999: 7).

Recent years have witnessed the ordination of a number of Western women as Tibetan Buddhist nuns. Thubten Chodron, a fully ordained American Tibetan Buddhist nun, states (2000: <http://www.thubtenchodron.org/BuddhistNunsMonasticLife>) that the reason for Western women's attraction to Buddhism is that the Dharma appeals so profoundly to them that they are encouraged to leave their cultures, families, and jobs, to seek ordination. Many of these Western nuns initially choose to live in Asia, but some eventually return to their countries and attempt to live there as monastics.

However, Western Tibetan Buddhist nuns face a number of difficulties which their Asian counterparts do not experience to a large extent. Usually, Asian women receive ordination either when they are still young with little life experience, or when they are elderly and their families are grown (Chodron 2000 <http://www.thubtenchodron.org/BuddhistNunsMonasticLife>). In contrast, Western women are usually ordained when they are already mature. Many of them have had careers and families. Asian women come from a Buddhist culture in which it is respectable and acceptable to become nuns. Asian cultures are more concerned with the group than with the individual (Chodron 2000: <http://www.thubtenchodron.org/BuddhistNunsMonasticLife>). On the other hand, Western women live in a society in which the individual is revered over that of the group; their families often criticize them for giving up their careers and abandoning their families, or for choosing not to have children (Chodron 2000: <http://www.thubtenchodron.org/BuddhistNunsMonasticLife>). They are labelled as parasites, or too lazy to work, and are accused of "repressing their sexuality and avoiding intimate relationships" (Chodron 2000: <http://www.thubtenchodron.org/BuddhistNunsMonasticLife>).

Another problem faced by Western nuns is the Tibetan language itself. Tibetan nuns perform rituals and receive teachings in the Tibetan language. They are also required to memorise lengthy texts in Tibetan (Chodron 2000: <http://www.thubtenchodron.org/BuddhistNunsMonasticLife>). In contrast, most Western nuns do not speak or understand Tibetan and need English translations to receive the teachings. Western nuns have different questions and issues than those of their Asian counterparts as they are from a different cultural background and what might be given knowledge to the Asian

nuns are not necessarily so for the Western nuns. Even in India, then, Western nuns do not easily fit into the established Tibetan religious institutions (Chodron 2000: <http://www.thubtenchodron.org/BuddhistNunsMonasticLife>). Yet, despite all these obstacles, a number of Western women continue to seek ordination as Tibetan Buddhist nuns.

A Buddhist community consists of both lay and monastic people. Both are essential for the continuation of Buddhism. However, a Buddhist community has four pillars: monks, nuns, lay women, and lay men (Chodron: 2007 http://www.thubtenchodron.org/BuddhistNunsMonasticLife/a_tibetan_precedent). Without one of these pillars, the community is, strictly speaking, not a Buddhist community. Many of the nuns therefore argue that in order for a Buddhist community to call itself truly a sangha, all four pillars should be intact. In harmony with the nature of Buddhism, these nuns, as well as the Dalai Lama and the 17th Gyalwang Karmapa, therefore express themselves strongly in favour of restoring full ordination for Buddhist nuns in a spirit of patience and compassion (Damcho: 2010 <http://www.thebuddhadharma.com/>)

1.2 PROBLEM STATEMENT

My fundamental research question is: What is the nature of existing gender bias in Tibetan Buddhism and why have Western Tibetan Buddhist nuns been so instrumental in addressing this? In an effort to answer this question, I was particularly interested in investigating the biography of Tenzin Palmo, the British-born woman who is currently the abbess of a Tibetan Buddhist nunnery in India and the most senior Tibetan Buddhist nun alive today. At the same time, a number of other prominent Western Tibetan Buddhist nuns came to my attention whose biographies and efforts in overcoming gender bias within the ranks of Tibetan Buddhism seemed important.

Underlying my fundamental research question were a number of sub-questions:

- i. Why did these Western women choose Tibetan Buddhism in particular as opposed to other schools of Buddhism?
- ii. How did Tenzin Palmo manage to rise to such a venerated position in a system traditionally dominated by men?
- iii. What are the challenges faced by Western Tibetan Buddhist nuns?
- iv. Why have Tibetan Buddhist nuns not yet been granted access to full ordination?

1.3 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. The study strives to engender a clearer understanding of the phenomenon of Western women's attraction to Tibetan Buddhism, and in particular its monastic aspect.
2. The research aspires to highlight the unusual case of a Western woman's advancement in the traditional male hierarchy of Tibetan Buddhist monastics to become an abbess of a Tibetan Buddhist nunnery as well as the most senior Tibetan Buddhist nun alive today.
3. It is the author's aim to contribute towards the debate surrounding the full ordination of Tibetan Buddhist nuns.
4. The researcher furthermore hopes to contribute an outsider's perspective on the challenges and contributions of Western Tibetan Buddhist nuns, especially in the sphere of gender bias within the ranks of Tibetan Buddhism. Ploos van Amstel (2005: 25) states that the subject of Western Tibetan Buddhist nuns is a subject that has not been extensively researched. To my knowledge, gender bias within Tibetan Buddhism, as well as the challenges faced by Western Tibetan Buddhist nuns have been mainly researched by insiders, i.e. by scholarly Western Tibetan Buddhist nuns such as Jampa Tsedroen (see 5.7.1), Karma Lekshe Tsomo (see 5.7.2), and Thubten Chodron (see 5.7.3). The only PhD on the subject of Western Tibetan Buddhist nuns which I could source was the one by Ploos van Amstel (2005).
5. It is the writer's wish to contribute towards a world in which multifold religious perspectives are tolerated and indeed deemed vital for human well-being (Sutin, 2006: ix), with particular reference to the experiences of Western Tibetan Buddhist nuns.

1.4 RESEARCH DESIGN

My research was conducted in three ways:

- i. *Theoretical research:* A thorough study was made of the appropriate literature, i.e. texts on Buddhism in general and on Tibetan Buddhism in particular, and of material dealing with the issue of the female quest for enlightenment and the

question regarding the full ordination of women in Tibetan Buddhism, as well as those about Western women who have been ordained as Tibetan Buddhist nuns.

- ii. *Questionnaires:* Twelve questionnaires (see Appendix 1) were despatched to Western Tibetan Buddhist nuns living in America, Canada, Europe, the U.K., and Asia. (I was unable to find any Western Tibetan Buddhist nuns living in Africa.)
- iii. *Interview with Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo and visit to Dongyu Gatsal Ling:* In April 2012 I travelled to India to interview Tenzin Palmo and to visit her nunnery. She generously granted me an hour-and-a-half interview. Her personal assistant, Ani Aileen, an Irish nun, conducted me on a tour of the nunnery.

1.4.1 Limitations of the research

- My theoretical research was limited to material available in English only.
- The response rate to the questionnaires was low, with only seven nuns' responses. Ploos van Amstel (2005: 33) faced the same drawback in her research amongst Western Tibetan Buddhist nuns and postulates that some nuns, especially junior ones, often feel shy and undeserving of the attention of a research project, and others prefer not to address matters other than the Dharma. However, the nuns who did respond did so with enthusiasm and in great detail. Despite this, the results of the questionnaire did not yield conclusive data.

1.5 RESEARCH METHOD

I was interested in establishing how the subjects of this research experienced their own world. To this end, phenomenology seemed to be the best approach. Phenomenology allows the researcher to suspend her own beliefs and assumptions in order to penetrate to the essence of issues (Kruger 1982: 18). Lester (1999:1) states that the intention of the phenomenological approach is “to illuminate” the particular and to discover phenomena by the way in which they are perceived by the individuals in a given situation. This is usually achieved through inductive, qualitative methods such as interviews, discussions and participant observation. The findings are normally represented from the perspective of the research participants (Lester 1999: 1). However, some scholars question the validity of phenomenology as a reliable research method since the subjectivity of the data can lead to difficulties in establishing reliability. It can also be difficult to detect researcher induced bias. Furthermore, since the samples are

usually small phenomenology does not produce generalisable data (<http://www.researchproposalsforhealthprofessionals.com>). I therefore employed empirical research methods as well where these were applicable (see Chapter 3).

1.6 ETHICS

A concern for ethics is essential to all research. As a researcher one has a responsibility to ensure that one's research is ethical (Murray 2006: 1 - 2). Bassey (in Murray 2006: 1) suggests that research should be conducted within an ethic of respect for persons, respect for knowledge, respect for democratic values, and respect for the quality of research. The researcher must keep in mind that she is engaging in a social relationship with the participants. Good communication and mutual trust are therefore essential (Murray, 2006: 1- 2). Consequently, all participants in my research, i.e. the Western Tibetan Buddhist nuns with whom I was in contact, were informed of the nature of my research. I obtained written consent from the nuns to use the content of the questionnaires in this study. Murray (2006: 1 - 2) states that a central principle of ethical research is that of informed consent. I therefore only used information from participants in my research who agreed voluntarily to participate in this study. Participants were given the option of withdrawing from the research at any time, and were assured of anonymity if they so wished. Tenzin Palmo was given access to Chapters 2, 5, and 6, to confirm their accuracy.

1.7 FOREIGN TERMS

- For ease of reading frequently used foreign terms have usually been italicised only once when they first appear in the text. Most of these also appear in the Glossary for further clarification.
- For further ease of reading diacritics have been omitted in Sanskrit and Tibetan words.
- I have used the terms yogin (m) and yogini (f) when referring to spiritual adepts in Tibetan Buddhism in order to avoid confusion with the more popular term of yogi as used in Hinduism and in particular when referring to a Hatha Yoga expert.

1.8 OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS

Chapter two: The main research question of this thesis is situated within the context of *Tibetan Buddhism*. Chapter two therefore provides a brief outline of Buddhism in general in order to orient the reader within the broader principles of Buddhism. The chapter also aims at clarifying the school of Buddhism specifically known as Tibetan Buddhism, Vajrayana Buddhism, or Tantra, and its sub-sects. Furthermore, the chapter provides a short history of Buddhism in the West.

Chapter three: Since the fundamental research question of this thesis is positioned within the context of *Tibetan Buddhism*, it is necessary to provide a brief overview of Tibet, its history, the present political situation, as well as the reasons that caused the Tibetan Diaspora which was primarily responsible for popularising Tibetan Buddhism in the West (Farber 2003: 182).

Chapter four: This chapter is devoted to the subject of women and the feminine in Tibetan Buddhism, i.e. a Buddhist definition of feminism, female deities, yoginis, dakinis, and female incarnations in Tibetan Buddhism, as well as important historical female personalities in Tibetan Buddhism. Finally, the chapter discusses the concept of enlightenment, especially enlightenment in a female body.

Chapter five: The focus in this chapter is on life as a Western Tibetan Buddhist nun. It discusses monastic training, the issues surrounding the debate on full ordination for Tibetan Buddhist nuns and the possibility of the instatement of the Mulasarvastivada bhikshuni ordination, the contribution of Western nuns, and gender politics. The chapter also provides information about prominent Western Tibetan Buddhist nuns, Western Tibetan Buddhist nunneries, and Buddhist women's organisations and conferences.

Chapter six: This chapter provides a fairly detailed biography of Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo, as she served as the case study of a Western nun's struggle against patriarchy and misogynism in Tibetan Buddhism. It highlights her twelve-year retreat in the Himalayas and the establishment of her nunnery, Dongyu Gatsal Ling in northern India. The chapter concludes with comments on the importance of her Jetsunma ordination

and her views on compassion and patience as the best way to overcome gender bias in Tibetan Buddhism.

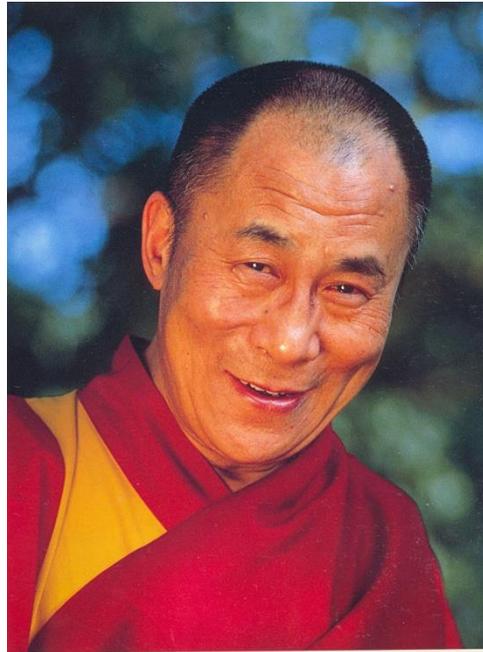
Chapter seven, as the concluding chapter, provides a summary of the research, observations on human rights, and the final conclusive paragraphs.

A **glossary** of foreign terms is provided at the end.

CHAPTER TWO: WHAT THE BUDDHA TAUGHT⁴

Difficult to perceive, profoundly hidden, meandering and capricious – this is the mind. The intelligent person guards it because a guarded mind is the start of joy.

(The Dhammapada, in Ripa 2006: 26)



2.1 INTRODUCTION

The main research question of this thesis is situated within the context of *Tibetan Buddhism*. The intention of this chapter is therefore to provide firstly, a brief outline of Buddhism in general in order to orientate the reader within the broader principles of Buddhism. Secondly, the chapter aims at clarifying for the reader the school of Buddhism specifically known as Tibetan Buddhism, Vajrayana Buddhism, or Tantra.

Fischer-Schreiber (1994: 50) describes Buddhism as “the religion of the awakened one.” Snelling (2000:8) characterises it as “a jewel from the treasure house of Indian spirituality.” Buddhism seems to be the fastest growing religion in the West today (Guruge 2008: <http://www.asiantribune.com>). It attracts many new converts as well as people who wish to study and practise various aspects of Buddhism (Guruge 2008: <http://www.asiantribune.com>). It is estimated that there are approximately between 230

⁴ Rahula 1978.

million and 500 million Buddhists worldwide, making Buddhism the world's fourth largest religion (Geldart 2002:3; <http://www.buddhanet.net>).

Radhakrishnan (in Sutin 2006: vi) writes that:

The West is passing through a new Renaissance due to the sudden entry into its consciousness of a whole new world of ideas, shapes and fancies...there is a sudden growth of the spirit to-day effected by the new inheritance of Asia with which India is linked up...Whether we like it or not, East and West have come together and can no more part.

2.2 WHAT IS BUDDHISM?

Buddhism originated in northern India (Ganeri 2004: 8), with the birth of Prince Siddharta Gautama in a place called Kapilavastu, just inside the borders of what is today Nepal (Smart 1984: 95) about 2 500 years ago, around 563 BCE. Prince Siddharta's father was a local raja from the Sakya clan (Smart 1984: 95). Consequently Siddharta later became known as Sakyamuni Buddha, i.e. the sage of the Sakya clan. Sakyamuni Buddha refers to the historical Buddha as opposed to other buddhas (enlightened ones) who preceded him or who will follow him in a future age (Fischer-Schreiber 1994: 46, 47).

Siddharta Gautama's life is well-known (Bowker 1997: 56, 57). It is therefore not necessary to describe it here. Suffice it to say that after he attained enlightenment he embarked on a 45-year ministry travelling between the villages, towns, and cities of the central Ganges plain in India (Snelling 2000: 14). He died at the age of 80 around 486 BCE after apparently eating poisoned mushrooms which had accidentally been added to a dish (Smith 1965: 96).

2.2.1 The fundamental tenets of Buddhism

Smith (1965: 104-109) succinctly summarises Buddhism by pointing out that the Buddha taught a devotional method devoid of authority, ritual, speculation, tradition, and the supernatural. He also advocated a path of intense self-effort. After his death all the accoutrements of religion returned, but as long as the Buddha was alive original Buddhism continued as a system that was empirical, pragmatic, therapeutic, psychological, democratic, and directed at individuals.

The Buddha argued that he was simply a human being. He did not affirm any inspiration from an external spiritual being or power. Buddhism has no belief in a traditional Creator God, although it does believe in celestial beings called deities (Gyatso 1975: 25). Buddha Sakyamuni therefore accredited his achievements simply to human effort and intelligence (Rahula 1978: 1). Only a human being is able to become a Buddha, and every human being has this potential within him/herself (Rahula 1978: 1). According to Buddhism the human being is master of him/herself, and there is no higher being that sits in judgement over one's destiny (Rahula 1978: 1). Man therefore has the ability to attain his/her own enlightenment by way of one's own personal efforts (Rahula 1978: 1). Buddhism consequently allows its adherents great personal freedom based on the principle of individual responsibility (Rahula 1978: 2).

The Buddha delivered his first sermon, after he had attained enlightenment, at the Deer Park at Sarnath. The subject of his sermon was The Four Noble Truths. The Four Noble Truths form the axioms of his system, the fundamental postulates from which almost everything in his teaching logically unfolds (Smith 1965: 110). Rahula (1978: 16) calls it "the heart of the Buddha's teaching."

2.2.2 The Four Noble Truths

- The First Noble Truth states that suffering (*dukkha*) exists.
- The Second Noble Truth states that suffering has an origin (*samudaya*).
- The Third Noble Truth states that there is a way to end suffering (*nirodha*).
- The Fourth Noble Truth states that there is a means to end suffering, i.e. by following The Noble Eightfold Path (*marga*) (Ganeri 2004: 14; Hanh 1998: 9, 11; Rahula 1978: 16).

2.2.2.1 The First Noble Truth

The First Noble Truth states that all existence is characterised by suffering and does not bring satisfaction (Fischer-Schreiber 1994: 109). Suffering can perhaps better be translated as non-satisfactoriness. Everyone suffers from non-satisfactoriness to some extent. We usually have some malaise in our body or in our mind (Hanh 1998: 9). Suffering encompasses birth, sickness, death, tied to that which one does not like, separated from what one loves, and not obtaining what one desires (Fischer-Schreiber

1994: 109; Smith 1965: 113). *Dukkha* also suggests the unsatisfactoriness, inconclusiveness, incoherence, and impermanence of the human condition (Lowenstein 1996: 28).

2.2.2.2 The Second Noble Truth

The Second Noble Truth states that suffering has a cause, an origin. The origin of suffering is the human being's desire or craving for sensual pleasure, for becoming and for passing away (Fischer-Schreiber 1994: 109). These desires bind the human being to the cycle of existence (*samsara*) lifetime after lifetime. The individual's sense of dissatisfaction has its origin in material and spiritual desires (Hanh 1998: 11).

2.2.2.3 The Third Noble Truth

The Third Noble Truth states that there is a way of overcoming life's cravings and desires (Smith 1965: 114). *Dukkha* can cease because its cause can cease (Bercholz & Kohn 1994: 58).

2.2.2.4 The Fourth Noble Truth

The Fourth Noble Truth tells us how to overcome the desires that lead to our suffering. By following the Noble Eightfold Path dissatisfaction can be surmounted. It has also been described as the Path of Eight Right Practices (Hanh 1998: 11):

- Right View
- Right Thinking
- Right Speech
- Right Action
- Right Livelihood
- Right Diligence
- Right Mindfulness
- Right Concentration

The Noble Eightfold Path can be divided into three stages: the practice of morality (*sila*), meditation (*samadhi*), and wisdom (*panna*) (Hinnells 1984: 71; Goenka, in (Bercholz & Kohn 1994: 97). The moral practice of *sila* is the abstention from all

unwholesome actions of body and speech, i.e. Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood. *Samadhi* is the practice of concentration, developing the ability to intentionally direct and control one's own mental processes, i.e. Right Diligence, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration. Finally, *panna* is the practice of wisdom by developing insight into one's own nature, i.e. Right Thinking, and Right View (Goenka, in Bercholz & Kohn 1994: 96-114).

2.2.3 Further characteristics of Buddhism

In addition there is the belief in causality or “dependent origination” (Lowenstein 1996: 30). This suggests that every aspect of human life is conditioned by a prior influence or state of being. For instance, suffering arises as a consequence of individual *karma* (past action). *Karma* accumulates as a result of ignorance. Lowenstein (1996: 30) explains the chain of causality in the following way:

Because of ignorance, rebirth-producing-karma-formations arise; because of rebirth-producing-karma-formations consciousness arises; because of consciousness, name-and-form arise; because of name-and-form, the sense spheres arise; because of the sense spheres, contact arise; because of contact, feeling arises; because of feeling, craving arises; because of craving, clinging arises; because of clinging, the process of becoming arises; because of becoming, rebirth arises; because of rebirth, old age, death, pain, grief, and despair arise.

However, the process can be reversed by knowledge of enlightenment. When this knowledge is achieved, karma and suffering are eliminated, and the fear of death is replaced with the possibility of nirvana (Lowenstein 1996: 30).

In Buddhism there is no enduring, unchanging spirit which can be considered “Self”, or “Soul”, or “Ego”, as opposed to matter (Rahula 1976: 23). The belief in the process of rebirth does not involve the transmigration of a self or soul because the belief that everything is constantly changing precludes a durable entity passing from life to life (Bodhi, in Bercholz & Kohn 1994: 63). Continuity through the succession of rebirths is maintained by the transmission of impressions and tendencies along the stream of consciousness in which they arise. The direction the continuum takes is determined by

“volitional action” or karma. It is our own willed actions, bodily, verbal, and mental, that determine the forms of existence we assume in our successive journeys through *samsara* (Bodhi, in Bercholz & Kohn 1994: 63).

Buddhism is further characterised by a monastic community of monks and nuns, whose lives and practice are regulated by a set of rules called the *vinaya*. The Buddhist *sangha* is central to the community in Buddhist countries.

2.3 THE VARIOUS SCHOOLS OF BUDDHISM

The Buddha’s teachings were memorised by his followers and passed down by word of mouth. After the Buddha passed away a council collected his teachings, and about a hundred years later a second council set out the rules of discipline for Buddhist monks and nuns (Ganeri 2004: 20). However, as can be expected different opinions began to arise about what the Buddha actually taught. Buddhism eventually split into two main schools, Hinayana and Mahayana Buddhism. Of the Hinayana schools only Theravada remains⁵ (Farber 2003: 13). Theravada is practised mainly in South East Asia, in Thailand, Myanmar (Burma), Laos, Cambodia, and Sri Lanka (Ganeri 2004: 20). Mahayana spread to India, Nepal, Tibet, China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. However, a particular form of Mahayana Buddhism called Vajrayana or *Tantra* (Farber 2003: 13) spread to Tibet from North India (1994 Fischer-Schreiber: 398).

2.3.1 Theravada Buddhism

Theravada is the oldest school of Buddhism existing today (St. Ruth 1998: 9) and it regards itself as the school closest to the original form of Buddhism (Fischer-Schreiber 1994: 369). Theravada means “Way of the Elders.” It is also known as the Southern School of Buddhism (St. Ruth 1998: 9). Theravada focuses mainly on the discourses of Sakyamuni Buddha. These texts are called the Pali Canon, and includes the Buddha’s guidance to develop meditative consciousness and to cease all negative emotions and actions that bind us, lifetime after lifetime, to *samsara* (Farber 2003: 13). The Pali Canon is so named because the texts were written in Pali, a language closely related to Sanskrit (St. Ruth 1998: 19).

⁵ Although the Ritsu School in Japan, while down to a single temple, is regarded as a Hinayana sect (Fischer-Schreiber 1994: 291).

Theravada is a devotional, gentle form of Buddhism. Its teachings are based on generosity, tolerance, mindfulness, morality, and insight. This in turn leads to wisdom, compassion, and liberation from suffering (St. Ruth 1998: 9). The Theravada teachings consist fundamentally of The Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, the doctrine of conditioned arising, and the doctrine of *anatman* or non-self (Fischer-Schreiber 1994: 369).

The emphasis in Theravada is on the liberation of the individual, which takes place by way of one's own efforts (in meditation), and through observance of the rules of moral discipline (Fischer-Schreiber 1994: 369). The monastic system is therefore central to Theravada Buddhism and it interacts closely with the lay community.

The Theravada teachings of the Buddha are known as the *Tripitaka* (the three baskets). This consists of the *Vinaya*, dealing with the moral discipline of the monastic community and lay followers; the *Abhidharma*, concerning the wisdom of Buddhist psychology and metaphysics; and *Sutra*, regarding contemplations and various discourses (Thondup 1999: 7).

2.3.2 Mahayana Buddhism

Mahayana includes much of what is taught in Hinayana. Hinayana and Mahayana are both rooted in the basic teachings of Sakyamuni Buddha, but emphasise different aspects of the teachings. While Hinayana seeks the liberation of the individual, Mahayana emphasises the altruistic motivation for its followers to attain enlightenment in order to save all sentient beings from suffering (Farber 2003: 13). This attitude is embodied in the Mahayana ideal of the *bodhisattva*, an enlightened being who strives to lead others to *nirvana* (the condition of enlightenment) (Fischer-Schreiber 1994: 216).

Characteristic of the Mahayana is the teaching of the transcendent nature of a buddha, the bodhisattva ideal, and the notion of emptiness (Fischer-Schreiber 1994: 216). Mahayana places less value on monasticism than Theravada. Consequently, lay persons can also attain enlightenment, in which they will be helped by buddhas and bodhisattvas (Fischer-Schreiber 1994: 216).

Mahayana divided further into a number of schools, notably Zen Buddhism in Japan, and Vajrayana or Tantra in Tibet⁶. According to the Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions, Buddha taught not only Hinayana, orthodox Buddhism, but also Mahayana, advanced Buddhism, and Vajrayana, esoteric Buddhism (Thondup 1999: 7). Thondup (1999: 12) describes the different approaches of the three yantras as follows: He uses the image of a poisonous plant to represent the defilements of ignorance, lust, and anger. The Hinayana follower will avoid the danger of the poison; the Mahayana devotee will destroy the poison by its antidotes; and the Vajrayana practitioner will transmute the poison into supreme wisdom.

2.4 TIBETAN BUDDHISM

Tibetan Buddhism is followed in Himalayan countries such as Sikkim, Bhutan, and Ladakh, as well as in Mongolia. Buddhism was first introduced into Tibet by King Trisong Detsen (755–797) who invited the Indian Buddhist scholar Shantarakshita as well as the Indian tantric master Padmasambhava to visit Tibet (Bercholz & Kohn 1994: 52). The tradition of the Nyingma school stems from this time. Following a period of persecution, a second wave of Buddhism arrived in the eleventh century. The Tibetan king Yeshe O invited the Indian scholar Atisha to Tibet in 1042 (Ray 2001: 43) in order to provide the people of Tibet with spiritual instructions which they could relate to their ordinary day-to-day lives (Farber 2003: 18). Atisha summarised the Buddhist path for the people, suggested moral discipline as the basis for all spiritual practice, and emphasised the importance of the spiritual teacher (Farber 2003: 18; Ray 2001: 44). He founded a school called the Kadam which no longer exists (Norman 2009: 90), but the establishment of the Kagyu and Sakya schools grew from the Kadam school some years later (Farber 2003: 18). A major section of Indian Buddhist writings was translated to form the Tibetan canon. These included tantric scriptures and commentaries. In the fourteenth century a reform movement resulted in the formation of the Gelukpa school (Bercholz & Kohn 1994: 52).

The rising of Islam in India around the eleventh century, followed by the Mogul invasion, virtually eradicated Buddhism in India (Norman 2009: 31). Tibet, with its high

⁶ Pure Land Buddhism and the Nichiren Schools are also forms of Mahayana Buddhism (Fischer-Schreiber 1994: 280, 246).

altitude and Himalayan borders, became a sanctuary in which Buddhism could flourish (Farber 2003: 15). A Buddhist culture unlike anywhere in the world came into existence in Tibet. An extraordinary spiritual culture emerged which produced a rich tradition of art and architecture, visionary Buddhist masters, and an immense body of religious literature (Farber 2003: 15). This Tibetan Buddhist civilisation thrived peacefully for centuries until the Chinese invasion of the 1950s (Farber 2003: 15). Many of Tibet's spiritual teachers were killed or incarcerated, and others were forced to flee into exile (Farber 2003: 15) (see 3.4).

All four schools of Tibetan Buddhism present the path to complete enlightenment, motivated by compassion for other living beings (Farber 2003: 18). His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama encourages a non-sectarian approach to Tibetan Buddhism in the spirit of the Rime movement that began in the nineteenth century (Farber 2003: 18). Rime integrated the teachings of all four schools, recognising the distinctions of the various lineages while regarding them all as valid instructions that ultimately lead to the same understanding (Tulku 2007: xiii).

2.4.1 Tantra

Tantra is a mystical form of Buddhism deriving from a convergence of Buddhist and Hindu ideas (Lowenstein 1996: 134). It was established in the sixth century (Bowker 1997: 74) based on ritual texts known as Tantras (Hinnells 1984: 320). These texts include medical Tantras, as well as astrological Tantras (Fischer-Schreiber 1994: 355). However, it is primarily a term used to describe the basic activities of the Vajrayana and its systems of meditation (Fischer-Schreiber 1994: 355). The expounding of the Tantras is credited to Sakyamuni Buddha, and it means “continuum” or “system” (Fischer-Schreiber 1994: 355). According to tradition the texts were transmitted in virtual secrecy until the fourth or fifth century after which they were propagated widely in India (Hinnells 1984: 320). Tantric rites were initially held in secret because it was believed that only those who had been initiated into their symbolism could understand their meaning (Lowenstein 1996: 135).

According to Fischer-Schreiber (1994: 355) Tantra is powerfully oriented towards man's experiential possibilities, describing spiritual development in terms of the categories of ground, path, and fruition. The ground is the practitioner; the path is the

path of meditation, which purifies the ground; and the fruition is the state that arises as an effect of Tantric practice. Every form of Tantra relates to these three phases (Fischer-Schreiber 1994: 355).

Tibetan Buddhism divides Tantra into four classes: action Tantra, elaboration Tantra, yoga Tantra, and supreme yoga Tantra. Tantra is thus classified to accommodate the differences in the spiritual capacities of its practitioners (Fischer-Schreiber 1994: 355).

Tantra makes extensive use of the evocation of deities (Hinnells 1984: 320), meditation, ritual, and symbolism (Bowker 1997: 74). Mantrayana is a form of Tantra employing mantras, or powerful sacred sounds (Bowker 1997: 74). Tantra includes apparently contradictory elements such as rituals, spells, and belief in spirits (Lowenstein 1996: 136).

Tantric practitioners claim that Tantra is a swifter way of attaining enlightenment. Tantra tries to realise the continuous connection between all human states and conditions, including those that are usually considered as polluting or dangerous (Bowker 1997: 74). Bowker (1997: 74) states that Tantra holds that the Buddha-nature is present in everything if perceived and experienced rightly. Therefore hatred and revulsion, for instance, which are the opposite of love and desire, dissolve in the realisation that all states are equally the undifferentiated Buddha-nature and are without real characteristics of their own.

Tantric texts were initially written in Sanskrit and were coded so as to be intelligible only to the initiates of a Tantric master (Lowenstein 1996: 136). In contrast to the *Sutras*, which expound doctrine, or the *Vinaya* and *Abhidharma*, which describe monastic discipline and theories of knowledge, most Tantras provide information on *mantras* (mystical sounds and words), *mudras* (ritual gestures), *yantras* and *mandalas* (ritual diagrams), and rites that will transform devotees from their secular selves into *siddhas* (individuals of power) (Lowenstein 1996: 136).

According to Lowenstein (1996: 136) mantras, or auspicious verbal formulae, have been used by ancient societies to invoke power, to heal, to change the weather, and to attract certain animals. He furthermore states (1996: 136) that Hindu ceremonies are usually accompanied by the chanting of mantras. Hinduism also believes that the universe is composed of sound and that the sound *om* both evokes all reality and brings the adept into direct experience of the divine. Tantric Buddhism adopted many Hindu

mantras and also devised several of their own (Lowenstein 1996: 136). The most well-known Tantric mantra is *om mani padme hum*, which means “jewel in the lotus” (Gyatso 2006: 135, 136). *Mani* (jewel) and *padme* (in the lotus) are Sanskrit words, but the syllables *om* and *hum* cannot easily be translated (Lowenstein 1996: 136). Briefly jewel and lotus refer to the Buddha and the dharma (Lowenstein 1996: 136).

Mandalas are ritual diagrams representing a symbolic miniature universe that serves as an object of meditation (Lowenstein 1996: 142). Mandala meditation was introduced into Tibet from India in the eleventh century (Lowenstein 1996: 142). The theory and techniques of mandala construction are transmitted from teacher to student in a continuous line, and the present Dalai Lama as well as other prominent lamas continue this unbroken line of teaching (Lowenstein 1996: 142).

Buddhism maintains that the historical Buddha was one in a line of enlightened beings, all of whom taught the same religious message of liberation (Bowker 1997: 75). Eventually this idea was developed into the view that Buddhas were “as numerous as there are grains of sand on the banks of the river Ganges” (Bowker 1997: 75). Some of these celestial Buddhas became objects of popular worship, and comprehensive descriptions of them feature in the Mahayana texts. Tantric practitioners view each one as a particular manifestation of the Buddha’s fundamental nature (Bowker 1997: 75). Tantric adherents, under the guidance of a master, learn to visualise and identify with one of these aspects of Buddhahood. Techniques such as mantra recitation and meditation on the deity’s mandala are used to accomplish this goal. These may be supplemented by yoga techniques which can change the balance of subtle forces within the body (Bowker 1997: 75).

In Mahayana, the Buddha and bodhisattvas have female consorts. The male divinity is usually experienced as aloof from humanity; his female partner can then be evoked to intervene in human affairs (Lowenstein 1996: 137). In Tantra there is a category of divine female energy or *shakti* known as Tara (see 4.3.2). Sometimes Buddhas and bodhisattvas are depicted in a sexual embrace with a Tara or other *shakti*. This is symbolic of the belief that concepts and ideas that the world treat as opposites, i.e. male/female, light/darkness, and good/evil, exist in a state of dynamic tension and that ultimate reality is indivisible (Lowenstein 1996: 137). The Vajrayana text, *Hevajra Tantra*, for instance explores the relationship of the male divinity, Hevajra, with his

female consort, Nairatmya. The major purpose of this text is to unify the perception of *samsara* (the cycle of rebirth) with *nirvana* (enlightenment). According to Lowenstein (1996: 139) this text claims that the apparent discrepancy between *samsara* and *nirvana* lies in the identification of wisdom with *nirvana* and compassion with *samsara*. The *Hevajra* furthermore claims that only the rites contained in the Tantra will cultivate the view that there is not the slightest difference between *nirvana* and *samsara* (Lowenstein 1996: 139).

The practice of Tantra requires the presence of a master from whom the Tantric practitioner receives instructions (Hinnells 1984: 320). Tantric masters provide teachings in three principal ways: through empowerment in which he empowers the student to meditate on a deity; by textual transmission in which the master presents the student with the relevant text; and lastly by instruction in which he explains the methods of practicing the particular teaching (Hinnells 1984: 320).

Vessantara (2008: 5–17) characterises Tantra as follows:

- Tantra is concerned with direct experience.
- Tantra uses symbols and magic.
- Tantra addresses the whole person.
- Tantra regards the world in terms of energy.
- Tantra employs the strongest experiences of life.
- Tantra views *samsara* and *nirvana* as interrelated.
- Tantra starts at the highest point.

Lowenstein (1996: 136) maintains that Tantric adepts believe that with ritual and initiation into esoteric realms, they can reach Buddhahood faster than by struggling through many lifetimes.

2.4.2 The Nyingma School

The Nyingma or “Ancient Translation School” was the first school of Tibetan Buddhism to be established. It was inspired by the tantric master Padmasambhava and relies on the early translations of Indian Buddhist texts that were supervised by Padmasambhava at the Samye monastery in the eighth century (Farber 2003: 20).

Padmasambhava is regarded as much more than a historical figure. Tibetans refer to him as Guru Rinpoche, and they regard him as an ever-present guide and protector (Farber 2003:20). Padmasambhava delivered oral teachings on Dzogchen or “Great Perfection”. The Nyingma School considers Dzogchen the most profound practice in Buddhism (Farber 2003: 20). The Dzogchen way brings about the realisation of the practitioner’s original nature, leading to complete enlightenment (Farber 2003: 20). It is a state in which both the generation and completion stages are effortlessly present. The generation stage involves meditating on forms, sounds, and appearances as the body, voice, and mind of the deity, in preparation for the completion stage. The completion stage follows after the visualisation of the deity has been completed. It involves manipulating psychic energies and fluids within the body in order to draw the energies into the central channel of the body (Palmo 2002: 248, 249).

Padmasambhava and his consort Yeshe Tsogyal (see 4.4.1), who was also his main disciple and an accomplished tantric adept, brought the transmission of *termas* from India to Tibet. These were texts and sacred objects that were concealed for future generations of practitioners to discover (Farber 2003: 20). The texts and sacred objects have indeed been found over the centuries by realised adepts called *tertons* or “treasure finders” either in material locations or through individual revelation (Farber 2003: 20). One of the most important discoveries was the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* by the fourteenth century *terton*, Karma Lingpa (Farber 2003: 20). The manuscript provides comprehensive explanations of the process of death, offers guidance to the dying on the intermediary states or *bardos*, and guides them into their next rebirth (Farber 2003: 20).

The Nyingma lineage emphasises progress towards more advanced stages of enlightenment by using “preliminary practices” that embody the beliefs and practices of Buddhism before the advent of Tantra, and by means of “higher practices” which involve the attainment of enlightenment by the chanting of particular formulas, employing special hand gestures, and mystical diagrams (<http://www.buddhanet.net>).

The Nyingma School practices a powerful system of meditation called *chod*, meaning “to cut”. In recent years it has been adopted by all four schools of Tibetan Buddhism (Farber 2003: 21). The aim of this practice is to cut through attachment to the physical body and in this way to penetrate to the self-cherishing and self-identity that lie at the origin of all suffering (Farber 2003: 21). *Chod* is based on the Buddha’s Perfection of

Wisdom sutras and was developed by the tantric yogin/yogini, Machig Labdron (see 4.4.2) (Allione 2000: 167). *Chod* is traditionally performed in cemeteries and cremation areas since customarily a Tibetan family who has lost a loved one will ask a yogin/yogini to do *chod* practice at the place where the ashes are to be scattered. The *chod* texts are sung and accompanied by drums and bells. In this way contact is made with the deceased person's consciousness, encouraging him or her to let go of attachment to the physical realm (Farber 2003: 21). *Chod* can also be practised by monastics and advanced lay practitioners in temples and other locations. It combines specific tantric visualisations with melodious chanting to the beat of *chod* drums (Allione 2000: 168, 169).

In the past the Nyingma School had no centralised authority. However, since the Tibetan diaspora (see 3.5), the Nyingma tradition, at the request of the Dalai Lama, has appointed a head. The position is mainly an administrative one, and important decisions are often made in an oligarchy or community of the senior sangha within a given jurisdiction (<http://www.nyingmapa.cn>).

Monasticism is less emphasised in the Nyingma tradition and therefore it has a greater number of *ngakpas* or teachers and yogin/yoginins/yogin/yogininis who are householders and non-ordained tantric practitioners (Ray 2001: 407).

2.4.3 The Sakya School

The Sakya lineage is passed down through a hereditary family line (Farber 2003: 18). *Sakya* is a Tibetan word meaning “pale earth.” It refers to the colour of the earth where the first Sakya monastery was established in the Tsang province of central Tibet (<http://www.buddhanet.net>) in the eleventh century by its founder Konchok Gyelpo (Farber 2003: 24). The Sakya lineage has descended intact through family lines to the present day (<http://www.buddhanet.net>) and is alternated between two family branches (Farber 2003: 23). The present head of the lineage is the forty-first occupant of the Sakya throne, His Holiness Sakya Trizin (<http://www.buddhanet.net>).

The teachings particular to the Sakya School are called *Lamdre*. *Lamdre* originated in the ninth century with the Indian tantric adept, Virupa, and was brought to Tibet in the eleventh century by Drogmi (Ray 2001: 45). *Lamdre* is Tibetan for “path and fruit.” The path comprises the development of method and wisdom, and the fruit is the

achievement of buddhahood (Farber 2003: 25). The *Lamdre* teachings are divided into two broad sections. Part one, the “three visions,” contains knowledge common to Hinayana and Mahayana. Part two, the “three Tantras,” based on the core Tantra of the Sakya School, the *Hevajra Tantra*, outlines the stages and practices of the Vajrayana section of the path (Ray 2001: 46). Collectively, the *Lamdre* provides a comprehensive approach on the journey to enlightenment including the texts, teachings, and practices of all three Buddhist schools, i.e. Hinayana, Mahayana, and Vajrayana (Ray 2001: 47).

Lamdre emphasises that *nirvana* (enlightenment) and *samsara* (unenlightened existence) appear to us as either the one or the other due to our own perceptions. Farber (2003: 25) explains that *nirvana* cannot be attained by rejecting *samsara* since the mind is the foundation of both. By means of meditation, *Lamdre* practitioners reach the understanding that *samsara* exists when the mind is obscured by ignorance and other afflictions. *Nirvana* is realised when these obscurations have been overcome.

The *Lamdre* teachings remain a strongly protected oral tradition even today, and students take a vow of secrecy when they receive the teachings (Farber 2003: 25). The Sakya order stresses scholarly training and monasteries offer degrees in Buddhist studies (Farber 2003: 25).

2.4.4 The Kagyu School

The Kagyu order is known for its meditative practices, its focus on retreat, and the many realised masters it has produced (Martin 2003: 11). It was the first school to maintain their lineage through a line of reincarnate masters (Kagyu literally means “teaching lineage”) (Farber 2003: 18, 22).

The teachings of the Kagyu School can be traced back to the eleventh century Indian master, Tilopa. Tilopa in turn passed the tradition on to his main student, Naropa (Ray 2001: 47). Naropa was a very learned scholar, but he came to recognise that his understanding of the dharma was merely theoretical and that he had not integrated the teachings into his everyday experience (Farber 2003: 22). He underwent twelve years of tests and trials set by Tilopa until he was able to access true spiritual realisation (Farber 2003: 22). Naropa passed the lineage on to a highly realised Tibetan lay practitioner, Marpa the Translator, who became the founder of the Kagyu lineage (Ray 2001: 48).

The most well-known yogin in the Kagyu tradition is Tibet's twelfth-century poet saint, Milarepa, who inherited the lineage from Marpa. Milarepa is revered by all Tibetan Buddhist schools, and his poetry forms a vital part of Tibetan culture today (Farber 2003: 22). Marpa set Milarepa a series of demanding physical tasks to cleanse the negative karma he had created previously. Thereafter Marpa passed on the transmissions of his lineage to Milarepa who became a recluse in order to internalise what he had learned (Farber 2003: 23). Milarepa continued to meditate alone in a cave for many years until he eventually became fully enlightened. He passed on the lineage to his main disciple, Gampopa (Ray 2001: 48), who established a framework for a tradition that came to place great importance on meditation practices as a requirement for spiritual progress (Farber 2003: 23).

Kagyu practitioners are therefore known for their intensive retreats. Kagyu teachers must consequently complete at least a three-year retreat (Farber 2003: 23). The teachings of the Kagyu School include yogin/yoginic practices such as the Six Yogas of Naropa, as well as the practice of *Mahamudra* or "Great Seal." Many sub-schools have developed in the Kagyu tradition, but they are all rooted in these practices (Farber 2003: 23).

Mahamudra holds that all phenomena are simply the "theatre of the mind" (Farber 2003: 23). It furthermore states that all conceptual thoughts arise from the *dharmakaya*, the wisdom mind of Buddhahood, in the same way that waves arise from the ocean (Farber 2003: 23). The meditator is advised to focus on the ocean without consciously trying to calm the waves. In this way the meditator subdues conceptual thought merely by shifting the focus of awareness (Farber 2003: 23). Especially profound in the context of Tantra, this practice is said to lead to direct insight into the ultimate nature of reality (Farber 2003: 23).

The Kagyu School was the first school of Tibetan Buddhism to establish a lineage through identifying reincarnations of enlightened teachers. The Kagyu order is further divided into four main schools, namely the Phaktru Kagyu, the Kamtsang or Karma Kagyu, the Tsalpa Kagyu, and the Barom Kagyu schools.

The leader of the Karma Kagyu, the main lineage of the Kagyu School, is the of eight additional sub-schools of which the Drukpa order is one (<http://www.kagyuoffice.org>). This is

the lineage to which Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo belongs.⁷ Karmapa. He is revered by many Tibetans as a living Buddha. The present Karmapa is the seventeenth incarnation in this line (see 2.5.4) (Martin 2003: 11).

2.4.5 The Gelug School

Gelug is Tibetan for “followers of the virtuous path.” This tradition was established in the fourteenth century by Tsongkhapa, widely regarded as one of Tibet’s greatest Buddhist masters (Farber 2003: 26). Tsongkhapa was a child prodigy and took the vows of a novice monk when he was seven years old. He received training from more than a hundred renowned masters from all four of the Tibetan Buddhist schools (Farber 2003: 26). Tsongkhapa showed unusual scholarly abilities as a child, and as he matured he demonstrated an exceptional capacity to memorise texts (Ray 2001: 57, 58). He was immensely popular and developed a universal and eclectic approach to the dharma (Farber 2003: 26). Tsongkhapa was a prolific writer, composing eighteen volumes of Buddhist writings. The most influential was *The Great Exposition of the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment* (Farber 2003: 26). He was also an accomplished yogin and participated in extensive meditation retreats (Ray 2001: 58).

Tsongkhapa aimed at reforming Tibetan Buddhism which he felt had lost some of its authenticity and purity. He emphasised in particular the importance of the *vinaya* (code of ethics for the monastic community) established by the Buddha (Ray 2001: 56). He was the founder of Ganden Monastery, one of the three great Gelug monastic universities. Drepung and Sera are the two other monastic universities.

The Gelug tradition uses a system called *Lamrim*, meaning “stages of the path.” It comprises a series of gradual steps that eventually lead to enlightenment. The path emphasises three principle aspects namely, renunciation of worldly attachments, the altruistic determination to achieve enlightenment for others, and a correct understanding of the nature of reality (Farber 2003: 27).

All Dalai Lamas belong to the Gelug School, although they also serve as the supreme head of all four Tibetan Buddhist schools (Farber 2003: 27). This came about when the Mongol chieftain, Altan Khan, conferred the title of Dalai Lama on Sonam Gyatso, the second reincarnation of one of Tsongkhapa’s main disciples (Farber 2003: 27). The

⁷ Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo is discussed in detail in Chapter 6.

authority of the Gelug School was later established when the Fifth Dalai Lama founded the first Tibetan government in the seventeenth century (<http://www.tibetanclassics.org>).

The Gelug School stresses the importance of scholarship as a necessary foundation for meditative practice within the monastic community. Many Gelug monastics therefore study for a doctorate in Buddhist philosophy, called the *geshe* degree (Farber 2003: 27).

The actual head of the Gelug School is called the Ganden Tripa or “throne holder”. In order to become the Ganden Tripa a monk must hold the *Geshe Lharampa*, the highest *geshe* degree, but does not have to be a reincarnate lama (Farber 2003: 27).

2.5 MASTERS OF TIBETAN BUDDHISM

Farber (2003: 63) writes that the living presence of the spiritual teacher makes the ideal of Buddhahood an “accessible and tangible” reality. It provides an encouraging example to which the disciple can aspire. Practitioners may receive instruction from various teachers, but there is usually a “root guru” with whom they develop a particular relationship. Unique to Tibetan Buddhism is the system of recognising reincarnated masters (Ray 2001: 360). These extraordinary gurus, called *rinpoches* or “precious jewels,” are at the heart of Tibetan Buddhist life (Farber 2003: 63). The term *Rinpoche* is a reverential title bestowed on these reincarnated masters. They are also referred to as *tulkus* (Farber 2003: 64). According to Tibetan Buddhism, reincarnated masters are living repositories of Vajrayana Buddhist traditions. They choose to be reborn, lifetime after lifetime in the same position to continue to transmit the dharma to others (Ray 2001: 360). Martin (2003: 11) describes the concept of reincarnation as “the light of one candle passing on to the next, and that one passing on to another, and another.” Reincarnated masters choose consciously to be reborn, motivated by a desire to benefit all living beings and made possible by the depth and clarity of an individual’s realisation (Martin 2003: 11).

Before the Chinese invasion of Tibet (see 3.4), there were about 3 000 *tulkus* (Farber 2003:65). Many of them did not survive the Chinese invasion, but a large number of lineage heads and knowledge holders continue to take rebirth (Farber 2003: 65). *Tulkus* are usually identified when they are children and pass through a process of recognition, enthronement, and training before they are officially invested with the spiritual responsibilities of their lineage (Ray 2001: 374 - 379).

The legitimacy of a tulku is determined according to a strict procedure (Farber 2003: 65). The process includes the meditational experience of high lamas, consultation with oracles, other forms of divination, and the direct testing of the candidate (Ray 2001: 387-402). In the test, the candidate is asked to pick out objects that belonged to their previous incarnation from among similar items. According to Farber (2003: 65) these tulkus display at an early age an extraordinary ability to absorb and learn whatever they are taught, as if they had mastered these subjects before.

The Tibetan Buddhist tradition also produces other extraordinary scholars and meditation masters or *yogins*. Some of these teachers can be called rinpoches as well although they may not have been recognised as tulkus (Farber 2003: 65). In the Nyingma, Kagyu, and Sakya traditions, the title *khenpo* is used to designate someone who has attained an extraordinary level of Buddhist academic training, corresponding to a doctorate in Buddhist philosophy (Farber 2003: 66). The training consists of a complete theoretical education in Buddhism and requires a nine- to fifteen-year study programme (Farber 2003: 66). In the Gelug School *khenpo* is the title of the senior master who presides over the ordination ceremony of new monks. It is also often used to indicate an abbot of a monastic college (Farber 2003: 66). The title *geshe* in the Gelug tradition indicates a monastic who has earned the Lharam Geshe degree, the highest degree in Buddhist philosophy. Very few monks earn this degree as it takes fifteen to twenty-five years of intensive study to complete (Farber 2003: 66).

2.5.1 His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama

All of the Dalai Lamas are regarded as reincarnations of Avalokiteshvara (or Chenrezig in Tibetan), the Buddha of Compassion (Craig 1997: 3). For almost six centuries the Dalai Lamas served as the key religious leaders of Tibet, as well as spiritual advisors to powerful Mongol rulers and Chinese emperors (Farber 2003: 53). The Dalai Lamas were also exceptional individuals who have made significant contributions to history. Until recently, they have served as the secular as well as the spiritual heads of the Tibetan nation.

Farber (2003: 53) states that it is not easy to describe the devotion that Tibetans feel for the Dalai Lama. One Tibetan remarked that “it was as if the sun had left us” when the present Dalai Lama escaped into exile in 1959 (Farber 2003: 53). It is a source of great

pride for the Tibetan people that the Dalai Lama has since become one of the most beloved and revered spiritual leaders in the world (Farber 2003: 35).

Rowell (in Rowell & Gyatso 1990: 8) writes that His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama personifies the Buddhist belief that all sentient beings achieve their greatest happiness in feeling compassion towards one another, and that if we cannot escape hatred we should try to focus on the deed rather than the doer. The Dalai Lama's forthright statements about Chinese atrocities in Tibet are therefore always tempered with apparently incongruous expressions of love for the Chinese people (Rowell, in Rowell & Gyatso 1990: 8).

The title Dalai Lama is a combination of a Mongolian word (*Dalai* meaning "ocean") and a Tibetan one (*Lama* meaning "spiritual teacher") (Farber 2003: 54). *Dalai Lama* can therefore be translated as "Ocean of Wisdom" (Farber 2003: 54). The title was created by the Mongolian prince, Altan Khan, for his spiritual guide, the Tibetan monk Sonam Gyatso, in 1578 (Craig 1997: 6). Gyatso became known as the Third Dalai Lama as his two previous incarnations were recognised posthumously. The Fourth Dalai Lama was a direct descendent of Altan Khan, which resulted in a strong spiritual bond between Mongolia and Tibet (Farber 2003: 54). However, the Dalai Lamas did not become Tibet's ultimate spiritual and political leaders until the seventeenth century, when Ngawang Lobsang Gyatso, the "Great Fifth," became leader of a united Tibet and head of the first Tibetan government (Farber 2003: 54). He was succeeded by Dalai Lamas who included amongst others, a prolific writer and respected scholar, a pious figure uninvolved in politics, and a number of Dalai lamas who died young (Farber 2003: 54). The "Great Thirteenth," Thupten Gyatso, was an astute statesman and yogin/yogini, who propelled Tibet into the modern world (Craig 1997: 1, 2). When he died in 1933 at the age of 57, the great search for his successor began.

Any Tibetan family, regardless of social status, can become the recipient of a realised being. Dalai Lamas have been born into both noble and peasant families (Farber 2003: 55). The traditional way of discovering the Dalai Lama involves a complicated process, including visiting the Tibetan state oracle, called the Nechung oracle, visiting sacred sites, and receiving visions. Once a candidate has been identified he is carefully and thoroughly tested and is expected to identify ritual objects belonging to his former incarnation (Farber 2003:55).

After the death of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama, the then Regent of Tibet sought divine guidance in order to find the next Dalai Lama. He received visions of the boy's small house with unusual gutters as well as of a gold-roofed monastery nearby. Two years later, in 1935, a search party of lamas arrived in the village of Takster, in the province of Amdo, where they located the monastery as well as the house with the strange gutters. The family's remarkable two-year old boy, Lhamo Dhondrup, immediately recognised the head lama from Sera Monastery, who had disguised himself as a servant. The boy also identified items that had belonged to the Thirteenth Dalai Lama, claiming that they were his (Craig 1997: 11-17). The Fourteenth Dalai Lama had been found.

At the age of four he was ordained as a novice monk and moved to the Potala Palace in Lhasa where he entered a life of strict religious study. He was renamed Jetsun Jamphael Ngawang Lobsang Yeshe Tenzin Gyatso, which means Holy Lord, Gentle Glory, Compassionate One, Defender of the Faith, and Ocean of Wisdom (Craig 1997: 71). When Tibet was invaded by the Chinese in 1950 (see 3.4), on the recommendation of the Nechung oracle, the Dalai Lama, at the age of 15, was enthroned as the temporal and spiritual leader of Tibet. Four years later he received full ordination as a Buddhist monk and in 1959 he received the Lharam Geshe monastic degree (Farber 2003: 57). When the March 10 1959 uprising by the Tibetans was crushed by the Chinese army (see 3.4.1), the Dalai Lama, with no hope of cooperation from the Chinese government, reluctantly left Tibet, escaping to India (Farber 2003: 57).

He eventually settled in the Himalayan town of Dharamsala, where he set up a Tibetan government in exile. The Dalai Lama established a Tibetan democratic constitution in 1963. He also began a lifelong focus on the preservation of the Tibetan Buddhist culture and way of life. The Dalai Lama's devotion to non-violent ways to achieve political autonomy earned him the 1989 Nobel Peace Prize.

He is the master of all four schools of Tibetan Buddhism and has written extensively on the subject. The universality of his message has made him a revered leader and ambassador for peace and unity (Farber 2003: 57).

On March 14 2011 the Dalai Lama further implemented his belief in democracy when he announced to the Fourteenth Assembly of the Tibetan People's Deputies that he was

resigning as the political leader of the Tibetan Government in Exile. He motivated his decision by saying that:

[I]f we have to remain in exile for several more decades, a time will inevitably come when I will no longer be able to provide leadership. Therefore, it is necessary that we establish a sound system of governance while I remain able and healthy, in order that the exile Tibetan administration can become self-reliant rather than being dependent on the Dalai Lama. If we are able to implement such a system from this time onwards, I will still be able to help resolve problems if called upon to do so. But, if the implementation of such a system is delayed and a day comes when my leadership is suddenly unavailable, the consequent uncertainty might present an overwhelming challenge. Therefore, it is the duty of all Tibetans to make every effort to prevent such an eventuality.

(Tenzin Gyatso 2011: <http://www.dalailama.com>)

The Dalai Lama also announced already as far back as 2003 that his next rebirth as the Fifteenth Dalai Lama will not take place in China. He stated quite emphatically that he will be reborn to a Tibetan family living in a politically free country (Sutin 2006: 319).

2.5.2 His Holiness Sakya Trizin

His Holiness Sakya Trizin is the 41st in an unbroken lineage of lamas going back to 1073 CE (Farber 2003: 77). He was born in Tibet in 1945 and received his first enthronement at the age of three. As a young boy he possessed an extraordinary ability to recite Buddhist texts by heart (Farber 2003: 77). At the age of eight he entered a seven-month retreat. In 1959 at the age of fourteen he was formally enthroned as the Sakya Trizin, head of the Sakya School. He fled Tibet in the same year and settled in India. Since then he has taught all over the world and is the founder of numerous monasteries and institutes for Buddhist higher studies (<http://www.buddhanet.net>). In 1974 he married Dagmo Tashi Lhakee in order to maintain the Khön family lineage. They have two sons (<http://www.hhthesakyatrizin.org>).

2.5.3 His Holiness the 100th Ganden Tri Rinpoche

Lobsang Nyima held the title of the 100th Ganden Tri Rinpoche (holder of the Golden Throne and the official head of the Gelug School), a seven-year office, until 2003. He was born in 1921 in Kham, eastern Tibet. He became a monk at the age of twelve. He enrolled for his monastic studies as a seventeen-year old at Drepung Loseling Monastic University in Tibet (<http://www.loselingmonastery.org>) and followed the Dalai Lama into exile in 1959. He eventually earned the Lharam Geshe degree. He was later appointed abbot of Gyumey Tantric College and then of Namgyal Dratsang, the Dalai Lama's private monastery (Farber 2003: 78). In 1995 he assumed the title Ganden Tri Rinpoche, overseeing the training of Gelug monks worldwide.

2.5.4 His Holiness the Seventeenth Gyalwa Karmapa Ogyen Trinley Dorje

The Gyalwa Karmapa is the leader of the Kagyu order. The first incarnation was recognised in thirteenth-century Tibet. Thereafter, the Karmapa continued to return, generation after generation, until the present seventeenth Karmapa (Martin 2003: 11). The seventeenth Karmapa was born in 1985 into a nomadic family in eastern Tibet (<http://www.kagyuoffice.org>). He was recognised as the seventeenth Karmapa in 1992. The place and circumstances of the birth of the present Karmapa was foretold by the sixteenth Karmapa as well as by one of the most renowned *tertons* (a discoverer of hidden sacred texts), Chogyur Dechen Lingpa. The sixteenth Karmapa also left a letter in which he predicted the place of the present Karmapa's birth, i.e. "to the north in the east of the land of snow." His reincarnation was officially confirmed by His Holiness the fourteenth Dalai Lama (<http://www.kagyuoffice.org>). The Karmapa was enthroned at the age of seven at Tsurphu Monastery in Tibet. He fled to India at the beginning of 2000. The Karmapa presently lives in Rumtek, in the Indian state of Sikkim (Martin 2003: 143). He is also a gifted poet and artist (Martin 2003: 13).

It might be interesting to mention that a controversy arose with the identification of the seventeenth Karmapa. Two senior disciples of the sixteenth Karmapa identified two different incarnations, one born in Tibet, and one born in India. Most of the khenpos and rinpoches of the Kagyu School seem to recognise both incarnations and consequently there now seems to be two seventeenth Karmapas

(<http://www.rinpoche.com>). However, the incarnation born in Tibet, Ogyen Trinley Dorje, is the one officially recognised by the Dalai Lama.

2.5.5 The eighth Khamtrul Rinpoche Dongyud Nyima

The eighth Khamtrul Rinpoche was born in Tibet in 1931 (<http://www.khamtrul.org>). The first Khamtrul Rinpoche incarnation was recognised in 1548 (Mackenzie 1999: 41). The eighth Khamtrul Rinpoche left his monastery, Khampagar, in Kham about thirty years later and fled to India crossing the Himalayas on horseback disguised as a merchant (Mackenzie 1999: 41). He was one of the main revivers of the Drukpa Lineage, a sub-school in the Kagyu tradition, in India. In 1969 he re-established Khampagar monastery in India in Tashi Jong. Khamtrul Rinpoche Dongyud Nyima was a great scholar and well versed in the art of thangka painting, ritual dances, Tibetan medicine, and traditional Tibetan wood and metal craft (<http://www.khamtrul.org>). He eventually became Tenzin Palmo's root guru and ordained her into his order, establishing her as only the second Western woman to become a Tibetan Buddhist nun (see 6.3.1) (Mackenzie 1999: 44). When he died in 1980 at the age of forty-nine, he left behind seven volumes of collected works (<http://www.khamtrul.org>).

2.6 BUDDHISM IN THE WEST: HOW THE SWANS CAME TO THE LAKE⁸

When the Karmapa first visited the United States in 2008, he said that he agreed to go there since the teachings of the Buddha had preceded him. He continued to say that “[I]f there is a lake, the swans would go there” (Fields 1992: xii).

During the last two hundred years or so many Western intellectuals have been drawn to and influenced by Buddhism (Bercholz & Kohn 1994: 54). According to Bercholz & Kohn (1994: 54) the “exotic profundity” of Buddhist thought has stimulated Western philosophers such as Arthur Schopenhauer and Henri Bergson. Currently there is a great interest in Buddhism in certain academic circles, and accurate translations of Buddhist texts have become more available. A new level of understanding has come about since the 1950s with the emigration of Asian meditation masters to the West, and their consequent acquisition of serious Western students (Bercholz & Kohn 1994: 54). Sutin (2006: ix, x) states that it is widely agreed that the many forms of Buddhism provide Western culture

⁸ Fields 1992

with significant teachings and practices that can be meaningful in religion, philosophy, psychology, neurology and related cognitive sciences, and even politics.

It is interesting to note that while Buddhism has declined in parts of Asia, it has grown tremendously in the West (Lowenstein 1996: 6). One might well ask what accounts for the appeal of Buddhism to the Westerner. Lowenstein (1996: 6, 7) offers the following explanation:

- Buddhism offers a diagnosis of the suffering experienced by the human being.
- It outlines a way of life that leads, through individual endeavour, to the resolution of that suffering.
- Buddhism contains a moral code based on compassion and non-violence.
- It does not require faith in a deity.
- Meditation offers a means to self-healing which can lead to serenity and spiritual insight.
- Buddhism is intellectually stimulating.
- It offers possibilities for artistic expression.

Sutin (2006: 278) mentions some remarkable statistics regarding the Jewish interest in Buddhism. He estimates that about 33 percent of current Western Buddhist leaders have Jewish ancestry. A further estimated 75 percent of Western students in Dharamsala studying Tibetan Buddhism, are Jews by birth. Sutin (2006: 278) is of the opinion that Jews are attracted to Buddhism because they tend to view Christianity and Islam as taboo competing faiths. To embrace these faiths would degrade their heritage and shock their families. Buddhism offers a “clean” alternative which views other religions with respect (Sutin 2006: 278), and this enables many Jewish people to embrace the deeper mystical aspects of Buddhism without offending their families.

Buddhism reached the West towards the end of the nineteenth century (Ganeri 2001: 42) and a number of individuals were responsible for pioneering an interest in Buddhism in the West. Mention should perhaps be made of the following people: Thomas William Rhys Davids, Caroline Rhys Davids, Sir Edwin Arnold, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, Alexandra David-Neel, Walter Yeeling Evans-Wentz, Carl Gustav Jung, James Hilton, T. Lobsang Rampa, Ayya Khema, and the present Dalai Lama.

2.6.1 Thomas William Rhys Davids (1843–1922) and Caroline Rhys Davids (1857–1942)

Western scholars such as T. W. and Caroline Rhys Davids wrote about Buddhism and translated texts from the Pali which they published through the Pali Text Society which they founded in 1881 (Ganeri 2001: 42). Sutin (2006: 138) states that by the late nineteenth century a new generation of European scholars arose who were tolerant in matters of religion and felt themselves drawn to Eastern teachings. The most outstanding of these were Thomas William Rhys Davids (1843-1922). Sutin (2006: 138) calls him the “foremost British Buddhist scholar.” Rhys Davids was the founder of the London School of Oriental Studies.

Rhys Davids studied Sanskrit in Germany in his early twenties (Sutin 2006: 139). Shortly afterwards he joined the British Civil Service in Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) where he rose to the position of magistrate. Here he and his wife Caroline, a fellow Buddhist scholar, first encountered Buddhism. While in Ceylon he learned Pali, Tamil, and Sinhalese, and continued to pursue studies in Buddhism (Sutin 2006: 139).

On their return to Britain the Rhys Davidses founded the Pali Text Society (Fields 1992: 105) which published nearly one hundred volumes of translations of early Buddhist texts in their lifetime (Sutin 2006: 140). The Pali Text Society is still active today, and continues to contribute to the accessibility of Theravada Buddhism in the West (Sutin 2006: 141).

2.6.2 Sir Edwin Arnold (1832–1904)

Sir Edwin Arnold was strongly influenced by the Rhys Davids’ sympathetic interpretations of Buddhism (Sutin 2006: 141). An Oxford graduate, Arnold served as principal of the Government Sanskrit College in Pune, western India until 1860, when he returned to Britain. There he became editor in chief of the *London Daily Telegraph*. Sir Arnold had translated various works from Sanskrit, but the 1879 publication of his work *The Light of Asia* earned him an extensive readership (Fields 1992: 115). *The Light of Asia* is an epic-length poem of the life of the Buddha. Sutin (2006: 142, 143) states that the success of this work was based on Arnold’s “careful framing of Buddhism as an inferior but worthy religion.” However, many Western as well as Asian readers were seriously influenced by it and were consequently drawn to Buddhism (Sutin 2006: 143).

2.6.3 Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891)

The influence of Russian-born Helena Petrovna Blavatsky's Theosophical Society on the spread of Buddhism in the West can hardly be disputed. Blavatsky was an enigmatic and eccentric character whose methods were occasionally questionable (Sutin 2006: 171). It is paradoxical that the Theosophical Society's writings on Buddhism were sometimes blatantly inaccurate (Sutin 2006: 171). However, it contributed greatly to the wish of many people in the West and even in Asia to pursue a deeper understanding of Buddhism (Sutin 2006: 172). Blavatsky and her associates presented a more sophisticated picture of Buddhism to the West which seemed to inspire many disaffected Westerners to take a more serious interest in it.

Blavatsky was born in the Ukraine of a military father and a novelist mother who died when Blavatsky was eleven. She married just short of her seventeenth birthday but escaped the marriage three months later to travel around the world. The details of Blavatsky's life remain rather obscure. She claimed to have studied with various spiritual teachers in Asia, notably in Shigatse, in Tibet with two Mahatmas (or "Great Souls"), Koot Hoomi and Morya (Sutin 2006: 172).

Blavatsky and Henry Steel Olcott, co-founder of the Theosophical Society, travelled to India in 1878 and remained there for about two years. In 1880 they became the first known Westerners to undergo a ceremony in which they took the Five Vows of Buddhism (Sutin 2006: 173). Blavatsky believed that it was the role of the Theosophical Society to cultivate the "essential truth" in Buddhism and to disregard those Buddhist practices that they deemed not adequately universal (Sutin 2006: 173).

2.6.4 Alexandra David-Neel (1868–1969)

The generation of Western students that followed Blavatsky was less disposed to be satisfied simply with rumours of Buddhist masters. One of the most determined members of that generation was the long-lived Alexandra David-Neel, who in her youth was a member of the Theosophical Society (Sutin 2006: 255).

