

FROM SERVANT (*G.YOG MO*) TO DISCIPLE (*SLOB MA*):
MODERNITY, MIGRATION, AND EVOLVING LIFE COURSE
OPTIONS FOR BUDDHIST NUNS

GEOFF CHILDS AND NAMGYAL CHOEDUP

The aroma of roasting barley permeates the mountain air as we enter the courtyard of a modest dwelling. Ani Tsering sits beside an open fire, stirring barley grains in a skillet until they dance about, propelled by the popping of their shells. After a few moments Ani Tsering transfers the vessel to the stones paving her courtyard and extinguishes the flame so that the unburnt ends of the sticks do not go to waste. In a sunny corner sits her 80-year-old mother, body withered by a lifetime of childbearing and agricultural toil, the only perceptible movement from her lips as she continuously recites prayers. Ani Tsering is a village-based nun in Nubri, Nepal, who helped raise her younger siblings and then lived with her two fathers until they died, and still fulfills the role of primary caretaker for her aged mother. We were here to interview Ani Tsering; she represents a fading tradition of village-based nuns whose socio-economic obligations overshadow their religious aspirations.

A woman's path to religious attainment in Tibetan society can be strewn with obstacles rooted in traditional gender roles and ideologies. As many scholars have noted, monks far outnumber nuns, monasteries receive better funding than nunneries, and monks have better access to teachings and enjoy higher social status than nuns.¹ Recognition of the gender imbalance has sparked several debates, for example, whether Tibetan nuns should be allowed to attain full ordination on par with their male counterparts.² Such discussions highlight not only persisting inequities, but also the changing roles and status of Tibetan nuns in a transnational religious environment.

¹ Seminal works on gender and religion in Tibetan societies include Willis 1987, Havnevik 1989, Gutschow 2004, and Gyatso and Havnevik 2005. The biographies of Ani Lochen (1865–1951; Havnevik 1998) and Orgyan Chokyi (1675–1729; Schaeffer 2004) contain insightful details on gender and the struggle for religious attainment. On a nunery in rural Nepal, see Fürer-Haimendorf 1976.

² Tsomo 2004; Mroziak 2009; Mohr and Tsedroen 2010; Heirman 2011.

Meanwhile, an ongoing trend has increased the scale and improved the quality of monastic options for women. The construction of numerous nunneries in India and Nepal, initiated by Tibetan lamas living in exile and related to the transnational flow of religious patronage,³ is prompting families in the high Himalayas to reevaluate their selection of life course options for daughters. Until recently, ordaining a daughter as a nun and then keeping her at home was a popular, pragmatic option to enhance the household's labor force and ensure a caretaker for aging parents. That tradition is dwindling because nowadays parents prefer to send their nun-daughters to newly founded institutions in Kathmandu and India that provide both secular and traditional education. The phenomenon has opened pathways for girls to attain more rigorous religious training while reducing the time they devote to tasks associated with worldly suffering. This essay explores how the role of the nun in Nubri, an ethnically Tibetan enclave in the highlands of Nepal, is changing from being a servant for her parents' household to a disciple of the Buddha's teachings.

THE LIFE OF A VILLAGE-BASED NUN

In rural Tibetan societies parents normatively keep at least one son at home and send daughters as brides to other households. Moving daughters outside the natal household is important: many consider it risky to keep an unmarried, adult daughter under the same roof with her brothers' spouse because of the possibility that the two women will quarrel over control and authority. But marriage is not the only option for moving a daughter out of the household. Parents can build a separate residence for an unmarried daughter where she can live independently but continue contributing labor to the household, send her as an adoptive daughter to a childless couple, or ordain her as a nun.⁴

The nun option seems tempting given the hardships that women face in rural Tibetan societies. Orgyan Chokyi (1675–1729), a nun from Dolpo, had a miserable childhood. Born to a vindictive mother and a leprosy-ridden father who wanted a son, they named her “Happiness Dashed” (Kyilo) and habitually berated and beat her. After her father died Orgyan Chokyi requested ordination. An elderly nun advised,

³ On patronage, see Frechette 2002, Moran 2004, and Zablocki 2009.

