

Capturing the Quotidian in the Everyday Renunciation of Buddhist Nuns in Tibet

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Abstract In the novella “Lonely Soul” (ཁིང་རྒྱུང་གི་རྣམ་ཤེས།), Tsedrön Kyi (ཚེ་སྣོན་རྒྱུད།) chronicles the everyday life of a Tibetan nun and her companions at retreat hermitages and on pilgrimage. This is a meandering tale, narrated in episodic fashion, much like the lives of the nuns themselves who wander from place to place eking out a subsistence without institutional support or ample patronage. A leading Tibetan woman writer today, Tsedrön Kyi is brilliant at portraying the banality and humor of everyday predicaments that beset renunciants, as well as the passing observations of human failings and the resulting disappointment of the nun Salé Drölma, who is both protagonist and narrator. To analyze this novella, we draw from Sianne Ngai’s work, *Ugly Feelings*, regarding the aesthetic evocation of dysphoric affect, as well as conversations with Tsedrön Kyi about the marginalization of Buddhist nuns in Tibetan society. This essay introduces “Lonely Soul” and discusses its narrative style, affective contours, and poignant depiction of the liminality of Buddhist nuns in Tibet, followed by a translation of its first two chapters.

The retreat caves above the Dzokchen valley provide the opening backdrop to a contemporary Tibetan novella in which the everyday challenges of renunciation take center stage.¹ Whether encountering snakes while picking chives for momos or dealing with rodents sipping from water offerings on the shrine, the nuns in “Lonely Soul” (ཁིང་རྒྱུང་གི་རྣམ་ཤེས།) confront environmental precarities and human entanglements, even as they strive to practice esoteric teachings and free themselves from the vagaries of *samsāra*. The protagonist Salé Drölma (ས་ལེ་སྣོལ་མ།) brings an idealism to her life as a nun that is tested at every turn when witnessing human foibles and misfortune around her, as when the old yogin Pöngan (པོང་ན་ཟུག་པ།) proudly remodeled his hermitage with elaborate statues and wood carvings, only to watch it collapse, washed away in a mudslide during heavy rains.

In “Lonely Soul,” author Tsedrön Kyi (ཚེ་སྣོན་རྒྱུད།) chronicles the everyday life of a Tibetan nun and her various companions at retreat hermitages and on pilgrimage. This is a meandering tale

1. This does not refer to the famous Dzokchen Monastery in Kham, but rather a Dzokchen hermitage site in Barzong, the region of Tongdé where Tsedrön Kyi grew up. The material in this essay was first presented on a panel titled “Lost and Found in Translation” at the Sixteenth Seminar of the International Association of Tibetan Studies in Prague, July 3–9, 2022.

narrated in episodic fashion, much like the lives of the nuns themselves who wander from place to place eking out a subsistence without institutional support or ample patronage. Unlike the genres of *namthar* (ལྷན་ཐང་།) or *tokjö* (ལོ་གསལ་བརྗོད་།),² so often used to narrate religious lives, this is a contemporary work of fiction based on the oral testimony of nuns. Instead of the great deeds and visionary experiences of realized Buddhist and Bön masters, Tsedrön Kyi captures something more quotidian and ambiguous: the all too human challenges and fallibility in leading a renunciant's life. Her work is part critique of gender inequities experienced by Tibetan nuns and part testament to the struggles of renunciants who fall short of religious ideals.

Tsedrön Kyi is brilliant at portraying the banality and humor of everyday predicaments that beset renunciants as well as conveying observations of human failings—the complaints of a nun intended to garner offerings or a mysterious late-night visitor to a nearby hermitage—which lead the protagonist, and by extension the reader, to question the viability of renunciation. The disappointment of Salé Drölma, who is both protagonist and narrator, permeates the work. To reflect on this, we draw from Sianne Ngai's work, *Ugly Feelings*, regarding the aesthetic evocation of dysphoric affect in literature, in this case through things said and unsaid that linger as a kind of malaise. This essay introduces “Lonely Soul” and discusses its narrative style, affective contours, and poignant depiction of the liminality of Buddhist nuns in Tibet. A translation of its first two chapters follows.

Tibetan Women Writers Today

The presence of women writers in Tibetan literature has been scant historically. As an index of this, less than 1% of Tibetan life writing has been by or about female figures.³ In the 1980s, during the early efflorescence of contemporary Tibetan literature, the situation was not much better.⁴ However, in recent decades, Lama Jabb points out that Tibetan women writers have begun to “expose and amend many silences and shortcomings in Tibet's masculine literature tradition.”⁵ Addressing the issue of female silence, contemporary writers are voicing their experiences and expressing their wisdom in myriad ways which, among many other influences, has contributed to

2. Namthar literally means a story of “complete liberation” and tokjö means an “account of realization.” These genres also tend to use an episodic narrative style.

3. Schaeffer 2004. On the growth and development of namthar as a genre, see Schaeffer 2010.

4. For example, based on examining the archives of the Tibetan literary journal *Light Rain* between 1981 and 1991, Françoise Robin found women writers to be 1% of contributors, eight names out of five hundred: five writers, two illustrators, and one translator. Data presented at a conference on contemporary Tibetan women writers at INALCO in Paris, January 5–7, 2023.