Alexandra David-Neel was the first European woman to enter Lhasa and to travel extensively through then forbidden Tibet (Sutin 2006: 259). She was born in Paris of French parents, but raised in Brussels due to her father's liberal politics (Sutin 2006:

255). She moved to London at the age of nineteen and embarked on esoteric studies with the Theosophical Society and an organisation called the Supreme Gnosis (Sutin 2006: 256). An inheritance from her godmother made it possible for her to travel to India in 1891 (<http://www.alexandra-david-neel.org>). There she studied with a Brahman yoga teacher called Bashkarananda (Sutin 2006: 256).

After a brief career as a successful opera singer, she married the French railway engineer Philip Neel (<http://www.buddhanet.net>) who financed her foreign travels and served as the literary agent for her classic books on travel, ethnography, and Buddhist studies (Sutin 2006: 256). David-Neel studied Buddhist philosophy and the essentials of Sanskrit and Tibetan in Paris, Brussels, and London from 1906 to 1911, when she travelled to India (Sutin 2006: 256, 257). There she worked as a journalist and became the first Western woman to meet and interview a Dalai Lama, in her case, the Thirteenth Dalai Lama who was living in exile in India due to the Chinese incursions on Tibet (Sutin 2006: 257).

The Thirteenth Dalai Lama felt very strongly that Tibet needed to remain isolated from Western influence as free access to Tibet by Westerners would weaken Tibetan Buddhism (Sutin 2006: 257). David-Neel, however, was determined to visit Tibet, and in 1914 entered it illegally (Sutin 2006: 247). She stayed in a monastery just inside the Tibetan border where she continued to study Tibetan. Thereafter she moved to a meditative cave hermitage in Sikkim, and in 1915 she again entered Tibet illegally and travelled as far as Shigatse (Sutin 2006: 258). However, the British became aware of her activities and ordered her deportation (<http://www.alexandra-david-neel.org>).

David-Neel now had to gain entrance to Tibet via China. She arrived in Peking (Beijing) in 1917 by way of Burma (Myanmar), Korea, and Japan. En route she lived and studied at various Buddhist monasteries, and was received by D. T. Suzuki in Japan. With the help of a lama from Sikkim, Yongden, whom she employed as a servant and later adopted as her legal son, she made her way across the Chinese steppes to the eastern borderlands of Tibet (<http://www.alexandra-david-neel.org>). They eventually reached the monastery of Kumbum, a monastery associated in many ways with the family of the present Dalai Lama (Craig 1997: 43), where they stayed for three years.

There David-Neel continued to study Tibetan and was given the name Khadoma, which meant a dakini (female Buddhist deity – see 4.5) (Middleton 1989: 138).

In October 1924 she eventually arrived in Lhasa (<http://www.alexandra-david-neel.org>). She returned to France in 1925 and travelled to Tibet and China again twelve years later (Sutin 2006: 260).

David-Neel was the recipient of several awards, namely the Gold Medal from The Geographical Society of Paris, the Insignia of the Chinese Order of the Brilliant Star, and was made a Chevalier of the French Legion of Honor (Sutin 2006: 261). She was celebrated as the decisive authority and writer of the “exotic mysteries” of Tibet (Sutin 2006: 261).

David-Neel died at the age of one hundred in 1969 at her Tibetan-style house in Digne, in the Basses-Alpes (<http://www.alexandra-david-neel.org>). A few months before her death she disclosed to a close friend her sadness at being so far from the only country in which she felt at home: “I should have died there, among the immense grassy solitudes close to the Tibetan lakes; for a bed the earth, grass or snow, for a ceiling the canvas of my tent and the great starry sky” (Sutin 2006: 262).

2.6.5 Walter Yeeling Evans-Wentz (1878–1965)

In 1927 Oxford University Press published the first English translation of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (Fields 1992: 285). Sutin (2006: 263) claims that it was the “single most influential translation of a Buddhist text in the twentieth century.” It was translated by Walter Yeeling Evans-Wentz. Evans-Wentz was an Oxford scholar who became a Buddhist neophyte (Sutin 2006: 263). He was exposed to the teachings of the Theosophical Society in his teens (Sutin 2006: 262). He obtained bachelor’s and master’s degrees from Stanford, and then moved on to Jesus College, Oxford, where he studied religion, folklore, and anthropology (Fields 1992: 285). Evans-Wentz’s first book, *The Fairy-Faith in Celtic Countries* (1913), argued that the testimony of the local inhabitants of Celtic lands about the existence of faerie beings and realms, ought to be acknowledged by scholars as confirmation of a spiritual dimension outside their academic restrictions (Sutin 2006: 262).

In 1917 he travelled to Asia to study Eastern religions (Sutin 2006: 263). He remained in Asia for five years, travelling to Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), India, the Himalayan border-lands, and Sikkim (Sutin 2006: 263). In Sikkim he met Lama Kazi Dawa-Samdup who was well-versed in Tibetan Buddhism and who also had a good working knowledge of English (Fields 1992: 286). Dawa-Samdup had been employed some years before as a teacher and guide to Alexandra David-Neel (Sutin 2006: 263). Dawa-Samdup was the author of a Tibetan-English dictionary, and together he and Evans-Weltz collaborated on the translation of several Tibetan texts, most notably *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. (Fields 1992: 286).

2.6.6 Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961)

At the height of his fame (Sutin 2006: 265) Carl Gustav Jung wrote an extended essay on *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* and claimed that he owed many stimulating ideas and discoveries as well as fundamental insights to this book (Sutin 2006: 264, 265). He continued to write a commentary of *The Tibetan Book of the Great Liberation* as well. However, although Jung's contribution to popularising Buddhism in the West cannot be denied, many of Jung's commentaries have been rejected by current Western students of Buddhism (Sutin 2006: 266).

2.6.7 James Hilton (1900–1954) and T. Lobsang Rampa (1911–1981)

Western imagination about Tibet was greatly changed by two British writers with quite different intentions, namely James Hilton and T. Lobsang Rampa (Sutin 2006: 267). Hilton, a Cambridge University graduate, published a novel in 1933 entitled *Lost Horizon*. It became a best-seller, a successful Hollywood film (1937), and the first ever mass-produced pocket-size paperback (Sutin 2006: 268). Briefly, it related the story of a former Franciscan monk who travelled to a place in the East called Shangri-La and eventually became a High Lama. The novel hints at an exotic Buddhist Tibet and the name Shangri-La became a synonym for the definitive holy place and sanctuary (Sutin 2006: 268).

Dr. T (Tuesday) Lobsang Rampa, accused by many of being a literary fraud (Sutin 2006: 270), nevertheless was responsible for awakening an interest in Tibet and in Buddhism in many Western imaginations. He claimed to be a fully ordained Tibetan lama, and trained as a doctor of medicine at the Chakpori Lamasery's Temple of Tibetan Medicine (Rampa 1980: 9, dust jacket). Rampa's writing career spanned twenty-three years, eighteen volumes, and total sales of more than 3.5 million copies (Sutin 2006: 269). According to Sutin (2006: 269), Rampa's influence was extensive, influencing even readers who later became highly regarded adult intellectuals. Rampa's books were compulsively readable and infused with Tibetan mysteries and the supernatural (Sutin 2006: 270). Even the present writer, in her early twenties, was a keen reader of such novels as *The third eye* (1980) and *Wisdom of the ancients* (1965)!

2.6.8 Ayya Khema (1923–1997)

Ayya Khema was born in Germany of Jewish parents and escaped Nazi Germany in 1938 with two hundred other children who were relocated to Scotland. In the process she was separated from her parents, who went to China. Khema was reunited with them in Shanghai two years later. However, the family was interned in a Japanese concentration camp where her father later died (Brasington 2011: http://www.leighb.com/a_khema.htm). She immigrated to America upon liberation, where she eventually married and had a son and a daughter. In the early sixties she travelled through Asia with her family where she became familiar with Buddhism and its meditation techniques. She eventually started to teach meditation in Australia, America, and Europe. In 1979 she was ordained as a Theravada Buddhist nun and set up a forest monastery in the Theravada tradition near Sydney (Brasington 2011: http://www.leighb.com/a_khema.htm). At the time of her death she was the spiritual director of Buddha-Haus in Germany.

In 1987 Ayya Khema was instrumental in co-ordinating the first international conference of Buddhist nuns in the history of Buddhism at which His Holiness the Dalai Lama was the keynote speaker (<http://www.sakyadhita.org>). This resulted in the establishment of Sakyadhita, a world-wide Buddhist women's organisation (see 5.10.3). Ayya Khema was also the first Buddhist woman to address the United Nations in New York in 1987 (Brasington 2011: http://www.leighb.com/a_khema.htm).

2.6.9 Other influential individuals

Mention could also be made of the Catholic priest, Thomas Merton (1915–1968), who according to Sutin (2006: 280) was the “most influential American Catholic monk of the twentieth century.” Merton was influenced by the works of the Zen Buddhist D. T. Suzuki, and was a great supporter of the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh and his peace efforts during the Vietnamese War (Sutin 2006: 281). Merton got along famously with the Dalai Lama, and Sutin (2006: 283) is of the opinion that “[t]he passion Merton felt for interfaith exchange had a lasting effect on both Buddhist and Christian monastic communities.”

Hermann Hesse (1877–1962), the Swiss Nobel Prize winner’s novel *Siddhartha* has sold more than four million copies in America alone since the first English-language translation was published in 1951 (Sutin 2006: 285). Other Western writers such as Christmas Humphreys (1901–1983) and Alan Watts (1915–1973) also contributed to the popularisation of Buddhism in the West (Sutin 2006: 292 – 296).

2.6.10 His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama

However, no one else has done more to popularise Buddhism in the West than the present Dalai Lama. He has congregated the widest Western audience of any Asian Buddhist teacher in history (Sutin 2006: 319). The life of the Dalai Lama, the circumstances of his escape from Tibet in 1959, the genocide of 1.2 million Tibetans killed by the Chinese military (Sutin 2006: 318), and the organized annihilation of Tibetan Buddhist monasteries (see 3.4), have been well-documented in the West. When he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989 the “Free Tibet” movement was brought to the attention of a world audience. The Dalai Lama is a prolific writer and a compelling public speaker. His annual schedule is overwhelming (<http://www.dalailama.com>), especially for a man already in his seventies.

Schmidt (in Ricard & Schmidt 2005: 45) suggests that one of the main reasons for his growing number of Western disciples is that the Dalai Lama does more than pay lip service to the “fashionable” notion of altruism: “[H]e actually lives it out, and with a

refreshing originality.” Finally, Norman (2009: 385) concludes that whatever the Dalai Lama’s doctrinal commitments may be, he is undoubtedly someone “who would sooner bless his enemies than curse his enemies, who, at the utmost of his ability, seeks to be at peace with everyone; someone who is patient; who is kind...who is neither rude nor seeks his own advantage; who is always ready to make allowances, to trust, to hope...” He is an exemplary realization of traditional Tibetan culture, someone who strives continuously to mould his life to the example of Chenrezig, Bodhisattva of Compassion (Norman 2009: 386)

2.7 CONCLUSION

It is clear therefore that the Buddha’s teaching is aimed at not only monastics living in isolation and following a life of study and meditation, but also at lay men and women living at home with their families. The vast majority of people cannot become monks and nuns, nor can they withdraw into caves or forests. Monasticism provides an opportunity for some Buddhists to devote their lives to study and meditation as well as to the service of others. A layperson cannot follow such a lifestyle, but The Four Noble Truths, and the Noble Eightfold Path, as well as certain meditative practices, and caring about the well-being of others, are well within the reach of the ordinary man and woman on the street (Rahulla 1978: 76, 77). To become a lay Buddhist is quite simple since there is no initiation ceremony which one has to submit to (Rahula 1978: 80). If one has an understanding of the Buddha’s teaching and wishes to follow it, one simply proceeds doing so. Some followers might wish to make a commitment to the *Dharma* (teaching), the *Sangha* (the Buddhist community including the monastics), and to undertake to follow the five minimum moral obligations of a lay person, i.e. not to destroy life, not to steal, not to commit adultery, not to tell lies, and not to take intoxicating drinks (Rahula 1976: 80). There are no external rites or ceremonies which a Buddhist has to carry out. Buddhism is a way of life, and what is necessary is to follow the Noble Eightfold Path (Rahula 1976: 81).

Perhaps Buddhism appeals to many Westerners who are in pursuit of a more meaningful life, and who feel themselves alienated from the religion of their birth because it

aims at creating a society where the ruinous struggle for power is renounced; where calm and peace prevail away from conquest and

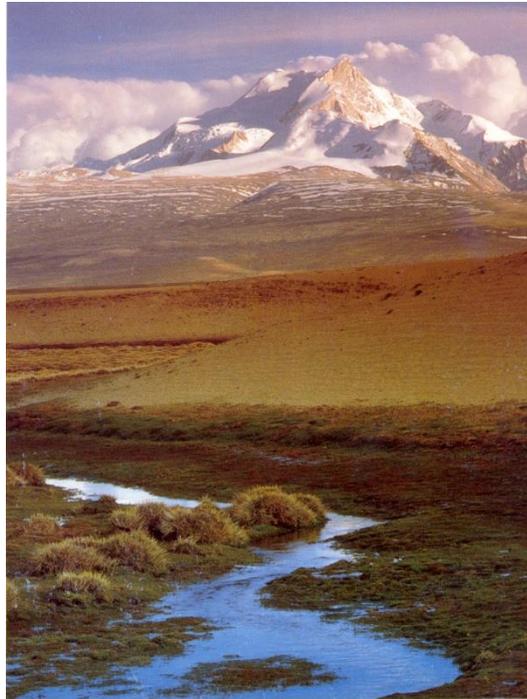
defeat; where the persecution of the innocent is vehemently denounced; where one who conquers oneself is more respected than those who conquer millions by military and economic welfare; where hatred is conquered by kindness, and evil by goodness...where compassion is the driving force of action.

(Rahula 1976: 88, 89)

CHAPTER THREE: THE LAND OF SNOWS

All six million Tibetans should be on the list of endangered peoples.

(Gyatso, in Rowell & Gyatso 1990: 15)



3.1 INTRODUCTION

Since the fundamental research question of this thesis is positioned within the context of *Tibetan* Buddhism it is necessary to provide a brief overview of Tibet, its history, the present political situation as well as the reasons that gave rise to the Tibetan Diaspora. The Tibetan Diaspora was primarily responsible for popularising Tibetan Buddhism in the West (Farber 2003: 182).

Situated in the heart of Asia is the secret land of Tibet, the Shangri-La⁹ of myth and legend. Encircled by the highest mountains on earth, Tibet is cut off from the rest of the world. Six million (Johnson 2011: xiv) people live on a plateau four times the size of Texas, or almost as big as western Europe (Kendra 2008: 5), with an altitude of more than four thousand metres above sea level (Losang 2011: <http://www.landofsnows.com>). Tibet has become synonymous with snow-capped mountains, yaks,

⁹ Shangri-La is a mythical Tibetan utopia described in James Hilton's popular novel *Lost Horizon* (1933) and the word has become synonymous with an imaginary earthly paradise – there is no mention of it as such in Buddhism.

alpine lakes, immense blue skies, silent deserts, the Dalai Lama, Buddhism, and Communist China.

The Dalai Lama's brother describes a journey across the Tibetan plateau before the Chinese invasion of 1950, when Tibetan wildlife was still abundant and plentiful:

Before long I was to see the vast herds of drongs [wild yaks]...The sight of those beautiful and powerful beasts who from time immemorial have made their home on Tibet's high and barren plateau never ceased to fascinate me...what a wonderful sight it is to see a great herd of them plunging head down in a wild gallop across the steppes. The earth shakes under their heels and a vast cloud of dust marks their passage.

Norbu 1961: 144

However, this picture was soon to change.

Until 1950 the Tibetan flag flew over a self-governing country that had its own government, religion, postal system, and currency (Rowell, in Rowell & Gyatso 1990: 7). Tibet was isolated from the rest of the world because of its geographic remoteness as well as by choice. It had hardly any diplomatic associations and did not hold membership of the United Nations (Rowell, in Rowell & Gyatso 1990:7). Therefore, no international framework existed to support the Tibetan cause when the Chinese communist armies occupied it by force in the late 1950s. His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, religious and until recently, temporal head of the Tibetan nation (see 2.5.1), was fifteen-years old at the time. He sought help from the United Nations, Britain, and the United States, only to find his cause dismissed by all of them (Rowell, in Rowell & Gyatso 1990:7).

Britain and the United States had severed all ties with China and vetoed its membership of the United Nations when Mao Zedong assumed power. Negotiations with China on behalf of Tibet were therefore impossible (Rowell, in Rowell & Gyatso 1990:7). However, when Richard Nixon "normalised" Sino-American relations after 1972, friendship with China

came “at the high price of purposeful obliviousness toward an ongoing reign of terror unparalleled in world history” (Rowell, in Rowell & Gyatso 1990:7).

3.2 THE ROOF OF THE WORLD

The official website of the Central Tibetan Government, which is the Tibetan government-in-exile in Dharamsala, India, defines the term Tibet as meaning the *whole* of Tibet, i.e. it includes the regions of Tibet that are inside the territory of the People’s Republic of China and not included in the Tibet Autonomous Region, a Chinese-created political entity that comprises about half of the geographic region where ethnic Tibetans live (Johnson 2011: 27). Tibet therefore comprises the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), U-Tsang, Kham, and Amdo, as well as Qinghai Province, and parts of Sichuan Province, Gansu Province, and Yunnan Province (<http://www.tibet.net>). According to the Tibetan government-in-exile the bulk of Tibet lies outside the TAR. The entire region of the area traditionally known as Tibet is about 2.5 million square kilometres (<http://www.tibet.net>). Tibet therefore stretches from Ladakh in the west to Tachienlu in the east (Wangyal, in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 14). For the sake of this thesis the word Tibet therefore signifies the region as defined by the Tibetan government-in-exile.

Tibet is one of the world’s most isolated territories. It is sealed off from the outside world by the colossal Himalayan mountains to the south and east, and from the north by the wastelands of the Qinghai desert (Mullin, in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 6). In the north Tibet is characterised by open plains and salt flats, dotted intermittently by lakes with crystallised salt sparkling on their shores. (Kendra 2008: 5). Here the people are mainly nomads, whose livelihood is rearing yaks and sheep, and who live in yak hair tents (Mullin, in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 6). In the south are greener valleys protected by the high Himalayan mountains. Traditionally farmers used to grow barley, fruit, and vegetables in these valleys. The Kham region to the east is forested and is traversed by impressive gorges and rivers (Kendra 2008: 5). Tibetan farmers and nomads live primarily on a staple diet of barley porridge or *tsampa* and butter tea (Mullin, in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 6). The immense regional diversity in climate and vegetation accounts for the variety in occupation of the population: nomads and semi-nomads in the higher more sparsely populated regions; agriculturalists in the river valleys; and forest dwellers and traders (Wangyal, in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 14).

The total Tibetan population in Tibet is approximately six million, of which only about two million live in the TAR. The rest of the Tibetan population live in the Tibetan areas outside the TAR (<http://www.tibet.net>). In 1983, according to a report by the Minority Rights Group (Mullin & Wangyal: 14), 100 000 Tibetans were living in exile. However, presently over 130 000 Tibetans now live in exile (<http://www.volunteertibet.org>). Tibetans-in-exile live mostly in India, Nepal, and Bhutan, as well as in other countries such as Switzerland and America (<http://www.volunteertibet.org>).

The Tibetans are considered to be descendents of the nomadic, non-Chinese, Chiang tribes of eastern Central Asia. Their language derives from the Tibeto-Burman group, and their written script is derived from an Indian script of the seventh century (Wangyal, in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 14).

3.3 HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Recent geological excavations in Tibet indicate that Tibetan civilisation dates as far back as 4 000 BCE (Smith-Lyod: 2011: <http://aahaamedia.com/nature>). Early written records indicate that Tibet had been ruled by various independent, opposing chieftains who later unified under the leadership of a succession of kings known as the Yarlung Dynasty (seventh to ninth centuries) (Wangyal, in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 14). Throughout this phase Tibetan armies invaded a vast area including some parts of China. The Tibetan king, Songtsen Gampo, demanded a Chinese princess in marriage in 640 CE who brought with her a statue of the Buddha (Norman 2009: 39), thus introducing Buddhism to Tibet for the first time. Buddhism became firmly established in Tibet during the reign of King Trisong Detsen (755–797), who invited Padmasambhava from India (<http://www.himalayanart.org>). Various Indian Buddhist scholars and masters were invited to Tibet, Buddhist scriptures were translated into Tibetan, and the first Tibetan monastery was founded at Samya (Wangyal, in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 15).

Tibetan expansion continued until Tibetans dominated Hunza, Nepal, Upper Burma, various Himalayan regions, parts of northern India, and Turkestan. Tibetans also made contact with Arab rulers in western Central Asia. In China, Tibet was in control of Gansu, much of Sichuan, and of northern Yunan. In 763 CE they sacked the Chinese capital of Chang'an. Tang dynasty documents bear witness to these extended periods of

warfare. In 821-2 a peace treaty seemed to have been concluded between China and Tibet the terms of which were carved on a pillar in Lhasa, capital of Tibet (Wangyal, in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 15).

Throughout the next few centuries Tibet did not attain any political unity. In 1244 the lama of the Sakya monastery concluded an agreement with the invading Mongols which guaranteed peace and religious freedom to the Tibetans (Norman 2009: 116). Kublai Khan, who became emperor of China in 1260, adopted Pakpa, lama of the Sakya monastery, as his spiritual teacher, thereby establishing a relationship whereby the predominant Lama of Tibet became the Emperor of China's spiritual advisor, who in turn guaranteed Tibet protection and religious freedom. According to Wangyal (in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 15) Tibet was a part of the Mongol Empire, but it was not part of China or one of its provinces. This political relationship waned towards the end of the Yuan dynasty in 1368.

3.3.1 The Dalai Lamas

In 1578 Altan Khan, one of the most powerful Mongol chiefs, bestowed upon the abbot of Drepung monastery the title of Dalai Lama, Ocean of Wisdom (Norman 2009: 188, 189). He was considered to be the Third Dalai Lama, his two predecessors having been recognised post-humously. The Fifth Dalai Lama, known as the "Great Fifth", united the whole of Tibet under his authority and ushered in a prosperous age for Tibet. In 1625 this Dalai Lama made a state visit to the Manchu Emperor of China as an independent and equal ruler (Wangyal, in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 15).

Tibet was plunged into confusion with the death of the Fifth Dalai Lama. The Manchu Emperor Kang Hsi emerged as the "liberator" of Tibet when he installed the Seventh Dalai Lama in Lhasa in 1720. Tibet retained its independence under the protection of China, but without its interference (Wangyal, in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 15). Two Chinese representatives were now installed in Lhasa, called the Ambans.

3.3.2 The British presence in Tibet

Towards the end of the 1800s Britain began to fear a Russian invasion of Tibet which would have held possible negative consequences for British interests in India and the Himalayan states (Wangyal, in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 15). British suspicions were

aggravated by rumours about the proximity to and influence of the enigmatic Mongol Dorjiev on the Thirteenth Dalai Lama, as well as reports of a secret treaty between Russia and Tibet (Norman 2009: 337). In 1904 Britain therefore deployed the Younghusband expedition to Tibet (Kendra 2008: 5). This led to the signing of an Anglo-Tibetan Convention which recognized Tibet's ability to enter independently into domestic obligations (Wangyal, in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 15).

China invaded Tibet for the first time in 1910 when Chao Erh Feng, the "Butcher," subdued the whole of Kham Province under his rule, and marched a Chinese army into Lhasa in February that same year. The Thirteenth Dalai Lama was forced to flee to India (Wangyal, in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 15).

The Chinese revolution of 1911 put an end to Chinese claims on Tibet. Consequently the Thirteenth Dalai Lama issued a proclamation of independence in 1912. Tibet enjoyed complete independence for the next thirty-eight years. Tibet also concluded a treaty with Mongolia in 1913 in which each country recognised each other's independence and sovereignty (Wangyal, in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 15).

The Simla conference of 1913-14 however proved problematic. The conference was convened with Britain, China, and Tibet as equal partners. The emerging treaty recognised China's suzerainty over Tibet as well as Tibet's autonomy. China however refused to sign it; Tibet and Britain were therefore the only signatories (Wangyal, in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 15).

Tibet remained neutral in both the Sino-Japanese War and the Second World War. Tibet also objected to Allied war materials being transported through its country. In 1942 the British Foreign Office observed that the Tibetans were an independent people (Wangyal, in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 15). Antony Eden advised China in 1943 that Britain was prepared to recognise China's suzerainty over Tibet only on the understanding that Tibet was regarded as autonomous (Wangyal, in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 15). As far as Britain was concerned, for as long as China failed to recognise the Simla convention, Tibet remained *de facto* independent (Wangyal, in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 15).

Tibet's independence was demonstrated in 1947 when it sent an independent delegation to the Asian Relations Conference in India, where the Tibetan flag was flown (Wangyal,

in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 15). The following year a Tibetan trade delegation visited a number of foreign countries all of whom recognised their Tibetan passports. Following upon this, the entire Chinese official mission in Lhasa was ordered to leave in 1949 (Wangyal, in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 15).

3.3.3 Tibetan society before the Chinese invasion

Wangyal (in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 16) writes that “it would be difficult to exaggerate the importance of Buddhism for the Tibetan people.” The one aspect of their national character that has most influenced their past and present, is the devotion to their religion. It dominated the thoughts and actions of every Tibetan (Richardson 1962, in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 16). Tibetans adopted the total Buddhist culture of India and throughout their history devoted themselves to the development of Tantric Buddhism to which they became the sole heir with the invasion of India by the Muslim Mughal Empire in the thirteenth century (Wangyal, in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 16). Tibetans of all classes were united in their religious beliefs. They supported the value system of that time. In fact, they were more interested in religion than in economics (Wangyal, in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 16).

Every town or village had its monastery with monks and lamas. These ranged from huge monastic university towns like Drepung, Sera, Ganden, and Lhasa which supported thousands of monks each, to small temples and isolated hermitages (Wangyal, in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 16). Wangyal (in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 16) claims that most of these were well run by earnest religious leaders and served the requirements of the local community.

The Tibetan government was distinctive in its twofold character of secular and spiritual purpose. The early kings called themselves Dharma-Kings (Buddhist kings) (Wangyal, in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 16). During the reign of the Fifth Dalai Lama, the term “Dual government of Religion and Politics” was used to describe the twin aspects of the Tibetan government. The system was based on the ten principles of Buddhism and the sixteen Tibetan civil laws. It was dedicated to both the temporal and spiritual welfare of the people (Wangyal, in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 16). Until March 2011 this was epitomised by the secular and spiritual authority vested in the institution of the Dalai Lama (see 2.5.1).

It was estimated that about one-sixth of the male population were monks (Wangyal, in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 16). The monks were engaged in spiritual practice and were therefore physically unproductive. Tibetan society was static in comparison to a modern Western society. Tibet's total ignorance of material well-being and comfort, her remoteness and lack of awareness of international political procedures all combined to project an image of Tibet as an isolated medieval country (Wangyal, in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 16).

Wangyal (in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 16) states that Tibet was a thriving and functioning society before the Chinese invasion in 1950. People's needs were uncomplicated. Tibet had vast resources of raw materials, its population enjoyed abundant free time, and it was entirely self-sufficient (Wangyal, in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 16). Tibetan society was unique and wholly different from that of the Chinese. The present Dalai Lama (in Rowell 1990: 15) states that not a single Tibetan record indicates that Tibet was, at any time, a part of China. He amplifies by stressing (in Rowell 1990: 51) that "Tibet is racially, culturally, and geographically distinct from any other nation. One of the main reasons for the distinctive identity of the Tibetan people is our cultural heritage. We must therefore recognise the importance and value of our own language, literature, and traditions..."

However, His Holiness also states (in Rowell: 1990: 27) that "[t]he world has become communicably smaller today, and with respect to its limitations, no nation can survive in isolation. It is in our own interest to create a world of love, justice, and equality, for without a sense of universal responsibility based on morality, our existence and survival are at a perilous precipice." The Dalai Lama further says (in Rowell: 1990: 33) that the Tibetan people discovered too late that it was not feasible to live in isolation from the rest of the world. Consequently when China invaded Tibet in 1950 it was not prepared to deal with Chinese aggression.

3.4 THE CHINESE INVASION

Kendra (2008:6) postulates that China invaded Tibet for three reasons. Firstly, they aimed at safeguarding their borders against attacks from the West. Secondly, China coveted Tibet's wealth, including jewel-encrusted statues made of gold and silver, as well as Tibet's uranium reserves, which are the largest in the world

(<http://www.123himachal.com>). Lastly, they continued to lay claim to Tibet as part of the Chinese “Motherland,” despite this being disputed by Tibetans and historians alike.

According to an official Chinese statement, the Tibetans fall into the 6.6% of the population of the “Motherland” which they describe as “Minority Nationalities” (Wangyal, in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 16). Mao Zedong confirmed in 1931 his recognition of the right to self-determination and complete separation, as well as the formation of each of the minorities into independent states. However, by 1945 he was saying that the Communists should assist the nationalities to secure their political, economic, and cultural liberation and development, even though he also stressed that their written and spoken language, their customs, traditions, and religious beliefs should be respected (Wangyal, in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 16).

Wangyal (in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 16) states that Mao was well aware of the unique situation China faced in Tibet. In 1935 the Chinese had met with hostility in Tibet when they passed through it during the Long March. In contrast to the Russian Revolution in which individuals other than Russians played an important role, the revolution in China was a solely Han Chinese matter (Wangyal, in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 16).

In 1950, the People’s Liberation Army entered Tibet and defeated the Tibetan army at Chamdo (Wangyal, in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 16). Tibetan resistance was weak and the soldiers were ill-equipped (Kendra 2008: 7). Tibet appealed to the United Nations, to no effect. Negotiations were conducted through Ngabo, the captured governor of Chamdo, whom Wangyal (in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 16) calls “the leading Chinese puppet in Tibet.” Tibet was obliged to take part in talks in Beijing which led to the notorious “Seventeen Point Agreement.” The Tibetan delegates had to choose between signing the agreement or facing war. They were not permitted to seek the Dalai Lama’s advice and even their office seals were reproductions made in Beijing (Wangyal, in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 16).

The Agreement promised “national regional autonomy,” and clauses 4, 7, and 9 should perhaps be highlighted:

- Clause 4: “[T]he central authorities will not alter the existing political system in Tibet...will not alter the established status, function, and powers of the Dalai Lama.”

- Clause 7: “[T]he policy of freedom of religious belief...shall be carried out. The religious beliefs, customs and habits of the Tibetan people shall be respected and Lama Monasteries shall be protected.”
- Clause 9 provided the assurance that “the spoken and written language and school education of the Tibetan nationality shall be developed” (Wangyal, in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 16).

However, it is well documented that China reneged on all these points. During the Dalai Lama’s visit to India in 1956 to deliberate with Nehru and Zhou Enlai, he was assured that Tibetan autonomy would be respected and “reforms” would not be forced on Tibet (Wangyal, in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 16). History was to prove otherwise.

3.4.1 The national uprising

The Chinese have already as early as 1952-3 introduced “democratic reforms” (Wangyal, in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 16). They tried to implement a class struggle. Large numbers of Chinese workers were imported to Tibet to build roads. In order to feed them the Chinese borrowed and then bought stocks of food, causing severe inflation (Craig 1997: 165, 166). Taxes were imposed, followed by confiscations and executions. Vast numbers of Chinese settlers were brought into the Chamdo area. The Chinese also tried to disarm the Khampas, warriors belonging to a tough Tibetan tribe. By 1954, a number of atrocities had been committed by the Chinese. In some places, Tibetans who had resisted the Chinese were rounded up, labelled as “reactionaries and serf-owners,” and publically executed (Wangyal, in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 16). However, as Tibetans see their religion as the core of their identity, Chinese persecution simply serves to strengthen their resolve to preserve their cultural and religious authenticity (Johnson 2011: 204).

A dissident Tibetan organisation, Mimang Tsongdu, or the “People’s Movement,” was already active in Lhasa as early as 1952. The first Tibetan National Party came into existence at about this time, and it organised massive demonstrations. Poster campaigns demanded that the Chinese leave Tibet (Craig 1997: 166). The Mimang Tsongdu’s leaders were identified and imprisoned (Wangyal, in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 16).

It is estimated that more than 30 000 Tibetan children (about 20 percent of the Tibetan population) were sent to China between 1952 and 1969 to study at the so-called Minority Nationalities' Institutes (Wangyal, in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 16, 17). These institutes ran a rigorous programme of indoctrination in communist doctrine, as well as presenting an edited Chinese version of Tibetan history. Consequently Tibetan students in Beijing were provoked into a deep awareness of their Tibetan identity. This led to an open revolt by the Tibetan students between 1956 and 1957, which was subdued by the Chinese with an "anti-nationalist" campaign. Subsequently the Chinese were reluctant to expose the "educated" Tibetan youths to positions of authority on their return to Tibet, and they were posted out of harm's way to remote villages as for instance interpreters (Wangyal, in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 17).

A full-scale war emerged in the Kham region of Tibet during 1955-56 (Wangyal, in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 17). The "Kanting Rebellion" initiated a major guerrilla offensive which later also spread to Amdo. Fighting was heaviest around Lithang, Bathang, Dege, Chamdo, and Kanze. The Chinese reacted with characteristic fierceness. The Lithang monastery was raised to the ground; other monasteries, villages, and Tibetan encampments were bombed and machine-gunned from the air (Wangyal, in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 17). The number of lives lost during this time is uncertain. However, many more Tibetans died in a famine in Kham during 1960 and 1961. By the end of 1961 refugees reported a stunning drop in the male population. In 1980 a number of foreign representatives saw hardly any male Tibetans in the Kham region over the age of thirty-five. It was as if nearly two generations had been annihilated (Wangyal, in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 17).

During the early 1960s the CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) and the Chinese Nationalist government (Taiwan) became interested in the Tibetan situation (Craig 1997: 206, 207). Wangyal (in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 17) writes that it was tragically ironic that interest should have been displayed by these two instances while Tibet had in fact appealed to the international community. He is of the opinion that the CIA and the Taiwanese government were simply interested in exploiting Tibet as an anti-communist force.

Khampa guerrillas began moving towards Lhasa in preparation for a large religious ceremony in honour of the Dalai Lama in 1957 (Wangyal, in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 17). Surprisingly, some Chinese soldiers began defecting to the Tibetan side, notably

Colonel Cheng Ho-Ching, the PLA (People's Liberation Army)'s artillery commander in Lhasa. He declared that he had simply become appalled at the brutal killing and manipulation of simple Tibetan people (Wangyal, in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 17). By 1958 fifteen thousand Khampa families had relocated to Lhasa. They were joined by other rebel groups including the apparently famous "Four Rivers and Six Ranges" resistance group (Craig 1997: 206). One of the slogans of these rebel groups was "[w]e would rather live for one day and die under the Buddha than live for a hundred years ...under atheist rule" (Wangyal, in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 17). Whilst the Dalai Lama and the monastic community condemned the use of force, the rebels considered force as the only solution.

In this highly-charged atmosphere the Dalai Lama received an invitation to attend a theatrical performance at the PLA headquarters in Lhasa early in 1959 (Wangyal, in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 17). The Dalai Lama was told to attend without his usual entourage of Tibetan soldiers and other dignitaries (Farber 2003: 50). The Chinese were prepared to allow him two or three unarmed body guards, and even went so far as to suggest that he should move to their Chinese military headquarters for his own safety (Gyatso 1998: 142-144). This sparked off a mass spontaneous uprising in Lhasa which later became known as "The 10th of March" (Wangyal, in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 17). On 17 March His Holiness left Lhasa disguised as a Tibetan soldier (Farber 2003: 50). The Chinese shelled the Potala Palace, winter residence of the Dalai Lama, on 20 March. The Dalai Lama's summer palace, the Norbulingka, was also attacked by the Chinese, and Tibetan casualties were crammed into mass graves or burned (Wangyal, in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 17).

The Tibetan Government was immediately dissolved by the Chinese. Reprisals and executions were carried out. Large numbers of monks and laymen were imprisoned or confined to labour camps. Lhasa was described as a "city of frightened women" (Wangyal, in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 17). Property was redistributed in favour of the local Han Chinese residents, and the population was categorised into various classes: notably rich, poor, and middle-class, as well as landlords, and reactionaries (Wangyal, in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 17). This caused a divided society in which mutual suspicion held sway. Today the situation has not changed notably. Chinese authorities still coerce prisoners, especially monks, to turn on each other. Their families are threatened with job losses and forced to display photographs of Mao Zedong in their

shrine rooms (Johnson 2011: 40). This is anathema to religious suicide as the Dalai Lama holds the highest office in Tibetan Buddhism and is revered as an incarnation of Avalokiteshvara, the Buddha of Compassion (Farber 2003: 53).

Incessant “struggle sessions” and political indoctrination lessons dominated the lives of the Tibetan people (Wangyal, in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 17). Many monasteries were closed and the monks were expected to enter the labour force. In 1959 the erstwhile five hundred monks at the great Sakya monastery had been reduced to thirty-six aged monks (Wangyal, in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 17). Gradually, monasteries, castles, and historic buildings were being destroyed. National festivals and celebrations were banned (Wangyal, in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 17). Norbu (in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 17) states that “[t]he main aim was to destroy the basis of Tibetan civilisation, or anything that gave the Tibetans a distinct identity of their own.” Theoretically the poor’s standard of living should have improved drastically, but in reality they found that they enjoyed even less than before the Chinese invasion on account of the heavy Chinese taxes and the unequal distribution of property in favour of the Chinese (Wangyal, in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 17).

In the two decades following the Chinese invasion in 1950 over 6 000 Tibetan Buddhist monasteries were destroyed; of the 550 000 monastics, over a 110 000 were tortured and put to death, while 250 000 were forcibly disrobed in a brutal campaign that the Dalai Lama described as a “Buddhist holocaust” (Farber 2003: 42). Nearly 1.2 million Tibetans were killed (Farber 2003: 42).

3.4.2 The Cultural Revolution

Approximately 8 000 Red Guards arrived in Tibet in July 1966 (Wangyal, in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 17). They vigorously and speedily introduced the Party’s policy. Their targets were the “Four Olds” – old traditions, old thoughts, old culture, and old customs (Johnson 2011:45). Wangyal (in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 17) states that “[o]nce unleashed, the Cultural Revolution in Tibet soared into an Orwellian extravaganza of oppression.” Across China the Red Guards went on a rampage ransacking museums, razing temples and shrines, and uprooting vestiges of ancient heritage. Tibet’s Buddhist patrimony was “ruinously devastated” (Johnson 2011: 45). Invaluable Buddhist relics, including handwritten sutras and other religious documents, were flung into rivers or

flattened in landfills (Johnson 2011: 45). Nearly six thousand monasteries, nunneries, and temples, as well as their priceless contents were partly or completely destroyed during the Cultural Revolution (<http://www.savetibet.org/resource-center/all-about-tibet/>).

The end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976 with the downfall of the “Gang of Four” had little effect on Tibet (Wangyal, in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 17). Chairman Hua Guofeng announced a new lenient policy in 1979, and removed Ren Rong who had been responsible for Tibet during the Cultural Revolution. The General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, Hu Yao-bang, visited Tibet in 1980 and expressed his shock and dismay at the mismanagement of the country (Wangyal, in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 17).

3.4.3 The aftermath

Wangyal (in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 17) states that China’s policy towards Tibet has evolved through various stages: the “gradual” policy of 1950–59, with its catastrophic attempts at “peaceful” reform in Kham; the post-1959 reprisals and “democratic” reforms in Central Tibet; the horror of the Cultural Revolution; and the “new dawn” announced by Hua Guofeng’s 1979 pledge for a new “leniency.”

Johnson (2011: 15) writes that China has moved “from communism to a form of savage authoritarian capitalism.” He adds that China’s “economic juggernaut” is leaving some people behind, notably the rural poor and some ethnic minorities. Beijing’s leaders have invested billions of dollars in projects in Tibet but have failed to raise the standard of living. The rest of China has developed much faster than Tibet. In 1980, income per capita in Tibet was about 400 yuan a year (approximately \$261). The farmers around the Beijing area were earning only about 100 yuan a year. However, presently farmers in the Chinese countryside earn 20 000 to 30 000 yuan annually while Tibetan farmers only earn about 4 000 yuan a year (Johnson 2011: 21). Johnson (2011: 27) quotes a Tibetan monk as saying that “[i]t would take days to explain to you how tough our lives are here... We’re under the gun. We Tibetans are on the lowest rung among minorities. There is no freedom here.”

Great advances have been made in industry in Tibet, but the majority of Tibetans cannot afford the manufactured products which are mostly exported to China, Hong Kong, and Nepal. Practically the entire workforce consists of Han Chinese, who also hold all the

vital posts. Tibetans are employed mostly as porters and labourers (Wangyal, in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 18).

Tons of Tibetan timber are exported to China. Vast areas have been deforested and the Tibetan virgin forests are fast disappearing (Wangyal, in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 18). Refugees also report large-scale mineral exports to China, and the employment of Tibetans in chrome mines. Thirty-six different kinds of minerals are found on the Tibetan plateau, some of which are very rare, including uranium and plutonium, all of which are mined by China for export. (Wangyal, in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 18).

Progress has been made in agriculture by opening up uncultivated areas and irrigation has become more extensive. Produce has certainly increased because of the more intensive working of the land. However, all the produce goes to the commune, and Tibetans are given ration cards indicating the amount of grain they can earn by working through a points system (Wangyal, in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 18). Wheat is cultivated instead of the traditional barley, for centuries the staple food of Tibetans. The Chinese prefer wheat to barley. This deprives the Tibetans of the basis of their staple diet *tsampa* - barley that has been ground and roasted to produce a thick flour which is then rolled into balls and eaten with Tibetan butter-tea (Johnson 2011: 32). Depriving the Tibetans of barley is comparable to forcing people to go without bread in the West (Wangyal, in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 18). Losang Tsetin, one of the thirteen Vice-Chairmen of the Tibet Autonomous Region, admitted in 1980 that Tibet, once a country that was completely self-sufficient, now had to import more than 30 000 tons of food a year (Wangyal, in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 18).

The Tibet Environmental Watch (<http://www.tew.org>) reports that the country's total forest cover declined from 25.2 million hectares in 1949 to 13.57 million hectares in 1985. Official Chinese statistics from 1959-1985 reveal that Tibetan timber to the value of \$54 billion were cut down and sold on the international market. No recent statistics seem to be available (<http://www.tew.org>).

Hospitals have been built in larger towns in Tibet. However, these only cater for Chinese or Tibetan officials. Ordinary Tibetans have to pay for medical treatment if they are able to access it at all (Wangyal, in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 18). The Tibet Justice Centre (<http://www.tibetjustice.org>) claims that children can often only gain

access to healthcare if their parents' social and economic status allows it. Consequently very few Tibetan children receive adequate health care.

Educational facilities and opportunities for Tibetan children are minimal. The education that is available suppresses Tibetan religious and linguistic identity (<http://www.savetibet.org/resource-center/all-about-tibet/>). Instead, Tibetan children are forced to study Chinese history, Chinese politics and geography, world history and world geography, and Mandarin (Johnson 2011: 37). Many Tibetan parents cannot afford schooling and prefer to send their children into exile to study at Tibetan schools in India (<http://www.savetibet.org/resource-center/all-about-tibet/>).

Schwartz (1999: <http://www.tibet.ca/media>) writes that “[i]t is impossible to understand religious persecution in Tibet without understanding the political context in which it occurs and the political apparatus that the Chinese government uses to maintain control in Tibet.” He continues to say that religious persecution is politically motivated in an attempt to absorb Tibet and her people into China. The Chinese government views Tibetan Buddhism as an obstacle to the eventual obliteration of Tibetan culture and to the goal of completely absorbing the Tibetans into China. During the Cultural Revolution any display of religion was forbidden, punishable by beatings and imprisonment, and all religious items were confiscated and destroyed (Schwartz 1999: <http://www.tibet.ca/media>). Religious practice was not allowed in China until after 1980 causing a huge resurgence of religion in Tibet. However, the Chinese government continues to restrict the way in which Tibetans are allowed to practise their religion. All photographs of the Dalai Lama have been banned; religious practice in prison is forbidden (two-thirds of all Tibetan prisoners are monks and nuns); political re-education takes place regularly in monasteries disturbing the practices and daily rituals of the monks and nuns; and political work teams often shut down monasteries on the grounds that the monastics have not been successfully re-educated (Schwartz 1999: <http://www.tibet.ca/media>).

3.4.4 The Tibetan environment

The Tibetan plateau is the largest and highest highland in the world. It sustains an exceptional and delicate high altitude eco-system much of which remained untouched due to its remoteness and inaccessibility. However, the impact of the Chinese invasion

and their disrespect for the Tibetan environment are taking an unparalleled and devastating toll on Tibet's natural resources. The wildlife, forests, grazing lands, rivers, and mineral resources have reached a stage where they are facing total obliteration and extinction (<http://www.savetibet.org/resource-center/all-about-tibet/>).

According to Buddhist beliefs there is a close interdependence between the natural environment and the living beings inhabiting it (Gyatso, in Rowell, & Gyatso 1990: 53). The Dalai Lama (in Rowell, & Gyatso 1990: 53) writes that environmental conservation is not just a question of ethics but is important for one's own survival and for that of future generations. He continues to say (in Rowell, & Gyatso 1990: 53) that "[w]hen the environment changes, climatic conditions change. When they change dramatically, the economy and many other things change as well. Even our physical health will be greatly affected. So this is not merely a moral question but also a question of our survival." The Dalai Lama states (in Rowell, & Gyatso 1990: 59) that fundamental to the Buddha's teaching is realising the equality among human beings as well as the equality of all sentient beings. According to the Dalai Lama, whether you are a Buddhist or not, it is important to know and to understand this.

The Tibetan Buddhist attitude is one of contentment and of living in harmony with the environment (Gyatso, in Rowell & Gyatso 1990: 80). The Dalai Lama proposed in his Five Point Peace Plan to the Chinese government that all of Tibet should become a sanctuary and a zone of peace. However, many of the actions taken by China after its invasion of Tibet, clashed with the Tibetan Buddhist way of interacting with the environment (Kummer 2003: 40).

Pre-1950 travellers in Tibet reported seeing vast herds of wildlife (Rowell, in Rowell & Gyatso 1990: 60). Today, the herds have all but disappeared because of the unregulated shooting by Chinese soldiers who shot with automatic weapons from trucks in the 1960s (<http://www.savetibet.org/resource-center/all-about-tibet/>). Poaching by Chinese and even Tibetans continue, threatening the survival of some species (<http://www.savetibet.org/resource-center/all-about-tibet/>). The loss of habitat contributed to the loss of much of the wildlife as the simple subsistence lifestyle of old Tibet was replaced by communes in which livestock had to be raised for export to China. Sensitive winter feeding grounds in the temperate valleys became drastically overgrazed (Rowell, in Rowell, & Gyatso 1990: 60). Some of these wild animals are

unique to Tibet and are not found anywhere else in the world, not even in zoos: the kiang (Tibetan wild asses), the drong (wild yaks), the gowa (a Tibetan gazelle), the nawa or Tibetan blue sheep, and the chankhu or the Tibetan wolf (Rowell, in Rowell, & Gyatso 1990: 61-70).

The Dalai Lama (in Rowell, & Gyatso 1990: 61) explains that Tibetans have always considered their wild animals as a symbol of freedom. He continues to state that “[n]othing holds them back. They run free...without them something is missing from even the most beautiful landscape. The land becomes empty, and only with the presence of wild, living things can it gain full beauty.”

Deforestation is taking place on an unprecedented scale and reforestation is neglected and unsuccessful. The forests in Tibet are the third most extensive within the borders of present-day China. Rapid and extensive deforestation are leaving hillsides susceptible to erosion and threatens the habitat of the rare giant panda, the golden monkey, and 5 000 plant species unique to the planet (<http://www.savetibet.org/resource-center/all-about-tibet/>).

Apparently the northern Tibetan Plateau is home to China’s primary nuclear weapons research and development plant (<http://www.savetibet.org/resource-center/all-about-tibet/>). The International Campaign for Tibet claims that there are at least three to four nuclear missile launch sites in Tibet containing an unknown number of warheads (<http://www.savetibet.org/resource-center/all-about-tibet/>). They further claim that nuclear waste from the research facility might be dumped on the nearby plains where Tibetan nomads have been suffering from illnesses and death from unknown diseases consistent with radiation sickness.

The International Campaign for Tibet in addition maintains that enormous and irreversible environmental damage has occurred to vast areas of the fragile tableland of the northern Tibetan plateau in Qinghai Province due to government-encouraged relocation to Tibet. Environmental experts attribute this deterioration to overgrazing, unreasonable land reclamation, and reckless exposure of surface vegetation (<http://www.savetibet.org/resource-center/all-about-tibet/>).

Furthermore, large-scale agricultural expansion, motivated by the need to feed the growing Chinese population and reduce the expensive importation of wheat, is

unsettling traditional farming practices as well as the delicate ecological balance maintained by Tibetan farmers for centuries (<http://www.savetibet.org/resource-center/all-about-tibet/>).

The mining of minerals and the removal of timber from the Tibetan regions are chiefly carried out by Chinese workers and administrators which leave the land despoiled and traditional Tibetan livelihoods disrupted (<http://www.savetibet.org/resource-center/all-about-tibet/>).

3.4.5 Tibet today

Johnson (2011: 42) writes that a public with a rising sense of “patriotic nationalism” would view any allowance towards Tibet as “a sign of weakness, anathema to party leaders.” He continues to say that Tibet’s resources and territory are too important to China’s welfare. Tibet is rich in minerals, and Himalayan glaciers supply the headwaters for seven of the greatest rivers in Asia, including the Yangtze and Yellow rivers (Johnson 2011: 42). It is also believed that China maintains four or five nuclear missile bases in Tibet (Johnson 2011: 42).

The chasm between Tibetans and the majority Han Chinese continues to grow. Johnson (2011: xiii) states that “[b]ehind largely fictitious verbiage pledging ‘autonomy,’ and while promising ‘leapfrog development,’ Beijing emasculates Tibetans. It has opened the floodgates to domestic migrants who weaken the Tibetans’ grasp of their identity and culture.”

The “Sky Train” to Lhasa, built at a cost of \$4.1 billion, at 3 962 metres (13 000) feet the highest railway in the world (Johnson 2011: 49, 50), is a source of great concern to many Tibetans. Once reachable only by air or by slow truck journeys, Tibet is now open to any Chinese who can afford the fare. Tibetans are worried that the railway is a strategy to allow Han Chinese to flood in and dilute their culture (Johnson 2011: 52). Johnson (2011: 52) quotes the Dalai Lama as saying that the railway is a “real danger.” The Dalai Lama claims that unemployed Han Chinese are flocking to Tibet in the hope of finding jobs. Johnson (2011: 52) concludes that the “railway line was engineered to keep the Tibetan permafrost stable, but its effect on the demographic stability of Tibetan society is another matter.”

Chinese newspaper and television coverage on Tibet are generally confined to a particular series of themes (Johnson 2011: 43). The Chinese maintain that Tibet has been a part of China since the thirteenth century; that preceding the arrival of Chinese troops in the 1950s Tibet was “hell on earth;” and lastly that China has managed Tibet in a benevolent manner, financing huge development while allowing Tibetans to direct their own affairs (Johnson 2011: 43). However, the minority nationalities account for nearly fifty percent of the national poor in China (Johnson 2011: 53).

Tibetans may attend the twelve universities created specifically for the 108 million or so people belonging to the fifty-five ethnic minority groups (Johnson 2011: 39). However, after graduating options are few for Tibetans. They may find work as low-paid school teachers or, if they have good connections, they may get government posts (Johnson 2011: 41).

Johnson (2011: 46), a foreign correspondent and the Beijing bureau chief for the McClatchy Newspaper group for six years, writes that China would like the world to believe that Tibet is open to anyone. However, this is far from true. He states that “Tibet is like a separate country with unique immigration rules.” As an accredited foreign journalist he was barred from Tibet unless invited to go there. Foreign journalists cannot gain access to Tibet unless they are able to obtain a permit, which is rarely granted (Johnson 2011: xi). Johnson (2011: xi) writes that “Tibet is one of several topics that remain virtually radioactive for the ruling party.” He continues to say that China coerces its trading partners to accept its point of view on Tibet and that as China grows stronger economically this coercion will affect all of us (Johnson 2011: xiv). This is borne out by recent events in South Africa when the Dalai Lama was forced to cancel a trip to South Africa after the South African government failed, following a fruitless five-week wait, to issue him with a visa in order to attend Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu’s eightieth birthday celebrations. The Dalai Lama had been invited by the archbishop himself, of whom he is a personal friend. His Holiness was also due to deliver a number of lectures at the University of the Western Cape and the University of the Witwatersrand. Politicians, the media, and the archbishop were outraged. They were unanimous in their outcry and blamed the South African government’s unprecedented silence on the issue on the fact that China is South Africa’s biggest trading partner and therefore puts South Africa under obligation to this partnership (Ferreira 2011: <http://www.mg.co.za/print/2011-10-04-anger-as-dalai-lama-cancels-trip-to-sa>). South Africa’s Deputy President had also just been to China on an official visit for four days

the previous week to sign a number of bilateral and investment deals (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-15164383>).

Many Tibetans cannot speak Mandarin with any fluency, but speak only Tibetan. The two languages are not mutually intelligible (Johnson 2011: 28). Few Tibetans really wish to study Mandarin, but they are enthusiastic about studying English (Johnson 2011: 37).

Closed-circuit surveillance cameras provide concealed Chinese officials twenty-four-hour access to what is taking place in most monasteries in Tibet, including the plazas outside the monasteries' main gates (Johnson 2011: 29). Such surveillance cameras are a constant feature in China's trouble-prone areas (Johnson 2011: 29), including the streets of Lhasa (<http://www.freetibet.org>). Johnson (2011: 35, 36) quotes several Tibetans as stating that they "really, really hate the Chinese people."

It is very difficult for Tibetans outside of Lhasa to visit there. Johnson (2011: 39) found that many Tibetans long to visit Lhasa, and he quotes one Tibetan as saying that "[e]very villager hopes to go to Lhasa because there are so many famous Buddhist statues there. It's the Tibetan capital." However, travelling is not easy since the Chinese police demand to know the reasons for travelling and anyone deemed a potential agitator is refused permission to travel to Lhasa (Johnson 2011: 39). "Lhasa is a Tibetan place, but Tibetans can't go there. The Potala is our palace, but it is overrun with Chinese," one young Tibetan is reported to have said (Johnson 2011: 39). It is ironic that *The Constitution of the People's Republic of China*, Article 4, Chapter 1, states that "[a]ll nationalities in the People's Republic of China are equal...Discrimination against and oppression of any nationality is prohibited; and any act which undermines the unity of the nationalities or instigates division is prohibited" (Johnson 2011: 49).

According to Johnson (2011: 11) in order to understand the Tibetan issue it is essential to consider what the Dalai Lama has to contend with in China. As the Dalai Lama advances in years, the question of his successor poses a problematic issue. The atheist Chinese government claims the right to endorse his successor. They will ensure that his so-called successor is compliant to their interests, as they have done with some less important lamas (Johnson (2011: xiv), notably the Panchen Lama (Wee & Blanchard 2011: 21). Wee and Blanchard (2011: 21) report that Padma Choling, the Chinese-appointed governor of Tibet stated unequivocally that the Dalai Lama had no right to

abolish the historical and traditional method of reincarnation in appointing his successor. The Chinese government furthermore insists on approving all incarnations of living Buddhas or senior religious figures in Tibetan Buddhism (Wee & Blanchard 2011: 21). The international prominence of the Dalai Lama has highlighted the Tibetan issue. According to Johnson (2011: xiv), the authoritarian Chinese government employs “bullying and heavy repression” to suppress anyone who threatens their monopoly on power, especially a minority group who “wield alluring ideas about self-governance, human dignity, and religious freedom.” However, the Dalai Lama has stated on several occasions that his reincarnation will take place outside of China. In fact, it could even take the shape of a *madey tulku*, a mystical process in which his successor is reborn while he is still alive, that will give him the opportunity to train the boy himself (Gyatso 2011b: 28, 29). His Holiness is quoted as having said that “I have no sort of assurance, but I feel the Fourteenth Dalai Lama’s life span may be a little longer than the Chinese Communist Party’s life span” indicating his belief that the Chinese regime cannot last for much longer (Johnson 2011: 8). Phuntsok Wangyal, the most widely known ethnic Tibetan in the Communist Party, is of the opinion that the ruling party is mistaken in believing that the death of the Dalai Lama will resolve the Tibetan problem (Johnson 2011: 23). Johnson (2011: 23) writes that Wangyal furthermore claims that if progress is not made on resolving the Tibet issue, “which has given China a black eye internationally,” the Dalai Lama’s death could ignite violence among radical Tibetans.

Already inside Tibet itself some dissatisfied Tibetans have resorted to self-immolations to protest against Chinese rule. Since 2009, 44 Tibetans have self-immolated (<http://www.savetibet.org/resource-center/>) making it one of the largest self-immolation movements in modern history (Wong 2012: <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/03/world/asia>). Forty-three of the self-immolations have taken place since March 16, 2011. Of the 44 self-immolations seven were women, of which two were nuns and sixteen were monks ((<http://www.savetibet.org/resource-center/>). The self-immolations were described by a witness as “not the end. This is only the beginning.” The witness continued to state that “[b]ecause of unfair judgments, oppressive policies and discrimination, because of all those things, the Tibetan people feel isolated” (Wong 2012:<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/03/world/asia>).

3.4.6 The role of Tibetan women in the protest movement

Xie (1990: 4) concludes her report on the changing role and status of women in China by stating that the full emancipation of women in China “is still a distant goal” which will demand the efforts of “many generations of both men and women” in China. She continues to say that although advances have been made in improving women’s status the position of women continues to be influenced by the remnants of a feudalistic system that lasted thousands of years, the difficulty of securing jobs, discrimination in education, women’s dual responsibilities, deep rooted social prejudice, as well as the huge population, and general lack of education and relevant qualifications of Chinese women (Xie 1990: 2, 3).

Although Tibetan society was also feudalistic in nature prior to the Chinese invasion of Tibet, Tibetan women have risen into prominence in the protest movement (<http://tibet.dharmakara.net/TibetFacts10.html>). Tibetan women from all three provinces of Tibet united in an uprising against the brutal Chinese oppression of the Tibetan people on 12 March 1959 (<http://www.tibetanwomen.org>). Although Tibetan women-in-exile living in India and other parts of the world enjoy equal status and opportunities (Farber 2003: 46), Tibetan women inside Tibet suffer enormously under Chinese rule (<http://tibet.dharmakara.net/TibetFacts10.html>). The Tibetan Women’s Association was therefore established in 1984 in India and advocates the rights of Tibetan women inside China as well as seeking to empower Tibetan women living in exile (<http://www.tibetanwomen.org>). The TWA is committed to a non-violent struggle against the Chinese invasion of Tibet and the brutalisation of Tibetan women (<http://www.tibetanwomen.org>).

Tibetan Buddhist nuns in China appear to be leading the resistance movement against the Chinese occupation of Tibet and the ban against the Dalai Lama (<http://tibet.dharmakara.net/TibetFacts10.html>). The unique position of nuns in society seems to inspire them to lead the independence movement. They have no children who would suffer as a result of their imprisonment or death. Consequently they have embraced this leadership role (Devine 1993: 18). Most of the demonstrations in Lhasa are initiated by nuns although they face immediate arrest. Nuns participated in fifteen of the twenty-five incidents reported between September 1987 and September 1989, and

almost entirely staged thirteen of these themselves. According to a Tibet Information Network report forty-nine of the 120 known pro-independence protests in Lhasa between 1987 and 1993 had been led by nuns (<http://tibet.dharmakara.net/TibetFacts10.html>). However, lay women also continue to play a prominent role in the pro-independence movement. One of the most courageous laywomen in the resistance movement was Patmo Kusang, the wife of a minor official. She was imprisoned by the Chinese after the 1959 demonstrations, and while in prison formed the Thu Wang Ku organisation in 1970 along with other prisoners to lead anti-Chinese demonstrations in prison. She was later executed and became a legendary martyr (Devine 1993: 21).

First-and second-hand reports by Tibetan women disclose that torture is a widespread response to non-violent protests. Human rights groups and the press present noticeably consistent accounts of the punishments and torture meted out to Tibetan women in prison (Devine 1993: 47). A report compiled by the Tibetan Women's Association in 2005, and presented to the United Nations Human Rights Commission (<http://www.iwraw-ap.org>) indicates that sexual assault is a particular form of torture used to punish, humiliate, and coerce female Tibetan prisoners.

3.5 THE DIASPORA

One might well ask why large numbers of Tibetans continue to risk the perilous trek across the high Himalayan passes from Tibet. They arrive in India with hardly any personal belongings and “face formidable challenges of economic survival as well as adapting to a foreign culture and climate” (Farber 2003: 41).

Traditionally, Tibetans maintain very close family units, but the Chinese occupation and the resultant diaspora of refugees have broken up many families (Farber 2003: 41). More than ninety percent of Tibetan refugees live in settlements on government-donated land in India and Nepal (Farber 2003: 41). There are also large Tibetan communities in Switzerland, Canada, Europe, and the United States (<http://www.tibet.net>). While rehabilitation has been mostly successful, the recent dramatic increase of refugees from Tibet has imposed a severe burden on the existing refugee communities (Farber 2003: 41). There are currently about 145 000 Tibetans living in exile (Johnson 2011: 104).

With the encouragement of Tibetan Buddhist teachers outside Tibet and help from foreign supporters, more than one hundred monasteries have been re-established (Farber 2003: 41, 43). The Tibetan Government-in-Exile has made a remarkable effort in preserving the integrity of Tibetan life by establishing projects such as schools and orphanages, homes for the elderly, and cultural organisations (Farber 2003: 44-49). Many of the refugees are children and teenagers and the Tibetan Government-in-Exile has proclaimed that all Tibetan refugee children must attend school. Almost half of the refugee community's resources is spent on education resulting in nearly universal literacy among young Tibetan refugees (Farber 2003: 46). The success of the educational programme has been largely due to the efforts of the Central Tibetan Schools Administration, funded by the Government of India (Farber 2003: 46). The Tibetan Homes Foundation, a boarding school for Tibetan refugee orphans, and the Tibetan Children's Village (TCV), run by the Dalai Lama's surviving sister, have made vast contributions to the educational, cultural, and personal needs of refugee children, especially those who have been orphaned or separated from their families (Farber 2003: 46).

Furthermore, The Library of Tibetan Works and Archives in Dharamsala has a museum and archive collection. It offers seminars and translates Tibetan works into English and some other languages (<http://www.ltwa.net>). The Tibetan Medical and Astrological Institute, also in Dharamsala, trains medical students in traditional Tibetan medicine and maintains a hospital and a research centre (<http://www.men-tsee-khang.org>). The Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts is a professional training institute for drama, opera, and dance, and has a troupe that tours throughout the world (<http://www.tibetanarts.org>).

The exiled Tibetan community is administered by the *Kashag*, the Council of Ministers, and the Assembly of Tibetan People's Deputies, a democratically elected body introduced by the Dalai Lama. Situated in Dharamsala, North India, the Tibetan government supervises a number of departments and councils, including a Council of Religious and Cultural Affairs, a Council for Home Affairs, a Council for Tibetan Education, and the Information Office of His Holiness the Dalai Lama (<http://www.tibet.net>). A number of overseas offices represent the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Government-in-Exile, namely in New York, London, Switzerland, Japan, and Nepal.

3.5.1 Tibetans in exile

The majority of Tibetan refugees cross the Himalayas in winter by way of the snow-laden and windswept Nangpa Pass, at approximately 6 153 metres (18 753 feet) (Johnson 2011: 100). At the best of times it is an arduous journey, even though it seems to be safer in winter as freezing temperatures stabilise the ice and snow fields, making it safer to avoid the fatal open crevasses that swallow those who lose their footing (Johnson 2011: 100). The Chinese border guards also do not patrol as often in winter. Most refugees eat no hot food during their flight across the Himalayas and live mostly on dried meat, dried fruits, and *tsampa* which they mix with water or snow to make a paste. They sleep in empty plastic garbage bags to keep the cold at bay and often wrap their feet and hands with plastic bags to avoid frostbite (Johnson 2011: 103). However, extreme weather is not the only hazard faced by fleeing Tibetans. China's border management policy includes the provision of marksmen with high-powered rifles who shoot any suspicious looking Tibetans on sight (Johnson 2011: 100).

Once the Tibetans cross into Nepal they are faced with further dangers. Apparently Nepalese police and soldiers routinely strip Tibetan refugees of the little cash and other possessions they bring with them (Johnson 2011: 100). For the first few days Tibetans therefore sleep in the open avoiding villages with a police presence. The journey across some of the most forbidding high-mountain terrain on earth, from Tingri in Tibet to the safety of a refugee centre in the Nepalese capital of Katmandu, takes about two weeks (Johnson 2011: 100).

Between a few hundred to sometimes three-to four-thousand Tibetans leave Tibet every year to seek temporary or permanent exile (Johnson 2011: 100). Johnson (2011: 100) states that it is an "erratic exodus," depending on conditions in Tibet and the tightening of border patrols from time to time. For many Tibetans walking over the Himalayas is the only way out of Tibet as they may not leave Tibet without a passport and securing one is almost impossible (Johnson 2011: 100). According to Johnson (2011: 100) this exodus belies China's claim that all is well in Tibet.

The thriving Nepalese village of Namche is on the main hiking route to the base camp of Mount Everest (Johnson 2011: 101). Unbeknownst to many of the foreign mountaineers acclimatising there before commencing their climb up Everest, Namche is

on “the underground railway route for scared Tibetan refugees” (Johnson 2011: 101). This underground railway keeps information flowing back and forth between Tibet and the diaspora. All new arrivals are formally debriefed at refugee centres in Katmandu and Dharamsala. This provides a wealth of information to the Tibetan Government-in-Exile about conditions in Tibet (Johnson 2011: 101). Many guest house owners in the Namche region are sympathetic towards the Tibetan refugees and provide them with lodgings, information, and medical care. The proprietors use coded telephone messages to learn when new arrivals are due. Travellers sojourning at the guest houses are usually oblivious of these dramatic events (Johnson 2011: 101).