⁴ For more on this topic, see Childs, Goldstein, and Wangdai 2011.

You must persevere in the Dharma, for if you were to do worldly work in Peson [her village], you would be forced into corvée labor spring, summer, winter, and fall without rest. As a corvée laborer you would carry water and work all the time. Meet the Dharma, take refuge, study: then you will not suffer.⁵

Lest we believe that donning crimson robes buffers a nun from familial obligations, Kim Gutschow reminds us that worldly life “both draw and derail the Zangskari woman’s quest for celibacy.”⁶ In other words, a woman’s lack of power in her household and the physical hardships she must endure through childbearing and domestic chores provide tremendous incentives to become a nun. However, gendered roles and expectations continuously divert a nun from religious practice; living in a nunnery cannot fully protect her from domestic duties, as illustrated by the continual distractions Orgyan Chokyi encountered by having to provide services for lay patrons. During one burst of communal religious activity she lamented, “In the kitchen of mistaken conventional reality, with no leisure day or night, I was saddled with the work of [preparing] food and drink.”⁷

In Nubri, parents traditionally ordain their eldest daughter as a nun. An oft-expressed cultural rationale is that, by bequeathing her to a life dedicated to religion, both parents and daughter gain merit. However, one can deduce by observing the life course and living conditions of village-based nuns that pragmatic motivations supersede cultural rationales. Until recently nuns were not sent to retreats isolated from the rest of society, but were retained within their households to care for younger siblings, help with farm chores, and eventually act as primary caretakers for aging parents. The life of the village-based nun does involve some training and spiritual practice: during the first month of the Tibetan lunar calendar lamas provide basic liturgical instructions, and each month nuns are expected to participate in community rituals. But beyond intermittent ritual engagements, village-based nuns’ daily activities do not diverge considerably from those of their lay counterparts.⁸

⁵ Schaeffer 2004: 139.

⁶ Gutschow 2001: 52. Zangskar is a Tibetan Buddhist enclave in northern India.

⁷ Schaeffer 2004: 157.

⁸ Childs 2004: 133–41. It is impossible to determine how long this family management strategy has been practiced. In 1995 Childs encountered several 80-year-old village-resident nuns in Sama who fit the above description, so the practice dates to at least 1920 when these women were ordained.

Ani Tsering's⁹ (b. 1949) small house sits on the grounds of Pema Chöling, a monastery complex that is designated as the realm of religious practitioners (*mchod pa'i yul*) in contrast to the nearby village of Sama which is labelled the realm of worldly sufferers (*'jig rten pa'i yul*). Despite being symbolically detached from the village, Ani Tsering's life epitomizes how gender-based social norms continually ensnare her in a web of mundane obligations. Here is how she describes her life as a village-based nun.

My parents made me a nun at a very young age. It was not my decision. We nuns are made to work for our parents all our lives. Because I am the eldest child, I had to work very hard to help raise my younger brothers and sisters. Now my sisters are all married and my brothers have started their own households. After I had done all the hard work and all of them were settling into their own lives, I came up here to live at the monastery. At the time I was in my 40s.

When I was around 50, my parents came up here to live with me. I had to serve my parents as well as one of the lamas. At the same time I had to work to make a living for myself because my parents were not wealthy. I had to fetch water, clean the house, collect firewood for my kitchen, and I needed money to buy an iron stove and other things. So I did not get to care for my parents very well because I had to work so much.

If you are a nun, you don't receive much wealth.¹⁰ A daughter who marries receives some wealth because parents lose face if they don't give her some. But since we nuns don't marry, we don't get much of anything. I have only one small plot of land that my parents gave me, but it is not enough to feed me. I am single, and have to farm the land by myself. For plowing, I ask others with draft animals for help because I don't have any animals. We do labor exchange. For one day of plowing, I have to return two days of manual labor. I understand that farming is a sinful activity¹¹ but for the sake of your stomach, you have to farm.

We nuns recite prayers for a month or two in winter starting in the 12th month [of the Tibetan calendar, January]. In addition, the nuns and monks under my lama gather for religious offerings (*tshogs pa*) once every month in the main temple. Food is provided during these rituals. Other than that, we receive no allowances. The aid that comes from down

⁹ All names used in this paper are pseudonyms.

¹⁰ In this context *nor*, which we gloss as "wealth", refers to household possessions that are passed from parents to children, including land, animals, clothing, jewelry, and other valuable assets.

¹¹ Farming is considered sinful (*sdig pa*) in the Buddhist worldview because it entails killing insects and other living creatures. Whereas village-based nuns are expected to work in the fields, monks are prohibited from doing so, a dichotomy that further illustrates the gendered dimension of religious status and socio-economic roles.

valley [e.g., from the government or non-profit organizations] does not reach up here to the monastery; it all gets distributed in the village. We have to go here and there [to make a living].

There are several elderly nuns like me at Pema Chöling. We must fend for ourselves. If one of us falls sick, a nun who is a neighbor might help. Mainly it is relatives and family members from the village who come to check on and take care of us. But villagers don't treat us very well. They look down upon us. Nobody invites us to their homes or offers us anything. In fact, we have to help them sometimes. I have to go and work for them when they need help, but they do not reciprocate by returning the help.

Despite the difficulties expressed by Ani Tsering, when asked whether her life is easier or more difficult than that of a laywoman, she responded,

Compared to a laywoman, I think a nun leads a more pleasant life. Having children means protecting them from illnesses, and as they grow up you have to provide for their education and welfare. You have to nurture children, and conduct healing ceremonies (*sku rim*) in times of sickness. Being a nun is easier because you only need to worry about yourself. As long as you are warm and have a full stomach, you can pray to your root lama and the three jewels and don't have to worry about anything else. You don't have to worry about children suffering from sicknesses or anything.

Nevertheless, in our region nuns are made to work like servants and are not given any education. To be a real nun, education must be given, no? I have no education and can't even speak the Nepali language.¹² When I interact with Nepali traders, the only word I know how to say is *chaina* ("do not have"). I cannot say any other word. It makes me sad sometimes. I don't have any education, I can't speak Nepali, and I don't have any skills. The only thing I know how to do is pray to the three jewels, work, and collect firewood.

Nowadays, before dawn I get up and recite prayers. Afterwards, I eat breakfast then begin the day's chores. During the day I collect firewood, fetch water, cook, and clean the house. In winter, I find it very difficult to fetch water and firewood since I am old. When there is heavy snowfall, I still need fire to keep warm. So I stock up firewood and buy some essentials to prepare for winter.

That is what my life is like. I never received any education, but was made to work like a servant for all my siblings who then went on their own ways. Eventually I ended up here where I have to fend for myself, working here and there to earn a living. That is life not only for me, but

¹² Nepali is a second language for Nubri's residents who speak a dialect of Tibetan. Many elderly people who have not travelled much outside the valley struggle to understand or even speak a basic form of the language.

for other nuns in our region. As I get old, and see what has happened to me, I feel kind of sad. It feels like my appetite increases but I am unable to work hard. I have no one to talk to about my life conditions. You asked me to talk about my life today. Otherwise, who can I talk to? I just keep it to myself.¹³

DEMOGRAPHIC SHIFTS AND MODERNIZING NUNNERIES

Sending nuns out of the village for monastic education contributes to a prevailing rural to urban migration trend in Nubri. Nowadays over 70% of youths between the ages of 10 and 19 live away from their homes, mainly in boarding schools and religious institutions in Kathmandu and India. Among girls in that age group, the numbers are almost equally divided between those who are in schools and those in nunneries.¹⁴

In the past, parents in Nubri had limited options for sending a nun-daughter outside the village, as reflected in the fact that, today, the majority of nuns aged 30 and above (74%) reside in their natal villages. In contrast, the majority of nuns below age 30 (91%) live in institutions in Kathmandu and India. Among nuns aged 10–19, only one out of 48 resides locally; she is the caretaker for her elderly grandfather, an important lama. Clearly, a shift has occurred in the way that parents envision the relationship between long-term family management strategies, religious occupations, and educational opportunities for daughters.