Tibetans flee Tibet for a number of reasons including wishing to see the Dalai Lama and to extend their religious training. Some are teenagers whose parents wish them to obtain a Tibetan-language and English-language education in India at schools run by the Tibetan Government-in-Exile. A number of Tibetans are hoping for better economic opportunities abroad having been displaced by the numbers of Han Chinese currently streaming into Tibet. Others are fleeing political persecution and imprisonment (Johnson 2011: 103). Almost half of all Tibetan refugees are under the age of twenty-five (Farber 2003: 44). The majority of them are monks and nuns fleeing religious persecution. Many are former prisoners of conscience needing urgent medical care (Farber 2003: 44). *Asia News* (Carvalho 2011: <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/>) reported from Kardze in the Tibetan part of Sichuan Province, China, in January 2011 how Chinese police patrol the streets of Kardze exhibiting hostile behaviour especially towards Tibetan monks and nuns. A foreign tourist stated that there are thousands of Chinese police and soldiers in riot gear, patrolling the streets in armoured vehicles armed with machine guns, as well as on foot. Plain-clothes policemen also infiltrate the streets. It is reported in the same newspaper that the local prison is filled with monks and nuns as well as Tibetans who have expressed solidarity with the Dalai Lama. The evening television broadcast programmes showing Tibetan prisoners repenting for their crimes after being beaten and subjugated, including an 80-year old Tibetan woman. The same newspaper reported from Dharamsala, India, on the arrest of two Tibetan Buddhist nuns who expressed a wish for religious freedom and the return of the Dalai Lama (<http://www.asianews.it/news-en/>).

Farber (2003: 43) writes that “Buddhism in today’s Tibet is a pale shadow of its former self.” Many monasteries have been relegated to the function of museums, and the

monks and nuns reduced to caretakers. Although Tibetans are now allowed some external expressions of their religion such as circumambulating sacred sites, prostrations, making offerings, turning prayer wheels, and erecting prayer flags, the study of Buddhist teachings remain severely restricted (Farber 2003: 43).

Johnson (2011: 104) found frustrations high among second-generation exiles born in Nepal and India. They have little or no prospect of obtaining citizenship, carrying only refugee identity cards. They also experience frequent limitations on business and travel. A number of them have done well, obtaining university degrees and finding employment with aid organisations, embassies and travel agencies, and catering to hikers and mountaineers (Johnson 2011: 105). However, they feel rootless and angry over their stateless status, looking for a new way to bring about change to Tibet, a land most of them have never seen (Johnson 2011: 105).

The younger generation of Tibetans, usually under the age of thirty and university-educated, are frustrated with the Dalai Lama's "Middle Way" approach to the Tibetan issue (Johnson 2011: 105). The Dalai Lama has pursued this policy since the late 1980s seeking genuine autonomy for Tibet rather than full independence from China (Johnson 2011: 105). Some of these youngsters are even prepared to take up arms against China (Johnson 2011: 105). They want a free and independent Tibet; a Tibet they know only through their parents' tales and reminiscences. Yet they speak Tibetan, eat Tibetan food, and socialise with their fellow exiles. Although they revere the Dalai Lama they feel that his diplomacy with China has not been successful. Tibetan independence is what they strive for, and to obtain this they believe requires protests, demonstrations, and even stronger actions (Johnson 2011: 105, 106). These young people feel that a more aggressive, non-violent confrontational stance is necessary which is not just "talk, talk, talk" (Johnson 2011: 107). However, His Holiness Ogyen Trinley Dorje, the Seventeenth Karmapa and one of the most revered and respected leaders in Tibetan Buddhism today (Raushenbush 2011: <http://www.huffingtonpost.com>) continues to emphasise the importance of compassion and peaceful means in finding solutions for political problems (Martin 2003: 150, 152, 162). This does not deter him from stating the truth about the Chinese occupation of Tibet: "One of the things that the Chinese do not understand is that the Tibetans are seeking basic human rights - freedom of speech and freedom to practise our religion. The Chinese frame it as a political issue, but the Tibetans are not a political people... I am not anti-Chinese. I am a spiritual teacher and

am working for the welfare of all sentient beings. I am not anti anything, including China. But I will advocate for the truth and I want the truth to be known” (Raushenbush 2011: <http://www.huffingtonpost.com>).

The Tibetan Youth Congress (TYC), currently with a membership of thirty thousand, was set up in 1970 with the blessing of the Dalai Lama (Johnson 2011: 109). It is the largest non-governmental organisation voicing the frustrations of the exiled Tibetan youth, and is despised by China (Johnson 2011: 109). The TYC calls on each member “to struggle for the total independence of Tibet even at the cost of one’s life” (Johnson 2011: 110). China calls the TYC a “radical hotbed” and even a “terrorist organisation,” comparing it to Al Qaeda and the Chechen terrorists (Johnson 2011: 110).

Johnson (2011: 115) feels that the Tibetan struggle is on a knife’s edge. The Dalai Lama has appealed to the radicals to tone down their activities, fearful that violence will harm global support for the Tibetan cause. However, he also hopes that stronger political leaders will emerge in the diaspora (Johnson 2011: 115). He continues to advocate a non-violent approach and suggests compassion for the Chinese party leaders. True to his Buddhist beliefs the Dalai Lama states that those who perpetrate injustices face long-term karmic consequences. However, he is quoted as saying that “[i]f you really want revenge, keep calm and think deeply, what is the best way to hit back?” (Johnson 2011: 116).

3.5.2 Imprisoned Tibetans

Nearly one thousand Tibetans are presently imprisoned in Chinese prisons where torture is commonplace (Farber 2003: 43). The 2010 Annual Report of The Tibetan Centre for Human Rights (TCHRD) reports the number as 831 known prisoners (http://www/tchrd.org/publications/topical_reports). It further states that only 360 of these are known to have been legally tried by the Chinese courts. Twelve of the 831 prisoners are serving life sentences. During 2010 188 known Tibetans were arrested and detained. Seventy-one of these were sentenced by the courts. Since 2008 more than sixty Tibetan writers, bloggers, intellectuals, and cultural figures have been arrested. The report furthermore discloses that although China issued new regulations in 2010 to the effect that evidence obtained illegally through torture may no longer be adduced in death penalty cases, evidence obtained under duress was still routinely accepted. Torture seems to be a regular feature in the detention centres and prisons in Tibet.

Prisoners are randomly fired upon, beaten, tortured, held in solitary confinement, and their prison sentences extended without further trials. Deaths occur regularly under torture while others gradually succumb to their injuries and eventually die. (http://www/tchrd.org/publications/topical_reports).

There are three officially recognised prisons in Tibet: Drapchi Prison, Lhasa Prison, and Powo Tramo. However, the Tibetan Centre for Human Rights states that the actual number of prisons and detention centres far outnumber the official figures (http://www/tchrd.org/publications/topical_reports). The Tibetan Centre for Human Rights (TCHRD) also reports that Drapchi Prison is Tibet's most feared prison, being notorious as a dungeon of torture. Drapchi has seven major units. Five units are reserved for criminal prisoners, and two for political prisoners. There is one unit for female criminal and political prisoners, and one unit exclusively for male political prisoners. The seven units are currently housed in eight cellblocks.

The Centre describes the Drapchi Prison as the penitentiary in which the majority of freedom activists are incarcerated. Contrary to Chinese official reports that there are 115 political prisoners in Tibet, the TCHRD claims that as of 2001 an estimated 252 political prisoners are incarcerated or being held in detention centres in Tibet. Of these 129 political prisoners are in Drapchi Prison, of which 26 are female (http://www/tchrd.org/publications/topical_reports).

The Free Tibet Campaign regularly issues reports about Tibetan prisoners (freeTibet 2011: 2 - 4). Recently it brought to the public's attention the plight of Wangdu, a health worker from Lhasa. He was sentenced to life imprisonment for sharing information via an email, about the Chinese crackdowns he witnessed in 2008 in Tibet. He was charged with "espionage" (freeTibet 2011: 2, 3). Paljor Norbu, the eighty-one-year old owner of a printing business, was sentenced to seven years in jail for printing banned materials, including the Tibetan national flag. His family is in the dark about where he is being held (freeTibet 2011: 2, 3). Dhondup Wangchen was arrested for producing a film about the Chinese occupation of Tibet. He has been repeatedly tortured while in prison and has been denied access to medical treatment (freeTibet 2011: promotional leaflet). Ngawang Sandrol, aged thirteen, was tortured for nine months for taking part in a peaceful protest. "We were subjected to electric shocks, beaten with pipes, hung in the air with our arms tied behind our backs, and made to stand in direct sun or freezing cold

for extended periods of time” (freeTibet 2011: promotional leaflet). Furthermore the Free Tibet Campaign reports that on 8 April 2008 Tseyang Kyi (23 years old) and Sonam Tsultrim (22 years old) were two of eight people who died during a peaceful protest. They were calling for the release of two monks who had been arrested for refusing to denounce the Dalai Lama. Chinese police turned on the unarmed protestors with guns (freeTibet 2011 promotional leaflet).

Ani Panchen, an ordained nun, is known as Tibet’s “warrior nun” (Farber 2003: 42). In 1958 she led 700 people on horseback against the invading Chinese. She was captured in 1960 and spent the next twenty-one years in Chinese prisons. There she secretly continued her religious practices and during periods of solitary confinement she engaged in meditation retreats. She endured horrific torture, and yet maintained compassion for her torturers. She never denounced her devotion to the Dalai Lama or her beliefs in a free and independent Tibet. Ani Panchen was released in 1981 and escaped to India seven years later, fearing re-arrest. She continued to campaign for the Tibetan cause until her death in 2002 (Farber 2003: 42).

The United States Congressional-Executive Report on China (2007: 1) reveals that Chinese authorities continue to detain and imprison Tibetans for peaceful expression and non-violent action, charging them with such crimes as “splittism” and claiming that their behaviour “endangers state security.” Expression or action that is linked to the Dalai Lama is especially likely to result in such charges (The United States Congressional-Executive Report on China 2007: 26). The Commission’s Political Prisoner Database listed 100 known cases of Tibetan political detention or imprisonment as of September 2007. The average prison sentence is eleven years and two months. The database also lists 64 Tibetan monks and nuns currently imprisoned with average sentences of ten years and four months.

3.6 TIBETAN BUDDHISM IN THE WEST

The Tibetan Diaspora not only brought Tibetans to the West, but it was also responsible for the spread of Tibetan Buddhism around the world (Farber 2003: 182). A number of great Tibetan masters who went into exile contributed towards the expansion of the body of spiritual traditions comprising Tibetan Buddhism. The traditions and beliefs of Tibetan Buddhism are being transmitted to the West by the last of these great Tibetan

Buddhist masters who were educated and trained in Tibet before the Chinese invasion. Here one can list spiritual teachers such as His Holiness Sakya Trizin (see 2.5.2), the late Chogyam Trungpa, Geshe Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche, Tulku Thondup, Lama Tharchin Rinpoche, and the late Kalu Rinpoche. Tibetans and non-Tibetans alike are documenting the teachings of these masters, translating scriptures and compiling archives of surviving sacred texts and art (Farber 2003: 184).

In little more than fifty years Tibetan Buddhism has grown in the West into a significant movement with a vibrant network of centres, teachers, and students (Farber 2003: 184). The directory of meditation and retreat centres in America alone comprises five pages in the *Shambhala Sun* (2011: 91-95). Numerous Western disciples of Tibetan Buddhist masters have assumed monastic life or are running dharma centres in the West. The most prominent of these are Dr. Reginald A. Ray, professor of Buddhist Studies at Naropa University and Teacher in Residence at Rocky Mountain Shambhala Centre in Colorado (Ray 2002: dust jacket); Venerable Pema Chodron (see 5.7.4), abbess of Gampo Abbey (see 5.9.1), a Western Buddhist monastery in Canada (*Shambhala Sun* 2011: 65); Lama Surya Das, a renowned American lama authorised by his teacher Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche to disseminate the sacred teachings of Dzogchen (*Shambhala Sun* 2011: 71); Venerable Thubten Chodron (see 5.7.3), abbess of Sravasti Abbey (see 5.9.2) (<http://www.thubtenchodron.org>); and South Africa's own Prof. Rob Nairn who is the representative in Africa for Venerable Akong Tulku Rinpoche of the Kagyu Samye Ling Tibetan Centre in Scotland (see 5.9.4) (<http://www.robnairn.net>). A vast body of literature on Tibetan Buddhism is being produced by many of these Western teachers and students of Tibetan Buddhism. Numerous publishing houses have sprung up in the West specialising in Tibetan Buddhist literature, notably Shambhala, Snow Lion, and Windhorse Publications. In Boulder, Colorado, there is even an academic Buddhist-inspired liberal arts university offering bachelor's and master's programmes (*Shambhala* 2011: 54 – 59).

Books and films about Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism contribute towards popularising Tibetan Buddhism and the plight of the Tibetans. The Tibetan cause has also been adopted by many Hollywood celebrities (Farber 2003: 184). However, no one has done more to expound Tibetan Buddhism in the West than the present Dalai Lama. One of the Dalai Lama's books, *The Art of Happiness* (1998) attained the status as one of the best-selling self-help books in publishing history (Farber 2003: 184). His Holiness

refers to himself as “a simple Buddhist monk” yet he attracts vast numbers of people wherever he goes (Farber 2003: 184). He is not concerned about converting people to Buddhism and recommends that unless they experience a very strong calling to Buddhism they should retain their own spiritual religions (Farber 2003: 184). Rather, his message is one of compassion and universal responsibility by way of developing a “good heart” (Farber 2003: 184).

3.6.1 Tibetan Buddhism in South Africa

Tibetan Buddhism in South Africa is mainly represented by the Kagyu and Gelugpa Schools. Of these, the Kagyu Karma School has the largest number of followers (Laue 1999, in Clasquin & Kruger: 72-75). South Africans were first introduced to Tibetan Buddhism in 1972 when Sister Palmo visited Cape Town and Port Elizabeth (Laue 1999, in Clasquin & Kruger: 72, 73). Sister Palmo, formerly Freda Bedi¹⁰, an English woman who became a Tibetan Buddhist nun, founded Karma Rigdol in South Africa under the direction of His Holiness the Sixteenth Gyalwa Karmapa. Within five years Karma Rigdol had groups in Cape Town, Johannesburg, Durban, and Port Elizabeth (Laue 1999, in Clasquin & Kruger: 73).

In 1977/78 one of the Karma Rigdol members, Geoffrey Hardacre, and four other members, visited the Karmapa in France. The political situation in South Africa made it difficult for lamas to visit the country. Consequently the Karmapa gave Hardacre permission to provide refuge¹¹ to South Africans on his behalf. On their return to South Africa a number of Buddhists were given refuge and formally became Kagyu Buddhists (Laue 1999, in Clasquin & Kruger: 73).

A number of years later, in 1982, Akong Rinpoche was instructed by the Karmapa to visit South Africa. His Holiness Akong Rinpoche, a tulku and a qualified Tibetan doctor who was the abbot of a monastery in Tibet, escaped from there in 1959. Freda Bedi eventually helped him to settle in England from where he moved to Scotland to establish the Samye Ling Tibetan Centre, which today is one of the largest Tibetan

¹⁰ Tenzin Palmo went to work at Freda Bedi’s school for young lamas in Dalhousie when she first arrived in India in 1964 (see 6.3) (Mackenzie 1999: 34).

¹¹ To take refuge is the ritual act whereby an individual declares his/her devotion to the Buddha, his teachings, the Buddhist community, and the teacher/guru.

Buddhist centres in the West (Laue 1999, in Clasquin & Kruger: 72). Following his visit, the Karma Kagyu Trust was established and the Karma Rigdol centres now fell under the direction of Akong Rinpoche and the Karma Kagyu Trust (Laue 1999, in Clasquin & Kruger: 73). The Karma Kagyu Trust has centres in Cape Town, the Eastern Cape, and Gauteng (<http://www.kagyuafrica.org.za>).

Rob Nairn is Akong Rinpoche's representative in Africa. After retiring from academic life, he entered into a four-year retreat at Samye Ling in Scotland (<http://www.robnairn.net>). He has written four books (1997, 2001a, 2001b, 2004) on Tibetan Buddhism, and divides his time between Samye Ling in Scotland and the Tara Rokpa Centre in the Groot Mariko district in South Africa (<http://www.robnairn.net>).

The Mahasiddha Kadampa Buddhist Centre in Durban is run by the Buddhist monk Gen Kelsang Sangdak (<http://www.meditateindurban.org/>). This centre follows the new Kadampa tradition, a form of Mahayana Buddhism which developed from the Gelugpa School of Tibetan Buddhism.

Lam Rim centres in the Gelugpa tradition (Laue 1999, in Clasquin & Kruger: 75) have also been established in South Africa. The Lam Rim Tibetan Buddhist Centre in Johannesburg's spiritual director is Venerable Geshe Damcho Yonten who first visited South Africa in 1989. Geshe Samten Gyatso is the resident teacher at the centre (<http://www.lamrim.co.za>).

Small Buddhist groups in South Africa continue to operate both independently and within main-stream traditions (Smith 1999, in Clasquin & Kruger: 77). No research seems to have been done on the role of South African women in Buddhism and no statistics are available about the percentage of South African women who are practising Buddhists.

3.7 CONCLUSION

The United States Congressional-Executive Commission on China (2007: 1, 2) concludes that no progress is evident in the dialogue between China and the Dalai Lama or his representatives. The Commission states that Chinese officials display no signs of recognising the benefits of inviting the Dalai Lama to visit China and meeting with him directly. Furthermore, the Commission finds that there is an increased level of repression of the freedom of religion for Tibetan Buddhists. China has intensified its

long-running anti-Dalai Lama campaign, and government control over Buddhist monasteries, nunneries, monks, nuns, and incarnated lamas has deepened. The detention and imprisonment of Tibetans for staging peaceful demonstrations and for campaigning for the right of freedom of expression continues. Lastly, the Commission indicates that the Chinese government is introducing greater control over the Tibetan rural population by implementing programmes that will spell the end to the traditional lifestyle of the Tibetan nomadic herder by forcing them to settle in fixed communities and by reconstructing or relocating farm villages.

Johnson (2011: 291), an experienced foreign journalist with an in-depth knowledge and personal experience of living in China, states unequivocally that blatant mistruths are part of the “manufactured reality” that the one-party Chinese state creates as it exerts control over China. When Liu Xiaobo won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2010, the Nobel committee commended him for “his long and non-violent struggle for fundamental human rights in China” (Johnson 2011: 319). The Chinese government however declared that Liu was a convicted criminal (after a closed-door trial at which his defence was not allowed to present evidence and at which he was sentenced to lengthy detention for “inciting subversion of state power”) and that the award was “blasphemy against the Peace Prize” (Johnson 2011: 319).

According to human rights groups, China executes more people than the rest of the world combined, but it does not provide data on executions, claiming that such information is a state secret (Johnson 2011: 69, 70). Amnesty International estimated that in 2008 China executed 1 718 people (Johnson 2011: 70). Under Chinese law there are sixty-eight categories of crimes punishable by death, including homicide, aggravated assault, smuggling, tax evasion, and embezzlement (Johnson 2011: 70). Foreign objectors to capital punishment claim that China uses it excessively against ethnic minorities, particularly those convicted of leaking state secrets, violating security laws, or threatening national security (Johnson 2011: 70). Johnson (2011: 70) states that “[d]raconian state security laws” render almost any expressions by ethnic minority activists punishable by long prison sentences or capital punishment.

Mutti (in Ripa 2006: 19) describes the Tibetan people as “[e]quipped with a very sweet nature that allows them to endure the injustices of man in the same way they endure the harshness of nature.” He continues to say (in Ripa 2006: 19) that they display an

“eternal smile” on their faces that at times seems enigmatic, like the smile on the face of the Buddha. For the Tibetans the joy of living is a kind of weapon against the violence that they are continually being subjected to by the Chinese (Mutti, in Ripa 2006: 19).

Ripa (2006: 22) writes that the Tibetan people, despite the damage caused by persecution from the Chinese authorities, have maintained their religion intact and are fighting to keep their cultural traditions alive. A hostile environment, both politically and geographically, has not prevented the Tibetans from reaffirming themselves as a happy, tolerant, unaffected nation “tenaciously anchored” to a Buddhist concept of the world that is fundamentally different from Western thought (Ripa 2006: 22).

“The entire Tibetan landscape is an emanation of the sacred” (Ripa 2006: 22). The mountains are scattered with monasteries and stupas (symbolic monuments). The earth is marked with ritual inscriptions carved in rocks. *Tarcho* and *lung-ta*, flags covered with votive inscriptions, wave in the wind. Ripa (2006: 22, 23) states that the typical Tibetan holistic vision of nature no longer resides in Western man, who feels cut off from the universe, incapable of establishing a connection with it. It is, according to Ripa (2006: 23), precisely this power of the Buddhist faith that instils in Tibetans extraordinary forbearance, tranquillity, and inner energy.

Wangyal (in Mullin & Wangyal 1983: 23) indicates that the longer the Tibetan problem remains unsolved, the greater the likelihood that whatever small traces of their culture and identity the Tibetans in Tibet have managed to preserve, will be shattered. However, he believes that the Chinese are aware that the longer the delay the more difficult it will be for them to prevent other nations from supporting the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan cause. One can only hope that the Tibetan community-in-exile will continue its efforts in convincing the international community to recognise the uniqueness of the Tibetan cultural heritage and the right of the Tibetan people to govern their own country.

Despite the fact that traditional Tibet has been overrun and almost obliterated by the “tidal wave of modernity,” there is something in Tibet that has survived the mortal onslaught on the country and its people (Ray 2002: 2). One may well ask what the secret of Tibet is. Ray (2002: 2, 3) proposes that the attraction Tibet continues to hold for modern man, is its transcendent spiritual traditions and in particular its Vajrayana

Buddhist tradition. Van Loon (1999, in Clasquin & Kruger: 31) comments that “a powerful religious message has the capacity to assume vast proportions and weave itself into the social fabric and culture of a multitude of nations.”

CHAPTER FOUR: DAUGHTERS OF THE BUDDHA¹²

Throughout the ages, women have had a unique way of approaching the spiritual path and a specific perspective on wisdom. This feminine vision of enlightenment is process oriented, relational, circular, transparent, and passionate.

(Miller 2011: 30)



4.1 INTRODUCTION

Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo¹³ vowed unequivocally, boldly, and courageously at the commencement of her journey as a Tibetan Buddhist nun, that she intended attaining enlightenment in the female form “no matter how many lifetimes it takes” (Mackenzie 1999: 4). This promise is tantamount to stating that she intends becoming a female Buddha. Tibetan Buddhism represents a fair number of acclaimed women mystics, saints, and deities, but the “full flowering of human divinity had, for the past thousand years at least, been deemed the exclusive domain of the male” (Mackenzie 1999: 5) despite the fact that the Buddha confirmed the equal potential of women to attain enlightenment and ordained them as monastics (Tsomo 1999: 5). Tenzin Palmo’s intention could possibly be seen as the ultimate in women’s liberation (Mackenzie 1999: 7). She has certainly made great strides in that direction with her “track record of exceptional meditational ability and tenacity” (Mackenzie 1999: 5) having spent twelve

¹² Tsomo 1988

¹³ Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo is dealt with in detail in Chapter 6.

years meditating in a Himalayan cave 4 268 meters (13 000 feet) above sea-level (Mackenzie 1999: 2).

Both His Holiness the present Dalai Lama (see 2.5.1 and 2.6.10) and His Holiness the Seventeenth Karmapa (see 2.5.4) support the equality of women in Tibetan Buddhism especially in concerning the the full ordination of nuns. Presently only novice ordination for nuns is available in Tibetan Buddhism and nuns who wish to obtain full ordination have to travel to Hong Kong or Taiwan in order to be ordained in the Chinese school of Buddhism (Thanissara, Jitindriya, & Day 2010; 45).¹⁴ The ordination remains valid even though they continue to practise as Tibetan Buddhist nuns. The Dalai Lama, spiritual head of Tibetan Buddhism and one of its most learned scholars, has made his position clear with a statement issued in 2007 at the *First International Congress on Buddhist Women's Role in the Sangha*, held at Hamburg University in Germany. In it he states that “after extensive research and consultation with leading Vinaya scholars and Sangha members of the Tibetan tradition and Buddhist traditions internationally, and with the backing of the Tibetan Buddhist community, since [the] 1960s, I express my full support for the establishment of the Bhikshuni Sangha in the Tibetan tradition.” Two years earlier, in 2005, he had already urged Western bhikshunis to become more involved in the issue of full ordination in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. This led to the establishment of *The Committee of Western Bhikshunis* (<http://www.bhiksuniordination.net>) of which Tenzin Palmo is a member. There are six Western nuns on the committee. Furthermore, at a press conference in Dharamsala in 2008 the Dalai Lama made the astonishing announcement that his next incarnation might be as a female (Johnson 2011: 148). He stated that the time had come for women to take a more active role in world peace and in promoting human compassion, and that he might therefore subsequently assume a female incarnation (Johnson 2011: 148).

His Holiness the Seventeenth Gyalwang Karmapa has been equally outspoken on the issue. The Karmapa, the second most-venerated Tibetan Buddhist lama in exile today (Johnson 2011:137), astonished an international audience in the winter of 2010 in Bodhgaya, India by pledging to ordain women as bhikshunis, stating unequivocally that he was prepared to ordain these women himself (Damcho 2010:<http://www>).

¹⁴ Full ordination for women is currently available in the Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese Buddhist traditions, and has recently been re-established for nuns in the Theravada Buddhist tradition of Sri Lanka (Damcho 2010: <http://www.thebuddhadharma.com/>).

buddhadharma.com/:<http://www.thebuddhadharma.com/>). However, he did caution against expecting quick results, asking the assembled audience to be patient.

The declaration by the Karmapa was groundbreaking since it was the first time that a Tibetan Buddhist leader of this standing had publicly committed to personally making full ordination available (Damcho 2010: <http://www.thebuddhadharma.com/>). This statement followed intensive research into the possibility of establishing bhikshuni ordination for nuns according to the monastic code that regulates Tibetan Buddhism. Furthermore, it confirmed the Karmapa's dedication to addressing gender issues in Tibetan Buddhism (Damcho 2010: <http://www.thebuddhadharma.com/>). Although the "bhikshuni issue" is regularly discussed and debated at various Buddhist conferences, the Karmapa's announcement that he would take personal responsibility for extending the opportunity of full ordination to nuns is a critical step forward on a course that the Dalai Lama initially asked the Tibetan Buddhist monastic community to consider (Damcho 2010: <http://www.thebuddhadharma.com/>). The Karmapa furthermore stated that the ordination issue was not only a concern to women but that it affected the entire body of Buddhist teachings as well as the monastic community since both men and women were guardians of the dharma (Damcho 2010:<http://www.thebuddhadharma.com/>).

Prior to his public statement the Karmapa convened a Vinaya conference in India where he spoke at length to the monastic community about the importance of establishing bhikshuni ordination in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. He reminded the monastic delegates that the Buddha himself bestowed bhikshuni ordination on women as a means to bring about their liberation from samsara. He argued that the Mahayana perspective of compassion and sense of responsibility for the well-being of others included making the opportunity of full ordination available to women. The Karmapa in addition pointed out that currently the majority of Buddhists in the West were women (Damcho 2010: <http://www.buddhadharma.com/>). He used the analogy of a house with four pillars in which the house represented Tibetan Buddhism, and each of the pillars the nuns, monks, female and male lay practitioners. He explained that a pillar was missing from the "house" of Tibetan Buddhism since the nuns were not fully ordained, and that this prevented the stability of the dharma and its accessibility to the entire Buddhist community (Damcho 2010: <http://www.buddhadharma.com/>).

The previous year, in 2009, the Karmapa summoned khenpos from the major Karma Kagyu monasteries to his residence in Dharamsala to engage in several months of study and research under various Vinaya experts. They were directly involved in exploring the different options for conferring full ordination on women. The Karmapa concluded that he did not think that there were any major obstacles or challenges. He confirmed that there were some outdated views and ways of thinking about the issue but that he did not consider these a hindrance. Rather, he believed that what was necessary was for a leader to step forward and to move beyond conferences and discussions. “What is needed is to take full steps” (Damcho 2010: <http://www.buddhadharma.com/>).

4.2 SISTERS IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE BUDDHA

Rita M. Gross, Professor of Comparative Studies in Religion at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, states in her seminal book on Buddhism (1993: 3) that a “revalorisation” of Buddhism is necessary. She defines revalorisation as “working with the categories and concepts of a traditional religion in the light of feminist values” (1993: 3). According to Gross the task of revalorising a traditional religion is double-edged. On the one hand, feminist¹⁵ investigation of any major world religion “reveals massive undercurrents of sexism and prejudice against women, especially in realms of religious praxis” (1993: 3). Armstrong (1996: x) indicates that most religions “have been male affairs” and have held women in a subordinate position. On the other hand, the term “revalorisation” implies that however sexist a religious tradition might be, it is not irreparably so. Revalorisation in fact repairs the tradition and brings it more into line with its original values and vision than its patriarchal form (Gross 1993: 3).

In recent years a number of female Western academics have initiated this revalorisation process, notably Tsedroen (2010), Simmer-Brown (2001), Findley (2000), Tsomo (1999), Klein (1995), Shaw (1994), Gross (1993), and Boucher (1988). Jampa Tsedroen and Karma Lekshe Tsomo are academics as well as ordained Tibetan Buddhist nuns. Without exception these authors have also studied with Tibetan Buddhist lamas and some, like Anne Carolyn Klein, are moreover founders and directors of Tibetan Buddhist centres of meditation and study. Furthermore, alongside these academics some

¹⁵ In the context of this thesis the term *feminism* is used in its broadest philosophical sense pertaining to the reconstructions of current religions and societies to render them more just and equitable to women (Gross 1993: 291)

prominent Western Tibetan Buddhist nuns such as Tenzin Palmo (2002; 2006; 2011), Thubten Chodron (1997; 1999), and Pema Chodron (1991) have been engaged in their own revalorisation of Tibetan Buddhism and have published prolifically on many aspects of Tibetan Buddhism. It is interesting to observe as Armstrong (1996: x) does that it is the West that has pioneered the liberation of women.

Gross (in Tsomo 1999: 277) points out that it is significant that about half of the converts to Buddhism in the West are laywomen who are exceptionally dedicated to their Buddhist practice. The emergence of women as both teachers and students has contributed to the manifestation of values and practices that distance Western Buddhism from the monastic frameworks of the Asian tradition (Sutin 2006: 520) which is predominantly patriarchal in structure and orientation. This is furthermore enhanced by the appearance of female researchers in the traditional male realm of Western academic Buddhology (Sutin 2006: 320). Sutin (2006: 320) hails Rita Gross (1993) as a pioneer of postmodern Buddhist feminist scholarship considering her inquiry into Buddhist misogyny. She even goes as far as to point out that the Buddha himself failed to show adequate compassion for his own family and states that Buddhism can only serve women's interests and needs if women themselves accepted the challenge to free Buddhism of its lingering elements of patriarchy (Sutin 2006: 321).

In her seminal book on a feminist reconstruction of Buddhism Gross (1993: 125) states that inadequate consideration has been given to the implications of Buddhist doctrines for gender issues, and that existing literature is deficient in its treatment of the reconstruction of the Buddhist world in accordance with feminist values. She continues to say that "feminist discussions of religious traditions are more concerned with the present and the future than with the past" (1993: 125), and that information about the past history of a religious tradition is merely used to encourage feminist analysis and reconstruction of the tradition (1993: 125). Gross draws attention to a number of Christian and Jewish feminist theologians who are committed to reconstructing their traditions.¹⁶ They argue that the core symbols of a religion are not inherently sexist, misogynist, or patriarchal, but are essentially egalitarian and liberating for all human beings. However, established cultural practices and prejudices in favour of men and against women have critically contaminated this pristine core. They conclude that if the

¹⁶ Christ & Plaskow 1979: 131 -192

tradition contains a pristine, but tainted, core of egalitarian teachings, it not only allows but requires reconstruction of the tradition (Gross 1993: 126). Gross therefore reasons that Buddhism is reconstructible because “its fundamental teachings and symbols are essentially egalitarian and liberating for all.” However, she poses the question whether “those currently holding positions of authority in Buddhism have the courage and the will to incorporate such reconstructions” (Gross 1993: 127).

4.2.1 A Buddhist definition of feminism

Gross (1993: 127) offers a valid and workable definition of feminism within which Buddhism can be reconstructed. She defines feminism in Buddhist terms as involving “the radical practice of the co-humanity of women and men” (1993: 127). In this sense *radical* means *going to the root of things*, which is an essentially Buddhist approach to key existential questions. Similarly, feminism questions conventional gender arrangements and stereotypes in a radical way. However, Gross points out that “Buddhism...has never applied its usual radicalism to the gender stereotypes and arrangements that it has accepted and utilised” (1993: 128).

Gross reverses the conventional word order in her definition (*women* and men) drawing attention to the fact that linguistic precision is central to Buddhist philosophy even though it does not regard verbal expression as capable of capturing ultimate truth (1993: 128). Likewise, feminism establishes an important link between language and consciousness (e.g. the use of *he* as a generic pronoun). Gross therefore reverses the conventional word order deliberately as a “consciousness-raising device” (1993: 128).

Equally important is the emphasis on the *co-humanity* of both women and men. Gross’ definition thereby disassociates itself from those extreme versions of feminism that view men as “unworkable, essentially flawed beings who cannot get over being patriarchs, sexists, and misogynists” (1993: 128).

Gross defines Buddhist feminism here as a *practice* rather than a *theory* (1993: 128). Buddhism is essentially a *practice*, a spiritual discipline. A variety of meditation techniques is central to Buddhism, and is the method for achieving the goals of calm, insight, and liberation (Gross 1993: 128). Gross claims that in Buddhism theory grows out of practice and provides the practitioner with motivation (1993: 128). Feminists, on the other hand, are more used to the Western predominance of theory over practice, and

tend to talk about *feminist theory*. However, she believes that feminism “really involves a fundamental reorientation of mind and heart that cannot bear fruit if it is merely theoretical” (1993: 128). In order to be effective, feminism needs to develop into an ongoing practice of altering one’s language, expectations, and perception of normalcy, and to awaken to the truth of the *co-humanity* of women and men (1993: 128).

Gross finally states that “the key concepts of Buddhism and the key concepts of feminism mutually entail each other” (1993: 129). She explains that there is “an extremely potent” connection between feminism’s androgynous, two-sexed model of humanity, and the central Buddhist concepts of the six realms¹⁷ and the preciousness of birth in the human realm (1993: 129). Gross emphasises the importance of the *human* realm by pointing out that there is no separate realm for women, but that there is simply a *human* realm (1993: 129). It is in the human realm that humanity is afforded the opportunity to practising the dharma and acquiring the results thereof (Gross 1993: 129).

4.2.2 Fear of the feminine? ¹⁸

Diane Perry (see Chapter 6) was ordained as a novice Tibetan Buddhist nun at the age of twenty-one in India. She was only the second Western woman to receive such ordination. Upon ordination her root guru or lama, Khamtrul Rinpoche (see 2.5.5), bestowed upon her the monastic name of Tenzin Palmo (Mackenzie 1999: 44). She joined his monastery first in Dalhousie and then in its present location in Tashi Jong where she worked as his secretary and also taught English to the young monks. Although she was delighted to be with her lama and the other tulkus and yogis, she also describes the six years she spent at the monastery as “probably the most painful time of [her] life” (Palmo 2002: 14). There were eighty monks living in the monastery. Tenzin Palmo was the only Westerner and the only nun in the community. She was extremely lonely as she was not allowed to live with the monks, neither was she allowed to eat with them, nor participate in their studies and rituals. She was not a layperson, but neither was she a “monk...and there was no place for a nun in that society” (Palmo 2002: 14). It would have been much easier if she had been a man because she would

¹⁷ These realms are in descending order, the realm of pleasure-bound divine beings (*devas*), the realm of the ambitious semi-divine beings (*asuras*), the realm of humans, the realm of animals, the realm of homeless, hungry wandering spirits (*pretas*), and the realm of beings bound in the various tortuous hells (Gross 1993: 129).

¹⁸ Mackenzie 1999: 51

have lived in the monastery with Khamtrul Rinpoche. “But because I was a female, they didn’t quite know what to do with me” (Palmo 2002: 14). She became enormously frustrated at the lack of opportunities for nuns in participating in Buddhist ceremonies and in acquiring teachings beyond the most basic ones. She describes Buddhism at that time as “testosterone heavy” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 6) and continues to say that:

the more I looked the more I could see no sign that women were getting anywhere in the spiritual selection stakes. The lamas who taught us were male; the Dalai Lamas (all fourteen of them) were male; the powerful lineage holders who carried the weight of the entire tradition were male; the revered Tulkus, the recognised reincarnated lamas, were male; the vast assembly of monastics who filled the temple halls and schools of learning were male; the succession of gurus who had come to the West to inspire eager new seekers were male. Where were the women in all this?

(Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 6)

Mackenzie (1999: 6, 7) points out that the twentieth century had seen the “steady rise and inexorable emancipation of women in all areas of life, except religion.” Tenzin Palmo asked herself what female spirituality looked like. There were no female gurus to emulate. In spite of the Buddha’s word that all people could advance up “the spiritual ladder to Enlightenment there was no proof that women could actually do it” (Mackenzie 1999: 6). It was most discouraging to the women practitioners who were sitting at the feet of the lamas sincerely trying to follow the Buddha’s teachings (Mackenzie 1999: 7).

It was this dissatisfactory state of inequality and discrimination which eventually prompted Tenzin Palmo to seek out her high Himalayan cave where she could study and meditate undisturbed under the guidance of Khamtrul Rinpoche whom she would consult from time to time when she came down from the cave and visited him in his monastery at Tashi Jong (Palmo 2002: 18). Finally, after coming out of her twelve-year retreat and a sojourn in Assisi, she would return to India and in 1999 she founded a nunnery. Khamtrul Rinpoche had years earlier suggested that she might sooner or later wish to start such a nunnery (Mackenzie 1999: 157).

The aim of the *Dongyu Gatsal Ling Nunnery* (DGL) (see 6.6) is to provide a milieu where young women from Tibet and the Himalayan border regions can study and practise in accordance with the Drukpa Kagyu tradition. The nuns are given the opportunity to develop their intellectual and spiritual potential by means of a balanced training of study, meditation, and service. The special aim of the nunnery is to re-establish a specific lineage of yogic practice emphasised in Drukpa Kagyu, the *togdenma* lineage (Palmo 2011: 181).

Palmo (2011: 149) states that as in many religious institutions, Tibetan Buddhism is expressed in a “predominantly male voice.” She continues to say that women also have a voice, and a very distinct one at that. “In order to achieve balance in the dharma that voice needs to be heard” (Palmo 2011: 149). However, she once again emphasises the fact that most of the dharma books were written by men, that almost all the lineage lamas are male, and that most of the examples held up to women are also male (Palmo 2011: 149). The lamas usually point out that there were great female practitioners, but upon enquiry it is found that these women lived centuries ago, women such as Yeshe Tsogyal (8th century), Machik Labdron (11th century), and Jomo Manmo (13th century). Palmo feels that this is simply not good enough: “Easily, by the time you’re finished counting on one hand, you’ve run out of names, whereas the males are like stars in the sky. In this day and age, that is not good enough” (2011: 149).

It is for this reason that Tenzin Palmo is re-establishing the *togdenma* lineage at DGL (Palmo 2011: 151). She explains that the Drukpa Kagyu tradition is a practice lineage. Although the tradition has not had many important scholars it has produced a large number of eminent practitioners. The area of expertise of Khamtrul Rinpoche’s Khampagar monastery in Tashi Jong has been the *togdens* or yogins. These are fully ordained monks, but they have dreadlocks and wear white skirts. In Tibet the *togdens* used to live in caves above the monastery, and were rare and highly esteemed members of the monastic community. Before the Chinese invasion of Tibet in the 1950s there were also female *togdens* called *togdenmas*, but the lineage was annihilated during the Cultural Revolution. The Eighth Khamtrul Rinpoche, Tenzin Palmo’s root guru, expressed a wish for her to reinstate this lineage in her nunnery and she has “always felt that this is my real commitment” (Palmo 2011: 152).

Presently DGL has four young nuns in a three-year retreat who are being taught by one of Khampagar's senior yogins. It is an oral tradition handed down from master to disciple, and it is therefore essential that this practice is handed down to the nuns by still-living masters (Palmo 2011: 181).

4.2.3 Sisterhood

Palmo (2002: 69) stresses that it is important to understand the social conditions which prevailed in Magadha, central India, 2 500 years ago when the Buddha was alive. She cautions against judging the Buddha's decisions from a twentieth-century "California" perspective (Palmo 2002: 69). In the time of the Buddha women were defined in terms of their social roles and relationships to their menfolk. They were daughters, mothers, wives, and especially a mother of a son. Even in present day India women are still to a large extent defined in terms of these traditional roles (Palmo 2002: 69). According to this point of view, a woman could only attain spiritual liberation through devotion to her husband. Still today, women in India are very dependent on the male members of the family, to the extent that they cannot even travel alone but usually travel either in the company of other women or with male family members (Palmo 2002: 69).

It is therefore not surprising that when the Buddha's stepmother, Mahaprajapati, approached him about starting an order of nuns he at first refused to consider it. She made this request to the Buddha three times. Eventually, Ananda, the Buddha's cousin as well as attendant, took pity on Mahaprajapati and the large number of women who wished to become nuns, and asked the Buddha to reconsider ordaining the women. When the Buddha refused once again, Ananda asked him whether women were capable of leading a "holy life" and attaining liberation. The Buddha affirmed that they were. Ananda then enquired why the Buddha was creating such an obstacle for them by refusing to ordain them, whereupon the Buddha created the order of nuns (Palmo 2002: 70).

Throughout this time there were numerous great female practitioners who were praised by the Buddha for their wisdom, learning, and skill in teaching. On many occasions in the early *sutras* the Buddha commended his female followers and disciples. Nevertheless, it was a most unusual act for women to leave their homes and families to become spiritual practitioners. Even in modern India there are countless Hindu

sanyasins, mendicants, and sadhus, but almost no female renunciates (Palmo 2002: 70). It was therefore revolutionary for the Buddha to have started this order of nuns.

However, there appears to have been institutionalised bias against women from the start (Palmo 2002: 71). There is no mention of a female *arhati* attending the council of five hundred *arhats* after the Buddha passed away. The members of this council were called upon to recite everything they could remember the Buddha had said and thereby establish the canon. The Buddha gave teachings to the females but none of these were recorded due to their exclusion from the council (Palmo 2002: 71). As the years passed everything was therefore recited and recorded from the male point of view. Consequently women were increasingly seen as dangerous and threatening (Palmo 2002: 71).

According to Gross (1993: 88), “the bastion of male privilege” is greatest in the Tibetan Buddhist practice of discovering and installing successive reincarnations of great lamas. No leaders in Tibetan Buddhism is more respected and honoured, or possess more power and influence than these incarnations, particularly those who are heads of major lineages and prominent monasteries (Gross 1993: 89). Gross (1993: 89) continues to say that it is taken for granted that each successive incarnation will be a male incarnation¹⁹. These boys receive extremely privileged educations and indeed turn out to be exceptional people. One therefore welcomes the present Dalai Lama’s refreshing statement that his next incarnation could possibly be as a female (Johnson 2011: 148).

Inadequate androcentric record keeping deprives women practitioners from drawing inspiration from female role models who have accomplished great spiritual deeds and even enlightenment (Gross 1993: 90, 91). Although there is no doubt that accomplished women practitioners did exist, they did not have the institutional support of their male colleagues. Men’s privileged education more frequently enabled them to read and write and consequently men had the monopoly in choosing whose records to preserve for future generations (Gross 1993: 91). No wonder, Gross (1993: 91) asserts, that many feminist scholars of religion believe that it is their role to give a voice to the “unspoken worlds” of women’s religious lives.

¹⁹ See 4.6 regarding the only two female incarnations.

Palmo (2002: 71) cites the example of a meditation on the thirty-two parts of the body that the Buddha gave to his disciples in order to conquer desire. One starts with the hair on the top of the head and then proceed all the way down to the soles of the feet, imagining what you would find underneath if you took the skin off each part. The practitioner dissects his/her body in order to cut through the enormous attachment to the physical form and to see it as it really is. In losing attachment to our own bodies, we will also lose attachment to the bodies of others. Nonetheless, this meditation is primarily directed towards oneself. However, Tenzin Palmo (2002: 71) points out that in the writings of Nagarjuna (1st century) and Shantideva (7th century) this same meditation is used and is directed outwards towards the bodies of women. “It is the woman one sees as a bag of guts, lungs, kidneys, and blood. It is the woman who is impure and disgusting. There is no mention of the impurity of the monk who is meditating” (Palmo 2002: 71). Palmo (2002: 71) continues to state that the change occurred because the meditation was carried out by much less enlightened minds than the Buddha’s. Instead of using the visualisation as a meditation to work against attachment to the physical, it is used as a way of keeping the monks celibate. It is no longer used as a means to see the body as it really is, but instead, it is used to cultivate aversion towards women. The monks do not realise the impurity of themselves as well as everyone, male and female, around them, but focus only on the impurity of the female. Consequently, women began to be viewed as a danger to the monks, and this developed into a kind of “monastic misogyny” (Palmo 2002: 71). This is borne out by a comment made by a Tibetan Buddhist monk in the film about Tenzin Palmo’s life (Thompson & Cox 2003) when he says that “females are subject to constant mental distractions. These create much negativity which could harm the doctrine. If females get more and more powerful then the monks will not be able to raise their heads.”

4.2.4 The divine feminine

However, despite misogynistic pronouncements like the one just quoted, the most significant characteristic of Tantric literature in regard to women is an “uncompromising attitude of respect and homage” (Shaw 1994: 39). This is illustrated by a passage from the *Candamaharosana-tantra*, a major Tantric scripture:

One should honour women. Women are heaven, women are truth, women are the supreme fire of transformation. Women are Buddha, women are religious community, women are the perfection of wisdom.

(Shaw 1994: 39)

One of the earliest expressions of the concept of respect and honour towards women can be found in a treatise by one of the founding mothers of Tantric Buddhism, Laksminkara (Shaw 1994: 39). In *Realization and Nonduality* Laksminkara argues that women should be treated with respect and honour because they are the embodiments of the great goddesses of Tantric Buddhism (Shaw 1993: 39). She goes so far as to suggest that a man's response to a woman's divinity should range from respect to ritual worship (Shaw 1993: 40).

The recognition of human women and goddesses is often expressed by a female deity. Vajrayogini, an important female meditational deity and queen of the *dakinis*, states in the *Candamaharosana-tantra* that she reveals herself in and through women (Shaw 1993: 41). She claims that all forms of female embodiment, including supernatural beings, and female animals, share in her divinity when she states that "wherever in the world a female body is seen, that should be recognised as my holy body" (Shaw 1993: 41). Vajrayogini affirms that all women and female beings in the universe are her embodiments, or manifestations, and consequently should be respected, honoured, and served without exception (Shaw 1993: 41).

In early Tantric literature, respect for women was requisitioned upon both men and women, albeit with different implications for their respective progress. Women's relationship with Vajrayogini is one of identity wherein they must realise the divine female essence within themselves. This will ultimately lead to self-respect because when a woman re-appropriates her divine identity she will not need to look for external sources of approval as she will already possess an abundance of self-esteem that emanates from the depths of her own being (Shaw 1993: 41).

In the *Candamaharosana-tantra* the female Buddha Vajrayogini expresses her special concern for women and proclaims that although she is fully immersed in emptiness and bliss, and is therefore on a certain level formless, she appears in bodily form "for the benefit of women who do not know that I exist in the bodies of all women" (Shaw 1993:

41). Vajrayogini therefore assumes embodiment in order for women to recognise their inherent divinity and potential for enlightenment (Shaw 1993: 41). Shaw (1993: 42) concludes that since the female Buddha is present within every woman, all women consequently partake of her divinity. Finally, she states that “the presence of female Buddhas in the iconography of enlightenment affirms that a woman can attain Buddhahood in her present lifetime, in her present female body” (1993: 42).

Men however, are enjoined to meditate on Vajrayogini and other female deities as a way to remedy their ordinary views of women and to purify their vision (Shaw 1993: 42). Such meditation is a means to viewing women accurately, as embodiments of female divinity, inherently divine and sacred in essence. Shaw (1993: 43) states that one of the faculties that distinguishes male Tantric practitioners and mark their progress is their ability to see women as divine. She continues to point out that male Tantrics who fall short of rendering respect and devotion to women “can expect to be rewarded not with full enlightenment but with spiritual regress” (1993: 48). Tsongkhapa, founder of the Gelugpa School (see 2.4.5) of Tibetan Buddhism, warns of the calamitous consequences of disrespect in his *Cakrasamvara* commentary:

If one who aspires to enlightenment generates anger towards a female messenger, the merit accumulated over ten million eons will be destroyed in an instant.

(Shaw 1993: 48)

In fact, many of the most well-known and significant Mahayana texts explicitly deals with the question of how much a woman can attain, concluding that women’s abilities are unlimited and equal to men’s (Gross 1993: 10). The Mahayana *sutras* often assume the form of a debate between a highly developed female practitioner and a male representative of the more orthodox viewpoint. The man is frequently astonished and annoyed by the woman’s intelligence. She always defeats him in debate and he always asks her why, if she is so realised, she is not a man. The story usually ends at this point with one of two motifs. In one variation, the woman magically transforms her body into a male body. In the other, she retains her female body, indicating by logic or by magic the absolute relativity and insignificance of sexual differentiation (Gross 1993: 10).

Vajrayana Buddhism or Tantric Buddhism, which is based on Mahayana, is often regarded as the form of Buddhism that most fundamentally includes women and the feminine (Gross 1993: 11). Gross (1993: 11) states that this form of Buddhism has been “much maligned” in Western scholarship and is also suspect in many Buddhist circles in particular because of its appreciation of women and the feminine principle. Its extensive use of sexual symbolism has, in addition, often been misinterpreted as authorization for indiscriminate sexuality.

Basic Vajrayana imagery portrays all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas as male and female partners in sexual union (Gross 1993: 11). The male-female union symbolises the union of discriminating awareness which results in insightful liberation, and compassion, an activity intended to save all sentient beings (Gross 1993: 11). Consequently, Vajrayana reveres many important female leaders and founders, especially in Tibet, and the most popular figures in Tibetan devotional Buddhism include female figures (Gross 1993: 11).

Shaw’s groundbreaking work on Tantra (1994) points out that previous scholarship on Buddhism and Tantra assumed that women were included in Tantric practise only to the extent that they could support men in their pursuit of enlightenment (Hamilton 1998). Shaw, however, discovered through her pioneering research in this field and her first hand experience among traditional teachers, that for the serious male Tantric practitioner, women are to be worshipped, honoured and revered as the bringers of enlightened energy into the world (Hamilton 1998:<http://www.enlightennext.org/magazine/j13/shaw.asp?>). The goal of Tantric practise is to transform into the deity (Shaw, in Hamilton 1998: <http://www.enlightennext.org/magazine/j13/shaw.asp?>). The woman’s path involves realising that she is, in essence, a goddess or a female Buddha. The man’s treatment of her supports her in her emerging realisation of her enlightened essence. He does not simply treat her as an equal, but worships her as an embodiment of the deity (Shaw, in Hamilton 1998: <http://www.enlightennext.org/magazine/j13/shaw.asp?>).

Yet, despite the prominence of female Buddhas and other inspirational female beings and deities in Tibetan Buddhism, the monastic orders remain patriarchal and full bhikshuni ordination is still not available in Tibetan Buddhism.

4.2.5 Ambiguities and contradictions

Misogynism is not unique to the Buddhist religion. In fact, Armstrong (1996: vii) points out that “in traditional Western Christianity women have been kept out of the male world of action and thought.” She continues to say that even though Christian dogma has officially been quite positive about women, the implications of some of the teachings of Christianity have been “sinister and suspect” (1996: vii). “For centuries the teaching and propaganda put about by Christianity was misogynistic. Men castigated the female sex as evil and dangerous” (Armstrong 1996: 307). Armstrong (1996: 307) goes so far as to say that although Christianity is dedicated to spreading love and compassion, all too frequently it spreads bitterness as a result of its mysoginism. She (1996: vii) states that Christian attitudes towards women are often irrational and inconsistent and display no connection with authorised dogma since its origin is an emotional one. Armstrong cites the example of an Anglican priest who resigned from the ministry in 1992 because the Synod had made the decision to admit women to the priesthood (1993: 1). Although religious beliefs may change, emotional compulsions remain because it is more difficult to eliminate destructive patterns than to change opinions (Armstrong 1996: viii).

In the West in the present day women have encroached upon the male world. They even attend traditional male universities such as Harvard and the Oxbridge colleges. Women are members of parliament, prime ministers and presidents. It is by and large recognised that women are as intellectually proficient as men and that the former prejudices that barred women from certain professions were ill-founded. However, despite this widespread social change women are still denied entry into the priesthood in some churches (Armstrong 1996: 303). One may well ask, as Armstrong does (1993: 2), why a female priesthood “stirs up such desperate and intransigent emotion.” The subject of gender and sexuality is “notoriously sensitive and the prospect of women priests seem to touch upon anxieties that exist far below the rational level” (Armstrong 1993: 4). It is acceptable for a woman to be Prime Minister but not a bishop. Similarly, it is acceptable for a woman to be a novice Tibetan Buddhist nun but not a fully ordained one.

Many psychologists point out that it is dangerous to deny the feminine (Armstrong 1993: 228). Each individual and every society comprises feminine and masculine aspects which need to be integrated and balanced creatively. Excluding women from

clubs, professions and the priesthood is an outward sign of inward imbalance. Armstrong (1993: 228) points out that since the Jewish priestly tradition separated male and female, women have been feared as a polluting influence. She continues to state that the survival of such “primitive” fears demonstrates the superficiality of so-called rationalism (1993: 228). Occasionally the repressed feminine has attempted to break through, for example in the worship of the Virgin Mary (Armstrong 1993: 228). The issue of female ordination may be another such attempt to achieve balance and wholeness, and Armstrong cautions that it should be heeded carefully (1993: 228). She concludes that the issue of female ordination is not just a matter of women’s rights but that it points to “a wound that has long damaged the integrity” of religion (1993: 228).

Likewise, Janet Gyatso, Hershey Professor of Buddhist Studies at the Harvard University Divinity School, states quite unequivocally that image, respect, and prestige underlie the very nature of Buddhist monasticism (2010: 47). She continues to point out that the Buddhist sangha was intended specifically as an example of the optimum religious way of life. Its survival depends on the generosity of the lay community. The lay community’s support of the monastic community depends on its conviction that the monastic community is “maintaining its purity and the highest standards of behavior and wisdom” (2010: 47). In the light of the women’s liberation movement and the fact that a number of Western women have been ordained as Buddhist nuns, “the best path and the best values in the world favor gender equality and the elimination of patriarchy and misogyny” (Gyatso 2010: 47).

A Buddhist community consists of both lay and monastic adherents. Both are essential for the continuation of Buddhism. However, a Buddhist community has four pillars: monks, nuns, lay women, and lay men (Thubten Chödrön 2007: http://www.thubtenchodron.org/BuddhistNunsMonasticLife/a_tibetan_precedent). If one of these pillars is absent, the community is, strictly speaking, not a Buddhist community. Many of the nuns therefore argue that in order for a Buddhist community to call itself truly a *sangha*, all four pillars should be intact. In harmony with the nature of Buddhism, these nuns, as well as the Dalai Lama and the Seventeenth Gyalwang Karmapa, thus express themselves strongly in favour of restoring full ordination for Buddhist nuns in a spirit of patience and compassion.

Despite the favourable doctrinal attitude towards women, ambiguity still characterises the Buddhist approach concerning women. Vajrayana Buddhism includes a profusion of positive female images and symbols. Furthermore, it accommodates a number of highly regarded and respected female practitioners, both nuns and lay adherents (Gross 1993: 80). However, Gross (1993: 80) points out that “the exaltation both of femininity and of exceptional women contrasts significantly with everyday reality, for the folk wisdom of Vajrayana Buddhism continues unabated in its assessment of female birth as unfortunate.” Almost every institutionalised position of power, influence, authority, and veneration continues to be held by men (Gross 1993: 80). Usually this negative attitude towards women is absent in Vajrayana Buddhist texts as formal points of doctrine. Instead, this misogyny is “deeply embedded and ingrained assumptions of folk wisdom” (Gross 1993: 81). Gross (1993: 81) continues to explain that these negative attitudes towards women “insidiously crop up in everyday speech and attitudes, as asides in important religious texts, as androcentric record-keeping and remembering practices, and as accepted norms and practices of Tibetan society.”

In most major world religions compassion lies at the heart of religious experience. The Buddha proclaimed that after attaining enlightenment in solitude, the religious practitioner must return to everyday life in order to practise compassion for all living beings (Armstrong 1993: 223). Similarly St. Paul stated that without love a Christian is no better than sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal (1 Cor 13: 1). One might well ask how it is possible that world religions in which a “symbolic and mythic glorification” of the feminine coexists with a social reality that strongly limits women’s potential and opportunities. In addition, this ambiguity seems not to be perceived by those who benefit from the system (Gross 1993: 81).

Not much appears to have changed since Gross (1993) published her groundbreaking work on a feminist history, analysis, and reconstruction of Buddhism. In a recent paper, Gross (2010: 19) states that the liability of a female birth is still emphasised in many parts of the Buddhist world where male dominance and gender hierarchy persist. This situation has been especially devastating for nuns, who face reduced economic support, inferior education, and in some parts of the world even the extinction of their ordination lineages because long-established monastic rules are excessive in the way they favour monks over nuns (Gross 2010: 19). Several contemporary nuns, especially Western Tibetan Buddhist nuns, have largely overcome their inferior status, but in some parts of

the Buddhist world monks are employing every effort to prevent nuns from gaining full ordination status (Gross 2010: 19). Gross (2010: 19) concludes that “it is difficult to understand how otherwise intelligent and compassionate men cannot figure out the legalisms required to initiate or reinstate nuns’ ordination lineages, given that if their own ordination lineages were at stake, they would solve the problem in a heartbeat!”

The old beliefs are wearing thin and there is a groping for new. It is not a matter ...of being a Christian or a Muslim or a Buddhist or a Jew. We do not yet have another answer to the old problems. We know only a little bit about the direction in which the changes are taking place, but nothing about where the changes will end up. We have to have in mind not an orthodoxy but a wide and compassionate recognition of the storm of ideas in which we all are living and in which we must...find spiritual rest.

(Bateson, in Klein 1995: ix)

4.3 FEMALE DEITIES IN TIBETAN BUDDHISM

Even though the structure and hierarchy in Buddhism are patriarchal the various traditions of Buddhism have within their cosmology inspirational beings and deities who are female. The feminine spirit is intrinsic in Buddhist scripture and iconography as well as in the practice of both male and female Buddhists in all its traditions (Bianchi 2011: <http://www.bhikkhuni.net>). The rise of Mahayana Buddhism brought the feminine into prominence (Palmo 2002: 72). One of the main protagonists in several important Mahayana texts is a woman who scolds the monks for their partial views and enquire from them where in the innate reality of one’s Buddha-nature lies the male and where the female (Palmo 2002: 72). She goes on to explain to them that the male and female dichotomy exists only on a relative level. On an absolute level male and female are interchangeable. There are texts in which female protagonists transform themselves into males and back again. This emphasises the fact that female qualities, regardless of whether they are attached to a male or female body, are associated with a form of intuition, a higher awareness, known in Buddhist teachings as wisdom (Palmo 2002: 72).

Tibetan Buddhism includes a range of powerful female archetypes (Vessantara 2003: 8) in the form of deities. Every one of these female figures represents the qualities of

enlightenment as manifested in the enlightened mind (Vessantara 2003: 9). They do so in various forms, from the young and the beautiful to the old and the dangerous, mirroring many different aspects of women's experience of life, yet remaining embodiments of love, compassion, wisdom, and freedom (Vessantara 2003: 9). The female divinities are usually envisioned as vibrant and multifaceted entities with intricately drawn personae, powers, and numinous qualities (Shaw 2006: 4). Vessantara (2003: 10) states that these figures represent potentials of our own minds. The state of enlightenment transcends gender and takes place on a plane of consciousness on which biological distinctions are irrelevant (Vessantara 2003: 14). Some Buddhas and Bodhisattvas may appear androgynous while others are able to transform from male to female and vice versa, and can be understood as manifestations of the enlightened mind's male or female counterpart (Vessantara 2003: 14).

Tantra, which is a further development of Mahayana and specific to Tibetan Buddhism, promises Buddhahood in one lifetime (Palmo 2002: 73). It seems that some of the foremost instigators of Tantra were women (Palmo 2002: 73). Tantra affords greater freedom and a higher value to women than some other forms of Buddhism (Vessantara 2003:16). As the Buddhist Tantra developed it gave growing significance to the feminine and this manifested in the appearance during the ninth and tenth centuries of *yogini tantras*. *Yogini tantras* derive their name from the prominent and distinctive place they bestow upon female figures (Vessantara 2003: 16). The images of women and the feminine principle found in Vajrayana Buddhism are best transmitted by the female *yidams*, the meditation deities with whom the practitioner identifies in meditation practise (Gross 1993: 109).

For the sake of clarity it is important to distinguish between *yogini*, *dakini*, and *deity*. A *yogini* is a female Tantric adept, i.e. a female practitioner of Tantric yoga. *Yoga* in this instance must not be confused with so-called Yoga, a popular form of physical exercises derived from Hatha-Yoga. Tantric yoga involves practising intense meditation techniques which may include either physical or mental disciplines (Palmo 2002: 254). A *dakini* is a *yogini* who has achieved a high level of realisation. *Dakinis* may be human beings with extraordinary qualities, or they may be manifestations of an enlightened mind. They are female entities who have vowed to assist practitioners by removing obstacles and creating favourable conditions (Palmo 2002: 248).

The term *deity* in Tibetan Buddhism does not refer to “gods” or omnipotent creators. *Deities* in this context are extraordinary manifestations akin to the human form, both male and female, in which Buddhas appear in order to help people with varying inclinations to surmount their shortcomings and to realise their potentials (Berzin 2011: 8). Each Buddha-figure represents both the fully enlightened state and one of its particular characteristics, such as compassion or wisdom. Meditative practise arranged around one of these deities and the features it represents, provide a clear focus and framework enabling more rapid progress towards enlightenment (Berzin 2011: 8).

Shaw (1994:3) describes the Tantric goddesses as “numinous, sky-borne women,” “revellers in freedom,” “enchantresses of passion, ecstasy and ferocious intensity.” She furthermore writes that “[o]ne can almost hear the soft clacking of their intricate bone jewelry and feel the wind stirred by their rainbow-colored scarves as they soar through the Tantric Buddhist landscape” (Shaw 1994: 3). Hamilton (1998: <http://www.enlightennext.org/magazine/j13/shaw.asp?>) reminds us that Tantra is specifically aimed at the enlightenment of women.

I use the terms female deity, female divinity, and goddess interchangeably to refer to the female deities in Tibetan Buddhism. Shaw (2006: 9) argues that although Western scholars eschew the term “goddess,” Buddhist writings have employed this term to refer to female deities in their pantheon from the earliest times. Shaw (2006: 9) points out that two arguments against the use of the word “goddess” have been advanced by scholars such as Judith Simmer-Brown and Anne Klein. Simmer-Brown is concerned that the term could belie the “sophisticated relativistic ontology” fundamental to the Tantric conceptions of deity. Klein is apprehensive that the “feminine resonance” of the term “goddess” may not be in keeping with Western understanding of gender. Nevertheless, Shaw (2006: 9) continues to point out that the lexical meaning of “goddess” is precisely “female deity” and “female divinity.”

4.3.1 Training the imagination

Tantric practice extensively employs the imagination (Berzin 2011: 8). Berzin (2011: 8) affirms that continually visualising achieving an objective is a compelling method for accomplishing it more rapidly. He continues to say that success or failure depends on one’s self-image and that in Tantra one improves one’s self-image by means of Buddha-

figures. According to Berzin (2011: 8), imagining that one is already a Buddha provides a particularly compelling self-image to counteract negative behaviour and feelings of inadequacy. However, he does emphasise the importance of maintaining a clear distinction between fantasy and reality. Tibetan Buddhist teachers and texts all call attention to the requirement of clearly understanding the concepts of voidness (the absence of fantasised and impossible ways of existing) and dependent arising (the coming about of everything by depending on causes and circumstances) (Berzin 2011: 16).

One of the major goals of Tantric Buddhist practice is to realise the intrinsic perfection of the world by visualising the world as a celestial mansion (mandala) and all beings as divine. The deities that are envisioned represent “aesthetic patterns of enlightened energy and liberating activity” (Shaw 1994: 84). Berzin (2011: 16) explains that we all inherently possess a Buddha nature. Each of us has a mind, a heart, communicative ability, and physical energy whereby we are able to create the enlightening faculties of a Buddha. In Tantra one then imagines that one already possesses the form, surroundings, abilities, and enjoyments of a Buddha. The physical body of a Buddha consists of transparent clear light, capable of serving others untiringly, and is never lacking in any way. Berzin (2011: 16) continues to say that maintaining this kind of self-image helps to extend our self-imposed limits. It brings about a positive energy which enables the practitioner to influence his/her environment and relationships with other sentient beings in an uplifting manner.

Several Buddha-figures possess multiple physical features in a variety of colours (Berzin 2011: 16). This might seem strange to the practitioner at first, but there are significant supporting reasons. Many of the forms imagined in Tantra display a number of purposes, and each of their parts and colours consist of several levels of symbolism. Their complexity reflects the nature of the aim of becoming a Buddha (Berzin 2011: 16). Without employing some method it would be very difficult for the practitioner to focus simultaneously on several physical features, colours, and qualities. Tantric practitioners are therefore specifically instructed by their teachers and given various aids to employ in their meditation, such as a verbal mnemonic device, and mandalas (Berzin 2011: 16). Complete identification with the deity is one of the goals of Tantric practice, while the ability to perceive the deity is one of the fruits of spiritual advancement (Shaw 1994: 43).

The Buddhist pantheon demonstrates a captivating and diverse collection of female divinities. “Variously beatific and wrathful, tender and fearsome, serene and ecstatic, they represent the energies, powers, and beings that surround and suffuse human life” (Shaw 2006: 1). They also characterise the inner depths of the human spirit, embodying qualities that may be awakened by spiritual practice (Shaw 2006: 1). The female Tantric deities are recognised and explicitly designated as Buddhas, for they exemplify supreme enlightenment. The objective of practices devoted to them is the achievement of Buddhahood in the present lifetime of the practitioner (Shaw 2006: 8).

The two most important female *yidams* are Tara, gentle and beautiful, and Vajrayogini, fierce and compelling (Gross 1993: 110).

4.3.2 Tara

Tara is one of the best known and most loved female figures in Buddhism (Vessantara 2003: 17). Tara represents the quintessence of compassion and devotion to her permeates Tibetan society. One would seldom find a Tibetan shrine without an image of Tara (Gross 1993: 110). She is a saviouress of unlimited powers (Shaw 2006: 6) and is often invoked to help in domestic difficulties, and in long and dangerous journeys. In her more esoteric form known as Cittamari, jewel of the mind, she is meditated on in the complex yogas of highest Tantra which might lead to full enlightenment in one lifetime (Vessantara 2003: 18).

Tara manifests in twenty-one different forms which are differentiated iconographically by colour, body posture, and different attributes. In addition, Tara can appear either in a peaceful or a wrathful manifestation (Fischer-Schreiber 1994: 363). The most frequently encountered forms are Green Tara, White Tara, Red Tara, and Yellow Tara. Each colour conveys a different variety of emotional quality and spiritual message (Vessantara 2003: 18). In her green or white manifestations, Tara is gentle and loving, while she is threatening in her yellow, red, or blue manifestations (Ions 1967: 135). Her well-known story is presented on two levels. She is believed to be both an advanced Bodhisattva as well as a fully enlightened Buddha (Gross 1993: 110).

4.3.2.1 Green Tara: Quintessence of compassion²⁰

According to Vessantara (2003: 18) green is a calming and soothing colour and therefore Green Tara is particularly effective when invoked in situations of anxiety and fear. In Tantric symbolism, green is also the colour of the Action Family, those Buddhas and Bodhisattvas who specialise in the Wisdom of All-Accomplishing Action. This colour is therefore in agreement with Tara's continuous activity to help and save sentient beings. Consequently, a Green Tara initiation is especially recommended for active people who are grappling with major projects (Gross 1993: 111).

Many of the female deities and other devotional figures have over time acquired an intensive lore about how they first appeared and the ways in which they have helped people who were devoted to them. Her appearance and actions, frequently described in Sanskrit and Tibetan poetry, are well known and widely contemplated (Gross 1993: 110). The most celebrated description of Tara is the *Praise in Twenty-One Homages* in which the central figure of Tara is surrounded by twenty-one smaller figures of Tara representing all the activities she performs (Gross 1993: 110).

The first tale of Tara's origin recounts how the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, who particularly embodies compassion, appears in a cloudless blue sky. Avalokiteshvara's body is pure white, glittering against the blueness of the sky. His main concern is helping sentient beings overcome suffering. However, upon looking down over the world he realises that despite all his efforts there is still endless suffering. He begins to shed tears whereupon the tears form a great lake as it reaches the earth. From this pool of tears grows a pale blue lotus flower (Vessantara 2003: 19). On the lotus sits a young woman dressed in the silks and jewels of a princess. Her shimmering body is diaphanous and a translucent green (Purna 1994: http://www.westernbuddhistreview.com/vol2/tara_origins_a_development.html). As the jade-green eyelids of the princess open they reveal two perfectly blue eyes. She looks out over the world, at the lake of tears, and up to the white cloud of compassion, and then her face breaks into a smile "of such beauty and tenderness that the whole world trembles with joy" (Vessantara 2003: 19). From her heart rays of light begin to pour forth which produce a myriad of rainbows as they shine through the tears of compassion that are still falling around her. The rainbows whisper a sound which they carry like messengers from her heart. These

²⁰ Vessantara 2003: 17

sounds reach the troubled waters of the lake which become soothed and calm, and the falling teardrops turn into precious offerings to the cloud of compassion. The rainbows whisper the sound to the universe. The sound is the mantra of the beautiful green princess, and it heralds the beginning of the end of all suffering. The mantra of Green Tara is *om tare tuttare ture svaha* (Vessantara 2003: 19). It has no rational meaning but is simply a play on the sound of Tara's name (Vessantara 2003: 25).

Tara is jade green in colour and dressed in a rainbow skirt with a meditation sash tied around her waist. She is adorned in precious jewels and a tiara of gems. Tara is seated on a moon mat and her left foot rests on her right thigh in a meditation posture. Her right foot lightly rests on a small pale blue lotus and a moon mat. Her right arm extends down, gently resting the back of her hand on her right knee. The palm of her hand is open in a gesture of supreme giving. She holds her left hand in front of her heart, palm outwards, the thumb and ring finger together so that the other fingers point upwards in a gesture of protection and fearlessness through invoking the Three Jewels of Buddhism – the Buddha, his teaching, and his enlightened followers. Tara's thumb and ring finger gracefully hold the stem of a lotus flower which curves upwards towards her left shoulder and opens in a bud, a half-open flower, and a fully-open blossom of pale blue. The green princess is sixteen years old, full-breasted, and has flowing black hair. "She is supremely beautiful" (Vessantara 2003: 19, 20).

According to Shaw (2006: 326, 328), Tara's vernal green body surrounded by luxuriant lotus blooms evokes an association with nature, trees, and plants, and is indicative of the Vedic belief that plant sap carries the vital elixir of life. Although Tara's divine body is formed of light, the green hue suggests that plant sap, abounding in healing, regenerative, and divine energies, flows in her veins (Shaw 2006: 330). Since maternal nurturance is central to Tara's character, Shaw (2006: 331) suggests that her motherly essence is aligned with "the nourishing abundance and spiritual potency of nature itself."

There is another legend that recounts a different tale of how Tara developed into a Bodhisattva in female form. Taranatha, a prominent Tibetan teacher, recorded the legend in 1608 and it has now become the standard "history" of Tara (Gross 1993: 110). This legend tells of a princess called Moon of Knowledge who lived "an immeasurable period of time ago" (Vessantara 2003: 20). She was devoted to the Buddha of that time and ultimately developed the longing to gain enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings. The monks

urged her to pray for a male embodiment in order to serve as a Bodhisattva. Moon of Knowledge however, realised that male and female were concepts projected onto experience and had no existence in ultimate reality. She made a vow saying that “[t]here are many who desire Enlightenment in a man’s body, but none who work for the benefit of sentient beings in the body of a woman. Therefore, until mundane existence is empty, I shall work for the benefit of sentient beings in a woman’s body” (Vessantara 2003: 21). She practised meditation until she eventually reached a powerful state of concentration called “saving all sentient beings” during which she rescued every morning and every evening a “million million” sentient beings from mundane existence. Consequently she became known as Tara, the Saviouress (Vessantara 2003: 21; Purna 1994: http://www.westernbuddhistreview.com/vol2/tara_origins_a_development.html).

According to Vessantara (2003: 21), Tara can mean “star”, but is usually understood to mean “saviouress” or “one who ferries across.” The image of ferrying is common in Buddhism. The Buddha characterised his teaching as a raft used for crossing a river. We currently stand on the side of the unsatisfactory and unfulfilling world of mundane existence. On the other side of the river, so to speak, is the “farther shore” of complete peace, freedom, and permanent fulfilment of enlightenment. By meditating on Tara, who is the embodiment of the Buddha’s teaching, one finds oneself imperceptibly moving from one shore to the other (Vessantara 2003: 21).

Tara is also associated with spontaneous helpfulness. Many Tara devotees will call upon her or recite her mantra to protect them against everyday perils and problems. She is easily accessible and is said to help people with everyday worries not necessarily confined to so-called spiritual matters (Gross 1993: 111). Tara is said to provide protection from the eight great terrors of lions, elephants, fire, snakes, robbers, captivity, shipwreck, and demons (Vessantara 2003: 22). This list may also be understood symbolically to mean protection from the spiritual dangers of pride, delusion, anger, envy, wrong views, avarice, attachment, and doubt (Purna 1994: http://www.westernbuddhistreview.com/vol2/tara_origins_a_development.html).

“Tara helps to clear away obstacles and to open up opportunities for us to lead our lives properly” (Palmo 2011: 153).

Tara is in addition compared to a virgin, a mother, and a queen. She is completely pure and untainted, her morality is unblemished, and her wisdom is eternally fresh like the

pale blue lotus on which she sits. Tara possesses a mother's compassion and instant response to suffering. She cares for all beings as if they are her own children. Tara is very accepting, understanding, and forgiving. Palmo (2011: 152) states that the idea of the divine feminine has constantly been present the world over, and "despite the insistence through the last millennium or so on a male-only divinity, somehow the feminine has always managed to speak up." She continues to say that whether we are thinking of Tara, Kwan Yin, Isis, or the Virgin Mary, there is this sense of the mother (Palmo 2011: 152). Finally, Tara is like a queen, dignified, fearless, exercising spiritual sovereignty and taking responsibility for the entire universe, bringing an end to all suffering (Vessantara 2003: 22, 23).

According to Vessantara (2003: 24), by meditating on Green Tara, insight into reality can be attained more easily and speedily. One of her special attributes is the swiftness with which she reacts. She moves rapidly to help sentient beings escape *samsara*. "Tara is always immediate" (Palmo 2011: 153). Visualising Tara is very effective because she is so intensely beautiful. Consequently the practitioner finds his/her contemplation of Tara of great enjoyment and this leads to a more rapid assimilation of Tara's qualities of compassion and loving kindness (Vessantara 2003: 24, 25).

Tara is the personification of transcendental compassion. Her entire body is translucent, consisting of light, yet appearing empty, neither existent nor non-existent. Her beautiful appearance is simply the gateway to a more profound inner experience that has neither colour, nor form, nor gender (Vessantara 2003: 26).

4.3.2.2 White Tara: The seven eyes of wisdom²¹

Here Tara's body is "white as an autumn moon" (Beyer 1973: 447). Vessantara (2003: 26) describes her as embodying white light, like "sunlight on snow." She sits in the midst of the sky on a white moon mat, spread on a white lotus throne. Her legs are crossed in the *vajra* or full-lotus position. Her hair is dark blue and bound up in the nape of her neck with long tresses hanging down her back. She is adorned with precious gems, her blouse is of white silk with golden threads, and her robes are of varied-coloured silk like a rainbow (Beyer 1973: 448). The upturned sole of each foot has a wisdom eye. The palm of her right hand, resting on her right knee and facing outwards

²¹ Vessantara 2003: 26

in a gesture of giving, also displays an eye. She holds her left hand in front of her breast in a gesture of bestowing protection. In it she holds a spray of white lotus flowers, and another eye is visible in the palm of this hand. Her seventh eye of wisdom sits vertically in her forehead. She smiles compassionately. White Tara is surrounded by a great aura of white light, and above her head sits her teacher, the red Buddha Amitabha, deep in meditation (Vessantara 2003: 26, 27).

According to Vessantara (2003: 28), White Tara's seven eyes suggest the need for compassion to be wise, devoid of pity and sentimentality. It also serves to remind the practitioners to "guard the gates of the senses" (Vessantara 2003: 28). The practitioner should be aware of what is internalised via the senses and the affects thereof. Buddhism acknowledges six senses, adding to the usual five the sense of "everyday mind" that cognises ideas, memories, and fantasies. Six of the seven eyes therefore guard over the senses, including the mind sense, to ensure that what is perceived, does not encourage any unhelpful or unethical tendencies. Vessantara (2003: 28) associates the seventh eye, the one in the middle of the forehead, with the eye that looks beyond the senses altogether, perceiving transcendental reality.

White Tara offers the gift of longevity in order to allow the practitioner ample time to pursue enlightenment and to practise compassion (Vessantara 2003: 29). Her *sadhana* is therefore very calming and peaceful, and meditating on White Tara has the effect of focussing energy and "conserving and building up a reservoir of physical vitality" (Vessantara 2003:31). By meditating on White Tara the practitioner will realise that human life is valuable because it provides one with the opportunity to develop positive qualities and wisdom, and to help others to follow suit (Vessantara 2003: 32).

White Tara's mantra is *om tare tuttare ture mama ayuh punya jnana pushtim kuru svaha*. Essentially it means "increase my life, merits, and wisdom" (Vessantara 2003: 32).

4.3.2.3 Red Tara

Meditation on Red Tara aims at bringing about a state of pure, non-dual awareness (Vessantara 2003: 36). According to traditional texts the best time to meditate on Red Tara is when the sky may itself be red, i.e. at sunrise and sunset. She is visualised as appearing in the midst of the blue sky. Her body is brilliant ruby-red in colour, and she appears as a young princess dressed in the gems and silks of a Bodhisattva. She is

seated in the same posture as Green Tara. Her long black hair is partly drawn up into a topknot while the rest flows down her shoulders. She is seated on a red lotus throne on which is a sun disc. Her right hand holds a vase containing the nectar of immortality. In her left hand she holds the stem of a red lotus flower that blossoms next to her ear. On the spray of blossoms rest a drawn bow and arrow, both made of small lotus flowers. On her forehead she displays a third eye, a wisdom eye. A full moon aura shines behind her, and from her body emanates the colours of the Five Buddhas (blue, yellow, red, green, white) (Vessantara 2003: 36, 58 – 60).

Red Tara is characterised by bounteousness and generosity. She is said to bestow longevity on the practitioner as well as a deep love for the Dharma. Meditating on her may also result in valuing truth and freedom, and in developing wisdom and compassion (Vessantara 2003: 37).

In a more threatening manifestation she is known as Kurukulla, the goddess of subjugation. In this manifestation she can be called upon to subjugate and destroy malevolent spirits. Her brilliance is described as “a thousand suns radiating red light” (Beyer 1973: 302). She has four arms and holds a bow and arrow as well as an iron hook and a lotus flower. Kurukulla also has a third eye in the middle of her forehead and her hair “blazes upward reddish yellow” (Beyer 1973: 302). Standing in a dancing pose, she wears a tiger’s skin around her shoulders and a necklace of fifty human skulls (Beyer 1973: 303).

4.3.3 Vajrayogini

According to Shaw (2006: 8), Vajrayogini is “inarguably the supreme deity of the Tantric pantheon.” No male Buddha, including her divine consort, Heruka-Cakrasamvara, approaches her in metaphysical or practical magnitude (Shaw 2006: 8). Vajrayogini embodies one’s own innermost being (Ray 2001: 24).

Vajrayogini has a brilliant, fascinating, red body, the colour of arousal and passion, as she is intensely in love with the dharma (Vessantara 2003: 73). “She is beautiful, passionate, and untamed” (Shaw 1994: 28). Her black hair is flowing and dishevelled because she has gone beyond concern for worldly appearance (Vessantara 2003: 73). She has a third eye in the middle of her forehead, for she is able to see a higher truth, a wisdom beyond duality (Vessantara 2003: 75). She is a sixteen-year old virgin,

symbolic of the prime of youth and complete innocence (Vessantara 2003: 73). Vajrayogini brandishes a vajra-chopper in her right hand above her head with which she severs all attachment, especially concern for the physical body. With her left hand she clasps a skull-cup to her heart, filled with the ambrosia of Great Bliss. In the crook of her left arm Vajrayogini holds a magic staff symbolising her mystic male consort. Although she appears in female form, she is the perfect synthesis of male and female (Vessantara 2003: 73). Her head is adorned with a tiara symbolising her spiritual wealth. However, it is not set with gems but with human skulls, reminders of the wisdom of the Five Buddhas (Vessantara 2003: 73). Around her neck she wears a garland of fifty human skulls, suggestive of the endless round of birth and death (Vessantara 2003: 74). Vajrayogini occasionally wears a mirror tied by strings of bone in the middle of her chest in which all beings can perceive the consequences of their past actions. She abandons herself in a dance inspired by the dharma and dances with her right foot raised so that her legs form a rough bow and arrow shape (Vessantara 2003: 73, 75). In Tantra, the bow and arrow symbolise the inseparability of wisdom and its compassionate expression. With her left foot, Vajrayogini stands on a prostrate human figure, representative of the craving, hatred, and ignorance that she has subdued and which she now triumphantly stamps into the ground. The whole movement of her being is upwards, and all around her body flames leap up. Vajrayogini in addition appears in a number of forms other than in her dancing one (Vessantara 2003: 75).

Initiation into the *sadhana* of red, semi-wrathful Vajrayogini is much more difficult to receive than Tara's and her practice is much more restricted because she might arouse emotions that may overwhelm the student. Commentaries about her are mostly limited to the oral tradition (Gross 1993: 112). Practising with Vajrayogini as one's *yidam* is considered relatively advanced and dangerous. She is not usually regarded as a saviour, but her practice rather leads to *siddhi*, i.e. enlightenment. She is described as encouraging, frequently in a terrifying manner, the states of mind that overcome confusion and clinging (Gross 1993: 113).

4.3.4 Other Tantric goddesses

The Tantric pantheon also includes Nairatmya, the blue female Buddha, who symbolises the spaciousness and selflessness of enlightened awareness; Chinnamunda, who provides an astounding vision of advanced yogic practices and realisations by

holding up her own severed head; and Simhamukha, whose lion head offers a primal vision of untameable power (Shaw 2006: 9).

4.4 YOGINIS

In early Vajrayana Buddhism, it was possible for women to become *yoginis* instead of nuns. Indeed, this is possibly still a choice. Yoginis were not necessarily celibate and often wandered freely around Tibet on religious pilgrimages. They would also spend long periods in isolation in hermitages for intensive meditation practise. Although these *yoginis* were not necessarily highly educated philosophically they frequently received empowerments and meditation instruction from great meditation masters. They regularly attained high states of meditational realisation and were in demand as meditation teachers by male and female monastics and lay people. Most of the exceptional women who are honoured and revered in the Tibetan tradition belong to this category of religious practitioner (Gross 1993: 87). Gross (1993: 87) adds that if a woman can in one way or another battle through “the maze of negative socialisation and gender stereotypes” she will be deeply honoured as an outstandingly accomplished *yogini*.

Tenzin Palmo is a case in point (see 6.4.2). Although she is a nun she is often referred to as a *yogini*.

One of the true yoginis of our time, a woman who has dedicated her life to Buddhism, Tenzin Palmo brings her years of experience in a cave to offer us a down-to-earth, inspiring approach to the spiritual path. Her example empowers each of us to wake up, calling forth a modern practical approach to a precious tradition. Tenzin Palmo's is a voice we need to hear, a woman who has fully experienced what she speaks about with an absolute honesty, delightful humour, and real insight.

(Allione, in Palmo 2002: dustjacket)

Her exceptional spiritual accomplishments were recognised in February 2007 when she received the title *Jetsunma* in an enthronement ceremony in Katmandu, Nepal. His Holiness the twelfth Gyalwang Drukpa (see 6.7.1), head of the Drukpa Kagyu tradition to which

Tenzin Palmo belongs, bestowed the title upon her in recognition of her “special qualities of body, speech, mind and activity” (<http://www.snowlionpub.com/pages/palmo.html>).

Another contemporary *yogini* was Ayu Khadro who died in 1953 at the age of 115. Gross (1993: 87) cites it as most fortunate that her existence and accomplishments did not disappear in the mists of time. Instead, Namkhai Norbu, a male student from one of the elite Tibetan universities who briefly studied with her, composed her biography two years before she died and exported it to India (Allione 2000: 137-164). Gross (1993: 88) states that Ayu Khadro’s life story is particularly enlightening in its description of the freedom that could be experienced by such a *yogini*, as well as the depth and warmth of the spiritual friendship between Ayu Khadro and other *yoginis* that may be attained. Forced into an arranged marriage, despite her decision to follow a *yogini* lifestyle, she became gravely ill and was eventually released from the marriage and allowed to live with her aunt, another *yogini*, in a cave until her aunt died. Thereafter, Ayu Khadro travelled around Tibet in the company of a *Chod* practitioner and other *yoginis*. About fourteen years later, her former husband, to whom she gave meditation instruction, built her a retreat hut where she remained for the rest of her life (Gross 1993: 88).

The two most well-known *yoginis* in Tibetan Buddhism however, is Yeshe Tsogyel and Machig Lapdron.

4.4.1 Yeshe Tsogyel (757-817)

Yeshe Tsogyel, later known as the Great Bliss Queen (Klein 1995: 15), was an eighth century Tibetan woman who is said to have obtained Buddhahood in a single lifetime (Gross 1993: 92). Gross (1993: 93) writes that she is greatly inspired and comforted by her study of Yeshe Tsogyel’s biography, especially by her perseverance, compassion, relationships with female and male students, and by the way in which she acknowledged and dealt with emotions.

Gross (1993: 93) continues to describe the eight chapters into which the seminal biography²² of Yeshe Tsogyel is divided. The biography covers Yeshe Tsogyel’s human conception and birth, her failed attempts to avoid conventional marriage and her suffering within the confines of this marriage, her union with her guru Padmasambhava,

²² Tulku 1983

her early training and acquisition of her principal consort, her solitary three-year practice in a Himalayan cave characterised by austerity and discipline, as well as sexual and other fantasies, the auspicious signs and *siddhis* she manifested, her enlightened compassionate activities, and how she achieved Buddhahood.

Yeshe Tsogyel is regarded by Tibetans as a Buddha who assumed the form of an ordinary Tibetan woman so that people could form a relationship with her more easily (Klein 1995: 17). She is revered as an enlightened figure in her own right as well as a manifestation of Sarasvati, the Indian goddess of sound, learning, and literature. Some Buddhist texts also identify her with Tara. Like all enlightened female and male figures in the Tibetan Buddhist pantheon, she is a manifestation of wisdom and compassion. Klein (1995: 17) states that Yeshe Tsogyel's essence is not embodied in her appearance or activities, but rather in her wisdom and her ability to materialise in a variety of emanations in accordance with the needs of any given situation. At the same time, women can access her divine sphere in a way not accessible by men because of her female body and her ritual's explicit emphasis on the womb and vulva as symbols of enlightenment (Klein 1995: 17).

Yeshe Tsogyel is a "Buddhist prototype of the successful spiritual seeker" (Klein 1995: 20) because she overcomes dualistic tendencies that obstruct simultaneous awareness of self and other. The Great Bliss Queen embodies the possibility of manifesting one's complete physical and mental potential, i.e. enlightenment. Finally, a study of her biography enables the practitioner to weave together intellectual and experiential elements of Buddhist practice (Klein 1995: 21).

4.4.2 Machig Lapdron (1055 – 1153)

Gross (1993: 98) calls Machig Lapdron "Tibet's most innovative woman teacher and practitioner." Her biography is not as mythical as Yeshe Tsogyel's, and she also serves as a model in a way that Yeshe Tsogyel does not in that she had children of her own. She chose not to remain with her children and returned to full-time dharma practise once her youngest child was five years old, leaving her children in the care of her husband. Her accomplishments and renown were similar to the Great Bliss Queen, and it is said that Tara manifested to her directly and instructed her in secret teachings which Machig Lapdron was asked to advance. Tara also indicated that her children would

continue her lineage for ten generations to come. Machig Lapdron thoroughly trained her younger son and he carried on her lineage (Gross 1993: 98).

In her youth, patrons employed her to read the sacred texts aloud to them, thereby gaining merit herself. She excelled at reading and was especially known for the speed at which she could read. In reading these scriptures, Machig Lapdron gained deep insight into many aspects of Buddhism out of which she developed a new form of *Chod* which has since been incorporated into all Tibetan Buddhist traditions (Vessantara 2008: 101). The central practise of *Chod* is to excise the false concept of ego by offering one's own body to demons. This ritual is carried out especially in extreme surroundings like charnel grounds, since it is in such places that demons and fright most easily arise. The practise of *Chod* aims at entirely cutting through uncontrolled thinking processes such as the fear of death and other imaginations and deceptions. It uses radical meditation techniques in various stages (Fischer-Schreiber 1994: 75).

Machig Labdron is usually depicted as a white dancing *dakini* holding up a *damaru* in her right hand and a ringing vajra bell in her left (Vessantara 2008: 103).

4.5 DAKINIS

Vessantara (2003: 70) is of the opinion that it is near impossible to create a satisfactory definition of the word *dakini*. "To try to catch a *dakini* in the iron trap of mundane logic is a hopeless task" (Vessantara 2003: 70). The Tibetan translation literally means female sky-goer. *Dakinis* are also sometimes referred to as sky dancers, sky-walker, or a woman who flies, highlighting "the flights of spiritual insight, ecstasy, and freedom from worldliness" achieved by the realisation of emptiness (Shaw 1994: 38).

Dakinis are difficult to meet. "They are not domesticated but wild. In fact...the *dakini* is Enlightenment expressing itself through the archetype of the Wild Woman" (Vessantara 2003: 70). *Dakinis* live in the wilderness and delight in its freedom. Essentially, the wilderness in which the *dakini* lives is the immense space that is beyond the control of ego. In order to find her, one has to leave behind the safety of one's own views and ideas. "You have to walk out into the unknown, the unexplored, the unimaginable" (Vessantara 2003: 71). A *dakini* can appear anywhere, at any time, and in any shape. She may manifest as a beautiful young maiden, a goddess, a decrepit old crone, voluptuous, alluring, or threatening. She may even appear as half-animal half-human, or

with a rainbow-coloured body. Mostly, though, a *dakini* appears as a naked, dishevelled, witch-like woman, dancing in the sky of freedom (Vessantara 2003: 72).

Dakinis are enlightened and deeply perceptive women who often act as messengers, reminders, and revealers to the practitioner (Gross 1993: 108). They are the guardians of the teachings of their non-earthly realm. In *sadhana* liturgy there are often no males present at all, especially if the central *vidam* is a female. According to the visualisation directions of many *vidams*, the central *vidam* or *vidam* couple is encircled by *dakinis*. These surrounding *dakinis* transmit significant symbolic meanings to the practitioner. The result is a heavily female-populated visualised universe (Gross 1993: 108). Gross (1993: 109) is of the opinion that the image of a strong, creative, intelligent female such as the *dakini*, is healing and supportive to women particularly in a patriarchal and androcentric context.

Terms such as *yogini* and *dakini* display a twofold connotation of human and divine since the Tantric way of thinking postulates a “spectrum of gradations rather than a clear-cut distinction between the human and the divine” (Shaw 1994: 39). According to Shaw (1994: 39) advancement in Tantric practice can result in supernatural powers and the realisation of innate divinity. Women who progressed on this path were therefore, and may still be, revered and held in awe.

4.6 PRESENT FEMALE INCARNATIONS

There are few known present female incarnations and lineage holders. The best known female tulku and lineage holder at present is Her Eminence Mindrolling Jetsun Khandro Rinpoche. The only other known female incarnation is Jetsunma Ahkon Norbu Lhamo, the first Western female tulku. She seems to be quite a controversial figure and has attracted much criticism regarding her behaviour and appearance which do not always conform to the public’s expectations of how a tulku should behave and dress, especially a female one (Cohen 1999: <http://www.enlightennext.org/magazine/j16/jetsunma.asp?page=3>).

4.6.1 Khandro Rinpoche (1967–)

Khandro Rinpoche is the daughter of the eleventh Mindrolling throne-holder, one of the six main lineages of the Nyingma Lineages of Tibetan Buddhism. Mindrolling also has the unique lineage of female masters, known as the *Jetsunma* line. The first Jetsun was

Mingyur Paldron (1699 – 1769). The present incarnation was born in 1967 and was recognised by His Holiness the sixteenth Gyalwang Karmapa as the lineage holder when she was ten months old. She was in addition recognised as the incarnation of Khandro Orgyen Tsomo, the consort of the fifteenth Karmapa, also known as the Great Dakini and believed to be an emanation of Yeshe Tsogyel (Chodron 1999: 171). Jetsun Khandro Rinpoche is therefore a double lineage holder, as a Jetsunma within the Nyingma tradition and as a Tulku within the Kagyu tradition (<http://www.mjkr.org>).

She received both a traditional Tibetan education as well as a modern Western education (Chodron 1999: 171). Khandro Rinpoche also received teachings and transmissions from some of the most revered Tibetan masters, and divides her time between teaching, study, and retreats in India as well as the United States. Her book (2003) has been translated into seven languages (<http://www.mjkr.org>).

4.6.2 Ahkon Norbu Lhamo (1949-)

Ahkon Norbu Lhamo is an American woman who was born as Alyce Zeoli to a Jewish mother, and raised as a Catholic. She was recognised as a tulku at the age of thirty-six by Penor Rinpoche, the first time ever that a Western woman was recognised as an incarnate lama.

Ahkon Norbu Lhamo started receiving a series of meditation instructions at the age of nineteen in her dreams which she followed for twelve years. She became involved with a group called the Black Mountain Light Centre which she renamed the World Prayer Centre in 1985 when she started a non-stop prayer vigil which continues unbroken to this day. The prayer vigil is dedicated to ending the suffering of all sentient beings. She met His Holiness Penor Rinpoche in 1984 and after extensive interviews and consultations with other prominent teachers and lamas, it was agreed that Alyce Zeoli was the incarnation of Genyenma²³ Ahkon Lhamo, the sister of Rigdzin Kunzang Sherab, the first throne holder of the Palyul lineage.

Ahkon Lhamo was enthroned in 1988 and her centre was renamed *Kunzang Palyul Odsal Changchub Choling* (KPC). She is the spiritual director of the centre and today it is a Vajrayana centre in the Kagyu and Nyingma traditions. She has received

²³ The title Genyenma indicates an accomplished female practitioner who is not an ordained nun.

empowerments, oral transmissions, and teaching instructions from a number of lamas and Buddhist teachers (<http://www.tara.org/jetsunma-ahkon-lhamo/biography/>).

4.7 THE FEMALE QUEST FOR ENLIGHTENMENT

“I have made a vow to attain enlightenment in the female form – no matter how many lifetimes it takes” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 5). Tenzin Palmo made this extraordinary declaration, avowing her intent to claim the pinnacle of inner perfection in the face of a seemingly patriarchal hierarchical system (Chopra 2006: <http://www.tenzinpalmo.com>). Palmo (in Chopra 2006: <http://www.tenzinpalmo.com>) states that at the time she made this vow she was “fed-up with the male attitude.” However, she adds that it is no easy task and that “to become realised is one thing, to become fully, totally enlightened is another.” She points out that not even the Dalai Lama claims to be enlightened, in fact, nobody does.

Palmo (in Chopra 2006: <http://www.tenzinpalmo.com>) explains that enlightenment is a mind that is like a dust-free mirror. Although the mind in its original state is clear and reflecting, in ordinary human beings it is covered with dust. When we look at the mind we see the thick layer of dust, not its bright, clear, mirror-like reflection. “Until we have wiped away every single speck of dust, we cannot achieve Buddhahood...[we] are not enlightened.”

Palmo (in Chopra 2006: <http://www.tenzinpalmo.com>) confirms that enlightenment is possible under all circumstances and that a monastic lifestyle is not a prerequisite for enlightenment. “Ninety-nine percent of people interested in spirituality...are not monks and nuns, especially in the West. So if the dharma has any relevance at all, it must be relevant for everybody.” She continues to say that meditation is only one aspect of the spiritual life. The Six Perfections of the dharma are equally important, i.e. generosity, ethical conduct, patience under provocation, energy to bring your life into harmony with the spiritual path, meditation, and wisdom. Anything one does is dharma practise provided one does so with mindfulness. “It does not matter whether we are in a monastery or workplace or at home, it is the same. The mind is the same. The mind does not have a shaved head!” (Palmo, in Chopra 2006: <http://www.tenzinpalmo.com>).

Fischer-Schreiber (1994: 101) describes enlightenment as awakening to “a newness of emptiness” which enables the practitioner to understand the true nature of existence. The term “awakening” is sometimes preferred since it more accurately conveys the

experience of enlightenment (Fischer-Schreiber 1994: 102). Emptiness in this sense is not nihilistic emptiness but is rather an experience that is unperceivable, unthinkable, unfeeling, and endless beyond existence and non-existence. “Emptiness is no object that can be experienced by a subject, since the subject itself is dissolved in the emptiness” (Fischer-Schreiber 1994: 102). There are different degrees of enlightenment in that there are differences in clarity and accuracy of insight although enlightenment by its nature is always the same. Fischer-Schreiber (1994: 102) proffers the example of breaking through a wall which can be done by means of a small hole in the wall through which the other side can be seen, and the total annihilation of the wall as in the complete enlightenment of Sakyamuni Buddha. However, in a profound experience it becomes clear that emptiness and phenomena, absolute and relative, are entirely one. “The experience of true reality is precisely the experience of this oneness” (Fischer-Schreiber 1994: 102). The ego is annihilated and one realises that “form is emptiness, emptiness is form” as expounded in the *Heart Sutra*.

Gross (2010: 18) states that “clinging to gender subverts enlightenment.” Every form of Buddhism adheres to teachings of egolessness, affirming that there is no permanent enduring self beneath the current of experience (Gross 2010: 18). Buddhism also claims that much of our suffering is due to our clinging to that non-existent self. Gross (2010: 18) then questions why it is that despite these dictums Buddhism assigns so much centrality to the importance of gender in Buddhist institutional life. In fact, she (2010: 18) continues to point out that gender has become the supreme organising principle of traditional Buddhist institutional life where sexual segregation and gender hierarchy in favour of the male is practised. Even in North America most of the best-known and most popular Buddhist teachers are men who are uninterested and even hostile towards Buddhist feminist reforms, both gender-inclusive and gender-neutral liturgies. “In other words, their allegiance to teachings on egolessness has had no impact on their reliance on conventional, everyday gender norms and stereotypes” (Gross 2010: 18). The most commonly invoked “slogan” is that the enlightened mind is neither male nor female, yet Buddhist monasticism finds it very difficult to enter into the dialogue of transforming gender bias and of granting nuns full ordination in the Tibetan traditions, clinging stubbornly to the existing gender hierarchy. Gross (2010: 19) concludes that “[o]ne must also wonder about the spiritual well-being of those who continue to insist that nothing can be done about traditional gender hierarchy. It does seem that ego-grasping

is quite alive and well in such a mind set.” She suggests that such ego-grasping is the result of an ego that is deeply conditioned by its residence in a male body, and that for many people the maleness (or femaleness) of that body takes precedence over its humanity (Gross 2010: 32).

Allione (2010: <http://www.bdtest1.squarespace.com/web-archive/2010/11/13/tara-the-first-feminist.html>) writes that when she thinks about women and Buddhism the first thing that comes to mind is the story of Tara and her vow always to return as a woman and to reach enlightenment in a woman’s body. Tara’s biography is equally valid today since obstacles still exist to the elimination of discrimination and violence against women and to achieving gender equality (Allione 2010: <http://www.bdtest1.squarespace.com/web-archive/2010/11/13/tara-the-first-feminist.html>). Female inequality is not restricted to Buddhism as most religions and social systems are still patriarchal (Palmo, in Waldon 2008: <http://www.tenzinpalmo.com>). However, Palmo (in Burton 2008: <http://www.tenzinpalmo.com>) states that despite its highly evolved spiritual practices, Buddhism is still very much a male bastion. “For centuries, millennia probably, women have been the overlooked half of the human race, so that most of the spiritual leaders are male and the texts are written by men from a male perspective” (Palmo, in Burton 2008: <http://www.tenzinpalmo.com>). Palmo (in Burton 2008: <http://www.tenzinpalmo.com>) concludes that what is needed is more female spiritual leaders and that it therefore makes sense to vow to continue to come back as a female in order to help women who are so overlooked. “I think it is significant that I was born as a woman and as a Western one at that” (Palmo, in Chopra 2006: <http://www.tenzinpalmo.com>).

4.8 CONCLUSION

“The tension between an underground tradition of highly accomplished female practitioners and the institutional preference for male practitioners” (Gross 1993: 88) is a contradiction in terms. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the *yogini-tantras* of Tantric Buddhism. In Tantric Buddhism the male principle is the consort to the female (Shaw, in Tashi 1995: <http://www.enlighteningtimes.com/tantra/miranda-shaw-on-tantra>). The word consort implies subordination, and in the Tantric texts the male is subordinate to the female, in the sense that the woman is more likely to have “a direct unalienable relationship with reality by virtue of having a female body which is an extremely complex intricate instrument of reality calibration” (Shaw, in Tashi 1995: <http://www.enlighteningtimes.com/tantra/miranda-shaw-on-tantra>).

According to Shaw (in Tashi 1995: <http://www.enlighteningtimes.com/tantra/miranda-shaw-on-tantra>), the Tantric tradition arose in non-hierarchical circles led by women to which men aspired to be admitted, and on occasion were. Ironically, those men supposedly then became the great “founders” of the tradition. Therefore, Buddhist women have a historical basis for questioning discriminatory institutional arrangements. They are not simply modern discontented feminists but are inspired by the egalitarian vision at the heart of their spiritual tradition which they instinctively recognise (Shaw, in Tashi 1995: <http://www.enlighteningtimes.com/tantra/miranda-shaw-on-tantra>).

However, there is a great disparity between what ancient texts reveal and what some current Tibetan lamas articulate. Shaw (in Tashi 1995: <http://www.enlighteningtimes.com/tantra/miranda-shaw-on-tantra>) states that the Tantras have a gynocentric world view which focuses on women as worthy of honour and respect. Those desiring to practise Tantra must follow and accept this philosophy. She (in Tashi 1995: <http://www.enlighteningtimes.com/tantra/miranda-shaw-on-tantra>) points out that people who pronounce upon the inferiority of women are generally monks who had to build up a psychological resistance to women. Palmo (in Cox 2011: 23) interestingly points out that in the East only a small minority of Buddhists ever meditate, and only a minority actually practise, even among monks. “They recite mantras and so forth. For most, the power of the mantra is enough; they may not be doing the visualisations and everything that goes along with it” (Palmo, in Cox 2011: 23).

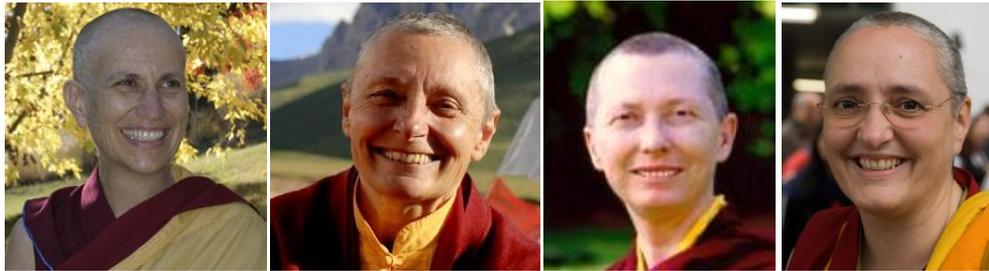
There is no doubt that institutionalised gender bias in Tibetan Buddhism has no sound basis. The Tibetan Buddhist pantheon is rife with female Buddhas, goddesses, dakinis, and other highly spiritual and enlightened women. Present times are characterised, especially in the West, by accomplished female academics and Tibetan Buddhist teachers, as well as prominent nuns. The *yogini-tantras* furthermore attest to the reverence and honour the male should afford to the female. Moreover, gender hierarchy and male dominance cause untold suffering and pain, especially devastating for female monastics. Palmo (in Malkin 2009: <http://www.tenzinpalmo.com>) states that “[j]ust as individuals often miss opportunities to transform suffering into compassion and patience, so it is with groups of people.” She continues to say that as human beings we have a unique opportunity to transform suffering and that we need challenges to grow spiritually (Palmo, in Malkin 2009: <http://www.tenzinpalmo.com>). Tenzin Palmo’s compassionate commitment to end sexism is evident in her vow to become

enlightened in a female body. She concludes that “[W]e always have a choice how we respond...Slowly, slowly...It just takes a bit of time and patience” (Palmo, in Malkin 2009: <http://www.tenzinpalmo.com>).

CHAPTER FIVE: BLOSSOMS OF THE DHARMA²⁴ : LIVING AS A WESTERN TIBETAN BUDDHIST NUN

The Buddhist monastic in female form will make a startling impression on the world stage. People will be able to read in her demeanour an exceptional resolve and an exceptional accomplishment...she will represent a victory over patriarchy and misogyny.

(Gyatso 2010, in Mohr & Tsedroen: 19, 20)



5.1 INTRODUCTION

Religion in recent times has diverged in various directions. Some people are moving away from the spiritual towards the more dogmatic, others are attracted by so-called magical manifestations, while still others have replaced the spiritual with psychotherapy or social service (Tsomo 1999: 291). At the same time the authentic spiritual richness of numerous sacred traditions is being recovered, revealing itself in ritual, contemplation, nature, and the ordinariness of daily life. Elsewhere the spiritual is being concealed by secular concerns (Kruger, Lubbe & Steyn 2009: 279). Asian religious systems are one of the most prominent spiritual traditions that have “taken root on Western soil” (Tsomo 1999: 291). Tsomo (1999: 291) states that “transplantation often involves a radically different cultural landscape, new caretakers, and new influences.” The traditions often mutate in admirable ways and fulfil significant needs for many people in their new environment (Tsomo 1999: 291).

U. S. Congressman Charles G. Rose introduced the Dalai Lama to the audience at Constitution Hall, Washington, D. C., on the Dalai Lama’s first visit to America in 1979, with the following words:

²⁴ Chodron 1999

I have read about the Buddhist concepts of karma and dharma. I even reviewed the 227 rules that Buddhist monks must follow, and then I realized how much I have to learn. But I came to the conclusion that what it is all about is self-awareness. Enlightenment starts with the individual. And if America is to cope with its current dilemmas, it must reach a higher level of consciousness than the level at which our problems are created. The belief of Tibetan Buddhism in the evolution of the individual is harmonious with the desire of a growing number of our citizens for spiritual growth to reach a higher consciousness.

(Rose, in Tenzin Gyatso, 2006: 15)

Classical Buddhism was essentially the religion and lifestyle of its monastic elite. Monastics adhered to the simple ethical code of Buddhism, and pursued its philosophical and meditational disciplines deemed fundamental to attaining enlightenment (Gross, in Tsomo 1999: 277). An important element in the transmission of Buddhism to the West is the development of a Buddhist monastic community (Napper, in Chodron 1999: xv). A small number of Western Buddhists have chosen to ordain as monastics, giving up family life, shaving their heads, donning monastic robes, and entering into a lifelong commitment in which their daily activities are guided by the *Vinaya* (Napper, in Chodron 1999: xv). Chodron (1999: xxvi) states that limited research has been conducted about Buddhist monastics living in the West. Currently there are no reliable statistics available about the number of Western Buddhist nuns and monks (Ploos van Amstel 2005: 37).

Nevertheless, these nuns and monks face a number of challenges. They enter into a monastic system which has until recently only existed in Asian societies where Buddhism and its culture are interwoven in the various communities. Western monastics' lives, like those of their Asian counterparts, are governed by a set of precepts that originated at the time of the Buddha more than 2 500 years ago. Although many of these regulations are timeless and relevant, there may be some that are difficult to abide by in our contemporary age. Furthermore, Western societies do not have a pre-existing role or place for women who don Buddhist robes (Napper, in Chodron 1999: xv).

In addition to the above-mentioned challenges, Western Buddhist nuns face the more subtle predicament of terminology and appropriate behaviour (Tsomo 2008: xxiii). In Asian Buddhist languages a clear distinction is made between a woman as such and a nun. Asian nuns do not regard themselves as women because of the clear distinctions made between the identity and lifestyle of nuns and other women. In the Asian world nuns and laywomen observe different social protocols. They sleep in different areas, do not eat together, and behave differently. Westerners who transgress these social expectations may be deemed ignorant, selfish, inappropriate, or even arrogant. In Asian Buddhist countries the decision to become a monastic is highly respected and is reflected in the language used to address nuns and monks. Monastics are not addressed by name without a qualifier such as “venerable” or “teacher.” To do otherwise would be considered rude. However, in the West, due to the ideal of social equality, addressing a nun as “venerable” may sound pretentious (Tsomo 2008: xxiv).

Buddhist monastics can live a variety of lifestyles and are not cloistered in the way Roman Catholic monastics are. A Tibetan Buddhist nun can live in a nunnery or in a city apartment. She can be engaged in social service, she may be occupied in intensive scriptural study, or she may be isolated in retreat. The only requisite is that she observes the monastic precepts to the best of her ability and that her day begins and ends with meditation and prayer (Chodron 1999: xxix). Currently there are dynamic and active Buddhist nuns living in the West as well as in Asia. Some are scholars, others are meditators living in retreat, some are translators of scriptures, and others do social service work in hospitals, prisons, and schools in war zones and poor areas (Chodron 1999: xxxvi).

5.2 YOU ARE BECOMING A WHAT?²⁵

A *bhikshuni* is a female religious mendicant who has renounced everyday worldly life to pursue the Buddha’s path to enlightenment and liberation (Barnes, in Findly 2000: 17). She has no livelihood other than her religious life. She is sustained by donations of food, clothing, and shelter from the lay community. Although the word *bhikshuni* is translated into English as nun, the similarity between Buddhist and Christian nuns is only approximate. A *bhikshuni* (like her male counterpart, the *bhikshu*) undergoes a period of religious instruction as a novice nun after which she is ordained as a full-

²⁵ Chodron 2010

fledged member of the nun's order in a formal ceremony known as *upasampada* (Barnes, in Findly 2000: 17).

Nuns represent the Dharma in public. They wear monastic robes, shave their heads, and live according to certain precepts. Chodron (in Findly 2000: 90), states that the robes and precepts are a tremendous support when encountering attachments and aversions that might arise in daily life. Men recognize that nuns are celibate and relate differently to them than they would to lay women. They usually refrain from initiating the subtle flirting games and self-conscious behaviour that people engage in when they are sexually attracted to each other. Furthermore, a nun does not have to consider a daily wardrobe and an attractive appearance. The robes and the precepts assist a nun in being aware of her actions and their results and makes her mindful not to act in unethical or impulsive ways (Chodron, in Findly 2000: 90).

Thubten Chodron (in Findly 2000: 81) writes that Western women who choose to become Tibetan Buddhist nuns do so because “the Dharma has spoken deeply to [their] hearts.” The responses I received from the questionnaires (see Appendix: Questionnaire, question 2) I sent to various nunneries and individual nuns, indeed reveal that the choice of *Tibetan* Buddhism as opposed to any other form of Buddhism, is often an instinctive choice rather than an intellectual one, influenced by the teacher with whom they first made contact and the nature of the teachings they received.

Tenzin Palmo (1993: [http://www.thubtenchodron.org /BuddhistNunsMonasticLife](http://www.thubtenchodron.org/BuddhistNunsMonasticLife)) states that monasticism is not for everyone. It is suitable only for a handful of individuals who are drawn towards a life totally dedicated to the Dharma by renouncing worldly concerns and practicing ethical purity. She continues to say that “the sangha is a group of monastics whose lives are based on renunciation, purity, restraint, and discipline which are aimed at reducing wants and desires.” Pema Chodron, an American Tibetan Buddhist nun who is the abbess of a monastery in Nova Scotia, states (2011b: <http://www.pemachodronfoundation.org>) that it is a general view that people choose to live in a monastery to escape from the world. She confirms that in reality the “intensity and simplicity” of monastic life demand that one becomes more intimately involved with one's life and life in general, a life “not motivated by personal concerns and habitual patterns” (2011b: <http://www>.

pemachodronfoundation.org). In the East the sangha has the role of preserving and transmitting the Dharma. The sangha is therefore usually supported and respected by these societies, and they take pride in their monastics (Tenzin Palmo, 1993: <http://www.thubtenchodron.org/BuddhistNunsMonasticLife>). In the West, however, the situation is quite different. Many of the Dharma scholars and meditation teachers are lay people. Tenzin Palmo (1993: <http://www.thubtenchodron.org/BuddhistNunsMonasticLife>) writes that renunciation is misunderstood and disparaged. Sangha members are characterised as escapists and neurotics unable to face the challenge of intimate relationships (Palmo, 1993: <http://www.thubtenchodron.org/BuddhistNunsMonasticLife>).

5.2.1 The contribution of Western nuns

Thubten Chodron (2000: <http://www.thubtenchodron.org/BuddhistNunsMonasticLife>) states that many people in the West continue to entertain preconceived ideas of monastics as innately selfish people who escape from society, making no contribution towards improving the world. They accuse them of not being able to confront the difficulties of daily life. She continues to say that her own experiences and observations as a Tibetan Buddhist nun have not validated these prejudices (Chodron, 2000: <http://www.thubtenchodron.org/BuddhistNunsMonasticLife>). Although they spend a significant amount of time in study and practice, Thubten Chodron (2000: <http://www.thubtenchodron.org/BuddhistNunsMonasticLife>) lists a number of contributions that Western Tibetan Buddhist nuns are making to society:

- i. They demonstrate a life of simplicity and purity.
- ii. In controlling their consumerist tendencies, nuns preserve the environment for future generations.
- iii. Nuns are celibate and therefore contribute towards preventing overpopulation.
- iv. They build cultural bridges between East and West.
- v. Western nuns offer many skills to the Buddhist community at large:
 - a. Teachers of the Dharma
 - b. Translators of sacred texts
 - c. Counselors
 - d. Some work in day-care centres
 - e. Some nuns help in hospices for the terminally ill

- f. Others work in refugee camps in their own countries and abroad
 - g. Some are artists
 - h. Others are therapists
 - i. And some are even professors at universities
- vi. Nuns offer an alternative to women's liberation by treating the body simply as a vehicle with which to practice the Dharma. They acknowledge that human beings are sexual beings, but women are more than just their sexual identity.
- vii. They set up Dharma centres in the West.

To these we can add Tenzin Palmo's (1993: <http://www.thubtenchodron.org/BuddhistNunsMonasticLife>) statement that "monastics remind us that we can live with few possessions and without sex, family, or security, and yet be happy and content." Although Western nuns may therefore face many challenges, Thubten Chodron (2000: <http://www.thubtenchodron.org/BuddhistNunsMonasticLife>) believes that these challenges can become "the fuel propelling them towards internal transformation."

5.3 MONASTIC TRAINING

According to the traditional texts followed by most schools of Buddhism, a woman who wishes to join the nuns' order has her hair shaved off by an ordained nun as a symbol of her renunciation of lay life. She requests two senior bhikshunis to act as her instructors during her two-year training period. These two senior nuns will also present her to the entire local community of nuns when she is ready for ordination. She will be asked a prescribed series of questions about her health, her legal status as a free woman, and her fitness to join the order. As soon as she has answered satisfactorily, she is presented with a nun's basic possessions: the five-part monastic robes in which she will dress henceforth, and an alms bowl. She formally accepts the rules of the Vinaya which will govern her conduct as a nun, and then proceeds to present herself to a quorum of bhikshus and bhikshunis of her local community for ordination. Once she has received this double ordination from both the bhikshuni and the bhikshu communities, she is recognised as a bhikshuni. The ordination of a monk is relatively similar to that of a nun, except that he is ordained only by the bhikshu community (Barnes, in Findly 2000 17, 18).

The beginning of the bhikshuni order is well documented (Kabilsingh, in Chodron 1999: 17– 33). However, modern scholars are questioning the accuracy of the historical texts in which the foundation of the nuns’ order is recorded. Very few Buddhist texts extant today can be accurately dated to earlier than the fourth and fifth centuries C.E. Some oral traditions about the teachings of the Buddha and the early years of the sangha were committed to writing in the first century B.C.E, a few hundred years after the death of Siddhartha Gautama. However, these written texts were probably revised before reaching the state in which we have them today. It is therefore possible that what they now represent is a carefully constructed interpretation of what Buddhism originally resembled. The history of the founding of the nuns’ order is an example of such a process of revision and refinement. It was written by monks at an unidentified time for the sole purpose of determining the status of monks and nuns within the sangha. However, since the mid-nineteenth century excavations of a number of ancient Buddhist sites in India paint quite a different picture about the status of nuns than the one presented in the texts. (Barnes, in Findly 2000: 18,19). Inscriptions found at these sites, principally at Bodghaya, Sarnath, Amarvati, Bharut, and Sanchi date from the third century B.C.E. to as late as the second century C.E. The largest and best-preserved body of inscriptions were found at Sanchi which produced more than 800 inscriptions providing detailed information about the Buddhist sangha and the condition of Buddhism not long after the Buddha’s death (Barnes, in Findly 2000:19). The records at Sanchi attest to the importance of the role of nuns in the sangha, namely as equal to that of the monks. Nuns seemed to have been active and influential. So much so that monks continued promulgating rules to control and limit the lives and activities of the nuns (Barnes, in Findly 2000: 29).

5.3.1 Training for Western nuns

Western women who wish to ordain as Tibetan Buddhist nuns are faced with a number of obstacles. Some Western nuns remain in Asia as long as possible but eventually experience visa and language problems. Tibetan nunneries are usually filled to capacity and Westerners are expected to pay in order to live in a guest room. Tibetan nuns receive their training in Tibetan, which includes memorising Tibetan texts. Furthermore, the rituals are performed in Tibetan. The majority of Western nuns do not speak Tibetan and memorising texts in Tibetan are usually not meaningful for them. Western nuns have different intellectual needs and questions than their Tibetan counterparts. Tibetan

nuns grow up within Buddhist communities where certain concepts and traditions are a given, for instance the Three Jewels. Western nuns may want to analyse and intensify their study of the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. Western nuns in India and elsewhere in Asia may therefore find that they do not readily fit into established Tibetan Buddhist institutions (Chodron 2000, in Findly: 82, 83).

Tibetan and Taiwanese nuns for instance, receive very different treatment in their endeavours (Li, in Tsomo 2000: 184). Foguangshan monastery in Taiwan recognises the productivity of the nuns, and gender equality is one of the central pillars of what Master Xingyun calls “humanistic Buddhism” (Li, in Tsomo 2000: 184). Foguangshan offers foreign students free education and monastic positions after graduation. It provides its nuns with opportunities for education and career advancement that few other Buddhist organisations can equal. Great care is taken when choosing ordination candidates and precept masters, and traditional monastic structures replace well-known family structures and traditional patterns of behaviour (Li, in Tsomo 2000: 185).

In contrast to this there is very little institutional support for Western nuns in the Tibetan tradition. Li (in Tsomo 2000: 185) maintains that this is due to a deficiency in resources as well as the lack of full ordination which would provide the necessary institutional recognition and support. The monastic role of nuns is more often than not restricted to a supportive role and preference is given to the needs of the monks and even the male laity above that of the nuns (Li, in Tsomo 2000: 185).

While Taiwanese Buddhist temples serve as important social institutions abroad and accord their monastics, male and female, respect and support ensuring that they are protected from financial difficulties, the same cannot be said about Tibetan Buddhist institutions in the West (Li, in Tsomo 2000: 185). Although the Tibetan Buddhist tradition has grown rapidly in the West in the last three decades due to the “accessibility and flexibility of its spiritual training” especially in meditation, it has not yet developed adequate support to budding monastic communities in the West (Li, in Tsomo 2000: 185). Available support is generally channelled to refugee monasteries in Nepal and India, and then mostly to monks. Western Tibetan Buddhist nuns are currently deprived of the Western concept of religious community and in addition there is no suitable place for them in the Tibetan religious community.

Li (in Tsomo 2000: 185) is of the opinion that as Tibetan Buddhism becomes more established in the West, it is important that the Tibetan Buddhist authorities facilitate the integration of Western nuns into their monastic communities. Furthermore, she states (in Tsomo 2000: 185) that one of the most effective strategies for accomplishing this task is the endorsement of the bhikshuni ordination.

5.3.2 The precepts

The function of precepts is to assist monastics in their spiritual pursuit and to help them to refrain from living in harmful, dysfunctional, and inconsiderate ways (Chodron, in Findly 2000: 86). Novice nuns have ten precepts which can be subdivided to total 36; probationary nuns have six precepts in addition to the novice precepts; and bhikshunis have 348 precepts as listed in the Dharmagupta school of Vinaya, which has the only extant bhikshuni lineage today (Chodron, in Findly 2000: 86). The precepts are divided into different categories, each with its own method of dealing with transgressions. The most serious precepts are the root precepts and must be adhered to in order to remain a nun. These mainly include no killing, no stealing, no sexual misconduct, and not lying about spiritual attainments. Other precepts include regulations concerning nuns' relationships with other nuns, with monks, and with the lay community. There are also precepts prescribing daily behaviour such as eating, walking, dressing, and residing in any given place. Infringement of the precepts are purified in a variety of ways according to their severity, for example confession to another bhikshuni, confession in the presence of the assembly of nuns, or relinquishing of a possession obtained in an inappropriate manner (Chodron, in Findly 2000: 86).

Observing the precepts in the West in the twenty-first century is not always easy. The precepts were established by the Buddha in India in the sixth century B.C.E. Although monastics in the Theravada tradition try to keep the precepts literally, other traditions might permit more flexibility. A careful study of the Vinaya and the background to the precepts enable nuns to understand the purpose of each precept. This enables them to adhere to its purpose although they may not necessarily be able to follow it literally (Chodron, in Findly 2000: 87). Chodron (in Findly 2000: 87) presents the example of one of the bhikshuni precepts which forbids nuns from riding in a vehicle. She explains

that in ancient India vehicles were drawn by animals and even human beings and was preserved for the wealthy. The Buddha's intention was to prevent suffering to other sentient beings and to avoid arrogance in monastics. Today, this precept is no longer practicable and nuns have adapted it to mean that they should avoid riding in expensive vehicles or developing pride when driven around in luxury cars. In this way monastics have to adapt themselves to modern conditions (Chodron, in Findly 2000: 87).

Chodron (in Findly 2000: 87) continues to point out that there will be diverse interpretations and implementations among the different traditions and even among different monasteries within the same tradition. Variations in observing the precepts may also be encountered in different cultures. For example, Asian nuns do not usually shake hands with men, whereas most Western nuns in the Tibetan tradition do. Nuns simply have to be mindful that attraction and attachment do not arise when shaking hands (Chodron, in Findly 2000: 87).

5.4 WESTERN TIBETAN BUDDHIST NUNS: A NEW PHENOMENON IN AN ANCIENT TRADITION²⁶

Tsomo (1999: 294) writes that “[f]eminists look at the role of women in Buddhist cultures and blink.” She continues to say that the introduction of Buddhist cultures to the West has “occasioned a ripening of feminist awareness” (Tsomo 1999: 294). It has highlighted certain traditional patriarchal patterns in some Asian cultures and has engendered questions about sexist attitudes within Buddhist and Western societies. However, she argues that before Buddhism can be “wholeheartedly embraced” by Western women, a number of issues need to be addressed. Buddhism purports to affect the welfare of all, yet it has failed to address actively discrimination against women. Buddhism claims to be egalitarian yet the myth of male superiority continues to thrive in Buddhist societies. So-called Buddhist saints are supposed to be enlightened, but they refrain from challenging the assertion that good karma leads to a male rebirth and bad karma to a female rebirth.

Shaw (1994: 35) states that “the religious lives of women unfold within a matrix of beliefs about women’s capacities and the nature and value of femaleness. Beliefs and

²⁶ Chodron, in Findly 2000: 81

attitudes shaping women's self-perception, such as the symbolic content and interpretation of their religious practices, are just as important as the objects they wield and the physical actions they perform." However, historically Buddhist women have faced obstacles in their spiritual lives in at least four areas (Findly 2000: 3). The first area presenting obstacles is in religious practices, including lifestyle customs, instructional opportunities, meditational forms, and institutional structures. These are routinely available to monks and lay men but are rarely or never accessible to lay women and nuns. Canonical texts, despite the misogynistic tone of some of their rhetoric, clearly state that women can achieve enlightenment. The essential processes, through which they can advance to this experience are however, often curtailed. The complete and irreversible transformation of Buddhist enlightenment is attained above all through extensive and strenuous disciplines which are intended to move the practitioner to a position of non-attachment and compassionate activity within the world (Findly 2000: 3). Women practitioners have been hindered in their efforts to realise the fullness of their spiritual lives by restricted access to the customary disciplinary opportunities (Findly 2000: 3).

The second area of discrimination against nuns is in the disciplinary rules that govern the lives of monastics in which nuns have unmistakably been delineated as second-class citizens in relation to the monks (Findly 2000: 3). This is painfully illustrated by the eight disciplinary rules for nuns which were laid down at the time of Gautama Buddha when the first nuns were admitted into the monastic order. The eight rules for example, require all nuns to pay homage to all monks, regardless of the seniority of the nun or the junior rank of a monk. The rules also require nuns to be instructed by monks but not vice versa. Furthermore, nuns should refrain from criticising or reprimanding monks although the reverse is not required of monks. Nuns have to be ordained by the orders of both nuns and monks, but the reverse does not hold true. The inequality of institutional governance places nuns' daily lives directly under the authority of monks and curtails any possibility of full self-governance for the nuns (Findly 2000: 4). The establishment of Tenzin Palmo's nunnery (see 6.6) however, is a step in the right direction. Dongyu Gatsal Ling is run by the nuns themselves without any interference from Khampagar Monastery (see 6.6.5).

Thirdly, although doctrinally women are fully capable of reaching enlightenment, recognition of their achievements by title and status has often been withheld (Findly 2000: 4). The status of nuns within the Buddhist community seems to correspond with ordination status (Tsomo 1999: 9). In a community where full ordination is available to nuns, their level of education and status also tends to be high. Where only novice ordination is available they are recognised as members of the Buddhist sangha but are not afforded equal treatment (Tsomo 1999: 9). However, full ordination does not necessarily result in equal status. Even nuns who enjoy full ordination, as in China, Korea, and Vietnam, often find themselves marginalised and in subordinate positions in the religious power structures of their traditions (Tsomo 1999: 9).

Lastly, female renunciants have often been refused the same material support that their male counterparts are privy to (Findly 2000: 4). Donor support of nuns' communities has lagged well behind those of monks and their communities. This has resulted for instance in the disappearance of the nuns' order in India (Findly 2000: 4).

Currently many nuns, Western as well as Asian, are challenging years of traditional obstacles (Findly 2000: 2). They are laying claim to forms, practices, and institutions that had hitherto been open only to men. Buddhist women, lay as well as monastic, are reshaping these forms, practices, and institutions "not only to suit their own needs and concerns but also to respond to the particular demands of life in late-twentieth-century culture" (Findly 2000: 2).

Western Tibetan Buddhist nuns are also faced with other, more subtle, difficulties. They bring with them habits, physical as well as intellectual, that have been well-honed through years of living in the world outside the nunnery, and they therefore tend to be more individualistic than their Asian sisters (Chodron, 2000: <http://www.thubtenchodron.org/BuddhistNunsMonasticLife>). They furthermore tend to be more self-sufficient and more self-motivated which sometimes makes it difficult for these very individualistic nuns to live in a monastic community (Chodron, 2000: <http://www.thubtenchodron.org/BuddhistNunsMonasticLife>).

As first generation Western Tibetan Buddhist nuns they often lead a homeless life, as there are very few nunneries in the West (Chodron, 2000: <http://www.thubtenchodron.org/BuddhistNunsMonasticLife>). In Buddhism there is no umbrella

institution that cares for its monastics (Chodron, 2000: <http://www.thubtenchodron.org/BuddhistNunsMonasticLife>). They are not provided for financially and many live on their life's savings which dwindle away year after year. Some nuns find sponsors, often family and friends, or live in great poverty in Dharma centres in the West (Chodron, 2000: <http://www.thubtenchodron.org/BuddhistNunsMonasticLife>). Tibetan nunneries in Asia are frequently quite overcrowded with no room for foreigners, and visa problems and the language barrier can become problematic (Chodron, 2000: <http://www.thubtenchodron.org/BuddhistNunsMonasticLife>). Western nuns are not an integral part of the Tibetan religious community, whose hierarchy consists of Tibetan monks (Chodron, in Findly 2000: 85).

Asian women are usually ordained when they are still young and impressionable with little life experience. Some Asian women may choose ordination when they are elderly and their families are grown. In contrast, most Western women are ordained when they are adults, are highly educated, have experienced careers and married life, and have raised children. These women have talents and skills which they bring to monastic life, but they also bring habits and expectations "that have been well polished" by years of contact with the world (Chodron, in Findly 2000: 81). Ordained Asian women are supported by their families and communities. Becoming a nun in Asia is acceptable and respectable. Furthermore, cultures in the East focus more on group rather than on individual identity, which makes it easier for nuns to adapt to community life in a monastery (Chodron, in Findly 2000: 81, 82).

Western nuns, however, grow up in a culture that emphasises the individual over the group often resulting in strong, individualistic personalities. Paradoxically, Western women need strong personalities in order to become Buddhist nuns. Often, they are reproached by their families for leaving well-paid jobs and careers and for not having children. Their communities brand them as "lazy parasites who don't want to work," and they are accused of "repressing their sexuality and of avoiding intimate relationships" (Chodron, in Findly 2000: 82).

These first-generation Western Tibetan Buddhist nuns are pioneers in many fields. There are few nunneries in the West, and nuns are generally expected to make some sort of financial contribution as there is not sufficient financial support from a surrounding

lay community to sustain the nunneries. This presents the nuns with a number of problems. According to their precepts, they are expected to shave their heads, wear monastic robes, and not to engage in commerce or touch money. Some of the nuns have sponsors or family and friends who assist them with a small stipend. Yet others are forced to take jobs in the lay community to support themselves, which interferes with their observing the ordination precepts and may prevent them from studying and practising intensely (Chodron, in Findly 2000: 82). However, His Holiness the present Dalai Lama has stated that in certain cases adaptations may be made. He emphasises the importance of considering the adaptations carefully before applying them, as every effort should be made to follow the Vinaya teachings and precepts as carefully as possible (Gyatso, in Chodron 1999: 197).

5.4.1 Transforming obstacles

Thubten Chodron (in Findly 2000: 83, 84), a prominent American Tibetan Buddhist nun, notes that obstacles such as those mentioned in 5.4 can be experienced as the catalyst for a nun's practice, and through practise her mind can be transformed and can become peaceful. She provides the examples of meditating on impermanence and death in order to come to terms with financial insecurity; contemplating the disadvantages of the eight worldly concerns²⁷ would assist a nun in remaining unaffected by praise and blame from others; and reflecting on karma and its effects when encountering difficulties in receiving a monastic education.

One of the biggest challenges for a Western nun is living as a celibate. "Sexuality spills" from the Western media, and Western culture pronounces romantic intimacy as the "*summum bonum*" of life (Chodron, in Findly 2000: 84). She recommends that nuns look beyond superficial appearances and contemplate the deeply ingrained emotional and sexual patterns of attachments that keep one imprisoned in cyclical existence. Furthermore, she advises nuns and lay people alike to study the nature of emotions and to learn to deal with it in constructive ways without depending on outsiders to make one feel good about oneself.

²⁷ Experiencing pleasure in receiving money and material possessions, praise and approval from others, having a good reputation and public image, or experiencing pleasures of the senses. Experiencing an aversion to not receiving or to losing the afore-mentioned.

5.4.2 The daily life of a Western Tibetan Buddhist nun

The monastic precepts provide a foundation for further Dharma study and practise. Western nuns live in a variety of circumstances usually either in a monastic community or a Dharma centre, or sometimes alone. Regardless of the circumstances every nun's day begins with prayers and meditation before breakfast. The rest of the day may be occupied by chores, practical work to support themselves, periods of study, and additional meditation. The evening ends with a further session of meditation. Annual meditation retreats ensure periods of intensive study and meditation devoid of the distractions of the usual daily activities of Dharma centres or nunneries, and the efforts of earning a living (Chodron, in Findly 2000: 88).

Western nuns attract some interesting comments in their daily lives regarding their appearance. Comments vary from compliments on their "outfits," to "[n]ot everyone can wear their hair like that, but [it] looks great on you," to "[d]on't worry, dear. After the chemo is finished your hair will grow back again" (Chodron, in Findly 2000: 88). Buddhist nuns are sometimes mistaken as followers of the Hare Krishna movement, and are occasionally encouraged to "[h]ave faith in Jesus" (Chodron, in Findly 2000: 88). However, they are also recognised as Buddhist nuns and approached about how to learn meditation, or about where to find a Dharma centre.

Nuns experience a variety of reactions to their monastic status even in Buddhist communities, and especially in the West where Buddhism is a relatively new religious experience. The public do not always know how to relate to monastics, and although some people may be respectful towards Asian nuns, Western nuns are often treated as "unpaid labour" for the Dharma centres and expected to run errands, cook, and clean for the lay community (Chodron, in Findly 2000: 88). Yet others treat the nuns courteously. However, nuns sometimes have to remind people about the correct protocol in dealing with monastics. Thubten Chodron (in Findly 2000: 88) had on one occasion to remind a Dharma centre who had invited her to teach in their city that it was not appropriate to provide accommodation for her at the home of a single man with a poster of a Playboy bunny in his bathroom.