As more nunneries are being constructed in Nepal and India, many now feature an integrated curriculum that includes rigorous Buddhist studies in a *shedra* (*bshad grwa*; study center) alongside courses in English, mathematics, nursing, medicine, and computer skills.¹⁵ The

¹³ November 2012 interview. Childs has known Ani Tsering since 1995, and previously described how she cared for her invalid father (Childs 2004: 129–31).

¹⁴ Childs *et al.* 2014. The data was collected through household demographic surveys conducted in Nubri in 2012 and 2013 in association with two projects: Genes and the Fertility of Tibetan Women at High Altitude (PI Cynthia Beall, funded by NSF), and Milk with Altitude (PI E. A. Quinn, funded by Wenner-Gren and Leakey Foundations). The surveys enumerated 1,894 individuals living in 402 households.

¹⁵ See Dolma Ling Nunnery and Institute near Dharamsala, India (<https://tnp.org/nuns/dolmaling/>); Jamyang Choling Institute in Dharamsala, India (<http://www.jamchoebuddhistdialectics.org/>); Jangchub Choeling Nunnery in Mungod, India (http://www.jangchubchoelingnunnery.org/About_the_Nuns.htm); the Arya Tara School in Pharping, Nepal (<http://www.theanifoundation.org/ats.html>); and Khachoe Ghakyil Nunnery, affiliated with Kopan Monastery in Kathmandu (<http://kopanmonastery.com/nunnery.html>). Thranu Tara Abbey, a nunnery on the outskirts of Kathmandu, buses young

push towards secular education and the emphasis on rigorous studies of Buddhism through the establishment of study centers occurred in a transnational context of Buddhist modernism among the Tibetan exiles.¹⁶ The importance of offering both secular and religious studies became evident when interviewing parents in Nubri about why they selected a particular nunnery for their daughter. Many immediately mentioned the opportunity to study English and other topics as a key factor in their choice of institution.

CONTEMPORARY PATHWAYS TO RELIGION

In 2014 we interviewed eight nuns from Nubri residing in two nunneries in the Kathmandu Valley.¹⁷ Only two had been designated initially by their parents to be village-resident nuns. Diki explained,

It used to be the practice in the village to make someone a nun at a very young age if she frequently falls sick. I was very ill a few months after I was born, so my parents made me a nun by offering my hair to a lama [in the village]. I was told very early that I was a nun. However, for a nun living in the village, there is very little opportunity for religious education and it is said that a nun will receive a better education in Kathmandu. That is why I came down here.

Pasang was also ordained at a young age by a local lama. As the eldest daughter in her family, she seemed destined to follow the traditional life course of the village-based nun. However,

nuns to a school run by the same Rinpoche where they receive secular education (<http://www.rinpoche.com/nuns.html>). Websites accessed on 21 June 2014. The trend apparently started through the Tibetan Nuns Project's revision of its curriculum in 2003 to include secular education for young nuns (Tobler 2006: 44).

¹⁶ On continuity and change in Tibetan monastic education in India and Nepal, including the role of the Dalai Lama as modernist reformer, see Dreyfus 2003 and Lempert 2012. The promotion of dialogue between Tibetan Buddhism and modern science by the Dalai Lama over the past several decades has contributed to the trend of providing secular education to monks and nuns which is understood by many as part and parcel of "being a 21st century Buddhist", a theme reiterated by the Dalai Lama in public teachings.