5.5 THE MISSING PILLAR: FULL ORDINATION FOR TIBETAN BUDDHIST NUNS

Apparently the bhikshuni or full ordination for women never spread to Tibet due to the difficulties of having the required quorum of ordained nuns who would have had to travel from India to Tibet across the high Himalayas in previous centuries. The novice ordination for nuns in Tibetan Buddhism is performed by monks. Although several prominent Tibetan Buddhist monks, including the current Dalai Lama as well as the Karmapa, approve of nuns in the Tibetan tradition receiving full ordination, the Tibetan religious establishment has not officially sanctioned this. Neither has the bhikshuni ordination of Tibetan Buddhist nuns in the Chinese tradition been approved by Tibetan religious authorities, although they have been given permission to go to Taiwan to seek full ordination. Western nuns who aspire to full ordination usually receive it in the Chinese, Vietnamese or Korean traditions where it is extant. Tibetan nuns face greater difficulties in obtaining bhikshuni ordination as they form part of the Tibetan community and are more susceptible to social pressures (Chodron, in Findly 2000: 85).

Women who wish to be ordained as nuns request ordination from their teachers. In the Tibetan tradition these teachers are usually men. Presently there are very few women teachers in the Tibetan tradition who may grant ordination. There are four levels of ordination in Tibetan Buddhism: sramanerika (novice) ordination, bhikshuni (full) ordination, bodhisattva vows, and tantric vows (Gyatso, in Chodron 1999: 194). A novice ordination ceremony usually lasts a couple of hours. A bhikshuni ordination ceremony however, is preceded by a stringent training programme which may last up to one month before the ceremony takes place. Bodhisattva and tantric vows can only be taken by fully ordained monastics. A Tibetan Buddhist nun who wishes to receive full ordination has to find a preceptor in the Chinese, Korean, or Vietnamese tradition who will train her in the various precepts (Chodron, in Findly 2000: 85). Training in the precepts includes teachings on the meaning of each precept, what constitutes a transgression, and how transgressions can be purified once they have occurred. According to Chodron (in Findly 2000: 86) Western nuns do not usually have any difficulty in finding preceptors, but the lack of nunneries in the West means that they are often deprived of the practical training that accompanies living with other monastics in a community.

5.5.1 Full ordination and the reconstruction of religious traditions

According to Li (in Tsomo 2000: 168) the current movement to establish full ordination for Buddhist nuns involves a considerable reconstruction of religious traditions. The campaign for the full ordination of Buddhist nuns is effecting changes in attitudes and institutions in various monastic communities. Tension exists between the Buddha's ordination of women, textual ambiguity, and the *de facto* exclusion of women from full ordination in certain Buddhist traditions. Li (in Tsomo 2000: 168) is of the opinion that these may soon be replaced by "the principle of universal equality from which a vital new tradition can emerge."

The impetus to set up an order of fully ordained nuns is motivated by three primary factors (Li, in Tsomo 2000: 168). Firstly, many dedicated nuns are required by Buddhist organisations who are attempting to establish themselves in the West. A subtle competition for Western Buddhist nuns have already surfaced between Tibetan and Taiwanese traditions. Secondly, there is rivalry between the various traditions to demonstrate their dedication to social equity by recognising women's equal right to full ordination. This is most apparent between Tibetan and Theravadin institutions in the West. Lastly, there is tension between the bhikshuni orders in Taiwan and the People's Republic of China (PRC) to demonstrate their legitimacy and lineage. According to Li (in Tsomo 2000: 169), this rivalry between Tibetans in exile, Taiwan, and the PRC is intimately associated with political concerns that may be far removed from Buddhist doctrines and ethics.

5.5.2 The full ordination ceremony in Bodhgaya

The Tibetan Government-in-Exile's Ministry of Religious and Cultural Affairs granted Western nuns in the Tibetan tradition permission to go to Taiwan to obtain full ordination. The Ministry's representative, Bhikshu Tashi Tsering, visited Taiwan to this end in 1997 (Li, in Tsomo 2000: 169). Foguangshan, the largest Buddhist monastery in Taiwan, then proceeded to conduct an international full ordination ceremony in Bodhgaya, India, in February 1998.

There were more than 1 500 participants, including pilgrims and ordination candidates. The ordination lasted nine days and according to Li (in Tsomo 2000: 170), it was one of the few times in history that Buddhist women in the Indian, Sri Lankan, and Tibetan

traditions had an opportunity to take full ordination. There were more than 300 applicants of whom 148 were selected for full ordination. These included 134 nuns and 14 monks. Candidates were ordained at three levels: novice monk or nun (sramanera/sramanerika), fully ordained monk or nun (bhikshu/bhikshuni), and bodhisattva.

Li (in Tsomo 2000: 174, 175) categorised the 134 female ordination candidates into three geographic areas according to the location of their monastic communities, namely Taiwan, South Asia, and the West. The Taiwanese nuns included ethnic Taiwanese, four Ladakhi novices in the Tibetan tradition, two Chinese Australians, one Chinese American, and one Singaporean. The ages of the nuns ranged from 20 to 54. The 66 South Asian candidates ranged in age from 19 to 80. Their educational backgrounds included five M.A.s, six B.A.s, and five nuns with post-secondary school vocational training.

The group of 18 Western nuns included 17 practising in the Tibetan tradition and one German nun in the Theravada tradition. Seven of these nuns were from the United Kingdom, three from the United States, two from Denmark, two from Belgium, two from Canada, one from Germany, and one from Spain. Their educational backgrounds included one Ph.D., eight M.A.s, three B.A.s, and four who had completed post-secondary school vocational training. Their ages ranged from 28 to 59 (Li, in Tsomo 2000: 174, 175).

The daily schedule of the ordination candidates was similar to monastic life in Taiwan: waking at dawn and retiring at 22h00. The ordination was divided into five sections according to the Chinese Buddhist tradition: ceremonial training in small groups; lessons on the *Pratimoksa* precepts; repentance rituals; the formal ordination procedures; and a large *sanghadana*, a meal offering to the monastic community.

According to Li (in Tsomo 2000: 170), the Chinese method of conducting an ordination differs from the Tibetan and Theravadin traditions. The Tibetan and Theravadin ordination ceremonies are conducted in a day. The Chinese style of ordination is more complex and ritualised, and includes teaching candidates the precepts, monastic regulations, and protocol. In Bodhgaya the ordination hall was elaborately decorated with colourful flags and fabrics and loud Buddhist music was broadcast. In contrast to this, a Tibetan ordination is usually relatively straightforward and quiet.

The Chinese system of ordination is distinguished from the Tibetan and Theravadin systems by the Triple Platform Ordination. The Triple Platform Ordination incorporates novice, full, and bodhisattva ordinations in sequence. Chinese Buddhism hereby integrates Mahayana doctrine and *Dharmagupta Vinaya* into the ordination while at the same time maintaining the orthodox monastic lineage of the *Pratimoksa* ordinations (sramanerika and bhikshuni) (Li, in Tsomo 2000: 171).

The Bodhgaya ordination included fully ordained monks and nuns from various Buddhist traditions. Since transmission of the bhikshuni lineage to the Tibetan and Theravadin traditions can only be conducted via the Chinese Buddhist tradition, the preceptors and recipients of all these traditions must be in agreement with each other. Recognition of the ordination as valid and legitimate is of the utmost importance for the future of the newly ordained bhikshunis as their well-being is dependent on the support of their local monastic communities (Li, in Tsomo 2000: 172).

A full ordination ceremony has three main bhikshu precept masters officiating: the *silapadaya*, the *dharma-acarya*, and the instructing *acarya* (Li, in Tsomo 2000: 172). At the Bodhgaya ordination all three precept masters were from the Chinese tradition. This international ordination ceremony was largely driven by Foguangshan's founder, Xingyun. According to Li (in Tsomo 2000: 172), he is one of the most renowned and controversial Buddhist teachers in Taiwan with a high international profile. He has on occasion pointed out that to exclude women from bhikshuni ordination "was to waste half of the Buddhists' potential energy worldwide" (Li, in Tsomo 2000: 172). He is convinced that international cooperation in this regard is possible and beneficial, as demonstrated by the Bodhgaya ordination.

The three principal bhikshu *acaryas* were supported by 22 witnessing *acaryas*. They were from Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Thailand, India, Great Britain, Cambodia, and Tibet. In this way both the Tibetan and Theravadin traditions were represented. These bhikshu witnesses served four distinct roles at the Bodhgaya ordination. The first group, consisting of monks from Cambodia and Thailand, served as witnesses rather than as participants as the ordination of women is illegal in their own monastic communities. The second group of *acaryas* represented monks who are active in the Bodhgaya Buddhist community and who are influential in the movement to revive Buddhism in India. They are from different countries and wear assorted styles of robes, but are joined

in long-term cooperation in their mission to revitalise Buddhism in its place of birth (Li, in Tsomo 2000: 173). Ten respected senior Sri Lankan monks made up the third group of *acaryas*. It was significant that there were *ten* monks, as ten monks are required in order for a full ordination ceremony to take place. This group of monks was most important in helping to re-establish the bhikshuni ordination in the Theravadin tradition. Some monks in the group have devoted themselves to the advancement of Buddhist women for quite some time. Many of them had also participated in the ordination of ten Sri Lankan nuns in Sarnath, India, in October 1996. These monks expressed their conviction that the reinstatement of bhikshuni ordination would afford women greater access to Buddhism, both in Sri Lanka and in the West (Li, in Tsomo 2000: 173). The fourth group consisted of just one monk, Lama Yeshe Losal Rinpoche, Abbot of Kagyu Samye Ling, Scotland, who brought eleven Western nuns from his monastery to receive full ordination. These nuns were privileged as they did not have to struggle to earn a living by working at jobs unrelated to their spiritual practice. They had received training in a monastic institutional setting and were able to undergo long term retreats. Many of them were not particularly concerned about receiving full ordination as they were satisfied with their situation in Scotland. However, they realised the importance of correct monastic discipline and the transmission of the Buddha's lineage to others. They were also motivated by their wish for the welfare of all sentient beings. Li (in Tsomo 2000: 174) states that it is significant that a well-established Dharma master such as Lama Yeshe, with a strong institutional base, should consider the full ordination of women important in the development of Buddhism in the West.

The ten bhikshuni *acaryas* at the Bodhgaya ordination reflected the contemporary development of the bhikshuni lineage in the various Buddhist traditions. Three senior bhikshunis from Foguangshan in Taiwan assumed the positions of *silā-upadhyaya*, *dharmā-acarya*, and instructing *acarya*, reflecting the important role the Taiwanese bhikshuni sangha plays in the full ordination of women. Kuang Woo, director of Bhikshuni Affairs of the Chogye order in Korea, represented the next largest bhikshuni lineage in the world. The emergence of the Western bhikshuni sangha was demonstrated by the appointment of Karma Lekshe Tsomo and Thubten Chodron as witnessing *acaryas* (Li, in Tsomo 2000: 174).

5.5.3 The Upasampada Ritual

The bhikshuni *upasampada* is the ceremony that transforms a female Buddhist practitioner into a bhikshuni or fully ordained nun. The first step in the ritual is to assemble the precept masters and candidates. Usually there should be ten ordination masters and teachers. Under certain conditions, for instance in the sparsely populated border areas of the Buddhist world, the number of ordination masters may be reduced to five (Li, in Tsomo 2000: 180). The full ordination of women also requires the presence of ten bhikshus. Nuns can therefore only be ordained in the presence of ten bhikshus and ten bhikshunis. The three central precept masters of both categories must have been ordained for twelve years or more ((Li, in Tsomo 2000: 182).

The precept masters will then proceed to define the ritual arena (*sima*) by means of a purification ceremony. Setting the boundaries of the ordination platform or altar protects the participants and symbolises the confines of the monastic community. It also indicates the approval and recognition of the ordination ceremony by the monastic community (Li, in Tsomo 2000: 180).

Since the bhikshuni lineage is currently only extant in the Chinese, Korean, Taiwanese, and Vietnamese traditions, involving bhikshunis from other traditions in a dual ordination ceremony becomes problematic and complex. Monastic regulations stipulate that bhikshunis should be ordained in the presence of other bhikshunis. The re-establishment of an order of bhikshunis should ideally involve the participation of bhikshunis ordained in an existing lineage. The dilemma here is then which nuns from which traditions are best qualified to perform these ordinations (Li, in Tsomo 2000: 181).

Li (in Tsomo 2000: 181) reminds us that “for some traditional ecclesiastics, the idea of reintroducing full ordination for women is as absurd as changing the Buddha’s gender from male to female.” Full ordination in the Tibetan and Theravadin traditions has been a “male-exclusive privilege” for centuries (Li, in Tsomo 2000: 181). It is commonly assumed and stated in some canonical texts that women are incapable of achieving Buddhahood, this despite the fact that the Buddha himself ordained women and that his purported words as well as the account of his establishment of the bhikshuni order, are preserved in the canon. This conviction has effectively retained women in subordinate positions and deprived them of monastic resources. Li (in Tsomo 2000: 181) quotes a

Sri Lankan nun as saying “[h]ow can you [monks] take vows of serving all sentient beings, but turn your backs on your own Dharma sisters?”

Such contradictions leave much room for debate. The controversy is greatly compounded by complex power relations and vested interest within and between the Buddhist traditions. However, it has also given rise to substantial cooperation between nuns of the various traditions, and international organisations of Buddhist women like Sakyadhita are engaging in the debate (Li, in Tsomo 2000: 181).

Ranking in the monastic hierarchy depends not only on gender but on status determined by the number of years they have been ordained. Men pass through two stages: sramanera (novice monk) and bhikshu (fully ordained monk). Women pass through three stages: sramanerika (novice nun), siksamana (a two-year probationary period created to exclude pregnant women), and bhikshuni (fully ordained nun).

The debate over bhikshuni ordination usually includes the requirement of dual ordination (Li, in Tsomo 2000: 182). According to the Vinaya, the full ordination of nuns requires the attendance of twenty qualified precept masters. This is to ensure that the nuns are fully prepared for ordination and also to avoid awkwardness when certain questions are asked. Buddhist communities throughout history have often encountered difficulty in finding ten suitably qualified bhikshunis to preside at an ordination ceremony. From time to time women were therefore ordained by bhikshus alone and the ordination was regarded as legitimate (Li, in Tsomo 2000: 183).

The Vinaya states that the dual ordination ceremony with ten male and ten female precept masters present is the ideal. At the same time it does not declare a single ordination ceremony as invalid. Many ecclesiastics maintain however that it is the bhikshus rather than the bhikshunis who represent the concluding authority on the ordination of nuns. Therefore, as stated by the Taiwanese bhikshuni, Zhaohui: if it is the monks who are authorised to perform bhikshuni ordinations, then it is monks who must be held responsible for the absence of a lineage of full ordination for women (Li, in Tsomo 2000: 183).

Bhikshunis Hengqing, Zhaohui, and Huimin, respected Taiwanese Buddhist scholars, have compared the Chinese *Dharmagupta* and the Tibetan *Mulasarvastivada* renditions of the *Bhikshuni Pratimoksa Sutra*, and have discussed their findings with Tibetan

ecclesiastic authorities, notably Bhikshu Tashi Tsering²⁸ (Li, in Tsomo 2000: 191). Despite minor differences in monastic laws, comparative analysis has shown that these two Vinaya systems are very similar. The differences in the two systems are mainly of an historical and cultural nature regarding the format of the ordination rather than monastic regulations or textual narratives (Li, in Tsomo 2000: 191). However, since the bhikshuni lineage is absent from the Tibetan and Theravadin traditions, nuns in these traditions have “to borrow, or recover, the lineage from the Chinese Buddhist tradition” (Li, in Tsomo 2000: 191).

However, the transmission of an ordination lineage in the Tibetan tradition is complicated by the requirement that the continuity of an uninterrupted lineage of ordination has to be traced to Buddha Sakyamuni himself. This extraordinary emphasis on lineage and continuity is a result of the unique connection between Tibetan religion and political patronage. Traditionally there was no separation between Tibetan Buddhist monastic institutions and the Tibetan government. It therefore becomes problematic to verify a 1 500-year old lineage traceable to the Buddha (Li, in Tsomo 2000: 197, 198).

5.5.4 The instatement of the Mulasarvastivada bhikshuni ordination

The Committee for Bhikshuni Ordination (see 5.10.2) has been involved in research concerning the establishment of the bhikshuni ordination in the Tibetan tradition for a number of years. Bhikshuni ordinations conducted according to the rituals described in the *Mulasarvastivada Vinaya* texts require a group of ten bhikshus and twelve bhikshunis. Tibetan Buddhists practise the *Mulasarvastivada Vinaya*, but all current bhikshunis worldwide practise the *Dharmagupta Vinaya* (representing the Chinese bhikshuni lineage). Tibetan scholars are currently engaged in research and discussions concerning three possible methods of establishing bhikshuni ordination for Tibetan nuns. These three possibilities are:

- A bhikshuni ordination ceremony consisting of 10 Mulasarvastivada bhikshus and 12 Dharmaguptaka bhikshunis.
- Ten Mulasarvastivada bhikshus alone performing a ceremony without bhikshunis to introduce the bhikshuni lineage in the Mulasarvastivada tradition.

²⁸ Bhikshu Tasi Tsering works for the Ministry of Religious and Cultural Affairs, Tibetan Government-in-Exile.

- Ten Dharmagutaka bhikshus and 10 Dharamguptaka bhikshunis conducting the initial ordination ceremony.

Although the bhikshuni lineage can be established by all three means, each approach has different theological concerns and implications which are currently under discussion by scholars and Vinaya lineage holders (<http://www.bhiksuniordination.net>).

5.6 GENDER POLITICS

There seems to be three underlying themes concerning the reestablishment of bhikshuni ordination in the Tibetan and Theravadin traditions. Various Buddhist traditions appear to be competing to gain support and recognition for bhikshunis among Buddhists in the West. They also wish to establish the bhikshuni lineage within their own traditions and so make it available to Tibetan and Theravadin nuns. Lastly there seems to be rivalry regarding the bhikshuni lineage within Chinese Buddhism itself (Li, in Tsomo 2000: 186).

The survival and revitalisation of Chinese Buddhism in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, relied greatly on financial support from Buddhists in the Chinese diaspora and Taiwan. Buddhists in China lack the resources to compete with their Taiwanese counterparts who are often sponsored by the government of the Republic of China (Taiwan). While Buddhists in the People's Republic of China are courageously attempting to recover from the overwhelming losses of Buddhist literary, architectural, and human resources lost during the Cultural Revolution, Taiwanese Buddhists have been representing Chinese Buddhism at conferences abroad. However, mainland Chinese Buddhists are claiming that their bhikshuni lineage is more orthodox than the Taiwanese bhikshuni lineage. They are in addition stating that historically their monastic traditions are more orthodox and therefore they have the "sovereign right" over all bhikshuni lineages (Li, in Tsomo 2000: 186).

There are undoubtedly hidden political agendas here. The Tibetan Buddhist leaders in exile are conscious that claims to religious authority may influence their own demand for political sovereignty, the crucial aspect in maintaining Tibetan ethnic, religious, and cultural identity (Li, in Tsomo 2000: 186). In the past the Tibetan Government-in-Exile has avoided any formal contact with the Taiwanese Buddhist community, and they in turn have shown consideration towards the Tibetan community in this regard. However, in recent years many Taiwanese Buddhists have become interested in Tibetan Buddhism

and this has impelled the exiled Tibetan authorities to initiate cautious relations with the Taiwanese Buddhist leaders. This puts them in a rather difficult position. If the Tibetans in exile wish to continue cultural interactions with Chinese Buddhists, they will eventually have to choose between the Taiwanese and the mainland Chinese Buddhist orders. Their preference will undoubtedly involve important political implications. Li (in Tsomo 2000: 186) is of the opinion that it may be simpler to reject both orders. I tend to agree with Li as Tenzin Palmo is of the opinion that the Tibetan nuns want to be ordained by their own lamas (Swanepoel, private interview, DGL Nunnery, April 5, 2012). It might perhaps just be less complicated to introduce the Tibetan bhikshuni lineage without the participation of senior bhikshunis from other lineages.

Another dilemma facing the Tibetan Buddhist policy makers about the bhikshuni controversy, is the threat posed by the popularity of Theravada Buddhism in the West. Although Theravada Buddhists are generally considered more conservative than Tibetan Buddhists, especially concerning women's issues, they do enjoy the added advantage of having a choice between Chinese and Taiwanese lineages concerning the establishment of the bhikshuni ordination without having to consider political issues. However, according to Li (in Tsomo 2000: 187), should the Tibetan authorities not respond appropriately to demands for the full ordination of nuns within its own monastic organisation, the international community will possibly credit the Theravadins as being more socially progressive.

Cumbersome decision making procedures within the Tibetan ecclesiastic system demands that decisions concerning monastic law require formal consultations among senior monks of the Tibetan Buddhist community. Although His Holiness the Dalai Lama has on several occasions publically expressed his support and interest in establishing the bhikshuni ordination, he has also pointed out that it is not within his power, as a single monk, to formally recognise the bhikshuni lineage (Li, in Tsomo 2000: 187).

5.7 PROMINENT WESTERN TIBETAN BUDDHIST NUNS

In the context of this study it is essential to focus on the work of five prominent Western Tibetan Buddhist nuns. Two of these nuns are academic scholars, most of them maintain current and informative websites, and almost all of them publish prolifically.

Perhaps the most renowned and respected of this group is Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo, who is the subject of Chapter six. She became famous for being only the second Western woman to ordain as a Tibetan Buddhist nun, and for her twelve-year stint in a Himalayan cave (Mackenzie 1990). The German nun, Carola Roloff, better known as Venerable Jampa Tsedroen, is a lecturer and research fellow at Hamburg University. Venerable Karma Lekshe Tsomo is an associate professor in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of San Diego. The abbess of Sravasti Abbey in New Port, Washington, is Venerable Thubten Chodron, and Venerable Pema Chodron is an American nun in the Shambala tradition and resident teacher at Gampo Abbey in Nova Scotia, Canada.

5.7.1 Venerable Jampa Tsedroen

Bhikshuni Jampa Tsedroen (also known as Dr. Carola Roloff) is a German nun born in 1959. She holds a B.A degree, an M.A. (magna cum laude), and a PhD (summa cum laude), all from the University of Hamburg. She is fluent in German, English, Latin, Tibetan, Sanskrit, and Pali, and was awarded the Karl H. Ditze Award for her outstanding doctoral thesis.²⁹ Jampa Tsedroen became a novice nun in 1981 and received full ordination in Taiwan in 1985. In 1991 she completed ten years of Vinaya study with the late Venerable Geshe Thubten Ngawang (1932– 2003).

Jampa Tsedroen is an exceptionally active nun, both as a Buddhist scholar and as an organiser and speaker, especially in the field of equal rights for Buddhist nuns. She was one of the founding members of Sakyadhita International (see 5.10) and served on its committee as National Representative and then as Vice President from 1987 to 1995. Jampa Tsedroen became the chair of the Sakyadhita Vinaya Research Committee in 1987.

She has managed a fundraising project for the past 25 years, raising funds for a study programme for Tibetan nuns living in exile in India at Jangchub Choeling Nunnery. Currently, more than 200 Tibetan nuns are participating in the 17-year Geshe study programme. Forty-seven nuns have successfully completed the Geshe degree study programme since 2006.

²⁹ Red mda' ba. Buddhist Yogi Scholar of the Fourteenth Century. The Forgotten Reviver of Madhyamaka Philosophy in Tibet.

She has served as a councillor at the Foundation for Tibetan Buddhist Studies in Hamburg since 1988 and manages their Vinaya Project. Jampa Tsedroen published the first results of her Vinaya research in 1992.

During the years 1988 – 2002 Jampa Tsedroen helped to establish the bhikshuni community of Tibetisches Zentrum in Hamburg, which currently consists of five bhikshunis. In December 2002 it became the first complete sangha of bhikshunis in Europe practising in the Tibetan tradition.

She became a founding member of the *Committee of Western Bhikshunis* (see 5.10) in 2005, and in 2006 His Holiness the Dalai Lama asked her to intensify her research on the bhikshuni Vinaya and related Vinaya lineages. In the same year she was invited to become a member of the Bhikshuni Ordination Committee of the Ministry of Religion and Culture of the Central Tibetan Administration in Dharamsala. Consequently she participated in the third Seminar of Vinaya Scholars about Gelongma [bhikshuni] Lineage in May 2006. She delivered a paper at the Seminar compiled by the Committee of Western Bhikshunis entitled, [A] *response to necessary research regarding the lineage of bhikshuni Vinaya*. In 2007 she was instrumental in organising, together with Dr. Thea Mohr of the University of Frankfurt, the *First International Congress on Buddhist Women's Role in the Sangha*.

Jampa Tsedroen began a three-year research project at the University of Hamburg in 2010 on the ordination of nuns in the Tibetan Buddhist canon and its representation in the Tibetan commentaries. In 2011 she was invited to participate in a discussion panel on the Vinaya and Modernity at the International Conference on Vinaya at the Central University of Tibetan Studies. In the same year she also delivered papers at an international conference on Buddhist nuns in India, at the University of Toronto, at Dharma Drum Buddhist College in Taiwan on the prospects of bhikshuni ordination in Tibetan Buddhism, and at the Global Buddhist Congregation in New Delhi on The Buddhist Nuns' Order Restoration Movement (<http://www.bhiksuniordination.net>).

Dr. Roloff is a prolific researcher and has published three edited books, two research monographs, seven chapters in collected volumes, and nine research articles, as well as presenting in excess of 40 conference papers between 1987 and 2011.

She is the recipient of the 2007 Outstanding Buddhist Women Award in honour of the United Nations' International Women's Day (<http://www.carolaroloff.de>).

Jampa Tsedroen is spoken of highly by other nuns (Swanepoel, private interview, DGL Nunnery, April 5, 2012). She was also particularly helpful and forthcoming in her comments and advice during the course of my research.

5.7.2 Venerable Karma Lekshe Tsomo

Bhikshuni Karma Lekshe Tsomo is an associate professor in Theology and Religious Studies at the University of San Diego. She received her novice ordination in 1977 and was fully ordained in 1982. Karma Lekshe Tsomo holds a B.A degree in Japanese, two M.A. degrees (one in Asian Studies and one in Asian Religion), as well as a PhD in Comparative Philosophy. In addition she devoted 15 years studying at the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives and the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics in Dharmasala, India (<http://www.sandiego.edu/cas>). She is fluent in Tibetan.

She is a past president of Sakyadhita International, and director of Jamyang Foundation, an initiative that provides educational opportunities for women in the Indian Himalayas and Bangladesh. Karma Lekshe Tsomo is a founding member of the *Committee of Western Bhiksunis*, now known as the *Committee for Bhiksuni Ordination*.

Prof. Tsomo is actively involved in interfaith dialogue and grassroots initiatives for the empowerment of women (<http://www.sandiego.edu/cas>). She is the editor of more than eight books, and has authored a book on a comparative analysis of the Dharmagupta and Mulasarvastivada Bhikshuni Pratimoksa lineages (<http://www.bhiksuniordination.net>), as well as one on Buddhism, bioethics, and death (<http://www.sandiego.edu/cas>).

Karma Lekshe Tsomo enjoys a high status among her peers (Swanepoel, private interview, DHL Nunnery, April 5, 2012), although she was difficult to contact and did not respond to any of my enquiries.

5.7.3 Venerable Thubten Chodron

Venerable Thubten Chodron is an American nun born into a Jewish family in 1950 (personal communication, September 7, 2011). She holds a B.A degree and a post-graduate teacher's qualification. She was married to a lawyer (personal communication, September 7, 2011) and worked as a teacher in Los Angeles before ordaining as a novice nun in 1977. She received full ordination in 1986 in Taiwan. Thubten Chodron speaks and reads Tibetan fluently.

She studied Tibetan Buddhism in India and Nepal for a number of years staying with the Western sangha at Kopan Monastery (personal communication, September 7, 2011). Thubten Chodron was the director of the spiritual programme at the Lama Tzong Khapa Insitute in Italy for two years after which she continued her Buddhist studies for three years at the Dorje Pamo Monastery in France. Subsequently she became the resident teacher at the Amitabha Buddhist Centre in Singapore followed by ten years as the resident teacher at the Dharma Friendship Foundation in Seattle (<http://www.bhiksuniordination.net>). She is presently the abbess of Sravasti Abbey in Newport, USA, which she founded in 2003 (<http://www.sravasti.org>).

Bhikshuni Thubten Chodron was a co-organiser of the *Life as a Western Nun Conference*, and is a founding member of the *Committee of Western Bhiksunis*, now known as *the Committee for Bhiksuni Ordination*.

Thubten Chodron maintains two very active websites which offer audio teachings, transcripts of articles and talks, as well as Internet teachings (<http://www.sravasti.org>; <http://www.thubtenchodron.org>). She is the author of over nine books and served as editor of an additional eight books, all on aspects of Tibetan Buddhism. She is especially interested in inter-religious dialogue and is active in teaching the Dharma to prisoners (<http://www.bhiksuniordination.net>).

Chodron is well-respected by other nuns and they are particularly grateful to the role she plays in pursuing bhikshuni ordination within the Tibetan tradition (Swanepoel, private interview, DGL Nunnery, April 5, 2012). She was most forthcoming with information and showed great interest in my research.

5.7.4 Venerable Pema Chodron

Bhikshuni Pema Chodron is the abbess of Gampo Abbey in Nova Scotia, Canada. She was born in 1936 and qualified as a primary school teacher. She taught for many years while raising two children. She has three grandchildren. She became a novice nun in 1974 and took full ordination in 1981 in Hong Kong. She studied with her root teacher Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche from 1974 until his death in 1987 (<http://www.bhiksuniordination.net>).

Pema Chodron is a Tibetan Buddhist nun in the Shambhala tradition. The Shambhala lineage was established in the West in the mid-1970s by Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, and represents both the Kagyu and Nyingma traditions (<http://www.shambhala.org>).

Venerable Pema Chodron served as the director of Karma Dzong in Boulder, Colorado, until moving to Nova Scotia to start Gampo Abbey.

She is interested in helping to establish Tibetan Buddhist monasticism in the West. She is the author of nine books and is exceptionally active in conducting Internet teachings and retreats (<http://www.pemachodronfoundation.org>). She no longer seems to be very active in pursuing the bhikshuni issue, and does not grant any interviews, perhaps due to her failing health. She was exceptionally difficult to contact and did not respond to any of my requests in connection with this research.

5.8 OTHER DISTINGUISHED WESTERN NUNS IN THE TIBETAN TRADITION

Four other Western nuns who have distinguished themselves in various Buddhist fields should also be recognised. Venerable Kunga Chodron is a professor at George Washington University in the United States, and a committee member of the Committee of Bhiksuni Ordination. Lama Gelongma Zangmo is a British nun renowned for her long retreats and for the honour of having the title of Lama bestowed upon her. Venerable Robina Courtin is an Australian nun who has worked tirelessly supporting the spread of Buddhism in prisons and founded the Liberation Prison Project. Venerable Geshe Kelsang Wangmo became not only the first woman but also the first Westerner

to earn the Geshe degree. There are currently no Tibetan Buddhist nuns resident in Africa. The Tibetan Buddhist community in South Africa is small and there are no monastic communities. The only Buddhist monastic community in Africa is currently the Nanhua Buddhist community in Bronkhorstspuit, which is a Buddhist community in the Taiwanese tradition.

5.8.1 Venerable Kunga Chodron

Ani Kunga Chodron, also known as Lois Peak, is a professor in the Department of Religion at George Washington University. Kunga Chodron has been a nun in the Sakya tradition since 1987, although she is not yet fully ordained. Her root teacher is Khenpo Kalsang Gyaltzen. She has also received teachings from other eminent Sakya lineage holders, including His Holiness Sakya Trizin (see 2.5.2), His Eminence Luding Khen Chen Rinpoche, and Venerable Dezhung Rinpoche.

Prof. Chodron holds a master's degree in Human Development and a doctorate in Comparative Human Development from the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Prior to joining the faculty at George Washington University, she served as editor of the *Harvard Educational Review*, and worked for more than 15 years in senior research and policy positions in the U.S. Department of Education.

Kunga Chodron is fluent in the Tibetan language. She has co-translated with Khenpo Kalsang Gyaltzen eight book-length works on Buddhist philosophy and ritual as well as in excess of a hundred shorter works. She serves as a core member of the working committee of the Buddhist Literary Heritage Project, which is currently translating the Tibetan Buddhist Canon (*Tripitaka*) into English.

Venerable Chodron assisted in 2001 in the founding of Tsechen Kunchab Ling Temple, which is the seat of His Holiness Sakya Trizin. She has also served as the temple's Secretary/Treasurer since its inception. She has been the President of Sakya Phuntsok Ling Centre for Tibetan Buddhist Studies and Meditation in Silver Spring, Maryland, U.S.A, since its foundation in 1986.

Prof. Chodron is the recipient of numerous grants and fellowships from amongst others the Khyentse Foundation, the Association of Asian Studies, the Spence Foundation, and the Social Science Research Council.

Kunga Chodron was appointed as a member of the *Committee of Western Bhiksunis* (now the *Committee for Bhiksuni Ordination*) in 2009 by His Holiness Sakya Trizin. She hopes to make a contribution to improve the situation for Buddhist women (<http://www.bhiksuniordination.net>).

5.8.2 Lama Gelongma Zangmo

Lama Zangmo runs the Kagyu Samye Dzong Centre in London. The centre is the London branch of the Kagyu Samye Ling monastery in Scotland. Lama Zangmo has managed the London Dharma centre since its inception in 1998 at the request of Choje Akong Tulku Rinpoche and Lama Yeshe Losal.

Kagyu Samye Ling was established in 1967, and was the first Tibetan Buddhist centre in the West. Lama Yeshe Losal is currently the abbot of the monastery. Choje Akong Tulku Rinpoche was one of its founders (<http://www.samyeling.org/index/about-kagyu-samye-ling>).

Lama Zangmo is known for the many years she has spent in retreat, totalling eleven and a half years. She started her first four-year retreat in 1984, during which time she was ordained as a novice nun. She again entered a four-year retreat in 1989, and was asked to help and advise the new retreatants. When she entered her third long retreat in 1993 she became the resident retreat teacher. In 1998 she was part of a group of nuns who was accompanied by Lama Yeshe Losal to the Bodhgaya ordination ceremony in India, where she was fully ordained.

In 2001, Lama Zangmo became the first person in the UK to be honoured with the title of Lama in recognition of her long experience, selfless qualities, and commitment to the Dharma (http://www.london.samye.org/london/kagyu/teachers/lama_zangmo.shtml).

Although she visited South Africa in April 2012 to give teachings at the Tara Rokpa Centre in the Groot Mariko District, I was unsuccessful in contacting her.

5.8.3 Venerable Robina Courtin

Robina Courtin has been a Tibetan Buddhist nun in the Gelugpa tradition for 40 years. She was born into a Catholic family in Melbourne, Australia, as one of seven children. She trained as a classical singer until her early twenties when she relocated to London. In the UK she became involved with the radical left and worked for a London-based support group for black and Chicano prisoners. She became a feminist in the early 1970s and returned to Melbourne to work with other like-minded feminists. She studied martial arts both in Melbourne and in New York.

In 1976 she attended a Tibetan Buddhist course run by Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche. This inspired her to become a Buddhist nun. She travelled to Kopan Monastery in 1977 where she received novice ordination in 1978 (<http://www.ChasingBuddha.org>).

Since her ordination she has worked full-time for Lama Thubten Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche's Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT). Robina Courtin was the editorial director of Wisdom Publications until 1987, where after she served as the editor of the international FPMT journal, *Mandala*. She resigned from this position in 2000 to devote more time to teaching the Dharma around the world, and to devote her time and energy to the Liberation Prison Project (<http://www.liberationprisonproject.org/>), of which she is the founder, and which supports the Buddhist practise and studies of thousands of prisoners in the USA and Australia.

Since 1987 she has travelled widely internationally, leading Buddhist retreats and teachings at FPMT centres worldwide. She also continues to function as a prison project ambassador and chief fundraiser.

Her life was documented in the award-winning film, *Chasing Buddha*, made by her nephew Amiel Courtin-Wilson and which includes scenes on her work at Kentucky State Prison. She is also one of the subjects in Vicky Mackenzie's book, *Why Buddhism?* (2002), and features in a film by Christine Lundberg, *On the Road Home* (<http://www.ChasingBuddha.org>).

She is the co-editor of three books and maintains a lively and up-to-date website (<http://www.robinacourtin.com>). I made several unsuccessful attempts to set up a Skype interview with her, but she travels extensively, and we never managed to have a Skype conversation.

5.8.4 Venerable Kelsang Wangmo

Venerable Kelsang Wangmo became the first woman as well as the first Western nun to receive the Geshe degree from the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics (IBD) in Dharamsala, India, in April 2011. The Geshe degree is the equivalent of a PhD in Buddhist Philosophy, and it took Kelsang Wangmo 17 years to complete her studies. It can only be conferred on fully-ordained monastics.

Venerable Kelsang Wangmo was born in Bonn, Germany, in 1971 (<http://tibetconnection.org/2011/08/extended-interview-with-geshe-kelsang-wangmo>). She developed an interest in Buddhism when she visited Manali and Dharamsala. She participated in numerous courses and retreats, after which she was inspired to ordain as a Buddhist nun. For the next two years she studied Buddhist philosophy in English, attended Lam Rim retreats, and did regular prostrations. Eventually she enrolled for the 16-year Geshe study programme at the IBD, making history when she graduated in April 2011.

Kelsang Wangmo is fluent in German, English, and Tibetan. She lectures in Buddhist Philosophy at IBD in English to foreign students. She also lectures in Buddhist Philosophy in the Study Abroad Program of both Emory and Miami Universities (<http://www.dharmafriends.org.il/en/teachers/VenKelsangWangmo/tabid/393/Default.aspx>).

However, Kelsang Wangmo seems to be in a difficult position now that she is the only female, Western recipient of the degree. I have made several unsuccessful attempts to contact her, but according to Tenzin Palmo (Swanepoel, personal interview, DGL Nunnery, April 5, 2012) she seems to want to keep a low profile. Apparently some of the lamas and more prominent monks look unfavourably upon the Western nuns whom they view as “a bunch of Western feminists” (Palmo, in Swanepoel, personal interview, DGL Nunnery, April 5, 2012).

5.9 WESTERN TIBETAN BUDDHIST NUNNERIES

In recent years Western Tibetan Buddhist nuns have established their own nunneries in the West. These nunneries enable them to pursue their spiritual lives in their own countries and communities and eliminate the cultural and financial constraints they often face in India and Nepal. The nunneries are self-sufficient and the monastic communities are small but they nevertheless provide an important opportunity for Western Buddhist women who wish to become nuns. Gampo Abbey is in Canada and was started by Venerable Pema Chodron at the request of her root teacher, Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche. Sravasti Abbey in the USA was founded by its present abbess, Venerable Thubten Chodron. Kagyu Samye Ling Monastery in Scotland was the first Tibetan study and meditation centre to be established in the West. The Chenrezig Nuns Institute in Australia is currently the largest Western Tibetan Buddhist nunnery. There is also a small nunnery in India, the Dharmadatta Nuns Community in Dharamsala which has four resident Western nuns.

5.9.1 Gampo Abbey

Gampo Abbey in Nova Scotia, Canada, was founded by Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche in 1984. According to Chogyam Trungpa the presence of an established monastic community will further contribute to the growth of Buddhism in the West (<http://www.gampoabbey.com/>).

The community consists of both nuns and monks of the Kagyu Karma lineage as expressed in the non-sectarian tradition of Shambhala, established by Chogyam Trungpa in the 1970s (Ploos van Amstel 2005: 212). The Abbey is under the spiritual direction of Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche, the spiritual head of Shambhala International. The abbot of Gampo Abbey is Venerable Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche, and its principal teacher is Venerable Pema Chodron (<http://www.gampoabbey.com/>).

The Abbey is situated on 21 acres of land and accommodates about 30 people in the main building. The central structure of the abbey consists of two wings. The one wing contains the kitchen, dining room, and women's quarters, whilst the other wing houses the men's quarters and the prayer rooms. The two wings are conjoined by the library. The Abbey complex also includes a retreat house, a few smaller retreat cabins, vegetable gardens, a flower garden, and a stupa. The Abbey's residents study, practise,

eat, and work together. The Abbey receives income from donations, visitors' fees, residents' contributions, and the royalties from the sale of Pema Chodron's books. The nuns and monks live free of charge at the Abbey, but non-monastic residents are asked for a financial contribution (Ploos van Amstel 2005: 212).

The daily schedule at Gampo Abbey runs from 06h00 until 22h00. Silence is maintained until lunch time. Saturday is a day off for all the residents, while Sunday is maintained as a silent practise day. The monastic programme at the Abbey consists of at least three hours of daily meditation, and a variety of study programmes (Ploos van Amstel 2005: 212). Residents are also responsible for regular house chores (<http://www.gampoabbey.com/>). Monastic training is in both the Kagyu and Nyingma traditions, including the three monastic rituals performed at the Abbey: Sojong (the bi-monthly renewal of vows), Yarne (traditionally the Buddhist summer retreat, but done in winter at the Abbey), and Gagye (the last day of Yarne, when all ordained monastics present a public lecture on the Dharma). The chanting at the Abbey is in English as opposed to Tibetan. Several times a year the Abbey is also visited by an eminent Dharma teacher for instruction. A personal meditation instructor is appointed to all residents at the Abbey (Ploos van Amstel 2005: 212, 213). Both lay and monastic residents abide by the five Buddhist precepts of not killing, not taking what is not offered, not lying, no sexual activity, and no consumption of intoxicants (<http://www.gampoabbey.com/>).

Non-monastic residents may undertake a period of temporary ordination which will provide them with the opportunity to experience monasticism without making a lifetime commitment. Temporary ordination is available to residents who have spent a minimum of three months at the Abbey. Temporary vows may then be taken for a minimum period of six months. Temporary monastics shave their heads, wear monastic robes, and train a similar way to ordained nuns and monks. Monastic who have taken temporary vows may request life ordination after a period of two years at the Abbey. Monastics remain on this level for a year after which they may request novice ordination, which lasts two years. Full ordination may be requested thereafter. The age limit for life vows is 55 years. Monastic and lay Dharma practitioners study and train at the Vidyadhara Institute, the monastic college of Shambhala International (<http://www.gampoabbey.com/>). The monastic community at Gampo Abbey currently consists of eight nuns and four monks. Pema Chodron is of the opinion that currently there is not "a

tremendous amount of interest” in the monastic path in the West, and that temporary ordination is a more acceptable way of experiencing monastic life (McKeever 2011: <http://www.tricycle.com/buddhist-traditions/tibetan/stepping-groundlessness>).

5.9.2 Sravasti Abbey

Sravasti Abbey was founded in 2003 by Thubten Chodron in Newport, Washington, USA. It is an Abbey in the Gelugpa tradition and accommodates both male and female monastics, hence the term *abbey*. Sravasti Abbey is named after Sravasti in India where the Buddha spent twenty-five Rains Retreats. Monastic training is the focus of the Abbey, but lay visitors are welcome to visit the community. Thubten Chodron is the abbess and main teacher. Guest teachers such as Lama Zopa Rinpoche, Geshe Lhundup Sopa, and Geshe Damdul Namgyal, however, regularly present teachings at the Abbey.

Sravasti Abbey is situated on 240 acres of meadow and afforested land. There is an abundance of wildlife, including wild turkeys, woodpeckers, deer, coyotes, moose, and bear. Approximately thirty acres of land are meadow. The remaining property is afforested with amongst others birch, aspen, tamarack, and cedar. The buildings include a large house, a barn with a workshop, a storage cabin, and a two-car garage. Building projects are on-going in order to turn the property into a full-scale monastery.

Thubten Chodron wished to support a Western sangha when she started Sravasti Abbey. Therefore the Abbey has adapted its programme to suit a more Western cultural setting, and most chanting is done in English. Gender equality and social service are key elements of the Abbey’s community life. The Abbey presents regular public teachings and the resident monastics also teach the Dharma in other locations on invitation. The Abbey serves as a resource centre for other Dharma centres. Some of the nuns at the Abbey, especially Thubten Chodron, write Buddhist books and articles. They also transcribe and edit visiting teachers’ discourses. In addition the monastics at Sravasti Abbey are trained to lead meditation, discussions, and rituals. They promote inter-religious dialogue, offer spiritual counselling, and work with prisoners.

Sravasti Abbey maintains a community based on *dana*, an interdependent relationship between the laity and the monastic community. The monastic and the lay communities share what they have with each other. The nuns and monks share their knowledge of the Dharma, i.e. public teachings, rituals, meditation instruction, spiritual counselling, and

in the case of Sravasti Abbey, their work with prisoners. The monastic community at Sravasti Abbey renders all services costless and does not charge visitors for accommodation. They often provide some of Thubten Chodron's books free of charge to visitors, and send books and tapes to prison inmates and people in Third World countries. In turn, the laity shares their resources with the monastery, i.e. donations of food, clothing, money, medicine, and voluntary service.

The Sravasti Abbey community is totally vegetarian, and hunting is not allowed on their grounds and in the surrounding forest. They maintain a forest development plan, recycle and re-use items, and conserve water and fuel as much as possible.

The monastic community currently includes six monastics of which one is a monk (<http://www.sravastiabbey.org/>).

5.9.3 The Chenrezig Nuns' Community

The Chenrezig Nuns' Community was founded in 1987 in Queensland, Australia (<http://www.chenrezig.com.au/content/view/129/136/>). It developed from the Chenrezig Institute, a lay Buddhist study centre founded in 1974, and shares its premises. The Chenrezig Institute was started by students of the late Lama Thubten Yeshe (1935 – 1984) and Lama Zopa Rinpoche (Ploos van Amstel 2005: 213). It was one of the first Tibetan Buddhist centres to be established in the West and remains one of the largest. It is currently home to a Tibetan Lama, a large community of nuns and monks, students of Buddhism, residents, volunteers, retreatants, and guests.

Chenrezig Institute is a non-profit charitable organisation affiliated with FPMT (<http://www.chenrezig.com.au/content/view/129/136/>). Lama Thubten Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche initiated an organization called the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT) in 1970 in Nepal. Their aim was to provide study and retreat facilities for the Buddhist lay community as well as monasteries and nunneries for the monastic community, and a publishing company. Today FPMT has more than 50 centres worldwide and a well-established publishing company called Wisdom Publications (Ploos van Amstel 2005: 213). Centres or projects affiliated with FPMT follow the spiritual direction of Lama Zopa Rinpoche in the lineage of Lama Thubten Yeshe. Lama Zopa Rinpoche is currently the spiritual director of the Chenrezig Institute (<http://www.chenrezig.com.au/content/view/129/136/>).

The Chenrezig Nuns' Community is the only substantial FPMT nunnery. It is one of the largest Western Tibetan Buddhist nunneries in the world. There are also a smaller number of monks living at the Institute (<http://www.chenrezig.com.au/content/view/129/136/>). FPMT practises in the Gelugpa tradition. The nuns usually travel either to Nepal to receive novice ordination from Lama Zopa Rinpoche, or to India to receive novice ordination from the Dalai Lama (Ploos van Amstel 2005: 213). Currently there are 20 nuns in residence at the institute. The monastics follow a five-year Buddhist studies programme. After graduation they engage in public teachings, conducting pujas, offering spiritual counselling, and undertaking hospice work (<http://www.chenrezig.com.au/content/view/129/136/>).

The Chenrezig Institute is nestled in the foothills of the Sunshine Coast Hinterland, about an hour's drive from Brisbane. Downhill is a camping ground and a house for working guests. Further uphill are private houses belonging to Institute members, a community building, gardens, a commemorative garden for the deceased, a stupa, and the Institute's office building which includes a dining room and kitchen. Proceeding from here one finds the temple annexe, library, the resident teachers' house, the guesthouse, and the nuns' residence, and the community area. The hill is dotted with retreat huts and cabins (Ploos van Amstel 2005: 213). The institute also has a dharma shop and restaurant (<http://www.chenrezig.com.au/content/view/129/136/>).

5.9.4 Samye Ling Tibetan Buddhist Centre

Samye Ling is a Tibetan Buddhist monastery and international study and meditation centre in Scotland belonging to the Karma Kagyu tradition of Tibetan Buddhism (<http://www.samyeling.org/>). The centre is situated on 23 acres of land (Ploos van Amstel 2005: 211) in a peaceful valley on the banks of the river Esk, in Eskdalemuir in South-West Scotland, about 24 kilometres from Lockerbie. It accommodates a community of more than 60 people including nuns, monks, and lay volunteers (<http://www.samyeling.org/>). The centre consists of a retreat centre, a cottage, the Samye Temple, a guesthouse, cabins for the monks and nuns, a shop, a handicrafts workshop, a small restaurant, the main building, and a stupa (Ploos van Amstel 2005: 211).

Samye Ling was the first Tibetan Buddhist centre to be established in the West. It was founded in 1967 by Akong Tulku Rinpoche and Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche. It was named after Samye, the first monastery to be established in Tibet. Akong Rinpoche is still the centre's director, while the current abbot is Lama Yeshe Losal Rinpoche (<http://www.samyeling.org/>).

Samye Ling is part of the Rokpa Trust, a registered charity which has an international network of Dharma centres working in the three main areas of spiritual guidance, humanitarian aid, and Tibetan medicine and therapy. In addition to week-long guided retreats, on-line courses and other study programmes, Samye Ling also offers a traditional four-year retreat (three years, three months and three days) for experienced practitioners, lay as well as monastic (<http://www.samyeling.org/>).

The daily schedule at the centre runs from 06h00 until 22h00, and includes five periods of meditation and puja. The centre derives its income from donations and paying guests (Ploos van Amstel 2005: 212).

The nuns' community at Samye Ling fluctuate as nuns come and go (Ploos van Amstel 2005: 212). Eleven nuns received full ordination in 1998 at the Bodhgaya ceremony. Although the monks at Samye Ling outnumber the nuns, there are, according to Ploos van Amstel (2005: 212), only four monks with full precepts. Most of the nuns live at the centre or in the immediate surroundings. A few of them live in Samye Ling centres in London, Glasgow, Barcelona, and Brussels. There seems to be about 15 nuns associated with Samye Ling and living there from time to time (Ploos van Amstel 2005: 212).

5.9.5 The Dharmadatta Nuns' Community

The Dharmadatta Nuns' Community is a small nunnery that is home to only four nuns. They founded the nunnery in 2009 under the spiritual leadership of His Holiness the Seventeenth Karmapa. The nunnery is housed in the Kangra Valley near Dharamsala. They practise in the Karma Kagyu tradition of Tibetan Buddhism and have as yet only taken novice ordination.

The nuns are from diverse Western cultures and backgrounds. Venerable Lhundup Damcho is an American nun and holds a PhD from the University of Wisconsin-Madison on Sanskrit and Tibetan narratives about the Buddha's female disciples. She has translated the Sanghata Sutra into English and is currently working on the translation of the narratives on which she based her doctorate. Venerable Tenzin Dapel is a Swiss nun and worked as an elementary school teacher before ordaining as a nun at the age of 28. Venerable Tenzin Nangpel was raised in Mexico by Polish and Mexican parents, and holds a degree in law. She worked as a researcher in Mexico's anthropology bureau and ran her own aikido dojo before becoming a nun. She co-translated the Sanghata Sutra into Spanish. The latest member of the community is Venerable Karma Lodro Drolma. She was born in Mexico City and has a degree in psychology. Prior to ordaining as a nun she was the manager of a Radisson Hotel in Mexico.

At the beginning of 2010, the nuns embarked on a five-year study programme under the supervision of the Karmapa. The programme includes Buddhist philosophy, meditation, Tibetan history and language, as well as periods of intensive retreat. The programme aims to develop a curriculum that combines the efficacy of Western education with the richness of a more traditional Tibetan monastic training. The study course also covers the tenets of all four of the major Tibetan traditions. For this particular module the nuns travel to the Rigpe Dorje Institute in Nepal. The programme includes a strong emphasis on women in Buddhism and their role in Buddhist communities.

The nuns rely on sponsorship and donations to sustain their nunnery. Their annual budget amounts to \$ 10 000 plus an additional \$ 6 000 towards study fees (<http://www.nunscommunity.net/index.html>).

5.10 BUDDHIST WOMEN'S ORGANISATIONS AND CONFERENCES

Various conferences and organisations have in past years been established to address the situation and role of Buddhist women within the global Buddhist community. Most of these conferences and organisations were convened and established through the initiative of Western women. This deployment of Buddhist women was spearheaded by the *First International Buddhist Women's Conference* in Bodhgaya, India, in 1987. *Sakyadhita International Association of Buddhist Women* was founded in 1987 directly

as a result of this conference, and has since its foundation been instrumental in promoting the status of Buddhist women worldwide. In 1996 a three-week educational programme was held, once again in Bodhgaya, entitled *Life as a Western Buddhist Nun*, which exposed many Tibetan nuns (about 20% of the participants were Tibetan nuns) for the first time to the possibility of bhikshuni ordination. Simultaneously the Dalai Lama had also requested the Department of Religion and Culture of the Tibetan Government-in-Exile in Dharamsala to investigate the authenticity of the extant bhikshuni lineages in the Chinese, Vietnamese, and Korean traditions, and to cooperate with leading monks of the Theravada traditions investigating the possibility of reviving bhikshuni ordination for Buddhist women worldwide (<http://www.bhiksuniordination.net>). In 2005, on the recommendation of the Dalai Lama, the *Committee of Western Buddhist Nuns*, now known as the *Committee for Bhikshuni Ordination*, was founded. The University of Hamburg convened the *International Congress on Buddhist Women's Role in the Sangha: Bhikshuni Vinaya and Ordination Lineages* in 2007. The Buddhist women's movement has been strengthened and supported in particular by the *International Congress on Buddhist Women's Role in the Sangha: Bhikshuni Vinaya and Ordination Lineages*, the *Committee for Bhikshuni Ordination* (formerly the *Committee of Western Buddhist Nuns*), and *Sakyadhita International Association of Buddhist Women*.

5.10.1 The International Congress on Buddhist Women's Role in the Sangha: Bhikshuni Vinaya and Ordination Lineages

The *International Congress on Buddhist Women's Role in the Sangha* was held at the University of Hamburg in July 2007 in cooperation with the University's Asia-Africa Institute. The congress was inspired by a request from His Holiness the Dalai Lama for a forum in which the reestablishment of bhikshuni ordination in the Tibetan tradition can be studied and discussed. The Dalai Lama had asked already as far back as 1987 for an investigation into the current Tibetan practice of excluding its nuns from full ordination, as opposed to the epoch of the historical Buddha when nuns could be fully ordained (<http://www.congress-on-buddhist-women.org/>). The Tibetan Department of Religion and Culture in Dharamsala has been engaged in an extensive research in this regard and His Holiness declared his wish in June 2005 on a visit to Zurich for the issue to be brought to an international forum for study and discussion. He held the opinion

that since no decision had been reached “we need to bring this to a conclusion. We Tibetans alone can’t decide this. Rather, it should be decided in collaboration with Buddhists from all over the world” (<http://www.congress-on-buddhist-women.org/>).

The congress attracted 65 delegates, including bhikshu and bhikshuni Vinaya masters from nearly all the traditional Buddhist countries as well as prominent members of the Western-trained academic community of Buddhologists. The congress was attended by close to 400 people from 19 countries (Berzin 2007: <http://www.berzinarchives.com/web/en/archives/approachingbuddhism/worldtoday/summaryreport2007internationalc/part4.html>). A large part of the congress proceedings was published in 2010 in *Dignity and discipline* (Tsedroen & Mohr Eds.). Papers that have not been included in the book, as well as essays related to the topic, can be downloaded free of charge from the congress website. The website still enjoys in the region of 700 visitors per month and is updated regularly with current news and information (<http://www.congress-on-buddhist-women.org/>).

The congress was convened specifically to present the results of research concerning the possible methods for re-establishing the *Mulasarvastivada* (Tibetan) bhikshuni ordination. In addition, delegates wished to apprise themselves of the experiences of non-Tibetan Buddhist monastic traditions about bhikshuni ordination and to consult with the masters of those traditions (Berzin 2007: <http://www.berzinarchives.com/web/en/archives/approachingbuddhism/worldtoday/summaryreport2007internationalc/part4.html>).

There was unanimous agreement amongst the delegates that the *Mulasarvastivada* bhikshuni ordination needs to be, can be, and must be reinstated. They voiced the opinion that Buddhism was in danger of diminishing its status in modern society as well as its ability to benefit society on the whole if it continued to sustain a practice that restrained the lives of its female monastics and is viewed as discriminating against women in this regard (Berzin 2007: <http://www.berzinarchives.com/web/en/archives/approachingbuddhism/worldtoday/summaryreport2007internationalc/part4.html>). Reflecting upon practical considerations and scriptural authority, the majority of delegates therefore recommended that the most satisfactory method for reinstating the *Mulasarvastivada* bhikshuni ordination lineage would be the introduction of a dual sangha consisting of *Mulasarvastivada* bhikshus and *Dharmagupta* (Chinese)

bhikshunis. The *Dharmagupta* bhikshuni lineage in China was initiated in the fifth century CE in a similar manner by including bhikshunis from the unbroken Theravada tradition of Sri Lanka as part of a dual sangha (Berzin 2007: <http://www.berzinarchives.com/web/en/archives/approachingbuddhism/worldtoday/summary-report-2007-international-c/part-4.html>). His Holiness the Dalai Lama stated in 2005 in Zurich that “were the Buddha to come to this 21st century world, seeing the actual situation in the world now, he might have changed the rules somewhat” (<http://www.congress-on-buddhist-women.org/>).

5.10.2 The Committee of Western Buddhist Nuns/The Committee for Bhikshuni Ordination

The Committee for Bhikshuni Ordination (CBO) was established in 2005 on the advice of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. It was originally known as The Committee of Western Buddhist Nuns after His Holiness expressed a wish for Western bhikshunis to become more involved in helping to establish bhikshuni ordination. The Committee of Western Buddhist Nuns changed its name to The Committee for Bhikshuni Ordination in 2010. The CBO’s goal is to make full ordination available to nuns in all Buddhist traditions, especially the Tibetan tradition. It also aims to make “excellent Vinaya training” (<http://www.bhiksuniordination.net>) available to nuns in every Buddhist tradition. The CBO cooperates closely in this regard with the Office of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, the Tibetan Department of Religion and Culture in Dharamsala, and senior Tibetan Buddhist bhikshus (<http://www.bhiksuniordination.net>). This goal has the strong support of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, the heads of the various Tibetan traditions, as well as leading Buddhist masters. However, the issue is still sufficiently controversial and misunderstood within the Tibetan monastic community and by the general Tibetan public to the extent that the goal has not yet been accomplished (<http://www.congress-on-buddhist-women.org/>). The CBO therefore endeavours to achieve consensus on the issue by studying the various Buddhist scriptures, commentaries and traditions, and by engaging in discussions with important role players in order to educate the monastic community and Tibetan public. They are currently developing communication materials on the recommendation of Gonpo Puntsok of the Department of Religion and Culture in Dharamsala (<http://www.congress-on-buddhist-women.org/>). Four information booklets are in various stages of research and printing: a booklet intended for Tibetan Buddhist nuns providing information for those who might wish to take full ordination in

the future; a brochure that introduces the bhikshuni issue to monks, nuns, and the general public; an illustrated booklet on the lives of famous Buddhist bhikshunis of the past as described in the sutras; and a pamphlet for monastic scholars that argues the case for bhikshuni ordination based on a study of the Vinaya and other Buddhist scriptures (<http://www.bhiksuniordination.net>).

His Holiness the Dalai Lama expressed a wish for *Western* nuns in particular, rather than *Tibetan* nuns, to carry out the task of researching and promoting the reestablishment of bhikshuni ordination in the Tibetan tradition. He reasoned that the process might be more effective if Western women accepted the challenge as it would be easier for them to obtain visas for international travel. He charged the Western nuns with the assignment of discussing the full ordination of women with senior monks since “senior monks need to correct the bhikshus’ way of thinking.” He continued to state that “[t]his is the 21st century. Everywhere we are talking about equality. We find a large number of women who are really showing interest in religion and particularly in the Buddhadharma. So naturally it is the females’ right. Basically Buddhism needs equality” (<http://www.bhiksuniordination.net>). The Dalai Lama then established a fund, the *Foundation for Buddhist Studies*, to which he donated 50 000 Euros, to administer the funds that would make travel and research possible for the CBO (<http://www.bhiksuniordination.net>).

Bhikshuni Jampa Tsedroen (see 5.7.1) proceeded to contact senior Western Tibetan Buddhist nuns with a view to establishing the CBO. The committee members currently are Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo (see Chapter 6), Venerable Karma Lekshe Tsomo (see 5.7.2), Venerable Thubten Chodron (see 5.7.3), Venerable Pema Chodron (see 5.7.4), and Venerable Jampa Tsedroen. Venerable Ngawang Drolma served on the committee until 2009, when she retired to go into retreat. She was replaced by Venerable Kunga Chodron (see 5.8.1). Venerable Heng-ching and Venerable Master Wu Yin, senior Chinese bhikshunis and Vinaya masters, serve as advisors to the committee. The committee members maintain regular contact with each other - either meeting physically when this is possible (members of the committee reside as far afield as the USA, India, Germany, and Taiwan), or via email and Skype.

The members of the committee are presently variously engaged in Vinaya research, writing papers, and attending conferences. All the members are teaching the Dharma.

Members of the committee are also involved in aiding Himalayan and Tibetan nunneries in India (<http://www.bhiksuniordination.net>).

5.10.3 Sakyadhita International Association of Buddhist Women

Sakyadhita celebrated their 20th anniversary in 2007. On that occasion Tenzin Palmo (in Chang 2009: <http://blag.biz/sakyadhita>) wrote as follows in their newsletter:

Twenty years ago, the subject of Buddhist nuns was simply not on most people's agenda, even with people of the Buddhist faith. In the early 1990s, when I first began travelling to raise awareness of the plight of nuns in the Tibetan tradition, many people confessed that up to that point they had not given a thought to the nuns, since all one heard about were monks. Today, that is no longer true. Everywhere, Buddhist nuns are finding their place and gradually gaining more confidence to raise their status, that is, the right to equal opportunities for Dharma studies and practice and the chance to realize their own intellectual and spiritual potentials.... Much of the credit for this movement to improve the status of nuns must be attributed to the Sakyadhita organization.

Sakyadhita, which means “daughters of the Buddha,” emanated directly as a result of the *First International Buddhist Women's Conference* held in Bodhgaya, India, in 1987. The conference was convened through the initiative and cooperation of three exceptional Buddhist women: Venerable Bhikshuni Karma Lekshe Tsomo, who has served ever since as the key organiser and president of the bi-annual conferences; Venerable Bhikshuni Ayya Khema, a German- Jewish nun in the Theravada tradition; and Venerable Bhikshuni Dhammananda, a Thai nun known as Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh before her ordination in 2001. According to Chang (2009: <http://blag.biz/sakyadhita>) it was the first international gathering of Buddhist nuns in the 2 500 years of Buddhist history. It brought together Buddhist women from all over the world, especially women who lived in isolated places and who have never had the opportunity of meeting with Buddhist women in other traditions. Although

the conference specifically aimed at addressing the status of nuns in the Tibetan and Theravadin traditions, it was inclusive of all Buddhist women, lay and ordained. At the conclusion of the conference, Sakyadhita was founded and it has continued to hold bi-annual conferences ever since. Sakyadhita conferences are usually held in Asia as the majority of Buddhist nuns live there and do not have the funds to travel abroad. Conferences have been held in Thailand, Sri Lanka, India, Cambodia, Nepal, Taiwan, Korea, Malaysia, and Vietnam. Regional conferences have also been convened in Germany and North America (Chang 2009: <http://blag.biz/sakyadhita>). According to Chang (2009: <http://blag.biz/sakyadhita>), other conferences, not necessarily entitled Sakyadhita conferences, were convened directly as a result of this organisation, for example the Hamburg conference on Buddhist women's role in the sangha and bhikshuni ordination.

The Sakyadhita Association has several universal objectives including promoting world peace, interfaith dialogue, and encouraging compassionate social action for the benefit of humanity. Its objectives concerning Buddhist women include creating an international network of communications among Buddhist women, conducting research into Vinaya texts, providing guidance and assistance to women aspiring to ordination, promoting the physical and spiritual welfare of Buddhist women worldwide, conducting research and preparing publications on topics of interest to Buddhist women, and working towards an international bhikshuni sangha (Chang 2009: <http://blag.biz/sakyadhita>).

Chang (2009: <http://blag.biz/sakyadhita>) is of the opinion that Sakyadhita has “established a truly global grassroots network of Buddhist women...[creating] bridges between women of many different worlds of experience...[bringing] together Buddhist women from east and west and has created a forum where scholars meet and interact with practitioners.” Sakyadhita conferences have had significant outcomes, including acquainting the Buddhist community with the importance of access to full ordination, improved Buddhological scholarship, international educational exchanges, grassroots educational initiatives, and a body of published scholarship (Chang 2009: <http://blag.biz/sakyadhita>). There are approximately three

million (Tsomo 2006: xi) Buddhist women worldwide and this alone has, according to Chang (2009: <http://blag.biz/sakyadhita>), the potential for global transformation since Buddhist women are already by definition committed to peace, honesty, compassion, and positive human values.

5.11 CONCLUSION

The Buddha confirmed women's spiritual potential more than five centuries before the birth of Christ. He devised a path to enlightenment that is accessible to all, laypeople and monastics, regardless of ethnicity, age, or gender. Buddhist monastic life offers women alternatives to conventional domestic roles. However, women in Buddhist cultures as well as those Western women who choose to become Buddhist nuns, face a host of obstacles that keep them marginalised and subservient to the male hierarchy in most Buddhist organisations. Many of them question the discrepancy between Buddhism's egalitarian ideal and the practical limitations of their everyday lives (Tsomo 2000: xvii). Gender equity is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which exposes Buddhism to "a sometimes uncomfortable spotlight" (Tsomo 2000: xvii). Although many Buddhists may "invoke the rhetoric" of men and women's equal potential for enlightenment and presume that traditional structures are adequate to support women's practice, they are not (Tsomo 2000: xvii). The "rhetoric of equality" often masks the truth of women's subordination and lack of opportunities for education, training, and ordination. The ideal of spiritual equality remains an empty claim as long as there are inadequate structures to support women's practice (Tsomo 2000: xvii). According to Tsomo (2000: xvii) these incongruities demand a "continuing inquiry" into Buddhist women's history and practice. She continues to say that "[t]he gender imbalance in Buddhist societies, gendered interpretations of Buddhist tenets, and inequitable authority structures in traditional Buddhist institutions all demand our attention" (Tsomo 2000: xviii). About half of the converts to Buddhism in the West are laywomen who are very serious about their Buddhist practice (Gross, in Tsomo 1999: 277) Gross (in Tsomo 1999: 277) is of the opinion that their way of combining life in the modern world with serious Buddhist practice will be significant for the future of Buddhism worldwide as well as for Buddhist women in every Buddhist country.

According to Li (in Tsomo 2000: 178), nuns play a vital role in communicating Buddhist teachings and attracting female followers. Even though the most significant Buddhist intellectuals are still elderly monks, young nuns are increasingly the most educated and sophisticated members of the Buddhist community, especially in Taiwan and the West.

There is a fundamental correlation between ordination, discipline, monastic administration, and financial support (Li, in Tsomo 2000: 178). The bhikshuni ordination has become a focal point in the Buddhist women's movement since it provides women with full membership in the monastic community, entitling them to monastic training and support. Furthermore, it enables them to participate in monastic liturgies such as ordinations, bi-monthly confession ceremonies, and other rituals. Ordination therefore provides access to advanced individual spiritual cultivation as well as to the benefits of a collective administrative system. Buddhist nuns without full ordination are barred from the "core of power," including the right to control their own spiritual training (Li, in Tsomo 2000: 178). Li (in Tsomo 2000: 178) points out that Buddhist nuns in the Chinese tradition flourishing in China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, have access to bhikshuni ordination and benefit from a full monastic life. The vigour of Taiwanese nuns in particular has become a paradigm for Buddhist women, and many Tibetan and Theravadin nuns attribute the achievements of the Taiwanese nuns to their access to bhikshuni ordination and the accompanying benefits of monastic life (Li, in Tsomo 2000: 178).

Li (in Tsomo 2000: 179) continues highlighting the urgency of establishing full ordination for women in all the Buddhist traditions. The enthusiasm of traditional Buddhists to spread Buddhism in the West, is complicated by the cultural contradictions the nuns encounter in their effort to distribute Buddhism in foreign countries. The dilemma of preserving their cultural tradition from Westernisation is "unavoidably complex in the area of gendered division of religious labour" (Li, in Tsomo 2000: 179). Buddhist women brought up in Western countries are instilled with vital human resources for global dissemination. However, these women more often than not challenge "the male-dominated ecclesiastic power structures" of Asian Buddhist customs (Li, in Tsomo 2000: 179). The rivalry for followers among the different Buddhist traditions therefore renders full ordination of women a pressing concern.

The instatement of the bhikshuni lineage in the Tibetan and Theravadin Buddhist traditions is currently the focal point of much Buddhist study and discussions. Since 1988 four major international full ordination ceremonies for women have been conducted. Prior to 1988 many Western and Tibetan nuns in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition had pursued full ordination in the Chinese tradition by travelling to Taiwan and Hong Kong. In 1988 250 women from 16 countries received full ordination in Los Angeles under the auspices of Xilai Temple, the American headquarters of Foguangshan. In October 1996 ten Sri Lankan nuns received full ordination in Sarnath, India, in the Korean tradition. In 1997 400 monks and nuns received full ordination in the Chinese tradition in mainland China. The nuns included women from the Tibetan and Theravadin traditions. This was followed in 1998 by the ordination ceremony in Bodhgaya (Li, in Tsomo 2000: 179) (see 5.5.2).

The Bodhgaya ordinations confirmed that the majority of Buddhist monastic traditions “recognise the urgency of establishing full ordination” (Li, in Tsomo 2000: 188). Nuns are an important resource in the endeavour to expand Buddhism internationally, representing a significant and talented group instrumental in spreading the Buddha’s teachings. They also serve as a key to modernising the different Buddhist traditions (Li, in Tsomo 2000: 188). The reluctance of the Tibetan ecclesiastical authorities to recognise bhikshuni ordination in the current era, unsurprisingly raises questions. Li (in Tsomo 2000: 189) identifies two fundamental questions in this regard. “When the acceptance of Buddhism in the modern world requires an egalitarian approach, what explains their hesitation?” Similarly, “[i]f the Tibetan monastic community wishes to avoid interference by Chinese Buddhist authorities in their internal ecclesiastic affairs, why insist on dual ordination?”

Tsomo (2006: xi) writes that the “challenges Buddhist women face today are formidable. Gender bias, poverty, illiteracy, social isolation, and political strife are but a few.” However, Buddhist women eventually also realised that “biased attitudes towards women are often shaped simply by tradition, without due thought” (Tsomo 2006: xi). She continues to state that although there is no direct indication suggesting that women are deliberately oppressed or silenced, their potential has undoubtedly been neglected. “Fully empowering women requires change and therefore challenges the status quo” (Tsomo 2006: xi).

Ploos van Amstel (2005: 20, 21) confirms that Tibetan nuns are still expected to behave “shyly in a subservient manner” whereas Western women are from societies that have been transformed to a large extent by the women’s liberation movement. Western women are more confident and outspoken, and have more freedom of movement than their Tibetan counterparts. In the last fifty years Western women have gained incredible freedom, able to enter almost any profession or vocation they wish (Wetzel, in Ploos van Amstel 2005: 21). This could perhaps account for the Dalai Lama’s request to Western nuns to take up the cause of establishing bhikshuni ordination in the Tibetan tradition.

The Western nuns referred to in this chapter, as well as prominent Western female Buddhologists such as Rita M. Gross, Miranda Shaw, Anne Klein, and Judith Simmer-Brown, to mention but a few, all contribute to the transformation of Buddhism in the West which has sparked a debate surrounding its gender discrimination and existing gender hierarchies and has promoted the process of change within the traditional male-dominated structures of Buddhism which will benefit not only Western nuns and lay Buddhists, but also the Tibetan nuns themselves.

CHAPTER SIX: JETSUNMA TENZIN PALMO

The purpose of life is to realize our spiritual nature. And to do that one has to go away and practise, to reap the fruits of the path, otherwise you have nothing to give anyone else.

(Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 4)



6.1 INTRODUCTION

The extraordinary story of Tenzin Palmo is that of an English woman born as Diane Perry, the daughter of a fishmonger from London's East End, who goes on to become a Buddhist legend and a champion for the equal rights of women to pursue spiritual enlightenment. In 1976 she isolated herself in a secluded Himalayan cave 4023 metres above sea level, disconnected from the world by snow-covered mountains. She engaged in twelve years of intense Buddhist meditation confronted by indescribable cold, avalanches, wild animals, and near-starvation. She grew her own food and never lay down, sleeping in a traditional wooden meditation box, about 914 cm square, steadily working towards her goal of attaining enlightenment as a woman (Mackenzie 1999: dustjacket).

Palmo's life is well-documented in both the official biography by Mackenzie (1999)³⁰ and the documentary by Thompson and Cox (2003). However, in the context of this thesis in which Tenzin Palmo's biography serves as a case study it is necessary to include a chapter which details the highlights of her life story. The circumstances of her early childhood and adolescence, as well as a number of incidents during that time, already point towards the extraordinary life she would lead later on. Her struggle against the patriarchal and misogynistic practices of Tibetan Buddhism further demonstrates her phenomenal achievements and the tremendous contribution she has made in the field of female monasticism. She is the only Western woman who is the founder and abbess of a Tibetan Buddhist nunnery in India, specifically for nuns in the Himalayan regions. In addition, she is the only abbess of a Tibetan Buddhist nunnery outside the USA³¹. The nuns at her nunnery have free access to a training programme hitherto available only to monks. Her nunnery is self-sufficient and its administration is democratic and in the hands of the nuns themselves. Furthermore, Tenzin Palmo has been bestowed with the unusual title of Jetsunma, a title rarely given to even the most revered Tibetan Buddhist female practitioners (Sherrill 2000: 149-151), in recognition of her ecclesiastic knowledge and expertise, and her spiritual achievements.

6.2 CHILDHOOD AND ADOLESCENCE

Palmo (in Thompson & Cox: 2003) states that growing up in the East End of London as an Anglo-Saxon Anglican amounted to more or less nothing. Her quintessential English upbringing could not be further removed from the world of Buddhism she would eventually discover. She was born on 30 June 1943 in the library of the stately home of Woolmers Park, Hertfordshire, because Hitler's Luftwaffe was blitzing London and the maternity hospitals had been evacuated to the countryside. She spent her childhood above a fish shop in Bethnal Green, reduced to a "mass of rubble" after the blitz (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 9). Palmo recalls that she never really felt that she belonged, and even today when she returns to England she feels as if she is in the wrong place (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 9). Her father owned the downstairs fish shop and suffered from chronic bronchitis as a result of being gassed in World War 1. He died at the age of fifty-seven when Palmo was two years old and her brother, Mervyn, was six.

³⁰ *Cave in the snow* (1999) has been translated into nine languages (Thompson & Cox 2003).

³¹ Venerable Thubten Chodron is to my knowledge the only other abbess of a Tibetan Buddhist nunnery. She is the abbess of Sravasti Abbey (see 5.7.3 and 5.9.2).

Diane Perry and her brother were raised alone by their mother, Lee, a former housemaid, who now took over the running of the fish shop. Lee is described as feisty, open-minded, optimistic, a free spirit, a spiritual seeker, and “a staunch supporter of Tenzin Palmo in all her endeavours throughout her life” (Mackenzie 1999: 9). Mother and daughter were very close and Palmo states that she admired her enormously (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 9).

Diane Perry was an introspective and reclusive child. Although she did have friends, she preferred to be by herself spending her time reading to the extent that her teachers even lent her books to take home, a privilege not usually accorded to other children. She was fascinated by the East from childhood, although no one in her family was even vaguely interested in the Orient. There was no flourishing Asian community in London’s East End as there is today. She spent her time drawing Japanese women in flowing kimonos, and begged her mother to take her to the newly-opened Chinese restaurant in the West End. Perry was also curious about nuns, especially those from the contemplative orders, and once declared to a shopkeeper in a neighbourhood shop that she intended to become a nun when she grew up (Mackenzie 1999: 10). Palmo recalls that as a young girl she felt at odds with her female body and when adults explained that her body would change when she reached adolescence, she had the curious notion that she would then be able to go back to being a boy (Mackenzie 1999: 10, 11).

As a child she was subjected to a series of illnesses. The base of her spine was twisted inwards and tilted to the left when she was born, leaving her spinal column off-balance. She developed round shoulders to compensate for this leaving her with a hunched look which she carries with her still today. It was an agonizingly painful condition which weakened her vertebrae and has made her prone to lumbago. She went to hospital three times a week for physiotherapy, which was unsuccessful. Relief only came when she took up yoga in her teens. When she was a few months old she contracted meningitis and was hospitalised. No sooner had she recovered than she contracted it again. Her mother was convinced she would die, but her father declared “Oh no, she’s not. Look at those eyes! She’s longing to live” (Mackenzie 1999: 11). Diane Perry also suffered from a mysterious illness characterised by high fevers and terrible headaches. She was hospitalized for months, once spending eight months at the Great Ormond Street Children’s Hospital. She lost a great deal of schooling and was so weak that her school arranged regular compulsory convalescent periods at the seaside at the council’s

expense. As she grew older, this illness simply disappeared. Palmo is of the opinion that it was a karmic experience she had to go through as she never became seriously ill when she lived in the Himalayan cave. However, she did have a number of out-of-body experiences during these high fevers. She recalls that she “used to travel around the neighbourhood but because [she] was a little girl [she] wouldn’t go far from home” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 11). She simply wandered around the streets looking down at people instead of always looking up at them. Apparently she tried to do it again when she was a teenager but she became scared and consequently never developed the ability to astral travel (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 11, 12).

Diane Perry was also once seriously burned. She was playing with a ball inside the house and her nylon dress brushed against the electric fire. Within seconds she was ablaze. Her mother wrapped her in a blanket and rushed her to hospital. She remembers no pain during that time although she remained in hospital for a long time lying under a protective frame keeping the sheets off her body. Remarkably she was left with no scars. Tenzin Palmo believes this was the result of her mother praying that Diane’s pain be taken from her and given to her mother instead. Although Perry experienced no pain, neither did her mother. This is similar to the Buddhist practice called *Tonglen* in which the practitioner breathes in the pain and suffering of the other person to relieve them from misery. In turn, you transpose all your health and well-being to the other person in the form of a white light (<http://www.naljorprisondharmaservice.org/pdf/Tonglen.htm>). Tenzin Palmo believes her mother did this practice quite spontaneously when she caught fire. She also expresses the belief that she incarnated into a Western female body in order to be with her mother (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 12).

When she was not ill their family life continued in quite an ordinary manner. Perry shared a bedroom with her brother, “the bath was brought out once a week, and money was in desperately short supply” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 12). After her father died, her mother took over the running of the fish shop but, unbeknown to her, the uncle who was managing the business was squandering the money by gambling on the horses. This eventually left the family in enormous debt and resulted in her mother putting in even longer hours at the shop to make ends meet.

Palmo recalls that it was nevertheless a happy childhood. “To be honest we never thought much about being poor, it was simply how we lived. We always had enough to

eat and one's goals in those times were so much more modest" (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999; 13). She also remembers that she did not miss having a father. They got along very well as a family and they did not experience the tension and conflict of her friends' two-parent homes (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 13).

Perry seems to have been quite a pretty child with big blue eyes and a mop of light brown curls. She jokes that she "reached [her] peak at three – after that it was downhill" (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 13). She was so delightful to look at that her monastery in India later insisted on displaying a picture of her when she was a child. She occasionally fought with her brother but they mostly got along very well. Once he persuaded her to approach strangers on Hampstead Heath telling them that their mother had abandoned them and asking for money for the bus ride home. As a result of this incident her brother claims that it was him who "put [her] on the path of the begging bowl" (Mackenzie 1999: 13).

Diane Perry enjoyed her two schools, Teesdale Street Primary School, and John Howard Grammar School. She appreciated the latter's motto of "They can because they think they can." She excelled in English, history, and IQ tests. She claims that the reason she did well in IQ tests was simply that she had "the sort of mind that can do intelligence tests" (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 13). She was often awarded with the annual progress prize, an honour she also humbly dismisses as she claims not to have tried very hard at school as she did not find the subjects particularly interesting.

Perry was much more interested in her mother's weekly spiritualist séances on Wednesday evenings. They used to gather around a huge, heavy mahogany table with "legs the size of tree trunks" (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 14). One evening the table was sent flying around the room with the greengrocer, weighing 114 kilograms, sitting on top, as a result of a remark by Lee Perry (Palmo's mother) that the spirits were not particularly strong. Palmo never doubted the authenticity of what she witnessed. It was her house after all and there were certainly no hidden trap doors and other secret gimmicks. She claims to have learnt a lot from those séances especially the belief that consciousness exists after death as she experienced it firsthand. In addition, she became aware of other dimensions of being that one is not normally conscious of that are absolutely real. Consequently, the notion of death was an authentic and very positive concept in her household. It was often discussed and not something to be feared. On the

contrary, “if you’re not [afraid of it] it removes an enormously heavy burden from your life” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 14). Palmo explains that death is simply the next step on our journey. “We’ve done so many things in the past and now we are to go on to an infinite future” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 14). As a result one has much less anxiety about this life if one views one’s current life simply as “a little water drop in a big pool...It gives one a sense of spaciousness, and hope” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 15).

Mackenzie (1999: 15) writes that Diane Perry had a “penetrating mind and a highly questioning nature – qualities that she was to carry with her all her life.” Palmo however, did not appreciate the hold spiritualism had on people by preventing them from getting on with their lives. The weekly séances became the centre of existence for her mother’s friends, and Palmo thought that on the whole people asked “such stupid questions,” not penetrating really profound and important issues. She was of the opinion that it was “a waste of the spirit guide’s time and knowledge” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 15).

Curiously enough, Perry was grappling with remarkably Buddhist questions such as how to transcend beyond experiencing the inherent suffering of one’s existence. She recounts an experience she once had as a young girl, sitting in the bus with her mother. It was almost as if she had a sudden flash of insight realising that underneath the surface of people’s lives are the facts of ageing, sickness, and death which negate all the other “good” things in life (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 16). This incident was similar to the Buddha’s experience when he encountered a diseased man, a sick man, and a corpse, and which led him on a spiritual quest for the truth which eventually resulted in the Buddhist movement (Mackenzie 1999: 16).

Perry was preoccupied with another question at this time: “I wanted to know how we become perfect” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 16). She explains that ever since she was small she was convinced that people were inherently perfect and that one kept taking rebirth in order to rediscover one’s true nature. “I felt that somehow our perfection had become obscured and that we had to uncover it, to find out who we really were” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 16). She believed that the purpose of human life was indeed to discover this innately perfect nature that each human being possessed. This inherently perfect nature of the human being and the effort to rediscover it are the “touchstones” of Buddhism (Mackenzie 1999: 16). Tenzin Palmo was therefore already early on in her life aware of these Buddhist concepts. Her belief in reincarnation, even

before she had come across Buddhism as such, as well as the existential questions she grappled with in her early teens, I believe, attest to her enquiring mind and prepared the soil, so to speak, for her future life as a monastic.

At her mother's weekly séances she consulted the spirit guides for answers to these questions she was grappling with. However, she found their responses unsatisfactory. To her question whether there is a God, they responded that they did not think that there is a God in the sense of a person, but that ultimately there is light, love, and intelligence. She then asked them how one could become perfect. Their response was that one had to be very good and very kind. She came to the realisation that they did not know how one could rediscover one's innate perfection, and this led her to lose all interest in spiritualism (Mackenzie 1999: 17).

Diane Perry next sought advice from her local Anglican priest, Father Hetherington. She enjoyed the pseudo-Gothic architecture of the cathedral which she occasionally visited with her mother. She liked Father Hetherington because "he was tall, ascetic, and monk-like" (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 17). However, he could not provide her with a satisfactory answer either. He gave her the same answer as the spirit guides, namely that one has to become good and kind. She knew many good and kind people, but they were not perfect. She was convinced that perfection was altogether something beyond being good and kind (Palmo, in Thompson & Cox 2003).

Palmo recalls that Christianity did not find any resonance with her. She found that it posed more dilemmas than solutions. The fundamental problem was that she could not believe in God as a personal being. She was also particularly puzzled by the hymns she sang at school, especially when they sang "All things bright and beautiful, all things great and small, all things wise and wonderful, the Lord God made them all." This raised in her the question about who created "all things dull and ugly" (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 17). She was therefore already at an early age confronting the problem of duality, good and evil, dark and light, big and small. She was seeking a solution that transcended the opposites (Mackenzie 1999: 17).

In her early teens she attempted to read the Qur'an and tried once again to understand Christianity, but it remained "an enigma" (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 17). When she was fifteen she started doing yoga, and through that was introduced to Hinduism.

Hinduism satisfied her curiosity up to a point, but once again she could not accept the idea of a personal God. “The problem was that all these religions were based on the idea of this external being who it was our duty somehow to propitiate... This simply did not have any inner reference for me” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 18).

Diane Perry eventually turned to the Existentialists like Sartre, Kierkegaard, and Camus. However, she felt that although they were posing all the right questions and clearly stating the problem of the human condition, they did not provide any satisfactory answers.

Perry was introduced to Tibet at school by a teacher who read Heinrich Harrer’s book *Seven Years in Tibet* (1956) to them. She marvelled at his journey to the Land of Snows and his friendship with the Dalai Lama. At around the age of nine or ten she saw a programme on the temples in Thailand and remembers seeing a frieze depicting the life of the Buddha. When she asked her mother who he was Lee Perry replied that he was some sort of oriental god. Diane retorted that he wasn’t and that he actually lived and had a story like Jesus (Mackenzie 1999: 18).

6.3 THE BREAKTHROUGH – DISCOVERING TIBETAN BUDDHISM

After completing her school education, Diane Perry took employment in the local library, the Hackney Library. It was a “nice, quiet job” as recommended by her teachers (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 19). It was well suited to her great love of books and “her methodical, meticulous mind” (Mackenzie 1999: 19). She wished to go to university to study English and philosophy, but her mother could not afford it. She comforted herself with the thought that earning money would enable her to leave England sooner. She desperately longed to go to the East and at times felt deeply homesick for it.

In 1961, when Diane Perry was eighteen years old, she and her mother travelled to Germany to spend Christmas with her brother stationed there as a member of the RAF (Royal Air Force). She took three library books along to read whilst in Germany: one by Sartre, one by Camus, and a book that had just been returned by a library member, *The Mind Unshaken*, because it had a tackle the Buddhist book. She related that “it was astonishing. Everything [she] had ever believed in, there it was... It was exactly as [she] thought and felt. And together with that was this absolutely clear and logical path to get us back to perfection” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 19, 20). She discovered the Buddha’s confrontation with ageing, sickness, and death, much in the same way as her

own struggle with them. The teaching on rebirth and “the fact that there was no external deity pulling the strings” also resonated with her (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 20). She explains that she found the Hindu concept of atman (soul) and its relationship with the divine unattractive. However, she felt greatly liberated when she discovered that in Buddhism there was no belief in an independent entity or self, but rather a belief in the principle of consciousness. The book transformed her life completely, and she announced to her mother that she was a Buddhist.

True to her lifelong motto, “[i]f you’re going to do something, you might as well do it properly,” Perry proceeded to read everything about Buddhism she could find, and looked for fellow Buddhists from whom she could learn more (Mackenzie 1999: 20, 21). This was difficult in the Britain of 1961 when Buddhism in the West was still a rather unheard of phenomenon.

Diane Perry commenced her journey on the path of Buddhism by promptly giving away all her clothes because she kept reading that one had to be free from desire. She began wearing a shapeless, yellow Greek-type tunic which she wore with a belt and stockings. She wore sensible shoes, stopped wearing make-up, tied back her hair, and stopped going out with boys. “I was desperately trying to be desireless” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 21).

Before long she discovered the Buddhist Society in Eccleston Square, just behind Victoria Station, founded in 1924 by Christmas Humphreys (see 2.6.9). Mackenzie (1999: 21) is of the opinion that Christmas Humphreys “did more than any other person” to familiarise the British public with Eastern spirituality. He was a distinguished judge with an unconventional interest in alternative medicine, astrology, and Buddhism. He had rubbed shoulders with C.G. Jung, Zen Master Dr D.T. Suzuki, and the newly exiled Dalai Lama. By the time Diane Perry joined the Buddhist Society, it was the oldest and largest Buddhist organisation in the West, even though its membership was relatively small (Mackenzie 1999: 21).

Perry discovered that the Buddhists at the society did not “[wander] around in yellow tunics” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 21). When she told her mother that it was perhaps a mistake to have given away all her clothes, Lee Perry promptly brought it out again. She

had locked away all Diane's clothes. Palmo says admiringly that "[r]eally, she was so skilful" (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 21).

At the Buddhist Society Perry engrossed herself in the teachings of Theravada Buddhism, the Buddha's Four Noble Truths, and his Eightfold Path. She states that "[i]t was like being at a banquet after you've been starving" (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 22). She found Zen Buddhism, the only other form of Buddhism available at the time, puzzling and frustrating. Its riddles and "clever intellectual gymnastics" (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 22) were beyond her comprehension at that time. Now she claims to enjoy Zen, but states that if the first book on Buddhism she read had been on Zen Buddhism she probably would not have continued her interest in it (Mackenzie 1999: 22).

At home Perry constructed an altar covered in a "buttercup-yellow bath-towel" (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 22) and displayed a statue of the Buddha on it. The statue was given to her by a woman from whom she had bought two Siamese cats. The woman's husband had brought it back from a trip to Burma, and it was just sitting on their mantelpiece. Palmo started performing prostrations in front of the altar, "naturally, energetically, and with great joy" (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 22). When she first saw a Buddhist shrine at the Buddhist Society her initial impulse was to prostrate, but she felt at that time that it would not have been correct. However, when she discovered that people do actually prostrate in front of a shrine, she was overjoyed and continued with her own prostrations at home with renewed enthusiasm (Mackenzie 1999: 22).

In the course of her reading she came across the Buddhist mantra, *Om Mani Padme Hum*, and began reciting it in her own way. The mantra calls in particular on the Buddha of compassion, Chenrezig (Sanskrit: Avalokiteshvara). She was a novice concerning mantra recitation then and simply repeated the mantra continuously, either verbally or mentally, depending on where she was and what she was doing. She found that she could recite the mantra "in her heart" while at the same time continuing with her work. "What it did was to split off part of my mind so that I had this kind of observing consciousness which was resounding with the '*Om Mani Padme Hung*.'"³² "It gave me space in which I could develop awareness of what was going on rather than being right in the middle of it" (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 22, 23).

³² *Hung* is the Tibetan equivalent of *Hum*.

Although Perry recognised that Buddhism was the spiritual path for her, she was concerned about certain aspects of the Theravada school. She found that she could not resonate with the *Arhats* for instance. *Arhats* are Buddhist practitioners who have attained nirvana and who have therefore freed themselves from the cycle of rebirth. Palmo experienced the concept of the *Arhats* as cold and loveless. “There was no talk of love in all that” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 23). She did not want to be like the *Arhats* but like the Buddha. She was not attracted to where the Theravada path was leading, and she felt that somehow something was missing from it (Mackenzie 1999: 23).

Perry continued her search, and some months later found a book by Nagarjuna, a well-known second-century Buddhist saint and philosopher, in which she discovered a description of a bodhisattva, an adept who forsakes nirvana in order to help free all sentient beings from suffering (Mackenzie 1999: 23). The idea of the bodhisattva confirmed what she was searching for. However, Nagarjuna was primarily revered and followed in Tibet, and in the 1960s Tibetan Buddhism was almost unknown in the West. The little that was known about Tibet was often inaccurate and shrouded in mysterious and fantastic tales. Tibetan Buddhism was dismissed by the London Buddhist Society as shamanistic, esoteric, and mostly degenerate. In contrast to the pure lines of Zen and the simple dogma of Theravada, Tibetan Buddhism was too exotic and too odd to their taste (Mackenzie 1999: 24).

Some time later, Diane discovered a description of the four schools of Tibetan Buddhism in yet another book she was reading. She instantly recognised that she was a “Kagyu” (see 2.4.4). Palmo explains that throughout her life she has followed the dictates of “the Voice” at strategic points in her life when she needed inner guidance (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 24) – a form of subconscious intuition that would manifest itself and guide her towards an insight and/or a decision. In this instance, “the Voice” proclaimed that she belonged to the Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism. She proceeded to contact the only person in London she knew of who had any knowledge of Tibetan Buddhism. She was given a book by Evans-Wenz (see 2.6.5) on the biography of Milarepa, poet-saint of Tibet and cave-dweller of note, who was the founder of the Kagyu school (see 2.4.4). Perry was riveted by the tales of Pure Lands, spirit realms, heavens, and hells. She recognised these levels of existence from the séances she witnessed as a child. “After all, I was brought up with tables floating around the room!” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 25, 26). She identified with concepts such as Milarepa flying

through the air because she had done the same as a child when she was ill and had out-of-body experiences. These incidences were entirely absent in Theravada and Zen Buddhism, and Palmo considered these forms of Buddhism too rationalistic, especially since there was no mention of spirit (Mackenzie 1999: 26). Diane Perry concluded that the next step would be for her to find a teacher or guru to guide her. She realised that she would have to travel to India since most of the Tibetan refugees were there and she was most likely to find a Kagyu teacher, *her* guru, there (Mackenzie 1999: 26).

Diane had another, lighter, side to her, though. She was young, a teenager, attractive with long curly hair, and described as “bubbly” by acquaintances (Mackenzie 1999: 26). “She had discovered boys and they had certainly discovered her” (Mackenzie 1999: 26). Life was fun in the London of the early sixties and Palmo thoroughly enjoyed the era of Elvis Presley, Ricky Nelson, the Beatniks, and rock ‘n roll. She had a busy social life and lots of boyfriends, especially Asian boys. She loved dancing and Elvis Presley – “he was my big renunciation when I became a Buddhist” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 26). However, she was adamant that she never wanted to get married. She wished to remain independent and did not “want [her] head filled with thoughts of one person” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 26, 27).

Diane Perry’s two sides unavoidably caused conflict and an inner struggle. On the one hand she was “frivolous” and “fun-loving” (Mackenzie 1999: 26, 27) and on the other she was a serious young girl seeking a deeper spirituality. However, she continued to date boys and to go dancing while at the same time pursuing her quest for her guru. She had heard via the grapevine of an Englishwoman called Freda Bedi who had married an Indian and converted to Buddhism. She was running a small nunnery for Kagyu nuns as well as a school for young incarnated lamas in Dalhousie, in northern India. Perry wrote to Freda Bedi offering her services in whatever way she could, and Bedi inevitably invited her enthusiastically to come to Dalhousie (Mackenzie 1999: 27).

Diane realised that she would never be able to earn enough money in her present position at the Hackney Library, and started to look for a better-paid position. She replied to an advertisement for a position at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in Bloomsbury. She was interviewed by the Chief Librarian, Mr Pearson, who wanted to know if she would be prepared to undertake library examinations. When she answered in the negative as she was planning to go to India in a year or two as soon as

she had saved enough money, she was sure she had lost the position. Much to her surprise, Mr Pearson rang her up a few days later offering her the position because they “had such a fantastic interview” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 29). During the interview she had discovered that he had just returned from Burma and India, and they ended up talking about his trip, never even mentioning her working hours and salary.

Once she had started working at the SOAS, Mr Pearson arranged Tibetan lesson for her with the renowned Tibetologist, David Snellgrove, at the expense of the SOAS. Snellgrove was one of the few people at that time who had actually travelled to Tibet. He had three Tibetan Bonpo (pre-Buddhist Tibetan religion) lamas staying with him at the time, and these were the first Tibetan lamas Perry ever met. During the course of the next year, a number of other Tibetan lamas drifted into England and Perry was in the privileged position at the SOAS to meet some of them. Lee Perry, always enthusiastic about new spiritual experiences, invited them home, enabling Palmo to gain first-hand knowledge from them (Mackenzie 1999: 28, 29).

Among these lamas was Rato Rinpoche, who now runs Tibet House in New York and who appeared in Bertolucci’s film *The Little Buddha*. The enigmatic and infamous Chogyam Trungpa was also amongst their guests. Trungpa went on to establish Buddhism in the West in a number of ways, as well as becoming renowned for his unconventional and often outrageous behaviour. He wrote numerous significant books and established the first British Tibetan retreat and meditation centre, Samye Ling, in Scotland. After a stint at Oxford, he moved to the United States and there founded the Naropa Institute and introduced his particular method of meditation and training called Shambhala (<http://www.shambhala.org/buddhism.php>). Trungpa was a high lama, a skilful meditation master, a gifted scholar, and an exceptional communicator. However, his eccentric and shocking behaviour degenerated his organisation into chaos (Mackenzie 1999: 29).

Nevertheless, at the time of his meeting with Diane Perry, Trungpa was still young and unknown. He was desperate to start teaching again and offered to become her meditation teacher. Diane became a private student of Trungpa’s although he “was nothing like how I imagined a monk or lama should be. He wasn’t at all beautiful. He was very plain and didn’t know English much but there was something there” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 29). Trungpa told her about the Tibetan lamas’ ability to change the

weather, which Perry and her mother actually experienced when they visited him in Oxford. She pounded him with a barrage of questions and they engaged in many excited arguments which they enjoyed.

Perry was overjoyed that she could at last commence serious meditation practice. At that time she could not explain why meditation was so important, or what effect it had. After more than thirty years of solid practice she now explains that “[m]editation is where you begin to calm the storm, to cease the never-ending chattering of the mind” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 30). She clarifies this by saying that one’s “mind is so untamed, out of control, constantly creating memories, prejudices, mental commentaries. It’s like a riot act for most people! Anarchy within. We have no way of choosing how to think and the emotions engulf us” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 30). Once one has managed to calm down the “chattering” of the mind, one is able to access the deeper levels of consciousness which will enable one to gradually disidentify with one’s thoughts and emotions. One is then able to identify the transparent nature of one’s thoughts and emotions which in turn creates inner harmony (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 30).

Diane Perry in addition experienced first-hand the controversial side of Trungpa. He later developed a reputation for being quite a womaniser, seducing, or trying to seduce, a number of his female students. When Perry met him the first time he indicated that she should sit next to him on the sofa. While enjoying afternoon tea and cucumber sandwiches, she suddenly felt his hand going up her skirt. She laughingly points out that she was wearing stiletto heels, and he was wearing sandals, so his hand was quickly removed. This did not discourage Trungpa, and he kept suggesting she sleep with him. In typical Palmo style, she was neither upset nor outraged, but points out that she might have considered sleeping with him had he not been a monk, and she certainly did not want to be the cause of any monk breaking his vows. “The fact was, he was not being truthful” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 31). He was putting himself forward as a chaste monk who tried to convince Diane that she had “swept him off his feet...which [she] thought was a load of baloney” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 31). In fact, he had not been celibate since the age of thirteen and had already fathered a son. Had she known this, she might have considered his proposition because “what would have been more fascinating than to practise with Trungpa” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 31). Palmo is here referring to the higher stages of tantra in Tibetan Buddhism in which the

practitioner may take a sexual partner to enhance her spiritual insights. “So, he lost out by presenting that pathetic image!” Palmo (in Mackenzie 1999: 31) adds with humour.

Despite Trungpa’s sexual escapades, Perry and Trungpa continued to be good friends. He strongly encouraged her to go to India to find her teacher. By February 1964 Diane Perry had saved the ninety pounds she needed for the cheapest sea voyage to India. She was twenty years old. She had to undertake two train journeys as well as a channel crossing to reach Marseille in the south of France, from where her ship, *Le Vietnam*, was to sail (Mackenzie 1999: 32).

6.4 INDIA AT LAST

She was joined on her journey by two other women who were also heading for Freda Bedi’s school. Palmo laughingly recounts that she had all the wrong things in her luggage, including six night dresses and loads of soap. *Le Vietnam* was crewed by Ethiopians, Vietnamese, Sudanese, and Algerians. It was a banana boat with no luxuries for its passengers. It took two weeks to reach Bombay (now Mumbai), where Perry stayed with a friend while she oriented herself. However, there was a sudden complication caused by a shipboard romance with a young Japanese man who had fallen head over heels in love with Palmo and who wanted to marry her. Diane Perry found herself in rather a difficult situation. On the one hand he was “so beautiful and a lovely person. He had such a good heart” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 33). He was from a good family and a Buddhist. Her friends encouraged her to marry him, but “deep inside” she did not really wish to get married (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 33). Caught between her need for physical and emotional intimacy, and the wish for a life devoted to spiritual pursuits, they agreed that Palmo would stay in India for a year and then travel to Japan (Mackenzie 1999: 33).

Diane arrived at Freda Bedi’s school for young lamas in Dalhousie after trudging through the snow for two hours in sandals. Bedi was a colourful character who scandalised English upper class society by marrying an Indian whom she had met at Oxford. She returned to India with him and they had five children. She campaigned against the British for Indian independence and was duly imprisoned. Upon her release she was employed by the Central Social Welfare board to work with the Tibetan refugees who were flooding into India after the Dalai Lama’s escape in 1959. After her

husband's death (Mukpo & Rose 2006: 71), she became the first Western woman to be ordained as a Tibetan Buddhist nun and adopted the monastic name of Khechok Palmo³³ (Mackenzie 1999: 35). According to Tenzin Palmo (in Mackenzie 1999: 35), Bedi was very organised and excellent at procuring funds from various aid agencies. She established a nunnery for Tibetan nuns which is still in existence today, and many Tibetan monks, including Chogyam Trungpa, first learnt English at her school.

At the time of Diane Perry's arrival in Dalhousie it was the major refugee centre for Tibetans in India, with some 5 000 Tibetans living there at that time. Only later did they move to Dharamsala and established what today is called Little Lhasa. Even though Dalhousie was "a lovely place" (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 35), many of the Tibetans there were extremely traumatised. They had witnessed horrifying violence, seen their sacred monasteries sacked and violated, and their monks and lamas tortured (see 3.4). They had undertaken the gruelling and dangerous journey across the Himalayas into India; they were destitute, displaced, desperately poor, and in "a pitiful state" (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 36). The Tibetan refugees were living under appalling conditions in tents made from flour bags, and were battling with India's heat after the crisp coldness of Tibet. "Many of them got sick and died" (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 36).

Diane Perry's accommodation was not much better. She first slept on the covered veranda of the nunnery, and later moved into a little room by herself. "It was...freezing cold, and when it rained, it rained outside and in" (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 36). She had to resort to sleeping under the bed where she was pestered by a myriad of enormous rats that devoured everything in sight, from her clothes to her prayer beads. She didn't mind them as much as the spiders, and remembers one huge spider with "little glassy eyes" that was far worse than the rats (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 36). Yet, in spite of her spartan and challenging living conditions, she thrived. She acted as Freda Bedi's secretary and taught English at the school for young lamas. These lamas were all tulkus, the recognised reincarnations of previous high spiritual masters.

³³ Tibetans do not usually use family names. Tibetan children are given names with auspicious meanings, and are often named after famous lamas. Tenzin, for instance, is a popular Tibetan name since it is the Dalai Lama's first name (i.e. Tenzin Gyatso). Tenzin means upholder of teachings (<http://www.first-names-meanings.com>). Tibetan names can be both male and female (Gephel 2012: <http://www.namgyal.org/articles/names.cfm>). Palmo means radiant woman (<http://www.dharmawheel.net>).

In the meantime she had received three letters from different boyfriends who thought she should leave her appalling circumstances and marry them immediately. However, by this time she had firmly made up her mind to be a nun. “None of these men realised I was having the time of my life. They all thought that because I wasn’t with them I must be miserable. They didn’t understand at all. At that moment I remembered again what I was there for” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 38).

Perry was in a unique position as one of the first Westerners involved with the Tibetans in India. This enabled her to meet some of the most prominent Tibetan religious leaders as well as one or two Westerners who would play a pivotal role in her life. She had started a correspondence with John Blofeld after reading his book *The Wheel of Life* (1978). Blofeld was well-known for his translation of the *I Ching*, his interpretation of the Zen masters, and his books on Taoism (<http://www.danreid.org/daniel-reid-articles-john-blofeld-the-wheel-of-life.asp>). He played an important part in her life until his death in 1987, offering advice and support (Mackenzie 1999: 39).

Diane Perry also had the opportunity to meet the late Karmapa as well as the Dalai Lama. Her meeting with the Dalai Lama turned out to be quite unique and he seemed to be aware of facts even unknown to Perry herself. She was wearing a traditional Tibetan dress for her meeting with him and he remarked that she looked like a lady from Lhasa, whereupon she answered that she was actually from Kham, a region in eastern Tibet. She had no idea why she said that, or why the Dalai Lama addressed her as *Ani-la*, a form of address used for nuns. One can only speculate that it was perhaps due to the Dalai Lama’s “legendary clear-sightedness” about what was to come and what has already been (Mackenzie 1999: 40).

6.4.1 The Eighth Khamtrul Rinpoche

Khampagar monastery in eastern Tibet had been the home of the Eighth Khamtrul Rinpoche for nearly thirty years when he left it disguised as a merchant, fleeing the Chinese invasion of his country. He eventually established Khampagar monastery in Tashi Jong, near the town of Palampur, in India (see 2.5.5).

However, in 1964 Khamtrul Rinpoche and his handful of followers were still living in and around Dalhousie. In her position as Freda Bedi’s secretary, Diane Perry usually handled all the correspondence. One day a letter arrived, signed by Khamtrul Rinpoche

forwarding a sample of hand-made paper from a Tibetan crafts group, which Khamtrul Rinpoche was hoping Freda Bedi could market. Palmo asked Bedi about Khamtrul Rinpoche and learnt that he was expected at the lama school any day. Tenzin Palmo recounts that she was filled with excitement and “the more [she] heard about him, the more excited [she] became. [She] felt this was the person [she] wanted to take refuge³⁴ with” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 42).

The 30 June 1964 was Diane Perry’s twenty-first birthday. It was also the day she met Khamtrul Rinpoche. When Freda Bedi was informed by telephone that Khamtrul Rinpoche had just arrived and was on his way to the lama school, she said to Perry “[y]our best birthday present has just arrived at the bus stop” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 42). Palmo describes herself as both excited and terrified at the prospect of meeting her lama. She rushed back to the nunnery where she was staying to change into a Tibetan dress and to fetch a *kata*. By the time she returned to the school, Khamtrul Rinpoche had already gone inside and was sitting on a couch with two young lamas, both recognised reincarnations. She was too scared to look at him, simply staring at the bottom of his robe and brown shoes (Palmo, in Thompson & Cox 2003). “I had no idea if he was young, or old, fat or thin” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 42). Freda Bedi introduced her, explaining that she wished to take refuge. Upon hearing this, Khamtrul Rinpoche said, “Oh yes. Of course” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 43). Having heard these words, Diane Perry was prompted to look up at last. Khamtrul Rinpoche was a tall, bulky man, about ten years older than Perry. He had a strong round face, and Palmo describes him as having a strange knob on top of his head, similar to those depicted in images of the Buddha. Palmo describes having two distinct feelings when she met her guru. “One was seeing somebody you knew extremely well whom you haven’t seen for a long time...at the same time it was as if an innermost part of my being had taken form in front of me. As though he’d always been there but now he was outside” (in Mackenzie 1999: 43).

Within hours of her meeting Khamtrul Rinpoche, Perry asked him to ordain her as a nun as well. Again, he simply answered, “Yes, of course” (Mackenzie 1999: 43). After merely three weeks in India, on 24 July 1964, Diane Perry was ordained as a Tibetan Buddhist nun (see 5.3 and 5.5), only the second Western woman to be so ordained. She

³⁴ See Glossary for an explanation of the term *refuge*.

was ordained at Khamtrul Rinpoche's monastery, which at that time was in Banuri (Mackenzie 1999: 43).

“The point was I was searching for perfection. I knew that Tibetan Buddhism not only gave the most flawless description of that state, but provided the most clear path to get there. That's why I became a nun. Because if one was going to follow the path, one needed the least distractions possible” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 42).

Tenzin Palmo recounts with glee her hair-shaving ceremony on the eve of her ordination. Some of the lamas with whom she had become acquainted begged her not to cut off her long, curly hair, but to ask Rinpoche if she could remain unshaven. In typical Palmo fashion she replied that she was not becoming a nun to please men. She felt light and unburdened after having her hair shaved off and still enjoys having it shaved once a month. Lee Perry, though, after seeing a photograph of her newly-shaven daughter, remarked, “My poor little shorn lamb” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 44).

Palmo remembers being extraordinarily happy on the day of her ordination. She states (in Thompson & Cox 2003) that it was her greatest birthday present and the greatest blessing of her life. It was the custom to take some gifts for one's guru on the day of the ordination, but the gifts Palmo had purchased in Dalhousie for Khamtrul Rinpoche, mysteriously disappeared. She therefore went to her ordination empty-handed and could simply offer her “body, mind, and speech,” to which Rinpoche responded that “[T]hat's what I want” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 44). Khamtrul Rinpoche bestowed upon Diane Perry the monastic name of Drubgyu Tenzin Palmo which means “Glorious Lady who Upholds the Doctrine of the Practice Succession”³⁵(Mackenzie 1999: 44). Palmo was to spearhead the movement which after her ordination saw a spate of Western women from all over Europe, North America, Australia, and New Zealand following in her footsteps thereby facilitating the formulation of the newly emerging Western Buddhism (Mackenzie 1999: 44).

Tenzin Palmo and Khamtrul Rinpoche maintained a special closeness all his life. The monks in his monastery treated her with the respect and deference usually reserved for tulkus (recognised reincarnations). There is indeed a cloth painting in Khampagar monastery which the monks had brought with them from Tibet, depicting a figure with

³⁵ See footnote 3.

piercing blue eyes and a long nose that closely resembles Palmo (Mackenzie 1999: 45). Tenzin Palmo seems to be rather vague on the subject of her own past lives. “I think I had been a monk for many lifetimes and that my relationship with Khamtrul Rinpoche started a long time ago. That’s why when we met again it was just a matter of taking up where we left off. I think I was his attendant monk” (in Mackenzie 1999: 46). A lama once asked her in amazement whether she did not realise who she was in her previous lifetime. When she answered in the negative he responded by saying that if Khamtrul Rinpoche had not told her, he must have had a good reason for not doing so. She, in turn, never asked him (Mackenzie 1999: 47). Palmo also suspects that she had been a yogi closely related to the sixth Khamtrul Rinpoche who lived in Tibet in the early 1900s. According to Mackenzie (1999: 47, 48) this could explain why Palmo perpetually felt “wrong” in London; her peculiar unfamiliarity with her female body as a child; her unusual attraction to Tibetan Buddhism; and her statement to the Dalai Lama that she was from Kham.

After her ordination, Palmo left Freda Bedi’s school for young lamas, and began working as Khamtrul Rinpoche’s secretary. This position enabled her to be in close contact with him on a daily basis. In a previous lifetime, as a Tibetan woman, perhaps living in Kham, protocol and tradition would have made this form of close contact impossible (Mackenzie 1999: 47).

Tenzin Palmo refers to Khamtrul Rinpoche with great love and admiration. He was an extremely accomplished man, a poet and grammarian, a painter, and an excellent lama dancer. Although he was “extremely sweet and gentle, with a very soft little voice” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 47), he had a very strong presence. Palmo was in great awe of him. Khamtrul Rinpoche was believed to have been one of the fierce forms of Guru Rinpoche, also known as Padmasambhava, the man who brought Buddhism to Tibet from India in the eighth century (see 2.4.2). Some lamas would see him in that form and this explained to Palmo the great force she always sensed when in his presence. In fact, she experienced it herself one evening when she was typing and Khamtrul Rinpoche came into the office. He was very tired and for a moment had dropped his mask as he looked at her. She describes the moment as being “hit by a thunderbolt” (in Mackenzie 1999: 47). She jumped up and started shaking. It was as if an electric current had run through her. Khamtrul Rinpoche immediately came over to apologise and asked one of the monks to take her home as she was quite overwhelmed. Although some people

found Khamtrul Rinpoche detached, Palmo insists that towards her he was always extremely kind and affectionate, displaying a humorous side not necessarily available to outsiders (Mackenzie 1999: 47). The extremely close relationship which she maintained with him she never experienced again with other lamas. When he passed away she sought instructions from lamas like Sakya Trizin (see 2.5.2), but the connection she had with Khamtrul Rinpoche was never duplicated (Mackenzie 1999: 48). Palmo explains that one's relationship with one's root guru is a relationship that has been ongoing for many lifetimes. The guru is committed to the disciple until enlightenment is reached, and this explains the intimacy of such a relationship (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 48).

At the age of twenty-one Tenzin Palmo had renounced her family, her background, her hair, and all aspirations for worldly accumulation (Mackenzie 1999: 48). However, she would still have to resolve her relationship with her Japanese boyfriend. Shortly after her ordination she was invited by John Blofeld to visit him and his wife at their home in Thailand. Khamtrul Rinpoche gave her permission to go but urged her to return quickly. Although she had written to her Japanese boyfriend explaining that she had become a nun and had terminated their engagement, he was waiting for her on her arrival in Thailand. He tried once again to convince her to marry him. Palmo enjoyed his company tremendously and describes him as “a lovely, lovely person” (in Mackenzie 1999: 49). She vacillated between wanting to continue her career as a nun and wanting to be with him. Giving up her Japanese boyfriend was her greatest renunciation (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 49). Furthermore, the conditions in Dalhousie complicated the decision. The monastery had not yet been rebuilt and the monastic community lived in tents. They were often knee-deep in mud, there were no toilets, and no tap water. Her Japanese boyfriend's parents had just moved into a new home and had extended an invitation to Tenzin Palmo to visit. She was ensnared in an intense inner struggle.

Eventually her mind was made up by the *I Ching*, the ancient Chinese book of divination. Blofeld had just finished translating it and Tenzin Palmo was helping him with the proofreading. He had taught her how to throw the yarrow sticks and read the resulting hexagrams. She asked the *I Ching* whether she should go to Japan. The answer could not have been clearer: “Further journey East not advisable. Return to the Sage” (Mackenzie 1999: 50).

This was no easy decision and she spent the night in tears. Eventually she prayed for help to her guru. Instantly she felt a golden light filling her body from head to toe, and heard Khamtrul Rinpoche telling her to return to India immediately. “After that I was perfectly happy. I was filled with bliss” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 50). She never saw the Japanese young man again.

6.4.2 The exclusive male club

Back in Dalhousie Palmo was the only nun in a monastery of about 100 monks. She had entered “the mighty portals of Tibetan monasticism” that had been “barred to the opposite sex for centuries” (Mackenzie 1999: 51). Despite Palmo’s dedication, extraordinary single-mindedness, and being inspired by the highest ideals, she experienced the most miserable six years of her life (Mackenzie 1999: 51).

The monasteries were to Tibet what the pyramids were to Egypt (Mackenzie 1999: 51). Some of them were immense institutions extending like towns over mountain slopes. They were abuzz with the energy of thousands of monks occupied with the quest for spiritual excellence. Some of these monastic institutions have been in existence for hundreds of years. They have produced several of the most excellent mystics and scholar-saints “the world has ever known” (Mackenzie 1999: 51). The discipline was severe and the curriculum imposing. Many monks spent as much as twenty-five years pursuing the Geshe degree, having entered the monasteries in childhood. The curriculum included the study of logic and reasoning, the identification of the different types of consciousness, methods for generating single-pointed concentration, and examined the varying views of Emptiness and the void. When the monks progressed sufficiently in their studies, they were initiated into the realm of tantra. Tantra is “the secret way,” claiming to be the fastest and therefore the most dangerous path to enlightenment (see 2.4.1). The curriculum emphasised Bodhicitta, the altruistic heart, without which nothing else was really practicable. The monasteries were Tibet’s pride and joy, but they were exclusively male (Mackenzie 1999: 52).

Tenzin Palmo bravely entered the world of unadulterated monastic patriarchy. It probably would not have been possible had she not been a Western woman, recognised as part of Khamtrul Rinpoche’s entourage, and had the Tibetans not been in disarray. It was not a comfortable position to be in. The monks, usually warm and affectionate, had

been trained from childhood to be wary of women, and kept Palmo at arm's length. This was devastating for her. She had just renounced her boyfriend and yearned for some other affection to replace their intimacy (Mackenzie 1999: 52). "It was terrible...It was like having this glass partition down – you could see but you couldn't get near. It was very painful to be so alienated, especially at that age. It went on for ages and ages. The only person who ever came near me was Khamtrul Rinpoche, who would sometimes give me a big bear hug. I would cry every night, I was so unhappy" (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 52).

As a woman she was barred from living at the monastery and sharing in their daily activities. This compounded her feelings of rejection and isolation. During the day she would function as Khamtrul Rinpoche's secretary in the monastery office and at night she would live alone in town. She rented a little room at the top of a dilapidated house. She could barely fit a bed and a table into it. There was no running water and no toilet. Tenzin Palmo relates that people often asked her whether she never felt lonely when she lived in the cave, but she recounts that she never was. "It was in the monastery that I was really lonely" (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 52). One evening she finally realised that her attachment to her emotional anguish and her longing for affection were causing her much suffering. Once she had come to this realisation, the anguish simply disappeared and she no longer desired to reach out (Mackenzie 1999: 53). She had experienced one of the fundamental tenets of Buddhism – that of detachment. The Buddha argued that one cannot experience compassion towards all sentient beings if one divided them into friend and foe. Nevertheless, detachment is exceptionally difficult to attain as not many human beings apparently wish to live with that much equanimity. Palmo points out that "[p]eople are always asking [her] how they can give up anger, but no one has yet asked [her] how to give up desire" (in Mackenzie 1999: 53).

However, before Palmo experienced this inner insight into her attachment to her emotional anguish and longing, conditions in Dalhousie went from bad to worse. She was refused participation in the esoteric teachings and sacred rituals that were the essence of Tibetan Buddhism, the *raison d'être* of her decision to become a nun. The reason for this was that "[w]omen... had never been given access to these sacred truths" (Mackenzie 1999: 53). Her request to be taught the sacred texts was refused and she was delegated to Choegyal Rinpoche, one of Khamtrul Rinpoche's closest disciples. He

proceeded to instruct her in simple Buddhist stories, as was appropriate to her status as firstly, a *woman*, and secondly, a *Western* woman (Mackenzie 1999: 53).

Tenzin Palmo became intensely frustrated. “It was like being at this huge banquet and being given a few little crumbs here and there. It drove me nuts. I could get absolutely nothing in depth” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 53). She claims that had she been a man, the situation would have been quite different. “Really, it was such a male-dominated situation. It was as though I had entered a big male club” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 53). On the surface the monks were very kind, but Palmo felt that they resented her on a deeper level and regarded having a woman on their territory as a challenge (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 54). She watched in dismay how Western male visitors were given access to teachings that she was barred from receiving (Palmo, in Thompson & Cox 2003).

Mackenzie (1999: 54) writes that Tenzin Palmo had hit “the spiritual glass ceiling,” a situation all nuns with aspirations eventually experienced. She continues to say that over the centuries Tibetan nuns have had a “raw deal” (1999: 54). While the monks were ensconced at monastic universities absorbed in supreme scholarship and clever dialectical debate, the Tibetan nuns were relegated to small nunneries. The nuns were more often than not unable to read or write and were reduced to performing simple rituals like saying prayers for the local community or, even worse, working in monastery kitchens and serving the monks. The nuns were excluded from the monastic Establishment, and were denied learning and status. No wonder then that there were no female Dalai Lamas (Mackenzie 1999: 54) and only two female lineage holders (see 4.6).

The root of the problem originated at the time of the Buddha when women had been regarded as the man’s property with no rights of their own. Despite the fact that the Buddha offered full ordination to women, there was the ingrained belief that women were lesser beings who were simply not capable of attaining enlightenment. “Their bodies forbade it. They were defiled” (Mackenzie 1999: 54). Shariputra, one of the Buddha’s main disciples, quite simply stated that “the body of a woman is filthy and not a vessel of the Law” (Mackenzie 1999: 54) (see 4.2.3). This strain of thinking was followed by the prejudice and discrimination that is still underlying Tibetan Buddhism today, albeit in a more subtle undertone. The word for woman in Tibetan means ‘inferior born’ and implies that a woman is a lesser being than a man (Mackenzie 1999: 54). Consequently, at any religious ceremony nuns had to sit behind the monks, and the

most junior monk would be served the ceremonial butter tea before the most senior nun. To add injury to insult, nuns were accorded a lesser ordination status than the monks thereby confirming them as second-class spiritual citizens as well (Mackenzie 1999: 54). The effect of this discrimination was devastating to the self-confidence and self-image of the nuns. They would be told by lamas that they were impure and that they had inferior bodies. Tibetan women's main prayer is to be reborn as a man. Palmo asks the very pertinent question of how a woman could possibly develop a genuine spiritual practice if her worthlessness is pointed out to her all the time (in Mackenzie 1999: 55). However, at recent gatherings Tenzin Palmo has noticed that the nuns would sit on one side and the monks on the other side. When the current Karmapa conducts teachings in a temple, the nuns would sit in front facing forward and the monks to the side (Swanepoel, personal interview, DGL Nunnery, April 5, 2012).

Palmo herself asked a very senior lama if he thought women could attain enlightenment. He answered that a woman would be able to attain all the necessary levels except the last, when she would have to change into the body of a man. True to Tenzin Palmo's straightforward manner, she asked, "What is it about a penis that is so essential for becoming Enlightened? What is it about the male body that is so incredible?" (in Mackenzie 1999: 55). She continued to ask the lama if there are any advantages to having a female body. He replied that he will have to think about it. The next day his answer was that he could not think of any advantages to having a woman's body. Palmo thought, "one advantage is that we don't have a male ego" (in Mackenzie 1999: 55).

Motivated by her own unhappiness and the blatant unfairness of the situation, Palmo began researching the reasons behind this gender discrimination and loathing of the female body. She states, as so many other eminent Buddhist scholars do (see 4.8), that the Buddha had never denied that women could reach enlightenment. She goes on to explain a meditation exercise in the early sutras in which the Buddha talked about the thirty-two points of the body which were to be meditated on in depth. The practitioner had to visualise peeling the skin off the body in order to examine what was underneath – "the guts, the blood, the pus, the waste matter" (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 55). The purpose of this exercise was twofold: firstly to create detachment from our own body, and secondly to lessen our attraction to the bodies of others. "The idea is that one is much less fascinated when one sees a skeleton stuffed with guts, blood, and faeces" (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 55). However, with time the interpretations of the aim of

this meditation exercise became distorted and the object of contemplation became a woman's body. "*She* is filthy, foul, disgusting, and the object of contempt" (Palmo, in Thompson & Cox 2003). Nagarjuna, a prominent Buddhist philosopher of the first century C.E, and Shantideva, writing in the seventh century C.E, in particular aim this contemplation at the impure body of the woman (Palmo 2002: 71). Palmo (in Mackenzie 1999: 56) points out that whilst the Buddha was truly enlightened, others used the Buddha's insights to their own purposes. In this way, instead of looking at our identification and obsession with the physical, the Buddha's teachings were used as a means to arouse disgust towards women. She pointedly adds that "[i]f you have a monastic set-up, it is useful to view woman as 'the enemy.'"

The belief that women were dangerous, "wiling men away from sanctity and salvation by their seductiveness and raging sexuality" was as old as the hills (Mackenzie 1999: 56). Mackenzie (1999: 56) states that Tenzin Palmo "was having none of it." "It's not the woman who's creating the problem, it's the man's mental defilements. If the man didn't have desire and passion, nothing the woman could do would cause him any problem at all" (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 56). A lama once accused Palmo of being seductive. She protested that it was all in his mind, at which he laughed and admitted that she was right (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 56). Palmo (in Mackenzie 1999: 56) continues to point out that "[i]t's the man's problem and he blames it all" on the woman. "Women are supposed to be these lustful, seductive creatures but when you look at it, it's absurd. Who has the harems? Do women have courts of men on hand to satisfy their sexual needs? Are men afraid to walk in the streets at night in case women will jump on them and rape them?" (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 56). She continues to say (in Mackenzie 1999: 56) that even male prostitutes exist to serve the needs of other men. When men are grouped together in isolation with other men, as in prison and the army, they turn to other men to satisfy their sexual needs. "It's all unbelievable projection. Men have this big problem and they put it all on to women because females happen to have a shape which is sexually arousing to them. Women don't even have to wear seductive clothing for men to be turned on." Palmo (in Mackenzie 1999: 56), relates that even when she was younger and going through a phase of pulling back her hair, wearing big sweaters and no make-up, she had no problem acquiring boyfriends and admirers.

At this stage her misery was amplified by her challenging relationship with Choegyal Rinpoche, the monk who was assigned to her to teach her Buddhism. He was a few years younger than Tenzin Palmo and a recognised lineage master now in his eighth incarnation. He was also an acclaimed artist. He had a particularly traumatic escape from Tibet at the age of thirteen. He was recognised by one of the Tibetan “Red Guards” (see 3.4.2), who first captured him and then released him. He also witnessed the destruction of his monastery and its precious works of art by the invading Chinese. This all contributed to making him highly strung and difficult for Tenzin Palmo to deal with (Mackenzie 1999: 57). “I got affected by his temperament. He was quite erratic and neurotic... it was one of the most difficult relationships that I have ever had” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 57). Khamtrul Rinpoche however, insisted that he should remain her teacher.

Tenzin Palmo was further alienated by her restricted knowledge of Tibetan. Snellgrove’s lessons in London were very rudimentary and did not equip her adequately to speak Tibetan and to read the texts. She had to struggle through the texts with a dictionary, having had to look up almost every word. In time, she would master the language adequately enough to be able to conduct simple conversations in Tibetan and to read the texts fluently. However, still today she feels hampered in her ability to converse in Tibetan, or to follow lamas teaching in Tibetan. She states that His Holiness the Dalai Lama is particularly difficult to follow as he speaks very fast and uses especially formal Tibetan (Swanepoel, private interview, DGL Nunnery, April 5, 2012).

She was as yet unaware of the women’s liberation movement and had no female role models to turn to. It gradually began to dawn on her that the situation she found herself in was not fair and that saddened her deeply. It was at this point that she made the vow that has inspired hundreds of women all over the world. She vowed to attain enlightenment in the female form. “I’m going to continue to take female form and achieve Enlightenment! I was so exasperated by this terrible male chauvinism that was all around me. I thought, ‘Forget it! I don’t want to be born in a male body under these circumstances.’ And so I made this strong prayer; even if I can’t do that much in this lifetime, in the future may this stream of consciousness go forward and take on the transitory form of a female rather than a male” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 58). She wasn’t particularly militant about it. After all being male or female is relative, but since we are living on the relative plane, it is an imbalance that she feels needs to be

addressed. “[T]here is such a great dearth of female spiritual teachers. So at this time being a female is more helpful” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 58).

6.4.3 Other highlights

About a year after Tenzin Palmo had been living in Dalhousie, her mother visited her from England. She adored India, the Tibetans, and the Buddhist teachings. She stayed for ten months, taking refuge with Khamtrul Rinpoche. However, the food and the weather, as well as the lack of comfort, took its toll on her and she had to return to England (Mackenzie 1999: 59).

In 1967, Tenzin Palmo travelled to Sikkim to receive official ordination from the Karmapa, head of the Kagyu sect. Khamtrul Rinpoche had not yet been formally ordained for the requisite ten years in order to conduct an ordination ceremony. During the proceedings the Karmapa whispered to her: “You’re the first Western nun that I’ve ordained. You’ve never been married, you’ve never had children, therefore there is more temptation for you to fall. You must be very strong and very careful” (Mackenzie 1999: 59). He continued by saying to her that in the years to come there will be “many, many who will ordain. Whatever happens, you must never give up your ordination” (Mackenzie 1999: 59).

While in Sikkim she visited the old Rumtek monastery which lay in ruins. In one of the rooms there was a hole in the wall and for some unknown reason she put her hand through it. She pulled out a bone artefact made of carefully carved pieces joined together like a net. It was identical to the garment worn by Vajrayogini, the powerful female tantric deity (see 4.3.2). Tenzin Palmo dutifully put it back as she had taken the Buddhist vow of not taking what has not been given. However, when she told Khamtrul Rinpoche about it, he told her that she should have kept it as it was meant for her (Mackenzie 1999: 60).

One of the greatest highlights of Tenzin Palmo’s years in Dalhousie was meeting the Togdens. They were ordained monks and the elite yogis of Khamtrul Rinpoche’s community. Traditionally they always numbered thirteen, but in Dalhousie there were only seven. They were selected from childhood to undergo the most rigorous and secret of training sessions in isolation from the rest of the monastic community. Their mystic feats were legendary, including the ability to materialise objects as well as themselves.

Tenzin Palmo lived in her own room in one of the houses in their compound for about a year. She witnessed the practice of *tumo*, in which they would sit out in the cold, damp air, their bodies wrapped in wet sheets, learning to dry themselves through the force of raising their mystic inner heat. She also heard them chanting and leaping into the air, folding their legs in the full lotus position before landing on the ground. Tenzin Palmo was treated as one of their own by the Togdens, in contrast to the treatment meted out by the other monks. They included her in many of their activities and treated her as an equal, inviting her to sit with them in the temple instead of at the back. Once, while witnessing an initiation in the temple, she was beginning to grow very cold when suddenly one of the Togdens covered her lap with his long dreadlocks like a blanket (Mackenzie 1999: 62).

Tenzin Palmo (in Mackenzie 1999: 62, 63) recalls that these yogis were extraordinary simple and humble human beings, ordinary even, totally unjudgemental and unpretentious. “There’s no ego there...Their minds are so vast” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999:62). They were so easy to be with and taught her that “the more you realize the more you realize there is nothing to realize” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 63).

The Togdens told her that in Tibet there were Togdenmas (see Glossary) associated with the Khamtrul Rinpoches who lived in secret places practising their spiritual skills with great success. Apparently they retained their youthful appearance even in old age. However, with the advent of the Cultural Revolution (see 3.4.2) they had disappeared and no one knew what had happened to them. The monks were not allowed to join them when they performed their pujas and had to observe from an upstairs balcony. The Togdens told Tenzin Palmo that the Togdenmas were extremely powerful. She knew then that she wanted to become a Togdenma, but as with all her previous requests to be given more teachings, the monastic community was once again opposed to her wish. Finally she became so frustrated that she packed her bags and prepared to leave Khamtrul Rinpoche in search of more advanced teachings elsewhere. He relented and arranged for her to be instructed by one of the Togdens. He declared, however, that “I pray that you will become an instrument in re-establishing the Togdenma lineage” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 63). Today there are four nuns at Dongyu Gatsal Ling (see 6.6) living in retreat and training to become Togdenmas (Swanepoel, personal interview, DGL Nunnery, April 5, 2012).

Eventually, in 1970 when Tenzin Palmo was twenty-seven years old, Khamtrul Rinpoche announced that she was ready to go away and practise, meaning that she could now leave his monastery to live on her own and to practise intense meditation. He sent her to a monastic community in Lahoul, a remote mountainous region in the very northernmost part of Himachal Pradesh, bordering on to Tibet. It was well-known for its meditators and Buddhist monasteries, in particular those established by a disciple of the sixth Khamtrul Rinpoche (Mackenzie 1999: 64). This was significant as Tenzin Palmo believes that she was closely associated with the sixth Khamtrul Rinpoche in a previous incarnation, probably as an attendant monk. (Swanepoel, personal interview, DGL Nunnery, April 5, 2012).

6.4.4 Lahoul

In 1970 Lahoul was still a remote mountainous region undiscovered by tourists with no passable roads. The valley was totally cut off from the rest of India for eight months of the year (Palmo, in Thompson & Cox 2003) by an impenetrable barrier of snow and ice. Tenzin Palmo had to make the journey on foot crossing the treacherous Rhotang Pass at 3 978 metres above sea level. Furthermore, she had to cross the pass before noon as the notorious winds would rise and whip up the remaining snow at the top even at the height of summer. Travellers could be blinded and disoriented, and could get lost. Spending a night lost on the pass inevitably led to exposure and death. The authorities insisted that Tenzin Palmo sign a document absolving them of any responsibility should she meet with some unfortunate incident or situation (Mackenzie 1999: 65).

She began her journey over the pass before dawn leaving behind lush, green Manali in the Kulu valley. It had been her last stop on her way to Lahoul, visiting an eminent lama, Apho Rinpoche, in his small monastery. As she climbed beyond the tree-line the land grew more rugged and desolate with every step. Even at the height of summer the wind was icy and the mountain slopes were no longer pine-covered but jagged and austere, “scarred by the heavy weight of near-perpetual snow and the run-off of the summer melt” (Mackenzie 1999: 66).

On the other side of the pass, however, the sky was a deep, flawless blue, and she had moved from an Indian landscape to a purely Tibetan one. “The houses all had flat roofs, there were Buddhist monasteries dotted over the mountains, it was full of prayer wheels

and stupas and the people had high cheekbones, almond-shaped eyes and spoke Tibetan (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 66). Lahoul's Buddhist community had been in existence for centuries and was one of the most powerful strongholds of Buddhism in the world. Concealed in the immense mountains and narrow valleys, Buddhism flourished. The caves in the mountains were occupied by mystical hermits practising in isolation and renowned for their spiritual prowess (Mackenzie 1999: 67).

In 1970 the Lahoulis had had very little contact with the outside world, and electricity and television were unheard of. The arrival of a *European* Buddhist nun caused a stir and some distrust among the local population. It was only later when they had witnessed her spiritual dedication that they accepted her as one of their own. After her long retreat in the cave she was hailed as a saint (Mackenzie 1999: 67).