¹⁷ The interviews are part of a larger project on rural to urban migration from Nubri to Kathmandu. Nuns represent one sub-set of the migrant population which also includes monks, and young men and women who are in college or have recently completed their studies. The data complements our 2011 interviews with 42 parents about decisions to retain some children in the village while sending others away. Funding for these projects was provided by the Shelley and Donald Rubin Foundation and Washington University.

I was a nun under [lama's name], but it was not working out for me because there was very little opportunity for religious study. Because most of the time I was sent to do work associated with worldly life (*'jig rten gyi las btang nas*), there was no opportunity of doing pure religious practice (*chos yang dag pa*).

I learned that [lama's name, based in Kathmandu] takes anyone from Nubri who wants to become a nun. I wanted very much to join his nunnery. When he visited Nubri he announced that parents could send their daughters to his new nunnery and that the quality of education is very good. And he announced that anyone willing to become a nun would be accepted. That is when I decided to come down to Kathmandu to join this nunnery because there is not much opportunity for religious education back in the village. My parents approved, and I approached my lama to inform him that I wanted to join the nunnery. He told me to be a good nun, and said I would be working all the time if I stayed here in the village.

Some girls become nuns after a family tragedy. Pema first expressed a desire to become a nun after she was orphaned at age 11; Buti and her two younger sisters were sent to nunneries in Kathmandu after their father died. Other girls resist their parents' desires to keep them in the village. Dolma was the child of her mother's second husband (the first died). Her mother kept her at home because the family needed the labor. She recalled,

We started working in the village from a very young age. My parents wouldn't allow me to become a nun even if I told them that I wanted to become a nun. We needed every hand in the family to help make a living. Later, as I became older and saw others going down to become monks and nuns, I became interested in becoming a nun. That is how I decided to come down and become a nun.

Tashi became a nun to escape an unwanted marriage. At age 19 her parents accepted engagement beer (*slong chang*) from another family, signifying that she was formally engaged. According to Tashi,

The idea of becoming a nun came about when I realized how this worldly life is full of never ending work, and it is meaningless in the end. I had no desire at all in getting tied down in this cyclic existence (*'jig rten 'khor ba*). I had seen how my mother has suffered in her own life and I knew that I would go through the same fate if I were to marry.¹⁸ Since my parents had already promised my hand in marriage and the boy's parents were in agreement, I realized that they would marry me off at any cost

¹⁸ Belt (2010: 48–55) discusses reasons why the residents of a nunnery in Dolanji, India, became nuns, including “practical considerations” related to suffering asso-

without letting me know in advance of the wedding day. That is why I decided that the only option left for me was to run away.

My father and I came down [to Kathmandu] on a trip, and I returned to the village carrying some loads. After staying in the village for a few days, I learned about this marriage proposal and the plan to marry me off. When I told my mother I didn't want to marry she gave me a good beating. She admonished me a lot, but I did not have any hard feelings because she is my parent and cares about me.

My mother's beating coincided with the day news reached the village from a lama informing parents that now was the time to send daughters to Kathmandu; new nun recruits would be accepted in the coming month. So I lied to my mother, saying that father asked me to come down to collect another load of goods. But she said I did not have to go and gave me a real good beating. Despite the beating, I decided to leave anyway. My mother said that if I left she would not think of me as her daughter any more and that I should not think of her as my mother. It made me so sad to hear these words from my mother. I thought I would never return home.

After reaching Kathmandu I met my father and told him I wanted to become nun. He didn't object and said it was fine because I was already set on becoming a nun, but worried that if I disrobed later my life would be difficult. I assured him that I would remain a nun all my life, that all these worries of our minds are impermanent, and that one cannot hold on to one's mental fears and worries. My father relented and advised me to be a good nun.

I did not return home for the next eight years. When I met my mother she had mellowed a lot and was happy to see me again. She was proud about what I had done and acknowledged her mistake by saying that she was the one who had not thought properly. She even apologized to me for the wrongs she had done me.