On her arrival in Lahoul, Tenzin Palmo stayed at Tayul monastery a few kilometres from the capital of Keylong. The monastery was about 300 hundred years old and had an extensive library, an excellent collection of thankas, and a large statue of Padmasambhava (see 2.4.2). Finally, Tenzin Palmo was allocated her own living quarters within a monastic environment. The individual monks and nuns lived in small stone and mud houses on the hill behind the temple, and she moved into one of these, intent on following a prolonged meditation retreat during the long snow-bound months (Mackenzie 1999: 68).

Tshering Dorje, a local scholar and guide, with whom Tenzin Palmo became especially good friends, remembers her as always laughing and kind-hearted, and extremely serious about dharma matters. "I think of her not as holy, but hallowed, because of her practice and her karma...her willpower is stronger than any man's" (in Mackenzie 1999: 69).

Tenzin Palmo proceeded to follow Khamtrul Rinpoche's prescribed meditation practices that would provide the essential foundation for the long retreats that were eventually to follow in the cave. These consisted mainly of the Preliminary Practices, a series of ritual acts that included performing prostrations and making mandala offerings which had to be repeated literally thousands of times. Such repetition was a necessary preparation for making the mind pliable for the more complex and esoteric meditation practices which were to follow (Mackenzie 1999: 69). Tenzin Palmo (Deer Park Institute, April 6, 7, 8 2012) explains that the mind is like a wild horse, it first needs to

be tamed before it can be trained. She did these practices diligently, studied the sacred texts, and refined her knowledge of the Buddhist canon. Her Tibetan improved in leaps and bounds as well since no one spoke English in Lahoul (Mackenzie 1999: 69).

Tenzin Palmo lived in this way at the monastery for six years. Once a year during summer she would return to Tashi Jong to see Khamtrul Rinpoche and to receive further instructions on her meditation practices. She went to London in 1973 after a ten-year absence to see her mother but absolutely hated it. She found the water undrinkable and received electric shocks from everything she touched. She was eager to return to Lahoul, but was short of funds. She had no choice but to find employment. She duly reported to the Department of Employment dressed in her nun's robes and her cropped hair. The department promptly hired her themselves to assist in setting up panels of various professionals to interview applicants for vocational training. She was so competent in her job that they appealed to her to stay on when she resigned after two and a half months, having saved up enough money to return to India. The unusual sight of a Western Buddhist nun with short hair and dressed in robes attracted people to her and encouraged them to open up, relating their woes and asking for advice. This made her realize even more the futility of a life based on materialism and people's yearning for finding meaning in their mundane existences (Mackenzie 1999: 72, 73).

She flew to India via Thailand where she visited John Blofeld. In the past he had offered various monetary donations which she had refused on the grounds that she had not done any dharma work (i.e. public teachings) and could therefore not accept it. However, this time he offered to pay for her trip to Hong Kong in order to receive the bhikshuni ordination (see 5.5). This was an offer she could not refuse. At that time bhikshuni ordination was only available in the Chinese tradition in Hong Kong and Taiwan. Most Tibetan nuns could not afford to make the journey and had to be content with remaining novice nuns which relegated them to an inferior position within the monastic community. Tenzin Palmo therefore travelled to Hong Kong to fulfil her deep yearning to become a fully ordained nun. Once again she made headlines as the first Western woman to be ordained as a bhikshuni. During the hours-long ceremony, as part of the ritual, three stumps of incense is placed on the nuns' heads and left to burn down slowly onto their freshly shaven scalps, leaving three little scars to remind them of their commitment (Mackenzie 1999: 74). These are clearly visible in photographs and of

course noticeable when meeting Tenzin Palmo in person (Swanepoel, private interview, DGL Nunnery, April 5, 2012).

Tenzin Palmo now returned to Lahoul to take up her life as a retreatant. However, the conditions at Tayul Gompa were not conducive to the kind of retreat she had in mind. Firstly, fetching water was a problem. When you are in retreat you are not supposed to be seen by anyone. Consequently she had to fetch water at night, but the path was layered with ice and snow. She had no wellingtons and used to cover her straw sandals in plastic bags which made walking very slippery. In this manner she used to go out once a week with a big tin on her back as well as a bucket to collect 30 litres of water. “I learnt to be very frugal with water” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 75). She also found Lahoul too noisy for the kind of meditation she needed to practise. In winter the nuns used to sweep the snow off the roofs of their little houses and then sat there in the sun having conversations with the other nuns across their rooftops (Mackenzie 1999: 75).

Tenzin Palmo decided it was time to move to a quieter and more isolated location. She went up the mountain behind the monastery and called upon the dakinins (see 4.5) for help. She had always had a particularly close relationship with the dakinis and now appealed to them for help in acquiring a suitable cave in which to continue her meditative practices. One of the nuns directed Tenzin Palmo to a cave that an older nun had told her about and which had water nearby as well as trees and a meadow outside. The next day Tenzin Palmo set out together with the head lama of the monastery and a small group of people to look for the cave the nun had told her about (Mackenzie 1999: 76).

6.5 THE CAVE IN THE SNOW

After two hours of climbing more than 305 metres beyond the gompa, with no path to follow, the mountain steep and treacherous, wide streams of loose boulders and stones across their path making it even more hazardous, they found the cave. It was so well camouflaged that it went almost unnoticed. The cave was more of an overhang on a natural ledge of the mountain with three sides open to the elements, rather than an archetypal deep hollow in a mountainside with a neat round entrance and a smooth dirt floor. This cave had a craggy roof under which you had to stoop, a jagged, slanting back wall, and beyond the ledge outside a sheer drop to the Lahoul valley. It was more of a flimsy shelter than a cave, and it was unbelievably small – three metres wide by about

one and a half metres deep. “It was a cupboard of a cave. A cell for solitary confinement” (Mackenzie 1999: 77, 78).

However, the view was sensational, affording a 180 degrees arc of mountains. In summer only the tops of the mountains were covered in snow, but in the eight-month long winter the mountains would be a wall of white snow and ice. The sky was azure blue, the air pristine and pollution-free, the light crystalline, and above all, the silence was profound, broken only by the rushing waters of the Bhaga river below, the whistle of the wind, and the occasional flap of a bird’s wing. A small juniper forest to the right of the cave would provide wood for fuel, and a short distance to the left was a spring that would provide fresh, clean water. It was 4 023 metres above sea level, higher than Mont Blanc or Mount Whitney (Mackenzie 1999: 78).

Other factors contributed to the fortuitous surroundings of the cave. “[C]onsidering her quest to attain enlightenment as a woman, she had landed in the midst of a vortex of female spiritual energy” (Mackenzie 1999: 79). The Lady of Keylong, as it was called by the locals, was on the summit of the mountain opposite the cave. It was a curious black rock that remained inexplicably free of snow even in the middle of winter. It was shaped vaguely like the silhouette of a kneeling woman draped in a cloak with a baby at her breast and one hand outstretched feeding a small bird. To a Westerner it might resemble the Madonna and child. To the local Buddhists it was Tara, the female Buddha of compassion (see 4.3.2). On a precipice nearby was a faded blue and gold painting, also of Tara, which had apparently appeared there spontaneously a number of centuries ago. Not far from the cave was an area believed to be occupied by the powerful Buddhist protectress Palden Lhamo, usually depicted riding a mule. Several years later Tenzin Palmo would see there footprints of a mule embedded in the snow, no other footprints leading to or from it (Mackenzie 1999: 79).

Despite objections from the local monastic community, Tenzin Palmo obtained permission from Khamtrul Rinpoche and duly moved into the cave. “She had overturned centuries of tradition which decreed that women were not capable of doing extensive retreats in totally isolated places in order to advance themselves to higher spiritual levels” (Mackenzie 1999: 80). She also became the first Western woman to follow in the footsteps of the Asian yogis in entering a Himalayan cave to seek enlightenment (Mackenzie 1999: 81).

The cave had to be rendered habitable before she could move in, though. Her Lahouli friends assisted her in employing labourers to perform the renovations. The front and side of the cave was bricked up with thick walls to keep out the cold. A small area inside the cave was partitioned off as a storeroom for her supplies of food. The floor was scooped out so that she could stand up, and was then covered with earth and flagstones. A window and a door were added. Wisely, the door was fitted to open inward, in case of heavy snow fall. The floor and walls were plastered with mud and cow dung. The ledge outside was levelled off into a patio for her, and finally a stone wall was constructed around the perimeter of the cave to keep wild animals at bay and to establish the boundary for her retreat area (Mackenzie 1999: 81).

The cave was furnished with a small wood-burning stove with a flue pipe that thrust out of the front wall, a wooden box covered with a flowery tablecloth served as a table, a bucket, and her meditation box. The walls were decorated with pictures of various Buddhist deities. A depression in the wall was turned into a bookshelf in which she stored her precious dharma texts, carefully wrapped in yellow cloth. Her ritual implements of dorje and bell were placed on a natural ledge. She set up her altar against the back wall of the cave. The most unusual feature though was her traditional meditation box. It was a square wooden structure measuring 76 cm by 76 cm (2ft 6in by 2ft 6in). It was raised slightly off the ground to protect the meditator from rising damp. Tenzin Palmo would spend the greater part of the next twelve years in this meditation box (Mackenzie 1999: 82). “I loved my meditation box. I’d wrap myself in my cloak and be perfectly snug there, out of the way of draughts” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 82). She was thirty-three years old when she moved into the cave. She would live there until she was forty-five.

Tenzin Palmo, bookish, other-worldly, and decidedly un-robust, had to become more practical, learning to do everything for herself. The first challenge was water. Initially she had to collect water from the nearby spring, carrying it on her back in buckets. In winter she melted snow, which was quite difficult as a huge amount of snow only renders a tiny amount of water. When she went into her three-year retreat and could not leave her boundary, a benefactor arranged for a water-pipe to deliver water from the spring into her retreat compound (Mackenzie 1999: 83, 84).

Food was another challenge. Since there was nothing edible growing on the mountain, she arranged for food supplies to be delivered from the village in summer. However, the deliveries did not always take place when they should and she was often reduced to fetching the supplies herself. During the last three years of her twelve-year retreat, her friend, Tshering Dorje, was charged with ensuring that the food supplies were delivered regularly. To supplement her food supply, Tenzin Palmo planted a garden. Below the ledge outside the cave she created two garden beds, one for growing vegetables, and one for planting flowers. Turnips and potatoes were the most successful as they grew underground and were beyond the reach of the rodents. She also attempted to plant some cabbages (Tshering Dorje, in Thompson & Cox 2003). Turnips proved to be most versatile as she could eat both the bulb and the turnip greens. Both could also be dried for winter supplies. She ate once a day at midday, as is the way with Buddhist monks and nuns.³⁶ For twelve years her menu remained the same: rice, lentils, vegetables, sour-dough bread which she baked herself, *tsampa*, tea with powdered milk, and a small piece of fruit, either apple or dried apricot (Mackenzie 1999: 84, 85).

Tenzin Palmo also had to learn to cope with the intense cold, temperatures often dropping below -35 degrees Celsius in winter. In her usual, stoic way, she makes light of it. “Sure, I was cold, but so what?” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 85). Huge snowdrifts would pile up against her cave in winter and on more than one occasion she was entrapped in her cave, unable to get out. However, caves are thermostatically controlled, and the cave proved to be much warmer than her little house at the monastery. The water offering bowls in front of her altar never froze over. “The thing about caves is that the colder it is on the outside the warmer it is on the inside and the warmer it is on the outside the cooler it is on the inside...the yogis had told me and I trusted them” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 85). She lit her stove only once a day at noon to cook her lunch and adds that you cannot keep jumping up to light the stove when you are busy meditating.

One of the arguments raised by men against women trying to practice in isolation, is that women’s desire for physical ease is one of the greatest obstacles to gaining enlightenment (Mackenzie 1999: 86). Once again Tenzin Palmo proved them wrong. She had no flushing toilet, no shower or bath, no electricity or running water, no bed to sleep in, no TV, no radio, no music. The most drastic of her deprivations was perhaps the absence of a

³⁶ However, on a recent visit (April 2012) to Dharamsala, I often noticed monks eating in the small restaurants after noon. No one was able to supply me with a satisfactory explanation for this behaviour.

bed. However, she did not want a bed. She wanted to follow in the tradition of the yogis and train herself to do without sleep. Yogis use the refined levels of consciousness induced by meditation to bring about both mental and physical renewal. This meant that she never lay down fully in the cave. She spent the nights sitting upright in her meditation box. “The idea is that you’re meant to stay sitting up in order to meditate. It’s good for the awareness...If I really felt I had to I would curl up inside my meditation box, or flop my legs over the side” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 87).

She lived in this manner from day to day, rarely seeing anyone. Occasionally during summer she would see a shepherd or a yak herder. From time to time some of the nuns or a friend might visit her for a day or two. She also visited Khamtrul Rinpoche every year for further guidance. During the course of the year she would draw up a list of questions to ask Khamtrul Rinpoche on her next visit. She often had pages and pages of questions, and Khamtrul Rinpoche would always kindly say to her, “OK, where’s your list?” (Palmo, in Thompson & Cox 2003). In the last three years of her retreat she saw and spoke to no one. “I was never lonely, not for a minute...In the cave I felt completely safe. And that’s a wonderful feeling for a woman to have. I never used to lock my door or window” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 88).

Although human presence was rare on her mountain top, there were plenty of animals wondering around and sometimes even into her cave. She could hear wolves howling at night and would see their paw marks in the snow around the cave in the morning. Once five of them even came up close to her as she was sitting outside the cave. They just looked at her for a while and then went away. She also came close to encountering the elusive snow leopard. She once saw its footprints outside the cave and on the windowsill. She showed her drawings of the footprints to a zoologist and he confirmed that it was indeed those of a snow leopard. Bear footprints were also found outside her cave one winter. She became very familiar with the rodents on the mountain, mostly mice and hamsters, who not only ate the peas and cabbages she tried to grow but also ventured into her storeroom to nibble at her grains and dried vegetables. She was also visited by martens, and a little stoat. While she never felt scared or threatened by these animals, she did have an unfortunate experience with a shepherd boy of about fifteen or sixteen one year. He would sit on a big boulder near the cave and stare at her. One morning she discovered the pole with her prayer flag on it thrown down. Another time the stones in the spring were moved so that the water no longer flowed. One day she discovered that the

window to her store room was smashed although nothing was taken. She was convinced it was the shepherd boy and it worried her as he had a lot of time to sit and think up mischief while tending the sheep. She appealed to the dakinins for help. A couple of days later she found a bunch of wild flowers at her gate and that the fountain had been repaired. When she saw the boy again he smiled at her and seemed to be completely transformed. “Dakinins are very powerful” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 91).

Tenzin Palmo was never again as ill as she was when a child. Although she did not contract any of the usual diseases foreigners often seem to pick up in Asia, like cholera and hepatitis, she did get ill frequently in the cave. Conditions were extreme, ranging from sub-zero temperatures for nearly eight months of the year, to the dampness of spring when the snow began thawing and seeped through the cracks of the cave flooding it. She had frequent chills accompanied by high fevers, a painful eye infection that lasted forty-nine days, and a mysterious lump under her arm. She simply lived and meditated through it all. “When you go into retreat you make a vow for how long you are going to go in and you stick to it. It’s considered part of the practice. Even if you are sick you pledge that you will not come out. If necessary you have to be prepared to die in retreat. Actually, if you do die it’s considered auspicious” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 96).

One year, when Tenzin Palmo was in total seclusion, her food supplies did not arrive at the usual time and she almost starved. The supplies in her storeroom grew smaller and smaller and she reduced her daily diet even more as the months went by. She never enquired from Tshering Dorje why he had not come, assuming that he must have had his reasons. All she would say was that she grew extremely thin (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 97).

There was also the time, in the winter of 1979, that she became snowed in during a blizzard that lasted seven days. It is a well-known anecdote (Thompson & Cox 2003) and typical of her stoicism and her devotion. She was buried inside her cave as the snow kept piling up above her window and door. She was plunged into total darkness and cold, and could not light her stove as the snow had broken the flue pipe outside. She was also reluctant to light candles as it would use up oxygen. The days wore on with no rescue in sight and no relief in the weather. She was convinced that she was going to die of asphyxiation. Tenzin Palmo prepared to die. Buddhists live with the realisation that death is definite, but that the time of death is indefinite. Tenzin Palmo therefore felt privileged to know her time of death had arrived and she set about preparing for it by

doing the necessary meditational practices. She reviewed her life and found that she had few regrets. She was still extremely glad that she had become a nun and appealed to Khamtrul Rinpoche to take care of her in the Bardo and in her future life. As she was awaiting death she heard her inner voice commanding her to dig! She opened her door, which luckily opened inwards, and began digging with one of her saucepan lids. She had to pile the snow up into the cave which made it even more damp and cold. “It became the snow in the cave instead of the cave in the snow!” (Palmo, in Thompson & Cox 2003). She dug for more than an hour, enveloped in total darkness, crawling along on her stomach. Suddenly she came out into the open air. “The relief was enormous” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 101). However, the blizzard was still raging outside and she had to crawl back into the cave. Inside the cave she realised that the air was fresh and not stale. She understood then that caves actually breathe, that snow also breathes, and that she was not going to die. The tunnel quickly filled up with snow again and in fact she had to dig herself out three times during that blizzard. When it finally stopped and she stood outside the cave, she saw a landscape, including the trees, almost completely buried in snow. In the village no one believed that she would have survived the storm. An avalanche, about 2 km wide, that started at 5 791 metres had swept down carrying everything in its wake. Many houses were destroyed and about 200 people died. Tayul monastery was made level with the snow and the monks and nuns also had to tunnel their way out. The snow reached higher than their roofs. Trees were uprooted and the roofs of houses blown off as the avalanche raged at approximately 350 km/h (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 101, 102).

It required hard work to clear away the snow and Tenzin Palmo’s face and eyes became red and swollen. Her eyes were so red and swollen that the whites were invisible and she could only see through slits. She was in great pain and she used a white offering scarf as a veil around her floppy hat, which brought some relief (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 102).

6.5.1 Two deaths

Nothing could prepare Tenzin Palmo for the death of Khamtrul Rinpoche though. She had been separated from him for several years already, first by living in Lahoul and then by moving into the cave. However, she did pay him annual visits and appealed to him in prayer when she needed him. They had maintained a very close bond despite the physical

distance. During her annual visits to him at Tashi Jong he would accord her “personalised, tailor-made instructions on her spiritual path” (Mackenzie 1999: 104). During the course of the year, while she practised in the cave, she would write down questions as they occurred to her, and when she visited Khamtrul Rinpoche she would go through her list of questions. “His answers were absolutely right. He answered from both his scholastic expertise and from his own experience” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 104).

She received the news of his death in 1981 while she was attending teachings in Nepal. She was on her way to see Khamtrul Rinpoche in Bhutan. She was absolutely devastated, feeling as if her world had fallen apart. “The sun had set and there was only darkness. I felt as though I was in this vast desert and the guide had left – completely lost” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 105). Khamtrul Rinpoche died from diabetes at the age of forty-nine. According to reports he had been ill for only an hour before his death and his passing had been completely unexpected by his followers. It seemed, however, that he himself was exceptionally well prepared for his death. He stayed in *tukdam* for some weeks after his death, his body not collapsing and remaining youthful-looking and pleasant-smelling. When it was time for his cremation, the mourners noticed that his once large and bulky body had shrunk to the size of an eight-year old boy’s. The coffin had to be discarded and a smaller one hastily constructed. The shrinking of the body in this way is not unknown among high lamas, being indicative of having reached a high level of spiritual advancement. One could be tempted to dismiss it as spiritual science fiction were it not for the plethora of eye-witnesses and factual documentation (Mackenzie 1999: 105).

Tenzin Palmo immediately went into retreat after Khamtrul Rinpoche’s death, but returned to Tashi Jong for the cremation. “The weather had been extremely rainy and cloudy and the night before cremation there was this terrific storm. They’d been building this beautiful stupa and I thought everything was going to be washed away...But the morning of the funeral dawned incredibly clear. There was this translucent, blue sky and everything looked washed and clean...Interestingly, the following day it clouded over again and began to pour with rain” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 107). Khamtrul Rinpoche’s remains were duly placed in the stupa next to the temple he had designed and helped to build with his own hands. The stupa is a tall, impressive white structure, built according to the laws of sacred geometry. It contains a small glass window behind which sits a statue of the Buddha. Strangely, a bodhi seed

implanted itself behind the glass and over the years the tree has forced itself out of the container and grew higher than the stupa.³⁷ The tree had grown from the heart of the Buddha. No one knew how it had managed to grow without soil, but to his followers it was further evidence of Khamtrul Rinpoche's awakened state of mind (Mackenzie 1999: 108).

Immediately after his cremation his followers began to search for his incarnation. They searched for signs that Khamtrul Rinpoche might have left behind which would indicate where he would be reborn. They discovered a poem he had written just before he had passed away in which he indicated the name of his future parents in an anagram at the end of each line of poetry. The eminent lama, Dilgo Kheyntse, as well as the Sixteenth Karmapa, who were both extremely close to Khamtrul Rinpoche, each had significant dreams concerning his reincarnation (Mackenzie 1999: 108). The ninth Khamtrul Rinpoche was found in Bomdila, in Arunachal Pradesh, a Himalayan town close to Bhutan. He was formally recognised and reinstated in Tashi Jong to continue his spiritual duties. When Tenzin Palmo met him for the first time the little boy laughed with joy at seeing her and shouted, "Oh look, that's my nun, that's my nun!" She returned to her cave even more determined than before to continue her practice with devotion. (Mackenzie 1999: 108, 109).

Lee Perry passed away in 1985 when Tenzin Palmo had already started her strict three-year retreat. She briefly went home to London in 1984 to visit her mother, a year before she died. A letter had arrived for her while she was in retreat informing her that her mother was very ill from cancer and appealing to her to come home. However, she had already started her retreat and it was impossible for her to interrupt it. When she received mail again a year later there was a letter from a friend informing her that her mother had died peacefully (Mackenzie 1999: 103). Although Tenzin Palmo states (in Mackenzie 1999: 103) that her mother was not afraid of death and looked forward to meeting her spirit guides, she has reproached herself for being rather cold towards her mother on that last visit to London before she went into strict retreat. "I think I was rather cold to my mother, and now I always feel very sad about that...I had been in the cave for a long time and was not used to relating closely to people" (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 103). However, when they parted, Lee said to her daughter that she

³⁷ On a recent (2012) visit to Tashi Jong I indeed saw the stupa and the tree.

felt it was probably the last time they would meet and that she prayed that she might be reborn as Tenzin Palmo's mother in future lives so that she could help her continue on her spiritual path (Mackenzie 1999: 103).

In spite of all the physical hardships she endured, the reservations of others, and the prejudice against her gender, the truth was that Tenzin Palmo was supremely happy in her cave. "There was nowhere else I wanted to be, nothing else I wanted to be doing...Being in the cave was completely satisfying. I had all the conditions I needed to practise. It was a unique opportunity and I was very, very grateful" (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 95).

6.5.2 Yogini³⁸

One cannot but wonder about Tenzin Palmo's inner experiences while she lived in the cave. Mackenzie (1999: 111) speculates whether she perhaps had visions, or heard celestial voices bathed in a golden light, experienced waves of transcendental bliss, or was she perhaps tormented by the demons of her psyche? No one will ever know what Tenzin Palmo really experienced in those long years of solitary retreat. Her tantric vows forbid her to divulge any progress she might have made. It is a long-held tradition, ever since the Buddha himself had defrocked a monk for performing a miracle in public, that the transformation of the human heart was the only miracle that really counted (Mackenzie 1999: 112). "Frankly, I don't like discussing it. It's like your sexual experiences. Some people like talking about them, others don't. Personally I find it terribly intimate" (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 112). She still avoids divulging any intimate details about her practice. During my interview with her in India in April 2012, I asked her what her main practice was and she replied, "Well, it doesn't matter, but it's not Tara." At the end of this interview I also asked her whether she felt that she had made any progress towards gaining enlightenment in a female body, and she simply answered, "You gain some, you lose some."

When pressed she concedes that of course one would have experiences of great intensity on prolonged retreats such as feeling your body melting away or feeling as if your body is flying. She states (in Mackenzie 1999: 112) that you experience states of incredible awareness and clarity when everything becomes very vivid. She also experienced

³⁸ Mackenzie 1999: 111

visions such as Khamtrul Rinpoche and other holy beings manifesting in her cave. However, she emphasises the importance of attaining realisations rather than visions. A truth becomes a realisation when it ceases to be a mere mental or intellectual construct and becomes a reality. Transformation begins taking place when meditation drops from the head to the heart and is felt and experienced. Realisations are not accompanied by “lights and music” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 112), but are actually quite bare. The point is that you are trying to see life as it really is. A realisation is non-conceptual and is not a product of the thinking process or the emotions. Visions belong to the levels of thinking and of emotions. “A realisation is the white transparent light at the centre of the prism, not the rainbow colours around it” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 112).

Experiencing a state of bliss is the reward for the isolation and physical hardships of living in a cave (Mackenzie 1999: 113). “There are states of incredible bliss. Bliss is the fuel of retreat” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 113). Tenzin Palmo continues to state (in Mackenzie 1999: 113) that long-term retreat is really impossible without inner joy as it is the joy and the enthusiasm that carries one forward. Without it there will be inner resistance and this will retard one’s progress. “This is why the Buddha named Joy as a main factor on the path” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 113). The danger though is that because bliss arouses such enormous pleasure “beyond anything on a worldly level” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 113), people tend to cling to it, wanting to experience it all the time, and then it becomes an obstacle to further spiritual development. She explains that more mature practitioners learn how to control their states of bliss and how to bring it down to more manageable levels. One also has to be able to see into the empty nature of bliss. “[B]liss in itself is useless...It’s only useful when it is used as a state of mind for understanding Emptiness – when that blissful mind is able to look into its own nature. Otherwise it is just another subject of Samsara” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 113). According to Palmo (in Mackenzie 1999: 113), Emptiness can be understood on one level, but to understand it on another more subtle level requires the compliment of bliss. The blissful mind is a very subtle mind and its realisations differ from the gross mind looking at Emptiness, and that is why the practitioner cultivates bliss. However, once again it is simply a stage one passes through on the spiritual journey. “The ultimate goal is to realise the nature of the mind” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 113). Palmo (in Mackenzie 1999: 114) explains that the nature of the mind is unconditioned, non-dual consciousness. It is Emptiness and bliss, the state of knowing without the

knower. When it is realised, it is not dramatic at all. There is no cosmic explosion or fanfare of celestial trumpets. “It’s like waking up for the first time – surfacing out of a dream and then realising that you have been dreaming...Our normal way of being is muffled – it’s not vivid...Waking up is not sensational. It’s ordinary. But it’s extremely real” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 114). She continues to say that it is a gradual process of awakening to the nature of the mind. “At first you get just a glimpse of it...after that you have to stabilise it until the nature of the mind becomes more and more familiar. And when that is done you integrate it into everyday life” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 114).

The path to enlightenment is an exceedingly long journey of hard work. Some lamas proclaim that if you achieve enlightenment in three lifetimes you have progressed incredibly quickly. What the practitioner is trying to do is to transform body, speech, and mind into that of a Buddha. Tibetan Buddhism has developed a specific methodology for achieving this. It is the belief that anyone is able to achieve enlightenment, given the texts which hold the instructions, the initiations which confer the empowerment, and the right motivation which ensures the seeker does not fall into the abyss of self-interest. There are precise paths to follow, detailed guidelines, delineated levels to reach all marked with their own characteristics so that you know exactly where you are. There are specific signposts to watch out for, particular yogic exercises to do, and countless aids harnessing all the senses to drive the practitioner forward. What this amounts to, is the mind working on the mind, consciousness working on consciousness, exploring its own inner space (Mackenzie 1999: 115).

Dr Robert Thurman, Professor of Indo-Tibetan studies at Columbia University, explains it as follows (in Mackenzie 1999: 115): “What the meditator is doing in those long retreats is a very technical thing. He’s not just sitting there communing with the Great Oneness. He’s technically going down, pulling apart his own nervous system to become self-aware from out of his own cells.” He illustrates this by using the example of being in the chip of Word Perfect. You are aware that you are in the chip. You have stabilised your mind to the extent that you have gone down right into the dots and dashes, and then you have gone down and down even into that. “In other words [the meditator] filled with the technical understanding of tantra, has become a quantum physicist of inner reality...[he has] disidentified from the coarse conceptual and perceptual process. He’s gone down to the neuronal level, and from inside the neuronal level he’s gone down to the most subtle neuronal level, or supra-neuronal level” (Thurman, in

Mackenzie 1999: 115, 116). The yogi/yogini therefore moves right down to the sub atomic level. What the yogi/yogini achieves here is not some kind of mystical process but a concrete, evolutionary process. It is at the highest level of evolution, and indeed this is what the Buddha can be defined as – the highest level of evolution (Thurman, in Mackenzie 1999: 116). Tenzin Palmo (in Mackenzie 1999: 116) states that “Tibet had been producing enlightened beings like an assembly line for centuries.” She did not doubt for a moment the efficacy of the methods she was following.

In her usual methodical and highly conscientious way, she had already started with the Preliminary Practices in Dalhousie and Lahoul long before she disappeared into her cave. The Preliminary Practices are aimed at preparing the mind for the more advanced esoteric tantra practices and consist of certain rites such as full-length prostrations, mandala offerings, and the recitation of mantras which are literally performed hundreds of thousands of times. She also fasted completely at one stage, and at another point she did a partial fast while doing prostrations and reciting prayers to Chenrezig, the Buddha of compassion. Physically and mentally this is usually an exceptionally strenuous exercise, and was made even more so by the conditions in which she lived. Despite developing digestive problems, Tenzin Palmo states (in Mackenzie 1999: 116) that “[t]he mind does become purified. The prayers are very beautiful and the mind grows extremely clear and light, very devoted and open.”

Simultaneously, Tenzin Palmo was working on Single Pointed Concentration or Samadhi, the meditative practice which trains the mind to focus single-pointedly on one subject without interruption. Samadhi is essential for penetrating the nature of reality and discovering absolute truth (Mackenzie 1999: 118). As Tenzin Palmo (Deer Park Institute, April 6, 7, 8 2012) explains: the mind is like a wild horse. It has to be tamed before it can be trained. The Preliminary Practices are the preparation or the taming of the mind which makes Samadhi possible. Samadhi is extraordinarily difficult as the mind habitually wants to jump from one random thought to the next, from one image to another, “perpetually chattering away to itself, expending vast quantities of energy in an endless stream of trivia” (Mackenzie 1999: 118). When the mind’s energy is harnessed and channelled into a laser beam on a single subject, its power is incredible and enables the practitioner to delve down into the farthest reaches of the mind (Mackenzie 1999: 118).

Tenzin Palmo (in Mackenzie 1999: 118) states that in order for a meditation practice to be successful, the mind which is meditating and the object of meditation must merge. This will create the transformation that will enable the awareness to drop from the head to the heart. The heart opens up and the realisation takes place that there is no “I”. This realisation causes great relief, especially when one can learn to live from the heart centre rather than the head, since it releases an immense flow of energy because it is not obstructed by one’s own intervention all the time. It provides a feeling of joy and light because one is no longer living in exile in the head. “Our modern scientific approach has thrown such emphasis on the brain, we’re all so cut off. That is why so many people feel life is meaningless and sterile” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 119).

Palmo followed the same daily routine without fail for the twelve years that she spent in formal retreat in the cave. She started her first three-hour meditation session at 3 a.m. followed by a breakfast of tea and tsampa at 6 a.m. Her second three-hour meditation session followed at 8 a.m. Lunch was at 11 a.m. The third three-hour meditation period was at 3 p.m. followed by tea at 6 p.m. and the last three-hour meditation session at 7 p.m. At 10 p.m. she went to bed in her meditation box. Although she followed a strict daily routine, she was never bored. She states (in Mackenzie 1999: 119) that in retreat there is a pattern that emerges and the material begins to open up and reveal its inner meaning. “You discover level after level of inner significance...at the end you are much more involved in it and totally identified with it than you were at the beginning” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 119).

Tenzin Palmo remains vague about the precise nature of the material she was working with. She simply states that she was doing very old practices the Buddha had revealed to various great masters who had written it down after having realised the practices themselves. The practices involve many visualisations and internal yogic exercises. One employs the creative imaginative faculty of the mind as a transformative tool, both internally and externally. “The creative imagination is an incredibly powerful force. If you channel it in the right way it can reach very deep levels of the mind which can’t be accessed through verbal means or mere analysis. This is because on a very deep level we think in pictures. If you use pictures that have arisen in an Enlightened mind, somehow that unlocks very deep levels in our minds” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 120). These images are a reflection of the deepest qualities within the human being. They are reflections of one’s Buddha mind and therefore a skilful means of leading one back to

who one really is, and that is why one has inner experiences during meditation (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 120).

Palmo (in Mackenzie 1999: 120) claims that she did not experience the so-called dark night of the soul while she was living in isolation in the cave. She was never confronted by the legendary demons so often met by other retreatants, nor did she suffer any moments of madness, paranoia, doubt, depression, or lust. However, without any social life to distract her, no role to fulfil, and no other people to talk to, she came face to face with who she really was. This was not always a comfortable experience. “In retreat you see your nature in the raw, and you have to deal with it” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 121). She explains (in Mackenzie 1999: 121) that some problems that one is faced with are not so transparent. It is not like confronting the tigers and wolves of anger and desire. These problems one can grapple with. It is the more insidious ones that are difficult to deal with. “[T]hey hide in the undergrowth so that they are more difficult to see” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 121). She continues to say (in Thompson & Cox 2003) that the point of these long retreats is to merge with the practice. The opportunity is there to peel away all the layers of one’s usual persona and to uncover the deeper layers of consciousness.

When she was not meditating, Tenzin Palmo painted, usually fine-looking pictures of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. She also copied out texts for her monastery in the graceful calligraphy she had taught herself. She read prolifically and penetratingly books on the Buddha and Buddhism, even those from other Buddhist traditions. She says (in Mackenzie 1999: 122) that it is important for Westerners to study the foundations of Buddhism thoroughly. The early sutras and the early Theravadin tradition form the foundation for everything following afterwards.

Although Tenzin Palmo lived in isolation in her cave, she had not forgotten the outside world. Over the years she had developed an extensive correspondence with an assortment of people. When she was not in strict retreat, she would faithfully answer all their letters, sometimes as many as sixty. Tshering Dorje would deliver her letters together with her supplies (Mackenzie 1999: 123).

Tenzin Palmo is a strong believer in the effectiveness of prayer, and her friends, family, and the multitude of sentient beings she did not know, were also included in her prayers

and meditations. “You automatically visualise all beings around you. In that way they partake of whatever benefits³⁹ may occur” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 123). She believes that there are infinite beings embodying intelligence and love who are always trying to help. “So you can definitely pray to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, but it is better not to pray for a bicycle at Christmas. Rather pray for spiritual growth that can flower in the mind. Pray to lesser beings for a bicycle” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 124).

Tenzin Palmo’s quest was to understand what perfection meant. She realised that on one level we never move away from it. It is simply our deluded perceptions that prevent us from seeing what we already have. The process of discovering our own innate perfection is like peeling away the layers of an onion. The more you practise meditation and the Buddhist path, the easier it becomes. This does not mean that dangers and pitfalls disappear. She gives the example of a concert pianist that may still encounter difficulties despite her skills, and continues to need daily practice (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 124).

6.5.3 The end of retreat

Mackenzie (1999: 135) states that “Tenzin Palmo was proving them wrong.” Against all odds this frail, Western woman survived in a cave under the most extreme conditions, courageously meditating her way to enlightenment in the body of a woman. Despite her iron-clad will, there was woefully little to encourage her in her quest. Tenzin Palmo was on her own, treading uncharted territory. There were no living exemplars of female spiritual excellence for her to follow. There was no female guru who had pursued the path before her to whom she could turn for advice and support. There was no map indicating the way specifically for female enlightenment with all the dangers and delights it may contain. “There was no glowing female Dalai Lama to give her an idea even of what supreme feminine spirituality looked like” (Mackenzie 1999: 125)

Despite the lack of female role models, Tenzin Palmo was content to sit in her cave meditating indefinitely. However, in the summer of 1988 she was startled by a policeman barging into her compound and knocking loudly on her door. He paid no heed to her boundary fence, erected specifically to keep all visitors out. Nor did he respect the rules of etiquette that barred people from disturbing solitary practitioners. He

³⁹ By *benefits* she means whatever merits the meditator may gain during meditation and prayer.

informed her that her visa had long expired and that she would have to report to the local police station the next day or face arrest. It was the first human voice she had heard in three years. However, Tenzin Palmo's traditional three-year, three-month, three-week, and three-day retreat had been broken after just three years. She duely descended her mountain and reported to the Superintendent of Police the next day. He apologised for the situation but explained that he had no choice but to give her a Quit India notice which gave her ten days within which to leave the country. She patiently explained to him that she had been in India for twenty-four years and was not prepared to leave India in ten days. Furthermore, she explained that the previous Superintendent of Police usually renewed her visa on her behalf, and she was therefore not directly responsible for the present situation. The Superintendent relented and since he was going on leave for a month he refrained from giving her notice immediately. He did however warn her that she will eventually have to leave (Mackenzie 1999: 137).

Nevertheless, Tenzin Palmo's retreat had been broken. It is said that the fruits of a traditional three-year retreat can only really be fully realised in the last three months, three weeks, and three days. It was not ideal to terminante a retreat in such a sudden manner. You are supposed to become used to seeing people again slowly. Word spread that Tenzin Palmo's retreat had ended and friends and acquaintances started to seek her out. They were curious to see whether she had undergone a metamorphosis during her long retreat. Didi Contractor, a long-standing friend, comments (in Mackenzie 1999: 140) that "[i]t wasn't so much that Tenzin Palmo had changed, more that her qualities were enhanced. The warmth, the mental sharpness, the humour, was still there, but more so. There was growth...She has stature and an integrity of character which is very developed. She also has a completeness. Tenzin Palmo is always completely consistent and always completely kind...[she] has got further than any of the other many western seekers I've met." Another acquaintance, Lia Frede, who saw her shortly after her retreat came to an end, observes (in Mackenzie 1999: 141) that Tenzin Palmo "has deep-seated purity and...innocence. And the other thing is that she has true equanimity. Things that happen to her she neither objects to nor supports – she neither pushes nor obstructs. She has this neutrality. She deals with what is happening without attaching any ego involvement to it...the ego is just not there." Lia Frede continues to say (in Mackenzie 1999: 142) that the equanimity that Palmo displays is indicative of a definite degree of spiritual advancement.

Her entry back into the world of people was not hugely traumatic, although she reports being exhausted by human company at first (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 142). Observers noted however, that she was exceptionally sociable, chatty, and super-sensitive to the needs and suffering of humanity. According to Frede (in Mackenzie 1999: 142), Tenzin Palmo possesses an unruffled compassion and she is unjudgemental and neutral in her dealings with other people. “I have the kind of mind that wherever I am that’s where I am...I think I have two sides to my nature – one is this basic need to be alone, the love of isolation, the other is a sociability and friendliness...So although I love to be alone, when I’m with others that’s fine too” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 143).

No retreat would be successful if some kind of transformation does not take place. On being questioned about how she feels her retreat has changed her, Tenzin Palmo reveals (in Mackenzie 1999: 143) that it brought about a kind of inner freedom, peace, and clarity that she did not possess previously. She became aware of the illusory nature of all things and consequently this brought about an inner distance in her. Whatever occurs now, whether it is an outer or inner experience, she usually retains this realisation of the illusory nature of life. “[I]t feels like being in an empty house with all the doors and windows wide open and the wind just blowing through without anything obstructing it” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 144). Tenzin Palmo explains however, that this inner distance that she experiences is not a cold emptiness but a warm spaciousness. “It means that one is no longer involved in one’s ephemeral emotions” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 144). It brings about the realisation that a large portion of the world’s suffering is brought about by people’s involvement in their own strong emotions and identifying it as real (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 144).

6.6 ITALY

After twenty-four years in India, Tenzin Palmo began to feel that her time in India had drawn to a close. She felt a need to return to the West and to rediscover her roots. For the past twenty-four years she had read nothing but dharma books and she now experienced the wish to learn more about those subjects, especially classical music, architecture, art, and old churches, which she had neglected in her pursuit of Buddhism. She had no idea where she would like to go, but in her usual calm manner she waited for “the Voice” to speak to her. In the meantime her many international friends continued to write to her and to invite her to visit their countries. One such friend, Ram,

an American, invited her to join him and his wife in Assisi, the medieval Italian town on the banks of the river Umbria, and in the shadow of Mount Subasio. Tenzin Palmo's 'voice' spoke and she knew that it was there where she would go next (Mackenzie 1999: 145).

She calmly prepared to leave India and her cave. She had lived in the cave from the age of thirty-three to the age of forty-five, yet she felt that time had just condensed and that the last three of those years had fled past. She arrived in Assisi in the middle of the night, yet she instantly felt that she had made the right choice. She felt a special connection with Assisi and states (in Mackenzie 1999: 146) that it is the only place she really misses, including the cave. "There's a special ineffable quality about it which is palpable in spite of the millions of tourists who flock there each year. It's not an ordinary place. It's the centre for world peace and stages many inter-faith conferences...many people have reported having spiritual experiences there" (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 146).

Palmo moved into the bottom floor of a house belonging to a friend of Ram's. She spent five years (Swanepoel, personal interview, DGL Nunnery, April 5, 2012) in Italy, rediscovering her Western roots and meditating in yet another famous cave, the one inhabited by St. Francis so many centuries before. She has a strong devotion to St. Francis and believes that she was probably a Christian monk in one of her previous incarnations. "The feeling when I go into cloisters is very strong. It's almost déjà vu...I've always had an affinity with the enclosed orders" (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 147). She commenced reading voraciously, especially French authors and novels with a religious plot, as well as any publications she could find on medieval history. The period between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries especially appealed to her, with the growth of the mendicant orders when great saints and artists were prominent. She read with great interest the biographies and writings of the Christian saints such as St. Teresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross, Thomas Aquinas, and Thomas Merton. Tenzin Palmo also discovered the pleasure of music, especially the classic composers Bach, Handel, and Haydn, and her favourite, Mozart. "It was something quite profound at a certain level. It was very moisturising. I think I had become extremely dry, somewhere" (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 148). The great Christian mystic, Meister Eckhart, expresses the conviction that the contemplative cannot spend his/her life continuously in

contemplation, and that an active period should follow that of a period of contemplation (in Mackenzie 1999: 148). Tenzin Palmo was doing just that.

Soon various religious orders and organisations got wind of her presence in Assisi and she started to receive invitations to talk at seminars, inter-faith conferences, and to conduct workshops. She was even invited by the Vatican Council to speak at an inter-faith conference in Taiwan. One Benedictine monastery asked her to instruct them in Buddhist meditation and wished to learn about Buddhism in order to help the younger members of their congregation who had been asking for methods with which to attain inner peace. Tenzin Palmo (in Mackenzie 1999: 149, 150) explains that Tibetan methods of meditation are excellent since they do not require any particular faith structure and can be used by anyone. She travelled to Rome, north Italy, Umbria, Devon, and Poland to give dharma talks. She also assisted in setting up a nunnery for Western Buddhist nuns in Pomaia, near Pisa. In the meantime she continued with her daily practices and even conducted several short retreats.

An opportunity then arose for her to travel to Tibet with her friend Ram on a pilgrimage to Mount Kailash. She had never been to Tibet and jumped at the chance to visit it. Mount Kailash is regarded as the most sacred pilgrimage site in Tibet. It is situated in western Tibet in one of the most remote and desolated areas on earth. Buddhists and Hindus alike regard Mount Kailash as the centre of the tantric universe. It is believed that at its peak of more than 6 400 metres live all the gods abided over by Tara (Mackenzie 1999: 151). They hired four yaks to carry their tents and cooking gear. Despite travelling in a Land Cruiser themselves, the journey took ten days as there were no roads, and the journey was consequently extremely difficult. They became disoriented when they had to cross the 5 486 metres Dolma Pass in a snow storm. “Then this big black dog appeared. We gave it some soggy biscuits and he showed us the way...It was very special and a great blessing” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 151). It took them two and a half days to circumambulate Mount Kailash once, prostrating at the holy places. Tenzin Palmo (in Mackenzie 1999: 151) states that some Tibetans managed to do it in a day. They get up at 3h00 and finish at 22h00. Some pilgrims do twenty to thirty rounds in a month, and some complete 108, the number of beads on a Buddhist rosary. Other pilgrims take two weeks to circumambulate, performing full prostrations all the way round.

In addition, she took a dip in Lake Manasarovar on her fiftieth birthday (Mackenzie 1999: 151). It is located at the foot of Mount Kailash and is the highest freshwater lake in the world. It is the holiest lake in Asia and also a pilgrimage site for Buddhist and Hindus. It is believed that immersing oneself in the lake removes the sins of all lifetimes and provides deliverance from reincarnation. Buddhists associate Lake Manasarovar with Lake Anotatta where the Buddha was mystically conceived. According to legend, the Buddha's mother was transported to the lake by the gods where she bathed in the sacred waters until her body was purified. As the Buddha entered her womb she saw a white elephant running towards her from Mount Kailash. Mount Kailash is also famed for its exceptional beauty. The colour of its waters change from a clear blue around the shores to a deep emerald green in the centre. It is 88 km in circumference and 90 m deep (<http://www.sacred-destinations.com/tibet/lake-manasarovar>). The water is freezing and there is usually a cold wind blowing as well. Tenzin Palmo (in Mackenzie 1999: 151) reports that one has to drink some of the water as well to experience the full benefit of immersing oneself in the sacred waters.

Palmo found the experience of visiting Tibet incredibly fulfilling, but was also deeply saddened by the destruction wrought by the Chinese invasion (see 3.4). She met gentle Tibetan nomads still clinging to a millennia-old way of life. They spoke to her of their longing to see the Dalai Lama. She witnessed their poverty but nevertheless thought that they were better-off than urban Tibetans who had to face daily humiliation by their Chinese overlords (see 3.4.3 and 3.4.5). “For all their suffering I was astonished by the indomitable spirit of the Tibetans and how they managed to stay cheerful in such awful circumstances” (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 152).

Back in Assisi, Tenzin Palmo set about building a small two-roomed wooden house in the grounds belonging to her friends with money from donations. She sincerely believed that Assisi would be her base for the rest of her life. She was planning to go back into retreat to pursue her practices further. However, the Italian authorities suddenly withdrew building permission. Fate, or karma, had once again stepped in to veer her in another direction (Mackenzie 1999: 152).

6.7 DONGYU GATSAL LING

In March 1993 Tenzin Palmo was invited to attend the first Western Buddhist conference in Dharamsala, India. It proved to be a landmark conference in many ways, least of all to bring to the attention of His Holiness the Dalai Lama the situation concerning many Western nuns and female monastics. Sylvia Wetzel, a German laywoman, put the male assembly through her by now famous imaginative exercise in which she asked all the monks to imagine themselves monks in a world where the majority of practitioners were female. She continued to describe the many prejudices and challenges they would face because they were male. “How blessed you are to be male, to benefit female practitioners on their path to enlightenment” (Wetzel, In Mackenzie 1999: 154). It was a brave and outrageous exercise, but delivered so charmingly that everyone laughed, including the Dalai Lama. It voiced what millions of women down the centuries had felt and it set the scene for opening up the Pandora’s Box on spiritual sexism and pent-up female resentment. Leading Buddhist teacher and author, Bhikshuni Thubten Chodron (see 5.7.3), spoke about the prejudice she had encountered within Buddhist institutions and how it had undermined her confidence to the point that it had become a serious hindrance on the path. Some senior Western Tibetan Buddhist monks also spoke up about the pain they had experienced when they witnessed the prejudice against nuns (Mackenzie 1999: 153, 154). Eventually it was Tenzin Palmo’s turn to speak. She described her experience of and her frustration with living in a monastery of 100 monks as the only female. She explained the subtle prejudices she encountered and how some of the teachings were not accessible to her. Finally she exposed the situation in the Western sangha and the difficulties faced by many nuns, especially those who had approached her in Italy. “The lamas ordain people and then they are thrown out into the world with no training, preparation, encouragement, support or guidance...I’m not surprised when they disrobe...They get discouraged and disillusioned and there is no one who helps them. This is true, Your Holiness. It’s a very hard situation” (Palmo 1993: <http://www.thubtenchodron.org/BuddhistNunsMonasticLife>). Tenzin Palmo was frank and outspoken in her plea not to allow prejudice, indifference, and contempt to lead to the weakening and discouragement of the female sangha. At the end of her appeal a great hush fell over the assembly and His Holiness the Dalai Lama was weeping silently. After a few minutes

he looked up and said softly, “You are quite brave” (Gyatso, in Palmo 1993, <http://www.thubtenchodron.org/BuddhistNunsMonasticLife>).

Tenzin Palmo had entered the fray of women’s spiritual liberation. The time was ready for her to assume a leading role in the struggle for gender equality in Tibetan Buddhism. She began by assisting in organising a conference for Western nuns in Bodhgaya where they could express their problems, exchange views, and establish a much-needed sense of community and support. She joined The Committee of Western Buddhist Nuns now known as The Committee for Bhikshuni Ordination. She also started mulling over the idea of establishing a nunnery for the women of her own order. Her guru, Khamtrul Rinpoche, had pointed her in that direction in the seventies by indicating an area in the lush Kangra valley where his own monastery of Tashi Jong had been rebuilt. At the time she did not consider the possibility of building a nunnery, but now that she was back in the world after twelve years of intense meditation, and older, she felt that it was perhaps a worthwhile project. Tibetan nuns in India urgently needed a nunnery. Like their Western counterparts they had nowhere to go because they had been forgotten by the exile monks’ community in their haste to rebuilt and re-establish their own monasteries. The nuns were reduced to cooking in monastery kitchens or forced to return to a life of domesticity in order to earn their keep. Tenzin Palmo was deeply inspired by the nuns’ devotion and dedication. Some of them prostrate all the way from Kham to Kailash, and then do prostrations around Mount Kailash as well. However, there was no study programme for nuns equivalent to that available to the monks (Mackenzie 1999: 157).

Nevertheless, starting a nunnery would be a huge undertaking. Tenzin Palmo (in Thompson & Cox 2003) relates a meeting with a Catholic priest at which she consulted him about whether she should go back into retreat or start the nunnery. He immediately said that of course she should start a nunnery. He told her that human beings are like rough pieces of wood, and if we are always stroking ourselves with silk and velvet, we will never become “smooth;” we need sandpaper to make us smooth. “So, the nunnery is my sandpaper” (Palmo, in Thompson & Cox 2003). Tenzin Palmo returned to Assisi and began to formulate her ideas. She wanted a nunnery where female enlightenment would be the goal. It had to be a place of female spiritual excellence, a place which would not only educate nuns in religious dogma but also turn them into yoginis. She therefore planned to run a programme for training togdenmas (see 6.3.3), the female

counterparts of the great yogis at Tashi Jong. The togdenmas follow spiritual techniques specially devised for female practitioners by one of Milarepa's (see 2.4.4) leading disciples, Rechungpa in the twelfth century. The togdenmas had, however, not been seen or heard of since the Chinese occupation of Tibet (see 3.4). Nevertheless, some of the old togdens living at Tashi Jong in India possessed this knowledge and Tenzin Palmo hoped to revive the togdenma lineage by engaging the togdens in training suitable nuns as togdenmas. She envisaged a nunnery that could eventually accommodate between 100 and 200 nuns. An initial five-year training programme would enable suitable nuns to continue the togdenma training, which was the *raison d'être* of the nunnery. The nunnery would include the nuns' accommodation, a monastic college, a temple, individual retreat huts, an international retreat centre, and a guest house. She also planned to introduce some revolutionary ideas such as economic independence for the nuns and the nunnery instead of the traditional system of individual sponsorship whereby monastics receive money from family members or a wealthy sponsor. The nuns would be educated in various skills that will enable them to earn a living. All the money would go into a central fund from where each nun would receive her robes, her food, and a small weekly stipend for personal items. Although the senior nuns will be the teachers, the jobs such as cooking, sweeping, and cleaning will be rotated in order to prevent a hierarchy and to facilitate a harmonious environment in which all the nuns cooperate with an understanding of each other's challenges. She also wanted to introduce hatha yoga to counteract the effects of the long periods of sitting and to realign the spine for meditation (Mackenzie 1999: 160, 161).

Tenzin Palmo dismisses the age-old accusation and one of the reasons given for women's so-called inability to attain enlightenment, namely that women did not get on well together. Men accuse women of squabbling and of being bitchy and unable to live and work together in harmony. "It's absolute nonsense. Women have been cohering for millennia. I have noticed that when women are working together on a project there is a tremendous energy, a very special energy. Women like the idea of all-women retreats. When we are feeling fulfilled, doing some inner work, we get along just fine. And women like each other's company...In my view bitchiness is not an intrinsic part of female nature. Sometimes men don't pull together either" (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 161).

When her plans for the nunnery had been carefully worked out, Tenzin Palmo approached the spiritual heads, including the young Khamtrul Rinpoche, at Tashi Jong.

She explained to them the importance of providing women with independence and the opportunity to be taught by other women. The panel at Tashi Jong agreed to all she had proposed and gave their blessing for the project. However, they charged Tenzin Palmo with taking care of the project herself and raising the necessary funds as they themselves were a refugee community and had little funds to spare. In her methodical way she set about plans to find land, building permission, architectural plans, bricks, mortar, and expertise in a range of areas, and money – a lot of money (Mackenzie 1999: 161, 162). In this way Tenzin Palmo became an international fundraiser, giving dharma talks whenever she was invited and eventually launched herself as an author as well, publishing three books to date (2002, 2006, 2011).

The lack of opportunities for nuns in the Tibetan tradition became a major incentive for establishing DGL (2007: <http://www.drukpa.com>). Tenzin Palmo has been greatly influential in raising awareness of the issue of gender inequality in Tibetan Buddhism through her dharma talks, her books, numerous interviews, and openly addressing and even challenging major Buddhist leaders, including the present Dalai Lama (Palmo 1993, <http://www.thubtenchodron.org/BuddhistNunsMonasticLife>). Furthermore, DGL is the only nunnery outside Tibet where the Togdenma⁴⁰ tradition, which became extinct during the Cultural Revolution (see 3.4.2), has been revived (2007: www.drukpa.com). Palmo has been a driving force in changing the misogynistic attitude towards nuns, both in their own self-perception as well as in the attitudes of many monks and lamas. Following the example of DGL, a number of nunneries in India, often funded with the help of Western nuns such as Karma Lekshe Tsomo and Jampa Tsedroen (<http://www.bhiksuniordination.net/about>) have established study programmes equal to that available to monks.

6.7.1 Initial fundraising

In 1994 she initiated her new-found career in Singapore. There she bumped into an old friend, Wong Pee Lee. She told Pee Lee of her mission to build the nunnery. It was most remarkable because just the previous night Pee Lee had a vivid dream in which Tenzin Palmo was surrounded by dakinis (see 4.5) wearing beautiful silks, and a voice telling her that now was the time to help women. Pee Lee went into action and organised the first of hundreds of lectures for Tenzin Palmo. She now criss-crossed the

⁴⁰ See glossary.

world from America and Europe to South-East Asia and South Africa giving dharma talks and running retreats. She visited amongst others, Malaysia, Taiwan, Brunei, Hong Kong, Sarawak, Indonesia, Cambodia, the Philippines, New York, Maryland, Vermont, Hawaii, the coast of California, France, Johannesburg, and Cape Town. She addressed Tibetan meditation centres, Zen groups, dedicated Vipassana practitioners, Christian communities, and even non-religious organisations (Mackenzie 1999: 164, 165).

Tenzin Palmo proved to be an inspired teacher. She speaks from her heart, without notes. Mackenzie (1999: 164) describes her as “displaying that quintessential feminine quality of cutting through abstract theories and ossified intellectual constructs.” Tenzin Palmo ignores all traditional approaches and goes straight to the heart of the matter: “Our minds are like junk yards. What we put into them is mostly rubbish! The conversations, the newspapers, the entertainment, we just pile it all in. There’s a jam session going on in there. And the problem is it makes us all very tired” (in Mackenzie 1999: 165). I gained first-hand experience of her brilliance as a public speaker in April 2012 in India while attending her teachings at the Deer Park Institute in Bir. She is practical, down-to-earth, and extraordinarily articulate. Audiences, both male and female, lap up whatever she says. She delivers the Buddha dharma in fluent, eloquent English. She understands the subtle nuances of the Western psyche, and she speaks from experience. Most significantly, she is a *female* monastic, which enables her to understand particularly female challenges and lends credibility to what she has to offer.

6.7.2 Beginnings

Finally the nunnery opened in January 2000 in a small room in Tashi Jong. It consisted of a group of girls from Ladakh. The numbers soon grew to twenty-one with young nuns from Tibet, Spiti, Kinnaur, and other Himalayan regions. The nuns lived in the newly-built monastic college at Tashi Jong for the first eighteen months. They were taught philosophy and Tibetan by learned teachers from Tashi Jong, and English by various volunteers. When Khampagar Monastery needed the monastic college building the nuns moved to a hundred-year old mud brick house on a nearby tea estate (<http://www.tenzinpalmo.com>).

The nunnery was named Dongyu Gatsal Ling (DGL) by its spiritual director His Eminence the 9th Khamtrul Rinpoche Shedrup Nyingma. It was named after the

previous Khamtrul Rinpoche, Tenzin Palmo's root guru, and means 'Garden of the Authentic Lineage' (<http://www.tenzinpalmo.com>).

In mid-1999 the DGL Trust was established and it purchased seven acres of suitable land from the Tashi Jong community. Construction of the nunnery began in 2001. In late 2005 the nuns moved into their newly completed living quarters. Meanwhile construction continued around them. A DGL website was established and teaching tours for Tenzin Palmo were organised to gain support and raise funds for the nunnery. Donations and sponsorships soon began to come in from all over the world. Vicky Mackenzie's biography (1999) as well as Tenzin Palmo's book (2002) continued to raise funds for the nunnery (<http://tenzinpalmo.com>).

6.7.3 Today

Presently there are seventy-seven nuns at DGL, four of whom are retreat nuns undergoing the Togdenma training (Swanepoel, personal interview, DGL Nunnery, April 5, 2012). Recently the sixth intake of nuns was ordained. They are mainly from Darjeeling, Lahaul, and Nepal. New nuns receive initial ordination from His Eminence the 9th Khamtrul Rinpoche, the Spiritual Director of DGL. A year later they receive novice ordination from His Eminence Dorzong Rinpoche in the presence of senior monks from the Khampagar Monastery (<http://tenzinpalmo.com>). The nuns range in age from twelve to twenty-five years. Several have had only basic schooling and some of them have had no schooling at all. The nuns initially enter a demanding six-year programme (<http://tenzinpalmo.com>).

6.7.4 The buildings

In April 2012 I had the privilege of visiting the nunnery. Ani Aileen, an Irish nun who is Tenzin Palmo's assistant, conducted me on a tour of the nunnery. We went up to the roof of the temple from where I had a bird's eye view of the grounds and the Himalayas. DGL is surrounded on three sides by breathtaking views of the Himalayas and at present consists of the nuns' living quarters, the office complex, the study centre, and a retreat centre. The temple, a small clinic, and a guest house are nearing completion.

The nuns' living quarters consist of two circular wings each surrounding a central courtyard. Each wing has a kitchen, a dining room, central bathrooms with solar power

heating and bedrooms. Each bedroom can accommodate three nuns. The two wings are joined by a large recreation room.

The office complex includes a reception area and shop, offices, a kitchen and dining area, Tenzin Palmo's living quarters and office, and accommodation for the Khenpo and other staff.

The study centre is a large two-storey building. There are four classrooms, a teachers' room, a visitors' room, a large puja and prayer hall, and a library. Downstairs there is also a courtyard for debating. The puja hall is beautifully decorated with hand-crafted statues of Prajnaparamita (the goddess of wisdom), Green Tara (see 4.3.2.1), and Manjusri (the bodhisattva of wisdom). The walls are magnificently painted with murals of Green Tara and other deities.

The nuns' retreat centre is a single storey building with two wings. Each wing has its own square courtyard and a common connecting area. One wing has twelve rooms for short-term retreats; the other wing is used for long term retreats and the trainee Togdenma nuns.

Construction of the traditional temple began in 2007. The three-story structure has been completed and contains a ground floor temple and, on the upper floor, accommodation for visiting high lamas and their attendants, a library for sacred texts, and store rooms. Some of the statues have been completed and the ornate murals, carvings, and painted ceilings are almost finalized.

The nunnery is surrounded by a boundary wall, and one enters the nunnery grounds through a gate house. There are two bore wells, a large water tank and a filtration unit, as well as a transformer for their own electricity supply (<http://tenzinpalmo.com>).

6.7.5 Study programme for resident nuns

The emphasis of the programme at DGL is to:

- Provide a programme of study, meditation, and service.
- Train nuns in integrating their daily life and work with dharma principles.
- Encourage a life based on monastic vows and communal harmony.

- Eventually reintroduce the bhikshuni ordination.
- Re-establish the togdenma tradition.
- Prepare some of the nuns who undertake higher philosophical studies to become dharma and meditation teachers and professors.

The study programme at the nunnery includes Buddhist philosophy classes taught by Khenpo Ngawang from the Khampagar Monastic Institute at Tashi Jong. He is assisted by two senior qualified nuns from South India. In their first year at DGL the nuns' focus is on intensive Tibetan language courses since this is the language of instruction as well as the language of the philosophical scriptures. English is taught at various levels by an experienced local teacher. Proficiency in English is important as it will enable the nuns to function in the modern world and will prepare them to become involved in office management and to maintain international sponsorship for themselves. Ritual and tormamaking classes are given by senior monks from Khampagar Monastery who also train the nuns to play traditional ceremonial instruments. The day ends with hatha yoga classes.

The nuns' daily life starts with early morning Tara puja at 05h30 followed by meditation with Tenzin Pamlo at 06h30. Their study programme begins at 09h30 and lasts until 12h00 and resumes again at 14h00. Afternoon tea is at 15h00 followed by debating at 15h30. The day ends with hatha yoga at 16h30. Saturdays are free, and Sundays are spent studying tormamaking, chanting, and ceremonial instruments (Swanepoel, private interview, DGL Nunnery, April 5, 2012).

A two-month retreat is undertaken each year in the monsoon season during which the nuns maintain silence except for ritual chanting. Empowerments and teachings are given to the nuns by His Eminence the 9th Khamtrul Rinpoche and by His Eminence Dorzong Rinpoche.

Some nuns have recently started driving lessons and others are undergoing office training which will enable them to gain valuable skills necessary for running the nunnery. The aim is for the nuns to be as self-sufficient as possible. Of the seven trustees at DGL, three are DGL nuns, and the nunnery hopes to appoint more in the future.

Each nun shares in the chores of the nunnery such as maintaining the puja hall, the purchase and cooking of food, recycling materials, cleaning and maintaining the

buildings, and providing basic health care. The nuns hold annual elections to select those who will occupy positions of authority within their community, such as the disciplinarian, the chant leader, several storekeepers, and class monitors. A nunnery committee of five nuns is also elected and meets weekly and make day-to-day decisions.

After completing the initial six-year philosophical study programme, a long retreat may be undertaken by those nuns who choose to do so. Some nuns may wish to continue their studies towards the Geshema (female for Geshe) degree. In May 2012 the exile Tibetan administration's Department of Religion and Culture announced that nuns will now also be eligible for the Geshema degree after completing a rigorous nineteen-year study programme. The degree has hitherto only been available to monks (<http://www.tibetanreview.net/news>).

6.7.6 Fundraising today

The construction of the nunnery buildings as well as the nuns' daily expenses is funded entirely by voluntary contributions. Tenzin Palmo's tireless international touring schedule and also the publication of her books (2002, 2006, 2011) have drawn donors from all over the world. An endowment fund for the nunnery was founded in 2008 to ensure sustained growth and a secure future for DGL. Donors can contribute to the fund in various ways namely by offering a one-time donation, a multi-year pledge, an honorary or memorial gift, a recurring gift, or a gift of an appreciated asset. Further donations can be made in the form of a bequest in one's will, gifts of real estate or art, a charitable gift annuity, and so on.

The nuns' basic needs and pocket money are met by the nunnery. Monies received are paid into a common fund from which their requirements such as food, clothing, medicines, and educational materials are provided. Nuns are expected to live as simply as possible (<http://tenzinpalmo.com>).

6.8 JETSUNMA ORDINATION

The rare title of *Jetsunma* (Venerable Master) was bestowed upon Tenzin Palmo in February 2008 by His Holiness the 12th Gyalwang Drukpa, head of the Drukpa Kagyu lineage. She received this title in recognition of her spiritual achievements as a nun and

her efforts in promoting the status of female practitioners in Tibetan Buddhism (<http://tenzinpalmo.com>).

6.8.1 The 12th Gyalwang Drukpa and the status of women

His Holiness the Twelfth Gyalwang Drukpa, like so many other lamas, is very outspoken about the status of women in Tibetan Buddhism. He even lives at his nunnery, not at his monastery, and when he travels he is almost always accompanied by about 108 nuns. His nuns are trained by prominent monks within his lineage (Swanepoel, private interview, DGL Nunnery, April 5, 2012). He is striving relentlessly to bring about an awareness of the existence and status of nuns. He has over 800 nuns in his nunneries, and he gives recognition for the nuns' spiritual achievements whenever possible. In this way, the Jetsunma title was conferred upon Tenzin Palmo in an enthronement ceremony. She is regularly invited to co-lead the Annual Drukpa Council, a week-long occasion of meetings and practise, at which all the leading Drukpa masters and an estimated 15 000 practitioners converge. She states (in Kaufman 2011, <http://www.mandalamagazine.org>) that His Holiness the Gyalwang Drukpa promotes her much more than ever happens at Tashi Jong. "There, I'm an *ani* who's been around forever." Her enthronement ceremony for instance, took place on the Gyalwang Drukpa's birthday, which always draws vast crowds. Tenzin Palmo humbly states that her Jetsunma title has been to the benefit of all nuns and not just in recognition of her own achievements. Many nuns have expressed their joy at being able to venerate at last a woman, since all the lamas and high officials up to now have been male (Swanepoel, private interview, DGL Nunnery, April 5, 2012).

6.9 CONCLUSION

Tenzin Palmo has achieved what very few people would have been able to attain. Not only did she take the most extraordinary vow of attaining enlightenment in a female body, but pursued her course of action in a most determined way. She survived twelve years of intense meditation in a Himalayan cave and thereafter defied the male-dominated Tibetan Buddhist establishment by founding and running a nunnery in India in a most progressive manner. Every year she embarks on a gruelling international schedule of lectures and talks to raise funds for DGL. Furthermore, the head of her tradition rewarded her with a title indicative of her spiritual progress.

She has become a Buddhist icon and an international celebrity. However, she states that she feels ill-at-ease in this role; “I don’t like it at all” (in Thompson & Cox 2003). She continues to say (in Thompson & Cox 2003) that she feels trapped by the process, like a rabbit in a cage. Nonetheless, she believes that change will come in the status of female monastics, albeit slowly and gradually. She does not want to create “big waves as it only creates opposition” (Palmo, in Thompson & Cox 2003). Patience and compassion is indeed the way to bring about the required change.