The stories these women told are not new; Tibetan women throughout history have pleaded with their parents to become nuns, and have sought refuge in nunneries after family tragedies or to escape undesirable marriages. The difference is that, today, evading the travails of village life is far easier and less risky over the long term because young

ciated with village life (watching their mothers struggle to raise children, witnessing siblings die in tragic accidents, etc.). Gender-based suffering is a theme found in the writings of Orgyan Chokyi from Dolpo who observed: "The steed follows yet another mare. When I see the shamelessness of men, [I think:] May I be born in a body that will sustain the precepts. When acts of desire are committed, suffering must follow. When I see the mare suffering, melancholia flares. Behold us with mercy, Lord of Compassion. Let me not be born a woman in all lives to come. When I ponder the suffering of beings, melancholia flares" (Schaeffer 2004: 142). See also Tsomo 2004: 345–49.

ladies can join well-endowed institutions that actively seek new recruits and provide room, board, and education.

CONTRASTING SITUATIONS

Recall that Ani Tsering, the elderly nun whose story is narrated above, stated her opinion that the life of a village-based nun—despite all its hardships—is still less stressful than the life of a laywoman. The nuns we interviewed concurred. Buti said,

On the whole, it is clear that being a nun is very fortunate. For instance, if you look at the lives of former nuns who disrobed, you can see right away that their life as a nun was definitely much happier. Their life is very difficult now because they have to take care of their children and parents.

Her sentiment is echoed by Dolma who stated,

I think the laywoman's life is hard because she has to bear many children. For many women in the village it also means never-ending work. Further, it depends on what kind of husband a woman has. Some husbands drink a lot and are always drunk. When you think about such things, you realize that a nun's life is definitely a happy one. You don't have to worry about such things at all.

All the nuns we interviewed are fully aware of the traditional practice whereby parents designate a daughter to be a village-based nun. However, only one of them anticipates caring for her parents in old age. Sangmo, one of two daughters both of whom are nuns, revealed her parents' plan to bring the two back to the village at some point.

[My parents] are quite young at the moment. However, they say that their two nun-daughters will take care of them in old age. Although my elder brother is in the village, he has his own family to take care of. I am not able to help my parents at all right now because I am struggling with my own education. Once I complete my education, I hope to take care of my parents.

The other nuns did not envision a similar future. Pasang's parents built her a small residence at Pema Chöling, the monastery complex where Ani Tsering lives, but she made it clear that she would not reside there as a caretaker for them. Rather, she prefers to continue her religious education and spend time in solitary retreat. Tashi, who became a nun

to escape an unwanted marriage, was adamant about not returning to her village:

I want to continue my religious practice and I don't have any plans to leave the nunnery. What will I do if I leave the nunnery now? I have already wasted half of my life. I don't want to waste any part of my life anymore. I only wish to get more opportunities to undertake retreat and practice.

Perhaps her reticence is related to the changing opportunity structure for female religious practitioners. We asked each of the nuns to contrast her own experience with that of a village-based nun. Diki, who actually started her religious life as a nun in the village, said,

The nuns in the village know how to read and they might also know how to meditate. However, in terms of religious education, they are not in position to achieve much because living in the village means that they are not able to fully avoid work associated with worldly life (*'jig rten gyi las ka*). They cannot devote their mind to religious practice because they have to help their parents. Getting bogged down in everyday existence in the village poses great obstacles towards a pure religious path. Here, we do not have to worry about the affairs of worldly life. We can focus fully on religious practice.

Buti commented,

Due to the kind grace of Rinpoche everything is provided for us in this nunnery, including food and clothing. Nuns in the village, however, have to take care of themselves. Although they get some food and gifts whenever there is a big religious ceremony, they don't get to study much since they have to work for their daily livelihood as well as help their parents in farming and herding. Whereas we can just focus on our studies, village nuns have to work for everything they need including food and clothing.

All the nuns we interviewed have received some secular education. Not long ago nuns were permitted to study until class 10 so that they could obtain a School Leaving Certificate (SLC).¹⁹ However, several subsequently disrobed, so those in charge decided it was best to stop the nuns' education after class six with the exception of a select few who are slated to serve critical needs as teachers, administrators, and interpreters. Regarding religious education, talented nuns who complete the preliminary practices are encouraged to enter an eight-year course in a *shedra* for higher Buddhist studies. Like monks, the core curriculum is

¹⁹ SLC, the final examination students take upon completing secondary school in Nepal, provides pathways to higher education and vocational training opportunities.

the “five great texts”.²⁰ Those who complete the course receive the title *a ni slob dpon* (nun spiritual master). The nuns we interviewed place high value on their religious education, are proud of their achievements, and recognize that such opportunities were much rarer and difficult to obtain in the recent past.

LOOKING FORWARD

In the near future nuns will no longer represent a significant component of Nubri’s village population and social fabric, whereas monks and ex-monks (*grwa log*) are now more prevalent than ever. Monasteries in Kathmandu and India are building branch institutions in their Nubri recruiting grounds; nowadays there are five monasteries in Nubri housing celibate monks compared to only one a decade ago. No new nunneries are planned for Nubri. Furthermore, parents can now make agreements with abbots to recall a son once he reaches a suitable age for marriage. Today, 45% of men aged 18–24 living in Sama are former monks; most are married. In contrast, nuns have a much stronger incentive to remain celibate for life. As Pema explained,

Monks who disrobe don’t face too many difficulties. But society regards it as something very bad when a nun disrobes. Further, a monk’s religious education will be of use if he disrobes. If a nun disrobes, there is no way anyone would invite her to perform a prayer ceremony (*zhabs brtan*).²¹

Nuns who renounce their vows face social reprobation, whereas monks are often encouraged by parents to do so in order to recommence life as householders. The liturgical skills monks learned in the monastery can translate into household rituals. For many men the ability to perform these rituals is a major source of income derived through cash and in-kind offerings made by patrons. As Pema points out, no such opportu-

²⁰ These comprise the five main branches of study in Tibetan Buddhism: *’Dul ba mdo rtsa ba*, Skt. *Vinayasūtra*, monastic ethics and discipline; *Tshad ma rnam ’grel*, Skt. *Pramānavārttika*, epistemology or commentary on valid cognition; *Shes rab kyi phar phyin*, Skt. *Prajñāpāramitā*, perfection of wisdom; *Chos mngon pa mdzod*, Skt. *Abhidharmakośa*, phenomenology; *dBu ma ’jug pa*, Skt. *Madhyamakāvātāra*, middle way philosophy. See Dreyfus 2003: 128–30 for details on the usage of texts and commentaries by different authors across sects and lineages.

²¹ Rituals, performed at the request of the laity, which have mainly instrumental purposes: to cure illness, repel curses of spirits, bring good fortune in social and economic undertakings, and so forth.

nity exists for former nuns. Thus, a combination of socio-economic factors poses daunting barriers for an ex-nun's return to village life: condemnation, partiality for sons over daughters to assume household management responsibilities, and a preference to contract male versus female practitioners to perform household rituals.

All the nuns we interviewed enjoy spending time in their natal villages, but only one foresees a permanent return. The others expect to live their lives in Kathmandu. Some look forward to long meditation retreats, others want to study medicine and other subjects. Importantly, the nunneries envision long-term roles for their nuns who are expected to offer services in proportion to their age and education by working as administrators, disciplinarians overseeing younger members, and other duties. One now holds the indispensable role of driver for her nunnery, tasked with everything from fetching supplies to conveying ill nuns to the hospital.

Ani Tsering continues to reside at Pema Chöling where she remains both removed from and deeply embedded within the bustle of village activity. Each year she witnesses a diminishing of her companions, through the forces of aging and mortality, as the village-based nun phenomenon withers toward extinction. Meanwhile, laypeople in their 40s and 50s must contemplate a fundamental question of rural existence: "Who will care for us in old age?" This is neither the first nor last time that people in Nubri adapt their family management strategies in response to changing circumstances, with the end result being a reconfiguring of social relations and cultural norms.

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