CHAPTER SEVEN: THE WORLD NEEDS YOGINIS⁴¹

The basis for realizing enlightenment is a human body. Male or female - there is no difference. But if she develops the mind bent on enlightenment, the woman's body is better

(Padhmasambhava⁴², in Gross 1993: 79).



7.1 INTRODUCTION

My initial aim with this research was to find a satisfactory answer to why quite a number of Western women, who are by implication liberated women, have chosen in recent years to become Tibetan Buddhist nuns. I was particularly interested in investigating the biography of Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo, a British-born woman and the most senior Tibetan Buddhist nun alive today, as well as the second Western woman to ordain as a Tibetan Buddhist nun (Mackenzie 1999: 43). She attained fame for the twelve years she had spent meditating in a cave high up in the Himalayas, and is in addition the founder and abbess of a Tibetan Buddhist nunnery in India. Furthermore, Tenzin Palmo is well-known for her statement that she intends to attain enlightenment in a female body (Palmo, in Mackenzie 1999: 58).

Underlying my primary research question is a number of issues that needed to be investigated. The most important of these is the unavailability of full ordination for

⁴¹ Palmo 2009b, in De Re, <http://www.northwestdharma.org/news/08Novdeccissue/yoginis.php>

⁴² Padmasambhava to Yeshe Tsogyel (see 2.4.2)

Tibetan Buddhist nuns and the debate surrounding this matter. Secondly, the attraction *Western* women in particular feel towards the *monastic* lifestyle of *Tibetan* Buddhism despite the challenges they face. Lastly, the role Tenzin Palmo has played in popularising Tibetan Buddhism amongst Western women, and her attainment of a venerated position in a system that is still almost exclusively male-dominated.

7.2 SUMMARY OF RESEARCH

The title of this thesis contains key phrases such as *patience and compassion*, *the female quest for enlightenment*, *Western Tibetan Buddhist nuns*, and *Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo*. Chapter Four deals exclusively with the female quest for enlightenment within the parameters of Tibetan Buddhism. Western Tibetan Buddhist nuns are discussed in Chapter Five, and Chapter Six highlights Tenzin Palmo's biography. Since the main research question of this thesis is situated within *Tibetan Buddhism* it was necessary to avail the reader of some background information. Chapter Two therefore provides a brief outline of the general tenets of Buddhism and of Tibetan Buddhism in particular. Chapter Three offers historical information about Tibet and how Buddhism spread from there to the West. The concepts of patience and compassion are fundamental Buddhist principles and are referred to throughout this thesis.

7.2.1 Why what the Buddha taught appeals to Westerners

Sutin (2006: ix) states that it is a matter of fairly general agreement that Buddhism, in its variety of forms, presents the West with extraordinary teachings and practices that can be vitally useful in the fields of religion, philosophy, psychology, neurology, and related cognitive sciences, as well as politics. According to recent statistics the number of Buddhists worldwide varies between 1.2 and 1.6 billion. Of these approximately 1 182 million live in Asia, 6 million in North America, 3 million in Europe, 800 000 in Latin America, 68 000 in Australasia, and 194 000 in Africa (http://www.thedhamma.com/buddhists_in_the_world.htm).

Berzin and Chodron (1999: www.berzinarchives.com) are of the opinion that one of the reasons Buddhism is so attractive to Westerners is that it is "reasonable and scientifically based." The Buddha appeals to possible adherents to analyse his words as if they are buying gold, and not just blindly to believe what he says. Buddhism's non-dogmatic approach seems to appeal to the more rationally schooled thinking of most

Westerners (Berzin & Chodron 1999: www.berzinarchives.com). The Dalai Lama for instance has been engaged in dialogue with scientists in many fields regarding the nature of reality. In fact, His Holiness has gone as far as to say that if scientists can prove that something the Buddha taught is incorrect he is prepared to exclude it from Buddhism (Gyatso 2005: 3).

Buddhism is non-dogmatic and can be practised in the privacy of one's home and in one's inner thinking processes without necessarily having to belong to a dharma group, or even to take refuge with a teacher. The Buddha taught a diversity of methods for people with an extensive range of preferences and abilities to use to develop themselves and to guide their daily conduct. Since the objective of Buddhism is to overcome our limitations and resultant problems in order to develop ourselves to the extent that we can be of benefit to others (Berzin & Chodron 1999: www.berzinarchives.com), "Buddhism offers multiple approaches to awaken the enlightened nature of the mind" (Thondup, in Ray 2001: vii). Likewise, Tibetan Buddhism offers its adherents a variety of approaches and methods to suit their individual needs, including exoteric and esoteric alternatives. Exoteric Tibetan Buddhism consists of the basic Mahayana teachings whilst esoteric Tibetan Buddhism comprises Vajrayana and Tantric Buddhism (Thondup, in Ray 2001: vii).

The Western nuns' responses to the questionnaires (see Appendix I) that I sent out proved to be equally diverse in connection with their attraction to the dharma. They list their reasons for becoming Buddhists variously as:

- Buddhism's down-to-earth and pragmatic approach.
- The concepts of reincarnation and karma.
- Techniques for dealing with anger, attachment, and ignorance.
- The equality of all sentient beings.
- Buddhism's practical psychology of mind.
- Its step-by-step methodology on how to practise.
- Its teachings on the nature of the mind.
- The concept of bodhicitta.
- The encouragement to examine the teachings.

I would like to postulate another reason why Western women in particular are so attracted to Tibetan Buddhism. Some of the foremost proponents of Tantra, a further development of Mahayana Buddhism, were women (Palmo 2002: 73). Tantra not only promises Buddhahood in one lifetime, but it displays greater freedom and a higher value to women than some of the other forms of Buddhism. Tantra also affords the feminine prominent significance by the existence of *yogini tantras* and female *yidams* (see 4.3). Furthermore, Tibetan Buddhism includes a range of powerful female archetypes in the form of deities representing the qualities of enlightenment as manifested in the enlightened mind. The female quest for enlightenment may therefore find in Tantra a welcome relief from otherwise misogynistic practices and systems.

7.2.2 The Land of Snows

Farber (2003: 182) is of the opinion that the Tibetan Diaspora was primarily responsible for popularising Tibetan Buddhism in the West. Of the total population of approximately 6 million Tibetans, about 130 000 now live in exile outside the People's Republic of China (2011: <http://www.volunteertibet.org>). His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama (see 2.5.1 and 2.6.10) is surely the best known Tibetan of his time and no one else has done more to popularise Buddhism in the West than Tenzin Gyatso. He has attracted the widest Western audience of any Asian Buddhist teacher in history (Sutin 2006: 319). For almost six centuries the Dalai Lamas served as the key religious leaders of Tibet, as well as spiritual advisors to powerful Mongol rulers and Chinese emperors (Farber 2003: 53). Consequently, the life of the Dalai Lama, the circumstances of his escape from Tibet in 1959, the genocide of 1.2 million Tibetans killed by the Chinese military (Sutin 2006: 318), and the organized annihilation of Tibetan Buddhist monasteries (see 3.4), have been well-documented in the West. When he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989 the "Free Tibet" movement was brought to the attention of an international audience. The Dalai Lama is a prolific writer and a compelling international public speaker. His annual travelling and lecturing schedule is overwhelming (<http://www.dalailama.com>), especially for a man closer to eighty than to seventy. Perhaps one of the main reasons for his growing number of Western disciples is that the Dalai Lama does more than paying lip service to the "fashionable" notion of altruism, but actually lives it out (Schmidt, in Ricard & Schmidt 2005: 45). He is an exemplary realization of traditional Tibetan culture, and someone who strives

continuously to mould his life to the example of Chenrezig, the Bodhisattva of Compassion (Norman 2009: 386).

A number of great Tibetan masters went into exile after the Chinese invasion of Tibet. They have contributed substantially towards the development of the body of spiritual traditions encompassing Tibetan Buddhism. In little more than fifty years Tibetan Buddhism has grown in the West into a significant movement with a dynamic network of centres, teachers, and students (Farber 2003: 184). Numerous Western disciples of Tibetan Buddhist masters have assumed monastic life, are running dharma centres in the West, and are Buddhologists at various academic institutions worldwide. Furthermore, a vast body of literature on Tibetan Buddhism is being produced by many of these Western teachers and students of Tibetan Buddhism. A number of popular films have also contributed towards popularising Tibetan Buddhism and the plight of the Tibetans (Mullen 1998: <http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/OrientalMullen.html>).

However, no progress is evident in relieving the present political situation in Tibet (Unites States Congressional-Executive Commission on China 2007: 1, 2). Chinese officials continue to refuse to invite the Dalai Lama to China or to show any willingness in engaging him in dialogue. Instead, China has intensified its campaign against the Dalai Lama, and has increased government control over Buddhist monastic institutions (see 3.7), including its statement that only the Chinese government, which is an atheistic government, has the right to appoint the Dalai Lama's next incarnation (Gyatso 2011: 26-30). In addition, detention and imprisonment of Tibetans for staging peaceful demonstrations continue. Currently, desperate Tibetans have resorted to self-immolations to protest against Chinese rule. Since 2009, 44 Tibetans have self-immolated, 43 of which have taken place since March 2011. A total of eighteen self-immolations were monastics (2012: <http://www.savetibet.org/resource-center/>). This has given rise to one of the largest self-immolation movements in modern history (Wong 2012: <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/03/world/asia>).

7.2.3 Daughters of the Buddha

Tenzin Palmo's vow to attain enlightenment in a female body (in Mackenzie 1999: 4) remains an extraordinary and inspiring statement for all Buddhist women. This bold declaration is almost synonymous to saying that she intends to become a female Buddha

– possibly, from a Buddhist perspective, the ultimate achievement in women’s liberation (Mackenzie 1999: 5, 7). Its significance is even more so since this declaration was made by a *Western* woman.

His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama as well as His Holiness the Seventeenth Karmapa have both publicly expressed their unequivocal support for transforming gender inequality in Tibetan Buddhism and for the reinstatement of full ordination for nuns in the Tibetan tradition. In fact, the Dalai Lama has specifically requested Western women to spearhead this task which led to the establishment of *The Committee of Western Bhikshunis/The Committee for Bhikshuni Ordination* (Haas 2013: 7). He has even declared that his next incarnation might be as a woman (Johnson 2011: 148). The Karmapa has made the ground breaking statement that he is willing to take the first step in ordaining nuns as *bhikshunis* (Damcho 2010: <http://www.thebuddhadharma.com/>). He has pointed out that the majority of Buddhists in the West are women and furthermore that the status of women within Buddhism affected the entire body of Buddhist teachings. To illustrate this he used his famous analogy of a house with four pillars, one of which is missing in Buddhism since nuns cannot yet be granted full ordination. The Karmapa is of the opinion that despite some outdated views and ways of thinking within the ranks of Buddhist monasticism, he does not regard these as an obstacle. What is simply needed is for a leader to move beyond conferences and discussions (Damcho 2010: <http://www.thebuddhadharma.com/>). However, the Karmapa is still a junior monk and an ordination ceremony may only be conducted by senior *bhikshus* (Swanepoel, private interview, DGL Nunnery, April 5, 2012). Tenzin Palmo claims that the leaders of all the lineages are in favour of *bhikshuni* ordination and that “the rank and file” is the problem. What is indeed needed, in her opinion, is a brave senior monk to take the initiative (Swanepoel, private interview, DGL Nunnery, April 5, 2012).

7.2.4 A revalorisation of Buddhism

Rita M. Gross (1993: 3) states that a “revalorisation” of Buddhism is necessary. Both Gross (1993: 3) and Armstrong (1996: x) are of the opinion that most religions have been male dominated, retaining women in a subordinate position, and that a feminist investigation of any major world religion discloses substantial undercurrents of chauvinism and discrimination against women, especially in the sphere of religious

praxis. The term “revalorisation” implies that however sexist a religious tradition might be, it is not irreparably so. Revalorisation can repair and restore it, bringing it more into line with its original values and vision than its patriarchal form (Gross 1993: 3). This revalorisation process has been initiated in recent years by a number of female Western academics of whom some are also fully ordained Tibetan Buddhist nuns. It is significant that it is the West that has pioneered the liberation of women (Armstrong 1996: x). Nearly half of the converts to Buddhism in the West are exceptionally dedicated lay women (Gross, in Tsomo 1999: 277), and this has contributed to the establishment of values and practices that distance Western Buddhism from the predominantly patriarchal monastic frameworks in Asia (Sutin 2006: 520). Of further significance is the appearance of female researchers in the traditional male realm of Western academic Buddhology (Sutin 2006: 320). Both Gross (1993: 126) and a number of Christian and Jewish feminist theologians (Christ & Plaskow 1997: 131-192) postulate that the core symbols of a religion are not inherently sexist, misogynist, or patriarchal, but are essentially egalitarian and liberating for all human beings. However, this pristine core has been contaminated by established cultural practices and prejudices in favour of men and against women. If the tradition therefore contains a pristine, but tainted, core of egalitarian teachings, it not only allows but requires reconstruction of the tradition (Gross 1993: 126). Gross therefore reasons that Buddhism is reconstructible because fundamentally Buddhist teachings and symbols are emancipating for all. Nevertheless, she questions whether those currently in positions of authority in Buddhism will have the courage to integrate such reconstructions (Gross 1993: 127).

7.2.5 Institutionalised gender violence

Tenzin Palmo experienced just how restricting the world of misogynistic monasticism could be when she joined her root guru’s monastery as a twenty-one year old novice nun. She was the only nun amongst eighty monks and was not allowed to participate in any of their daily activities and could acquire only the most basic teachings while the monks were engaged in serious Buddhist dialectics and philosophical studies (Palmo 2002: 14). It was a completely male dominated environment in which all the lamas, the lineage holders, and the *tulkus* were men. Although the twentieth century witnessed the emancipation of women in almost all areas of life, there were no female role models in Tibetan Buddhism for Tenzin Palmo to follow (Mackenzie 1999: 6). Tibetan Buddhism is expressed primarily in a “male voice” and Palmo feels that in this day and age that is

simply not good enough (Palmo 2011: 149). Furthermore, misogyny is encouraged by certain meditational visualisations which cultivate aversion towards the woman's body and leads to the view that women constitute a danger to monks. The monks fail to realise that their own impurity is the root cause and not the presence of women in their monastic abode (Palmo 2002: 71).

There appears to have been institutionalised bias against women from the start (Palmo 2002: 71). The council of five hundred *arhats* which was held after the historical Buddha passed away, did not appear to have been attended by any women. The Buddha gave teachings to women but none of these were recorded due to their exclusion from the council (Palmo 2002: 71). Consequently everything was therefore recited and recorded from the male point of view and women were increasingly viewed as dangerous and threatening (Palmo 2002: 71). Gross (1993: 88) asserts that the stronghold of male power is greatest in the Tibetan Buddhist practice of discovering and installing successive reincarnations of great lamas. No leaders in Tibetan Buddhism are more respected and honoured, or possess more power and influence, than these incarnations, particularly those who are heads of major lineages and prominent monasteries. It is taken for granted that each successive incarnation will be a male incarnation (Gross 1993: 89).

There is no doubt that accomplished women practitioners existed but they did not enjoy the institutional support of their male colleagues. Men's privileged education enabled them to read and write and therefore men had the monopoly in choosing whose records to preserve for future generations. Inadequate androcentric record keeping thus deprives women practitioners from drawing inspiration from female role models (Haas 2013: 5, 9, 10).

7.2.6 Ambiguities and contradictions

Despite the presence of female Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, the monastic orders remain almost exclusively patriarchal. Notwithstanding the favourable doctrinal attitude towards women, ambiguity still characterises the Buddhist approach towards females. Vajrayana Buddhism includes a profusion of positive female images and symbols, and accommodates a number of highly regarded and respected female practitioners (Gross 1993: 80). It seems that this ambiguity in world religions in which a symbolic and

mythic veneration (Gross 1993: 81) of the feminine coexist with a social reality that strongly limits women's potential and opportunities, are not perceived by those who benefit from the system (Gross 1993: 81).

The liability of a female birth is still emphasised in many parts of the Buddhist world where male dominance and gender hierarchy persist (Tsomo, in Mohr & Tsedroen 2012: 288). This situation has been especially devastating for nuns, who face reduced economic support, inferior education, and in some parts of the world even the extinction of their ordination lineages because long-established monastic rules are excessive in the way they favour monks over nuns (Gross 2010: 19). Several contemporary nuns, especially Western Tibetan Buddhist nuns, have largely surmounted their inferior status, but in some parts of the Buddhist world monks are employing every effort to prevent nuns from gaining full ordination status (Gross 2010: 19). It is therefore difficult to understand how apparently intelligent and compassionate men are unable to resolve the legalisms required to initiate or instate nuns' ordination lineages. One cannot but conclude that if their own ordination lineages were at stake they would certainly be capable of solving the problem without much effort (Gross 2010: 19).

Palmo (in Chopra 2006: <http://www.tenzinpalmo.com>) states that when she made the vow to attain enlightenment in a female body, she was "fed-up with the male attitude." Every form of Buddhism adheres to teachings of egolessness, affirming that there is no permanent enduring self beneath the current of experience (Gross 2010: 18). Buddhism also claims that much of our suffering is due to our clinging to that non-existent self. Yet, despite these dictums Buddhism assigns much centrality to the importance of gender in Buddhist institutional life (Gross 2010: 18). In fact, gender has become the supreme organising principle of traditional Buddhist institutional life where sexual segregation and gender hierarchy in favour of the male is practised (Gross 2010: 18). The most commonly invoked "slogan" is that the enlightened mind is neither male nor female, yet Buddhist monasticism finds it very difficult to enter into the dialogue of transforming gender bias and of granting nuns full ordination in the Tibetan traditions, clinging stubbornly to the existing gender hierarchy. Perhaps such ego-grasping is the result of an ego that is deeply conditioned by its residence in a male body, and for many people the maleness (or femaleness) of that body might enjoy precedence over its humanity (Gross 2010: 32).

The tension between a hidden tradition of extremely accomplished female practitioners and the institutional preference for male practitioners is a contradiction in terms (Gross 1993: 88). Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the *yogini-tantras* of Tantric Buddhism. In Tantric Buddhism the male principle is the consort to the female (Shaw 1994: 199). Nevertheless, there is a great disparity between what ancient texts reveal and what some current Tibetan lamas articulate. *Tantras* have a gynocentric world view which focuses on women as worthy of honour and respect. Those desiring to practise *Tantra* must follow and accept this philosophy (Shaw 1994: 199, 200). People who pronounce upon the inferiority of women are generally monks who had to build up a psychological resistance to women (Shaw 1994: 205).

7.2.7 Living as a Western Tibetan Buddhist nun

Classical Buddhism was characterised essentially by the religion and lifestyle of its monastic elite (Gross, in Tsomo 1999: 277). An important element in the transmission of Buddhism to the West is therefore the development of a Buddhist monastic community (Napper, in Chodron 1999: xv). The transplantation of spiritual traditions often involves a completely different cultural environment, new adherents, and new influences. The traditions frequently transform in commendable ways and fulfil important needs for many people in its new environment (Tsomo 1999: 291). At the same time, Western Buddhist monastics face a number of challenges when they enter into a monastic system which has until recently only existed in Asian societies where Buddhism and its culture are interwoven in the various communities. Although many of the monastic precepts are timeless and relevant, there may be some that are difficult to abide by in contemporary Western society. Furthermore, there is no pre-existing role or place for women in Western culture who don Buddhist robes (Napper, in Chodron 1999: xv). In addition Western Buddhist nuns face the more subtle predicament of terminology and appropriate behaviour as nuns and laywomen observe different social protocols in Asian culture (Tsomo 2008: xxiii).

At the same time, Buddhist nuns and monks are not required to live in nunneries and monasteries and are free to live a variety of lifestyles. The only requisite is that they observe the monastic precepts to the best of their ability and that the day begins and ends with meditation and prayer (Chodron 1999: xxix). Currently there are dynamic and active Buddhist nuns living in the West as well as in Asia.

Western Tibetan Buddhist nuns substantially contribute to society by rendering social services, by delivering Dharma talks and setting up Dharma centres in the West, thereby building bridges between East and West, translating sacred texts, counselling, and serving in hospice centres, refugee camps, animal shelters, and prisons. Furthermore, some are accomplished artists, therapists, researchers and academics at universities. Nuns also demonstrate a life of simplicity and purity, helping to preserve the environment, and preventing overpopulation by their celibate lifestyle. Most importantly, they offer an alternative to women's liberation acknowledging that women are more than just their sexual identity (Chodron 2000: <http://www.thubtenchodron.org/>).

There is very little institutional support for Western nuns in the Tibetan tradition. This is due to a deficiency in resources as well as the lack of full ordination which would provide the necessary institutional recognition and support (Tsomo, in Mohr & Tsedroen 2012: 285). Available support is generally channelled to refugee monasteries in Nepal and India, and then mostly to monks. Western Tibetan Buddhist nuns are currently deprived of a Western Buddhist religious community and in addition there is no suitable place for them in the Tibetan religious community (Li, in Tsomo 2000: 185).

The introduction of Buddhist cultures to the West has highlighted certain traditional patriarchal patterns in some Asian cultures and has engendered questions about sexist attitudes within Buddhist and Western societies. However, before Buddhism can be wholeheartedly accepted by Western women, a number of issues need to be addressed. Buddhism purports to affect the welfare of all, yet it has failed to address actively discrimination against women. Buddhism claims to be egalitarian yet the myth of male superiority continues to thrive in Buddhist societies. So-called Buddhist saints are supposed to be enlightened, but they refrain from challenging the assertion that good karma leads to a male rebirth and bad karma to a female rebirth (Tsomo 1999: 294).

According to Findly (2000: 3), Buddhist women have historically faced obstacles in their spiritual lives in at least four areas. The first problem area is in religious practices, including lifestyle customs, instructional opportunities, meditational forms, and institutional structures. The second area of discrimination against nuns is in the disciplinary rules that govern the lives of monastics in which nuns have unmistakably been delineated as second-class citizens. Thirdly, although doctrinally women are fully

capable of reaching enlightenment, recognition of their achievements by title and status has often been withheld. Lastly, female renunciants have habitually been refused the same material support that their male counterparts are privy to.

Western Tibetan Buddhist nuns are also faced with other, more subtle, difficulties. They tend to be more individualistic than their Asian counterparts as they have physical and intellectual habits that have been well-honed through years of living in the world outside the nunnery (Chodron 2000: <http://www.thubtenchodron.org/>). They furthermore tend to be more self-sufficient and more self-motivated which sometimes makes it difficult for them to live in a monastic community (Chodron 2000: <http://www.thubtenchodron.org/>). As first generation Western Tibetan Buddhist nuns they often lead a homeless life, as there are very few nunneries in the West and there is no umbrella institution on which they can rely (Chodron 2000: <http://www.thubtenchodron.org/>). Western nuns grow up in a culture that emphasises the individual over the group frequently resulting in strong, individualistic personalities. Paradoxically, Western women need strong personalities in order to become Buddhist nuns. They are commonly reproached by their families for leaving well-paid jobs and careers and for not having children. They also have to withstand retorts such as that they are repressing their sexuality and that they are avoiding intimate relationships (Chodron, in Findly 2000: 82).

7.2.8 Bhikshuni ordination

Bhikshuni ordination for women does not seem to have spread to Tibet. This was due to the difficulties of acquiring the required quorum of ordained nuns who would have had to travel from India to Tibet across the Himalayas in previous centuries. The novice ordination for nuns in Tibetan Buddhism is performed by monks. Although several prominent Tibetan Buddhist monks approve of nuns in the Tibetan tradition receiving full ordination, the Tibetan religious establishment has not officially sanctioned this. Neither has the *bhikshuni* ordination of Tibetan Buddhist nuns in the Chinese tradition been approved by Tibetan religious authorities, although they have been given permission to go to Taiwan to seek full ordination. Western nuns who wish to obtain full ordination usually receive it in the Chinese, Vietnamese or Korean traditions where it is extant. Tibetan nuns face greater difficulties in obtaining *bhikshuni* ordination as

they form part of the Tibetan community and are more susceptible to social pressures (Chodron, in Findly 2000: 85).

The current movement to establish full ordination for Buddhist nuns involves a considerable reconstruction of religious traditions. The campaign for the full ordination of Buddhist nuns requires changes in long-held attitudes and institutions in various monastic communities. Tension exists between the Buddha's ordination of women, textual ambiguity, and the *de facto* exclusion of women from full ordination in certain Buddhist traditions (Gyatso, in Mohr & Tsedroen 2010: 3, 4).

According to Li (in Tsomo 2000: 168), the impetus to set up an order of fully ordained nuns is motivated by three primary factors. Firstly, many dedicated nuns are required by Buddhist organisations who are attempting to establish themselves in the West. Furthermore, a subtle competition for Western Buddhist nuns has already surfaced between Tibetan and Taiwanese traditions. Secondly, there is rivalry between the various traditions to demonstrate their dedication to social equity by recognising women's equal right to full ordination. This is most apparent between Tibetan and Theravadin institutions in the West. Lastly, there is tension between the *bhikshuni* orders in Taiwan and the People's Republic of China (PRC) to demonstrate their legitimacy and lineage. This rivalry between Tibetans in exile, Taiwan, and the PRC is intimately associated with political concerns that may be far removed from Buddhist doctrines and ethics. However, most nuns are primarily motivated in their wish for *bhikshuni* ordination to be admitted to teachings that are restricted to fully ordained monastics only (Li, in Tsomo 2000: 169).

The ceremony that transforms a female Buddhist practitioner into a *bhikshuni* is the *bhikshuni upasampada*. The ceremony is usually conducted by ten ordination masters. The full ordination of women also requires the presence of ten *bhikshus*. Nuns can therefore only be ordained in the presence of ten *bhikshus* and ten *bhikshunis*. The three central precept masters of both categories must have been ordained for twelve years or more (Li, in Tsomo 2000: 182). A dual ordination ceremony involving *bhikshunis* from other traditions becomes problematic and complex. Monastic regulations stipulate that *bhikshunis* should be ordained in the presence of other *bhikshunis*. The re-establishment of an order of *bhikshunis* should ideally involve the participation of *bhikshunis* ordained in an existing lineage (Li, in Tsomo 2000: 181).

Some traditional ecclesiastics struggle with the idea of reintroducing full ordination for women as *bhikshuni* ordination in the Tibetan and Theravadin traditions has been an exclusively male privilege for centuries (Li, in Tsomo 2000: 181). It is commonly assumed and stated in some canonical texts, that women are incapable of achieving Buddhahood, despite the fact that the Buddha himself ordained women and that the account of his establishment of the *bhikshuni* order is preserved in the canon. This controversy is greatly compounded by complex power relations and vested interest within and between the Buddhist traditions. However, it also engendered substantial cooperation between nuns of the various traditions, and a number of international organisations of Buddhist women are engaging in the debate (Li, in Tsomo 2000: 181).

Ranking in the monastic hierarchy depends not only on gender but also on status determined by the number of years monastics have been ordained. The debate over *bhikshuni* ordination usually includes the requirement of dual ordination (Li, in Tsomo 2000: 182). However, women have also been ordained by *bhikshus* alone from time to time and the ordination was regarded as legitimate (Li, in Tsomo 2000: 183). Although the *Vinaya* states that the dual ordination ceremony with ten male and ten female precept masters present is the ideal, it does not declare a single ordination ceremony as invalid. Many ecclesiastics maintain however that it is the *bhikshus* rather than the *bhikshunis* who represent the concluding authority on the ordination of nuns. One could therefore argue that if it is the monks who are authorised to perform *bhikshuni* ordinations, then it is monks who must be held responsible for the absence of a *bhikshuni* (Li, in Tsomo 2000: 183).

Tibetan scholars are currently engaged in research and discussions concerning three possible methods of establishing *bhikshuni* ordination for Tibetan nuns: a ceremony consisting of 10 *Mulasarvastivada bhikshus* and 12 *Dharmagupta bhikshunis*; 10 *Mulasarvastivada bhikshus* performing the ceremony alone; or 10 *Dharmagupta bhikshus* and 10 *Dharmagupta bhikshunis* conducting the initial ceremony (Chodron, in Mohr & Tsedroen 2010: 183 – 194).

Cumbersome decision making procedures within the Tibetan ecclesiastic system demand that decisions concerning monastic law require formal consultations among senior monks of the Tibetan Buddhist community. Although His Holiness the Dalai Lama has therefore on several occasions publically expressed his support and interest in

establishing the *bhikshuni* ordination, he has also pointed out that it is not within his power, as a single monk, to formally recognise the *bhikshuni* lineage (Gyatso, in Mohr & Tsedroen 2010: 254, 279).

7.2 9 Prominent Western Tibetan Buddhist nuns

Cognisance needs to be taken of the exceptional contribution of five prominent Western Tibetan Buddhist nuns. Two of these nuns are academic scholars, most of them maintain current and informative websites, and almost all of them publish prolifically. The most renowned and respected of this group is Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo. She was also the first Western woman to be fully ordained, albeit in the Chinese Buddhist tradition (Mackenzie 1999: 35). She is in the unique position of being the only Westerner who is the founder and abbess of a Tibetan Buddhist nunnery, Dongyu Gatsal Ling (DGL), in India for nuns in the Himalayan regions. Tenzin Palmo has made an enormous contribution in highlighting the plight and status of Tibetan Buddhist nuns (Mackenzie 1999: 54, 55) by her honest and fearlessly outspoken campaign against gender prejudice and misogyny within the ranks of Tibetan Buddhism (Palmo 1993: <http://www.thubtenchodron.org/>). She is in high demand as a speaker (Mackenzie 1999: 149, 150) both in India and internationally, has been countlessly interviewed in the popular press and by academics, and has published three books to date (Dongyu Gatsal Ling Nunnery 2012: <http://www.tenzinpalmo.com>). Her nunnery serves as an example and inspiration to many Buddhist institutions due to its study programme, its administrative system, and its self-sustaining environment. The bestowal of the rare title of Jetsunma (Sherrill 2000: 149-151), has given her, and by implication, all Buddhist women (The 12th Gyalwang Drukpa 2008: <http://www.drukpa.com/>), recognition for attaining spiritual advancement within the ranks of a highly patriarchal religious system. The German nun, Carola Roloff, better known as Venerable Jampa Tsedroen, is a lecturer and research fellow at Hamburg University. She holds a B.A degree, an M.A. (magna cum laude), and a PhD (summa cum laude). She is a multi-linguist, fluent in six languages. Jampa Tsedroen is an exceptionally active nun, both as a Buddhist scholar and as an organiser and speaker, especially in the field of equal rights for Buddhist nuns. Dr. Roloff is a prolific researcher and has published three edited books, two research monographs, seven chapters in collected volumes, and nine research articles, as well as presenting in excess of 40 conference papers between 1987 and 2011. She is a member of the Bhikshuni Ordination Committee of the Ministry of Religion and

Culture of the Central Tibetan Administration in Dharamsala, and is the recipient of the 2007 Outstanding Buddhist Women Award in honour of the United Nations' International Women's Day (Roloff 2011: <http://www.carolaroloff.de>).

Venerable Karma Lekshe Tsomo is an associate professor in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of San Diego. She holds a B.A degree, two M.A. degrees, as well as a PhD. She is the editor of more than eight books, and has authored a book on a comparative analysis of the *Dharmagupta* and *Mulasarvastivada Bhikshuni Pratimoksa* lineages (Committee for Bhikshuni Ordination in the Tibetan Tradition 2011: <http://www.bhiksuniordination.net>), as well as one on Buddhism, bioethics, and death (Karma Lekshe Tsomo 2011: <http://www.sandiego.edu/cas>).

The abbess and founder of Sravasti Abbey in New Port, Washington, is Venerable Thubten Chodron. She holds a B.A degree and a post-graduate teacher's qualification. Thubten Chodron maintains two very active websites which offer audio teachings, transcripts of articles and talks, as well as Internet teachings (Sravasti Abbey 2011: <http://www.sravasti.org>; Thubten Chodron 2011: <http://www.thubtenchodron.org>). She is the author of more than nine books and served as editor of an additional eight books, all on aspects of Tibetan Buddhism.

Venerable Pema Chodron is an American nun in the Shambala tradition and resident teacher at Gampo Abbey in Nova Scotia, Canada. She is a qualified primary school teacher. She is the author of nine books and is exceptionally active in conducting Internet teachings and retreats (Pema Chodron 2012: <http://www.pemachodronfoundation.org>). All five of these nuns are fully ordained and were founding members of the *Committee for Bhiksuni Ordination*.

Two other Western nuns who have distinguished themselves in various Buddhist fields should also be acknowledged. Venerable Robina Courtin is an Australian nun who has worked tirelessly supporting the spread of Buddhism in prisons, and founded the Liberation Prison Project which supports the Buddhist practice and studies of thousands of prisoners in the USA and Australia. She is the co-editor of three books and maintains a lively and up-to-date website (Robina Courtin 2011: <http://www.liberationprisonproject.org/>). Venerable Geshe Kelsang Wangmo became not only the first

woman but also the first Westerner to earn the Geshe degree (Kelsang Wangmo 2011: <http://www.dharma-friends.org>). However, Kelsang Wangmo seems to be in a difficult position now that she is the only female, Western recipient of the degree and is keeping a low profile at the moment (Palmo, in Swanepoel, personal interview, DGL Nunnery, April 5, 2012).

7.2.10 Western Tibetan Buddhist nunneries

Western Tibetan Buddhist nuns have been prompted to set up their own nunneries in the West where they can pursue their spiritual lives in their own countries and communities and where the cultural and financial constraints they often face in India and Nepal are eliminated. The nunneries are self-sufficient and the monastic communities are small but they nevertheless provide an important opportunity for Western Buddhist women who wish to become nuns. Kagyu Samye Ling Monastery in Scotland was the first Tibetan study and meditation centre to be established in the West in 1967 (Kagyu Samye Ling 2011: <http://www.samyeling.org/>). There seems to be about 15 nuns associated with Samye Ling and living there from time to time (Ploos van Amstel 2005: 212). Gampo Abbey is in Canada and was started by Venerable Pema Chodron in 1984 at the request of her root teacher, Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche. The monastic community at Gampo Abbey currently consists of eight nuns and four monks (Gampo Abbey 2011: <http://www.gampoabbey.org/>). The Chenrezig Nuns Institute in Australia, founded in 1987, is currently the largest Western Tibetan Buddhist nunnery. Presently there are 20 nuns in residence at the institute. There are also a smaller number of monks living there (Chenrezig Institute 2012: <http://www.chenrezig.com.au>). Sravasti Abbey in the USA was founded by its present abbess, Venerable Thubten Chodron in 2003. The monastic community currently includes six monastics of which one is a monk (Sravasti Abbey 2011: <http://www.sravasti.org>).

7.2.11 Leading Buddhist women's organisations and conferences

Various conferences and organisations have been established to attend to the position and role of Buddhist women within the international Buddhist community. Most of these conferences and organisations were convened and established through the initiative of Western women. This deployment of Buddhist women was spearheaded by the *First International Buddhist Women's Conference* in Bodhgaya, India, in 1987.

Sakyadhita International Association of Buddhist Women was founded in 1987 directly as a result of this conference, and has since its foundation been instrumental in promoting the status of Buddhist women worldwide. In 1996 a three-week educational programme was held in Bodhgaya, entitled *Life as a Western Buddhist Nun*, which exposed many Tibetan nuns for the first time to the possibility of *bhikshuni* ordination. Simultaneously the Dalai Lama also requested the Department of Religion and Culture of the Tibetan Government-in-Exile in Dharamsala to investigate the authenticity of the extant *bhikshuni* lineages in the Chinese, Vietnamese, and Korean traditions, and to cooperate with leading monks of the Theravada traditions regarding the possibility of reviving *bhikshuni* ordination for Buddhist women worldwide (Committee for Bhikshuni Ordination in the Tibetan Tradition 2011: <http://www.bhiksuniordination.net>). In 2005, on the recommendation of the Dalai Lama, the *Committee of Western Buddhist Nuns*, now known as the *Committee for Bhikshuni Ordination*, was founded. The University of Hamburg convened the *International Congress on Buddhist Women's Role in the Sangha: Bhikshuni Vinaya and Ordination Lineages* in 2007. The Buddhist women's movement has been strengthened and supported in particular by the *International Congress on Buddhist Women's Role in the Sangha: Bhikshuni Vinaya and Ordination Lineages*, the *Committee for Bhikshuni Ordination*, and *Sakyadhita International Association of Buddhist Women*.

At the *International Congress on Buddhist Women's Role in the Sangha: Bhikshuni Vinaya and Ordination Lineages* there was unanimous agreement amongst the delegates that the *Mulasarvastivada bhikshuni* ordination needs to be, can be, and must be reinstated. Reflecting upon practical considerations and scriptural authority, the majority of delegates therefore recommended that the most satisfactory method for instating the *Mulasarvastivada bhikshuni* ordination lineage would be the introduction of a dual *sangha* consisting of *Mulasarvastivada bhikshus* and *Dharmagupta* (Chinese) *bhikshunis*. (Berzin 2007: <http://www.berzinarchives.com>).

The *Committee for Bhikshuni Ordination* (CBO) was established in 2005 on the advice of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. The Dalai Lama expressed a wish for *Western* nuns in particular, rather than *Tibetan* nuns, to carry out the task of researching and promoting the reestablishment of *bhikshuni* ordination in the Tibetan tradition. He charged the Western nuns with the assignment of discussing the full ordination of women with

senior monks since they will be instrumental in changing the attitudes of the other *bhikshus*. The Dalai Lama also established a fund, to which he donated a substantial amount, to administer the resources that would make travel and research possible for the CBO. The committee members currently are Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo, Venerable Karma Lekshe Tsomo, Venerable Thubten Chodron, Venerable Pema Chodron, Venerable Jampa Tsedroen, and Venerable Kunga Chodron. The CBO is currently preparing three educational booklets in both English and Tibetan, researched and written by leading academics in the field, many of whom are also *bhiksunis*. These booklets explain the *bhiksuni* ordination issue and justify providing an opportunity for full ordination for Buddhist nuns practicing in the Tibetan tradition (Committee for Bhikshuni Ordination in the Tibetan Tradition 2011: <http://www.bhiksuniordination.net>).

According to Tenzin Palmo (in Chang 2009: <http://blag.biz/sakyadhita>), much of the credit for the movement towards the improvement of the status of Buddhist nuns must be attributed to the Sakyadhita organization. Since its foundation, Sakyadhita has continued to hold bi-annual international conferences. Sakyadhita conferences have had significant outcomes, including acquainting the Buddhist community with the importance of access to full ordination, improved Buddhological scholarship, international educational exchanges, grassroots educational initiatives, and a body of published scholarship (Chang 2009: <http://blag.biz/sakyadhita>).

7.2.12 Women's spiritual potential

Buddhist monastic life offers women alternatives to conventional domestic roles and affords them the opportunity to realise their spiritual potential unencumbered by the stereotypes, burdens, and responsibilities of lay life. However, the ideal of spiritual equality remains an empty claim as long as there are inadequate structures to support women's practice (Tsomo 2000: xvii). Incongruities such as gender inequality in Buddhist societies, gendered interpretations of Buddhist doctrines, and discriminatory authority structures in traditional Buddhist institutions all demand an on-going investigation into Buddhist women's history and practice (Tsomo 2000: xviii). Since about half of the converts to Buddhism in the West are laywomen who are devout practitioners, their way of combining life in the modern world with serious Buddhist practice will be significant for the future of Buddhism worldwide as well as for Buddhist women in every Buddhist country (Gross, in Tsomo 1999: 277).

Nuns play a vital role in communicating Buddhist teachings and attracting female followers. Even though the most important Buddhist scholars are still elderly monks, young nuns are increasingly the most educated and sophisticated members of the Buddhist community, especially Taiwanese and Western nuns (Li, in Tsomo 2000: 178).

There is a fundamental correlation between ordination, monastic administration, and financial support (Li, in Tsomo 2000: 178). *Bhikshuni* ordination has developed into the central focus in the Buddhist women's movement since it provides access to advanced individual spiritual cultivation as well as to the benefits of a collective administrative system. Buddhist nuns without full ordination are excluded from the centre of authority, including the right to control their own spiritual training (Li, in Tsomo 2000: 178). Buddhist nuns in the Chinese tradition flourish in China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, because they have access to *bhikshuni* ordination and benefit from a full monastic life. The vitality of Taiwanese nuns in particular is ascribed to their access to *bhikshuni* ordination and the accompanying benefits of monastic life (Li, in Tsomo 2000: 178).

7.2.13 Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo

Chapter 6 narrates the biography of Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo in a fair amount of detail as she serves as the case study of this thesis. She is unique amongst Tibetan Buddhist nuns and serves as an icon to other nuns as well as lay practitioners (Mackenzie 1999: 44), for the following reasons:

- Although she is a Westerner, she is the most senior Tibetan Buddhist nun alive today.
- She was the first Western woman to be fully ordained, albeit in the Chinese Buddhist tradition (Mackenzie 1999: 74).
- She is the only woman, and only Western woman, who is the founder and abbess of a nunnery in India. Nunneries are usually administered by abbots (see 6.1).
- She attained fame for the twelve years she spent stoically meditating in a cave in the Himalayas (see 6.5).
- She has made an enormous contribution in highlighting the plight and status of Tibetan Buddhist nuns (Mackenzie 1999: 54, 55) by her honest and fearlessly

outspoken campaign against gender prejudice and misogyny within the ranks of Tibetan Buddhism (Palmo 1993, <http://www.thubtenchodron.org/BuddhistNunsMonasticLife>).

- She is in high demand as a speaker (Mackenzie 1999: 149, 150) both in India and internationally; she has been countlessly interviewed in the popular press and by academics; and has published three books to date (<http://tenzinpalmo.com>).
- Her nunnery, DGL, serves as an example and inspiration to many Buddhist institutions due to its study programme, its administrative system, and its self-sustaining environment (see 6.7, 6.7.3, 6.7.4, 6.7.5).
- The bestowal of the rare title of Jetsunma (Sherrill 2000: 149-151), has given her, and by implication, all Buddhist women (The 12th Gyalwang Drukpa 2008: <http://www.drukpa.com/teachings/by-our-dragon-masters/38-gdrukpa/14-tenzin-palmo>), recognition for attaining spiritual advancement (<http://tenzinpalmo.com>) within the ranks of a highly patriarchal religious system, despite some pronouncements and popularly held beliefs that women are not capable of the same spiritual progression as men (see 4.8).
- Despite the frustration that Tenzin Palmo and other nuns suffer regarding the instatement of bhikshuni ordination and the accompanying opportunities for further in-depth study, she advocates patience and compassion for a process she ultimately believes will eventually grant recognition to women's equal status in Tibetan Buddhism (Palmo, in Thompson & Cox 2003).

7.3 HUMAN RIGHTS?

On the sixtieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 2008, the Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy (TCHRD) published (2009) a promotional pamphlet on discrimination against women and the status of women worldwide based on research by the United Nations. It is ironic in many ways that the TCHRD should see fit to publish such a document since discrimination against women is still so visible within the ranks of Tibetan Buddhism.

In a declaration by the United Nations it states that “[e]quality is the cornerstone of every democratic society which aspires to social justice and human rights” (TCHRD 2009: 3). Withholding bhikshuni ordination from Tibetan Buddhist nuns, for whatever

reason, indicates that Tibetan society⁴³ is not yet fully democratic. Despite the Dalai Lama's efforts to democratise the Tibetan Government-in-Exile by stepping down as the secular head of that government (see 2.5.1), and the democratic election of a new leader in the form of Dr. Lobsang Sangay, reform within Tibetan Buddhism seems unusually slow in coming. Looking only to the Dalai Lama to spearhead the same kind of change as that brought about in the Tibetan Parliament-in-Exile, seems to be misplaced. His Holiness has certainly done much to encourage the improvement of nuns' status and to support research into the bhikshuni issue. He has also on several occasions, notably in 2005 and 2007, made it clear that he fully supported the reinstatement of full ordination for nuns in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition (see 4.1). He has been instrumental in establishing and funding (see 5.10.1 and 5.10.2) organisations, and requested the convening of conferences regarding the status of women in Tibetan Buddhism. His Holiness has even made the astonishing announcement that his next incarnation may well be as a woman (Johnson 2011: 148). Furthermore he stated that the time has arrived for women to assume a more active role in world peace and in promoting human compassion (see 4.1). However, the Dalai Lama seems to be in a difficult position. Although he is the head of all four schools of Tibetan Buddhism (see 2.5.1) he is not invested with the authority simply to change the *status quo* of rites and ceremonies (li, in Tsomo 2000: 187). His position is further complicated by recent events concerning what is called the "Shugden affair" which have divided his own Gelug tradition, and Tenzin Palmo is of the opinion that he needs to tread carefully around the subject of bhikshuni ordination in order to avoid further division within his own school of Tibetan Buddhism (Swanepoel, private interview, DGL Nunnery, April 5, 2012).

Hundreds of Tibetan Buddhist monks have been killed, imprisoned, tortured, or driven into exile by the Communist Chinese since their invasion of Tibet in the 1950s (see 3.4, 3.4.1, and 3.5.2). "The pacifist Buddhist monks are about as innocent and noble as victims can be" (Wilson 1999: <http://www.dorjeshugden.com/others-old/schisms-murder-and-hungry-ghosts-in-shangri-la/>). His Holiness the Dalai Lama is perceived as equally kind, compassionate, and heroic, and is one of the most universally respected religious leaders of our time. However, this peace-loving image may not always be

⁴³ Tibetan society here indicates the Tibetan society-in-exile since the research for this thesis has encompassed mainly Tibetans and Tibetan Buddhism outside the People's Republic of China. Tibet itself is closed to foreigners and research on the situation within the borders of that region is severely restricted.

matched by reality, and internal conflicts were cited by some observers as the reason for the ritualistic murder of three anti-Shugden clerics in Dharamsala in 1997 (Wilson 1999: <http://www.dorjeshugden.com/others-old/schisms-murder-and-hungry-ghosts-in-shangri-la/>). The problem centres on a deity, Dorje Shugden, who made his appearance nearly four centuries ago. Shugden is seen either as a wrathful demon or as a protecting saviour. Shugden worshippers seem to be “aggressively sectarian” (Johnson 2011: 261) and claim to be protecting the purity of the Gelugpa tradition, setting schools of Tibetan Buddhism against each other (Wilson 1999: <http://www.dorjeshugden.com/others-old/schisms-murder-and-hungry-ghosts-in-shangri-la/>). The Shugden movement is lead largely by a dissident Tibetan lama living in England with a large Western following (Johnson 2011: 261). The Dalai Lama has forbidden further Shugden worship (Johnson 2011: 262, 263) and has therefore attracted the wrath of its followers. They have painted a very different picture of the Dalai Lama, one that is unrecognisable to outsiders, calling him a “tyrant and a power-hungry religious dictator” (Johnson 2011: 261). Matters were made worse by the seemingly ritualistic murders on February 4, 1997, of the director of the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics, Lobsang Gyatso, and his two attendant monks. Five Shugden followers were questioned by the police, but since there were no witnesses who saw the assailants entering the director’s room, they were released. They have subsequently returned to Chinese protection in a Shugden-supporting region of Tibet because the opportunistic Chinese authorities have used the whole “Shugden affair” to their advantage, portraying the Dalai Lama as “a hypocrite on freedom of religion to undermine his credibility” (Johnson 2011: 261).

Therefore, although the Dalai Lama has publicly supported bhikshuni ordination and has done much to support the organisations involved in the issue, he claims (Li 2000, in Tsomo: 187) that he does not possess the authority to force the issue, even though he did seemingly have the authority to outlaw Shugden worship. Tenzin Palmo is of the opinion that he is hoping that all the Buddhist schools, including the Theravadins, will be able to provide an acceptable solution for the eventual instatement of bhikshuni ordination. She claims that this is simply a delaying tactic since some top Gelugpa geshes are opposed to female ordination. However, according to Palmo, some other geshes have been extremely helpful and have conducted valuable research, going right back to the original texts instead of relying only on the commentaries – and the texts have shown quite clearly that bhikshuni ordination can easily be instated. However,

many geshes do not see any advantage in it for themselves. They claim that the nuns have been studying for many years without receiving bhikshuni ordination or geshema degrees, and that this issue has now been stirred up by a bunch of Western feminists. Furthermore, these geshes claim that surely studying is enough – the nuns do not need titles. “No one will say that to a monk!” (Palmo, in Swanepoel, private interview, DGL Nunnery, April 5, 2012).

It is therefore clear that women have not yet attained equal status within the ranks of Tibetan Buddhism, and that the problem is fraught with internal politics. It is ironic that the geshema degree has now been instituted for Tibetan Buddhist nuns by the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics. The Institute offers a Rime Geshe degree which is a non-sectarian degree authorised by the Dalai Lama in 2009 (<http://www.tibetanreview.net/news.php>). The geshe degree may only be awarded to fully ordained monastics, so although nuns may enter the 18-year long study programme, unless bhikshuni ordination is instated in the meantime, this degree remains an inferior one since the nuns will still be barred from studying the full Vinaya texts (Tsedroen 2013: 2). But perhaps it is a step in the right direction, and the instatement of bhikshuni ordination might follow soon.

Although gender equality is a crucial component of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights and U.N. Resolution 1325 (Tsomo 2010, in Mohr & Tsedroen: 281), gender discrimination continues in many societies, including the seemingly passive Tibetan Buddhist religious community, as borne out by the decades-long debate about the question whether bhikshuni ordination should be allowed, and if, how it should be instated. Religious traditions that determine societal attitude towards women as well as women’s opinions about themselves, often convey mixed messages. Most of the major world religions assert that women and men possess equal potential for liberation and/or enlightenment and are equal in the sight of God. However, social realities reveal a stark contradiction between rhetoric and reality (Tsomo 2010, in Mohr & Tsedroen: 281). Most women continue to lack equal representation in social, political, and religious institutions (Tsomo 2010, in Mohr & Tsedroen: 281). The failure of the world’s religions to realize their professed ideals is therefore hypocritical and exposes religious institutions’ lack of social responsiveness to the needs of human society (Tsomo 2010, in Mohr & Tsedroen: 281). Unfortunately, Tibetan Buddhism seems to be no different.

While His Holiness the Dalai Lama professes that human rights are universal and follow naturally from concepts such as compassion and interrelatedness (Tsomo 2010, in Mohr & Tsedroen: 282) it is ironic that his own institution finds it so difficult to transcend such blatant institutionalised gender discrimination such as withholding opportunities for equal study and bhikshuni ordination from its nuns. Philosophically, Buddhists claim that all sentient beings have the potential to achieve enlightenment. Enlightenment is achieved by purifying one's mind of all mental afflictions, which is achieved through acquiring knowledge and by conducive conditions for practice, but nuns in the Tibetan tradition are denied access to certain teachings available only to fully ordained monastics, and their meagre conditions are often not advantageous to practice. Social, cultural, and religious constraints which do not apply to men therefore may impede women's ability to realise the goals of their chosen religious path (Tsomo 2010, in Mohr & Tsedroen: 283, 284).

Karma Lekshe Tsomo (2010, in Mohr & Tsedroen: 285) states that to assert women's inferiority or to restrict women's admission to monastic orders on the basis of gender "not only contravenes Buddhist ethics" but "is sadly out of step with the times." She adds (2010, in Mohr & Tsedroen: 285) that "gender discrimination is both contradictory to Buddhist principles and contrary to the norms of a progressive society". Buddhist institutions consequently need to recognise equal rights for women in order to be consistent with Buddhism's socially liberating message. The freedom to receive bhikshuni ordination is not only in the best interest of women, but it is also in the best interest of society at large, since it optimises the potential of all human beings (Karma Lekshe Tsomo 2012, in Mohr & Tsedroen: 287). Religious rights and freedom are regarded as among the most fundamental human rights. In denying religious rights and freedom to women, as Tibetan Buddhism does in withholding bhikshuni ordination and access to restricted religious practices and education, Buddhist institutions are in direct conflict with these basic human rights. In the present day, countries which deny women the right to vote are considered backward. Similarly, Buddhism will certainly "go down on the wrong side of history" (Karma Lekshe Tsomo 2012, in Mohr & Tsedroen: 289) if it continues to deny women the religious rights and privileges enjoyed by men. In addition, one might add that there are approximately three million (Tsomo 2006: xi) Buddhist

women worldwide and this alone has (Chang 2009: <http://blag.biz/sakyadhita>) the potential for global transformation since Buddhist women are already by definition committed to peace, honesty, compassion, and positive human values.

7.4 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

In recapitulation therefore of the research question and sub-questions as stated in 1.2 the findings of this research can succinctly be stated as follows:

- The nature of gender bias within Tibetan Buddhism pertains to the unavailability of full ordination for nuns, the institutional preference for monks and its accompanying privileges such as funding and a superior education, and the attainment of the Geshema degree, which in its present form is inferior to the Geshe degree in view of the fact that novice nuns may not study the full Vinayasutra texts.
- The instatement of bhikshuni ordination has been held back by androcentric record keeping, misogynistic meditation practices and attitudes, and cumbersome decision making processes.
- *Western* women's attraction to Tibetan Buddhism is dealt with in 7.2.1. To this I might add that the nuns indicated in the questionnaire that their choice of a *monastic* lifestyle was influenced by their wish to study Buddhism and to pursue intensive meditational practices and retreats unencumbered by the responsibilities of careers, spouses, and children. Furthermore, the choice of *Tibetan* Buddhism was more often than not a result of meeting the right teacher/root guru, rather than a rational choice to follow *Tibetan* Buddhism as opposed to other schools of Buddhism (see 7.2.4.1).
- The important role of Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo in the struggle against gender bias in the Tibetan tradition is highlighted in 7.2.5.
- I am of the opinion that three other Western nuns in particular have been instrumental in commencing the process of gender transformation and equalisation, namely Venerable Bhikshunis Jampa Tsedroen, Thubten Chodron, and Karma Lekshe Tsomo (see 5.7.1, 5.7.2, and 5.7.3). Jampa Tsedroen and Thubten Chodron have both done valuable in-depth research on the Buddhist canon and its commentaries in order to find an acceptable way forward to realise the instatement of bhikshuni ordination. Furthermore, Jampa Tsedroen and

Thubten Chodron have addressed the Tibetan ecclesiastic community on the bhikshuni issue and have presented their research to senior monks and decision makers. Karma Lekshe Tsomo has expressed herself forcefully on the issue of institutionalised gender discrimination in her many publications and in her commitment to the bi-annual *Sakyadhita* conferences. All three nuns have also worked tirelessly as members of the *Committee for Bhikshuni Ordination* to inform nuns of current developments and to compile and put out informative publications.

7.5 CONCLUSION

Armstrong writes (1996: xi) that “[r]eligious people must above all be concerned about truth even if it is sometimes uncomfortable.” I would like to postulate in the conclusion to this thesis that gender bias is still prevalent in Tibetan Buddhism, especially concerning the status of nuns, the unavailability of full-ordination, the difficulty in obtaining recognition for years of study in the form of the geshema degree (even though they may now be awarded this degree it does not have the same status as that awarded to the monks in view of the exclusion of the Vinaya texts), and the obstacles they face in obtaining sufficient funds to manage their nunneries.

In her seminal book on a feminist reconstruction of Buddhism, Gross (1993: 125) states that inadequate consideration has been given to the implications of Buddhist doctrines for gender issues, and that existing literature is deficient in its treatment of the reconstruction of the Buddhist world in accordance with feminist values. She furthermore postulates (2012: <http://www.sakyadhita.org/conferences/13vaishali-India/documents.html>) that a female rebirth is often considered to be an obstacle to enlightenment in most schools of Buddhism. Although Buddhist feminist thought has, by now, deconstructed this doctrine, and has proven that it is theoretically unsound, a female birth remains an obstacle in many parts of the world, and is still considered unfortunate by some die-hard, fundamentalist Tibetan Buddhist lamas. Furthermore, Buddhist feminists have extensively reiterated that there is a denial and a repression of female presence in the iconography and practices of Buddhism. Wangmo (2012: <http://www.sakyadhita.org/conferences/13vaishali-India/documents.html>) claims that there are deeply embedded exercises of control and secret practices in Tibetan

Buddhism, especially in the monastic realm and its tantric practices that have amplified and supported women's so-called inferior character. It is perhaps time that Buddhist institutional practices move beyond masculinisation, and supports the unfolding of a more female-friendly Dharma that enables its women practitioners to realise their full potential as well (Wangmo 2012: <http://www.sakyadhita.org/conferences/13vaishali-India/documents.html>).

Devaluing women's contribution to spiritual life and community is not unique to Buddhist culture, but is common to all patriarchal societies (Torrens 2012: <http://www.ru.org/92torrens.html>). However, a feminist approach to patriarchal restrictions and misogyny need not be strident or accusatory, or be confined to the cycle of action and reaction. Torrens (2012: <http://www.ru.org/92torrens.html>) declares that women should simply be adamant and wise in their effort to reclaim their place in the history of spiritual practice. Women have for too long been viewed in the spiritual arena as the object of desire to be overcome, rather than as partners on the path to self-realisation (Torrens 2012: <http://www.ru.org/92torrens.html>). Torrens (2012: <http://www.ru.org/92torrens.html>) proposes that it is not surprising that paganism has in recent years grown in popularity since it celebrates the mysterious nature of the female form and female sexuality. Women are restored to the level of matriarchs, recognising that the menstrual cycle reflects a link with the rhythms of nature and the universes as a symbiosis of the lunar flux. Women are celebrated as life givers, and fertility rituals celebrate women as the expression of the life force thereby rendering them as intensely mystical and spiritual beings (Torrens 2012: <http://www.ru.org/92torrens.html>).

Inadequate androcentric record keeping has deprived women of the opportunity to be able to refer to highly accomplished female spiritual practitioners of the past for guidance and inspiration (Gross 1993: 90, 91). The need for the excavation of texts about or by yoginis is therefore apparent (Torrens 2012: <http://www.ru.org/92torrens.html>). It is consequently highly inspirational and supportive for present female Buddhist practitioners to be able to refer to the biography of a present-day yogini such as Tenzin Palmo. Her efforts to transform the male face of Tibetan Buddhism, her own spiritual achievements, and the formal recognition she has received for it from the Tibetan Buddhist religious community, the establishment of a progressive nunnery and the resurrection of the togdenma tradition, as well as her outspoken determination to achieve enlightenment in the female form, "have been of

incalculable benefit in inspiring other women on the spiritual path” (Torrens 2012: <http://www.ru.org/92torrens.html>). Tenzin Palmo’s achievement as a Western woman is doubly significant in the development of women’s recognition within a deeply rooted patriarchal tradition, as well as further testimony that Westerns are also capable of “unwavering commitment and formidable accomplishments” (Schwab 2012: 51) on the Buddhist path.

Recently progress has been made within the ranks of Tibetan Buddhism towards the recognition of women’s equal monastic status by the agreement of the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics to confer the Geshema degree on nuns. However, in the past it was necessary to study the full Vinaya texts in order to qualify for this degree. Since bhikshuni ordination is not yet available to nuns in the Tibetan tradition, they may not study the full Mulasarvastivada Vinayasutra texts. The degree will therefore be conferred upon the nuns without this module, so to speak, which once again makes it a more inferior degree than the one conferred upon the monks (Tsedroen 2013: 2). In October 2012 a committee of senior Tibetan Buddhist lamas and scholars met in Dharamsala to discuss, for the first time, not *if* bhikshuni ordination was possible, but *how* to set up full ordination for nuns. The outcome of the meeting is imminent (Swanepoel: personal correspondence with Ani Aileen, 17 October 2012). Nevertheless, without the support of the senior monks, the instatement of bhikshuni ordination will remain a problematic issue (Heirman 2011: 603).

“The world needs yoginis... We need women who are not just realized but very deeply stabilized in their realization, with real understanding and knowledge of the Dharma because they have studied...so that in time they can come out and also teach. Because you know, all we women, we don’t have so many female teachers and for the future we need them, don’t we? It’s just an example of what women can do” (Palmo 2009b, in De Re, <http://www.northwestdharma.org/news/08NovdecIssue/yoginis.php>).

GLOSSARY

With reference to Ehrhard 1994; Farber 2003; Tenzin Palmo 2002; Gross 1993; Vessantara 2008

Acarya: A Buddhist master teacher instructing novice monastics in monastic rules and discipline.

Ani: A Buddhist nun.

Arhat/i: A person whose impurities are dissolved, whose wishes are fulfilled, who has laid down his burden, attained his goal, and freed his mind through perfect understanding. The arhat attains nirvana immediately following this life. In contrast to the bodhisattva of Mahayana Buddhism who wishes to free all beings, with the arhat the emphasis is on striving to gain his own salvation.

Bardo: The state between death and rebirth, usually lasting forty-nine days.

Bhikshuni: A fully ordained Buddhist nun.

Bhikkuni: Pali term for bhikshuni.

Bodhisattva: A being pledged to become a Buddha and by gaining enlightenment helping others escape from suffering.

Buddha: Someone who is fully enlightened.

Chod: An esoteric meditation practice often practised in solitary, frightening locations designed to sever attachment to ego and conventional reality.

Damaru: A drum, usually double-headed and made either of skulls or of wood, used in some forms of Tantric meditation and ritual.

Dakini: A yogini who has achieved a high level of realisation. Dakinis may be human beings with these special qualities or they may be manifestations of an enlightened mind. They are female entities who have vowed to aid practitioners by removing obstacles and creating auspicious circumstances.

Dana: A form of almsgiving to mendicant monks and nuns.

Dharma: The teachings of the Lord Buddha, or Buddhadharma, the universal truth.

Dharma-acarya: Buddhist teacher responsible for observance of rites, rules, and discipline in a monastic community.

Dharmagupta: Chinese Buddhist Vinaya tradition.

Empowerment: The process whereby the disciple is enabled by the guru to carry out specific meditation processes.

Gelongma: Tibetan for bhikshuni/fully ordained nun.

Getsul/ma: Novice monks and nuns

Geshe/Geshema degree: The highest degree in the Gelug monastic system, equivalent to a PhD.

Gompa: A monastic complex.

Gyalwang: An honorific title given to high incarnate lamas.

Karmapa: The name given to the succession of reincarnate lamas who are the heads of the Karma Kagyu sub-sect of Tibetan Buddhism.

Kata: A white scarf traditionally given in greeting by Tibetans.

Lama dances: Dances performed at monasteries associated with meditative rituals and ceremonies. The monks usually wear masks and elaborate costumes. The dances are accompanied by chanting, symbols, and drums.

Mahayana: This literally means “great vehicle.” One of the two principal vehicles of Buddhism. The other vehicle is Hinayana, or “lesser vehicle.” The Mahayana is based on the motivation to attain complete Buddhahood in order to liberate all sentient beings from samsara.

Manjusri: The bodhisattva of wisdom.

Mendicants: Monastics dependent on alms.

Misogyny: A hatred or dislike of women.

Mulasarvastivada: Tibetan Buddhist Vinaya tradition.

Paramitas: The paramitas are six kinds of virtuous practices required for skilfully serving the welfare of others and for the attainment of enlightenment, i.e. generosity, ethical behaviour, patience, joyous effort, concentration, and wisdom.

Prajnaparamita: A series of forty Mahayana sutras dealing with the highest consciousness of intuitive wisdom, i.e. prajna.

Pratimoksa precepts: A part of the Vinaya that contains the disciplinary rules for nuns and monks.

Puja: A ceremony that includes recitation of sacred texts and mantras, the invocation and visualisation of deities, and the presentation of offerings.

Root guru: A practitioner's original or main teacher.

Refuge: A ceremony whereby a person promises allegiance to the Buddha, the Dharma (the teachings of the Buddha), and the Sangha (the spiritual community).

Sadhana: A term for a particular type of liturgical text and the meditation practices presented in it. Sadhana texts describe in detail deities to be experienced as spiritual realities and the entire process from graphic visualisation of these deities to dissolving them into formless meditation.

Sadhu: An Indian holy man, or ascetic.

Samsara: The state of cyclical existence wherein the circumstances of beings are determined by their past actions and habitual mental patterns.

Sangha: Traditionally, this term is used for the community of monks and nuns. Nowadays, especially in Western Dharma centres, the term is used loosely to comprise the members thereof.

Sanyasin: Hindu mendicant.

Siddhi: Supernormal attainments gained through meditation, especially Tantra meditation. Enlightenment is the supreme siddhi.

Sila-upadhyaya: The head officiate at an ordination ceremony.

Sramanera/Sramanerika: novice monk/nun.

Stupa: A characteristic Buddhist monument in the form of a pointed dome, often the focal point in temples and monasteries. Originally it contained sacred relics, and is a symbolic reminder of the awakened state of mind.

Summum bonum: (Latin) The highest good/aim.

Sutra: Text attributed to the Buddha.

Tantra: The continuum from ignorance to enlightenment. This term is also used to describe certain currents existing in both Hinduism and Buddhism which developed for the purpose of speeding progress along the path to enlightenment.

Thangka: A Tibetan silk painting usually depicting a Buddhist deity or mandala.

The Three Jewels: the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha.

Togden/ma: Advanced male/female yogic practitioner of the Drukpa Kagyu lineage.

Torma: Ritual butter and flour sculptures.

Tsampa: The staple food of Tibetans. Barley ground into flour and usually made into dumplings to eat for breakfast.

Tukdam: The meditative state of a realised lama after death when the body does not decay. The heart centre remains warm and rigor mortis does not set in.

Tumo: Through the regulation of the rhythm of the breath, concentration on the naval centre, and the visualisation of certain syllables, the practitioner can raise his/her body heat.

Upadhyaya: A Buddhist teacher responsible for the observance of rites, rules, and discipline in a monastic community.

Upasampada: Ordination ceremony.

Vajra: A ritual sceptre, which symbolically combines the qualities of both diamond and thunderbolt.

Vinaya: The books of discipline containing the ethical precepts set out by the Buddha to guide the conduct of monastics and lay people.

Yidam: A term used for a personal deity whose nature corresponds to the individual psychological make-up of the practitioner.

Yogin/i: A male/female practitioner who practices intense meditation techniques which may include either physical or mental disciplines.

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APPENDIX I

Nuns' Questionnaire

1. How and where did you first encounter Buddhism?
2. Why did Tibetan Buddhism in particular appeal to you as opposed to other forms of Buddhism?
3. What attracted you to the dharma in the first place?
4. Briefly outline your educational background.
5. Why did you choose to become a nun rather than a lay Buddhist?
6. How old were you when you received your novice ordination, and where and by who were you ordained?
7. Which nunnery did you join, and why?
8. Do you have any sponsors?
9. If not, how do you manage financially?
10. When did you receive full ordination, where, and from whom?
11. How did you prepare for your full ordination?
12. What are the challenges you face as a western Tibetan Buddhist nun?
13. What do you understand by the term enlightenment?
14. Can it be achieved in the body of a woman?
15. Is it something you are wishing to achieve in this lifetime?
16. How would you go about doing that?
17. What in your opinion is the best way to address the gender issue in Tibetan Buddhism/Buddhism on the whole?
18. Who/what is holding back the implementation of the full bhikshuni ordination for women?
19. Daily schedule/ retreats