5. Jabb 2022, 220. Lama Jabb's article provides an important touchstone regarding contemporary women writers of Tibetan-language poetry and fiction.

a literary flourishing. Tibetan women writers artistically and analytically convey their presence in various genres, including poetry, fiction, essays, social commentaries, and research articles published in both print and online publications as well as social media forums. Popular literary journals and magazines such as *Drangchar* (*Light Rain*, ལྷང་ཆར།), *Gangyen Metok* (*Snow Flower*, གངས་རྒྱལ་མེ་ཏོག), and *Gangri Bumö* (*Tibetan Women*, གངས་རིའི་བུ་མོ།) have encouraged female literary voices not only through their creation of accessible literary spaces but also by dedicating special issues to female writers.

Most importantly, Tibetan women writers have expressed their voices and emphasized their presence in the act of anthologizing. This has been spearheaded by the women’s rights activist and poet Palmo (དཔལ་མོ།) who first anthologized poems written by Tibetan female poets in the 2005 anthology titled *Sholung* (*The Milk Toggler*, བཞེ་ལུང་།).⁶ Palmo continued this effort by publishing women’s collected critical essays in 2006 and short stories in 2011.⁷ Furthermore, she has supported Tibetan women’s writing by publishing their literary works in a 2016 book series among other publications.⁸ Beyond this, the learned nuns at Larung Gar, the largest Buddhist institution on the Tibetan plateau, founded a journal for writings by nuns and lay women titled *Gangkar Lhamo* (གངས་དཀར་ལྷ་མོ།) in 2011 and also compiled and published *The Dākinis’ Great Dharma Treasury* (མཁའ་འགྲོའི་ཚོས་མཛོད་ཆེན་མོ།), a 53-volume collection of works by, about, and for Buddhist women from India, Tibet, and China in 2017.⁹

Tsedrön Kyi is one of the gifted Tibetan women writers to emerge in recent decades and is featured in several of Palmo’s anthologies.¹⁰ A teacher from Barzong in Amdo, today’s Tongdé county in Hainan prefecture of Qinghai province, she received her BA degree from the Department of Ethnic Minorities Languages and Literature (གངས་ལུང་མི་རིགས་སྐད་ཡིག་སྡེ་ཁག) at Qinghai Nationalities University in 1997. In the same year, she started her career as a Tibetan language teacher at Yushu Nationalities High School. As a teacher, Tsedrön Kyi began composing short stories to show students how to engage in creative writing in Tibetan, and she regards her own writing as a didactic tool to inform readers about social issues, especially the conditions of women. From 2000 to 2002, Tsedrön Kyi studied Tibetan literature at the same university for her MA degree and since then has continued with her own creative writing in whatever time she could carve out as a single mother. Eventually, this led her to teach creative writing for a year (2013–14) at the Tibetan Grasslands School for Women (གངས་ལྗོངས་སྐྱ་ཐང་བུ་མོའི་སློབ་གྲྭ།) in Golok. In addition, she

6. Dpal mo 2005. On this figure, see Robin 2015.

7. Dpal mo 2006 and 2011.

8. Dpal mo 2016. Contemporary Tibetan Women Writers Book Series (བོད་ཀྱི་དེང་རབས་བུད་མེད་ཚོམ་པ་པོའི་དཔེ་ཚོགས།).

9. We use “learned nun” here for khenmo (མཁའན་མོ།). On *Gangkar Lhamo*, see Padma ’tsho 2021. On *The Dākinis’ Great Treasury of Dharma*, see Padma ’tsho and Jacoby 2021.

10. For example, Tsedrön Kyi’s short story “My Sunset” (ང་ཡི་ཉི་མ་རྒྱབ་སོང་།) appears in Dpal mo 2011, and her own collection of short stories *Shen/Remembrance* (ཞེན།) was published as the second volume of Dpal mo 2016.

has participated in various workshops on Tibetan creative writing including those organized by *Drangchar*, *Gangri Bumo*, *Mirik Tsomrik* (*Nationalities Literature*, མི་རིགས་ཀྱི་ཚྭ་རིག), and *Lushun Tsomrik Ling* (*Lushun Literary Institute*, ལུ་ཤུ་ལྷན་ཚུ་རིག་སྒྲིང་།). Since 2016, she has volunteered to teach pedagogy to Tibetan teachers in Yushu and supervised graduates from high schools in the prefecture. She has traveled and delivered over forty speeches at various schools on Tibetan language education including advice for the preparation of college entrance examinations. In 2020, the Education Bureau of Yushu awarded her the title of Eminent Language Advisor (སྐད་ཡིག་མཁུ་བ་སྟོན་དགེ་ཆེན་སྲུང་བྱེད་ཅན།) for the Tibetan language.

As a writer, Tse-drön Kyi mostly composes short stories and novellas. One of the salient features of her stories is her usage of Buddhist themes to grapple with social issues that Tibetan women are facing today such as domestic violence and sexual violation.¹¹ She also takes up issues of ethics and education, cultural consciousness, and religious lives, practices, and communities. Her main publications include two collections of short stories, *Kyonang gi Dögar* (*Tragic Dramas*, རྩོམ་གྱི་རྩོམ་གར།) in 2005 and *Shen* (*Remembrance*, ཞེན།) in 2016, as well as an essay in the 2017 anthology *Discussions of New Literature by Tibetan Women Writers* (བུད་མེད་ཚྭ་བ་པོས་གསར་ཚྭ་སྒྲིང་བ།).¹² She has published many other poems and articles in various magazines and journals including *Drangchar*, *Mirik Tsomrik*, and *Tsongön Pöyig Trimluk Tsakpar* (*Amdo Tibetan Legal News*, མཚོ་སྡོད་བོད་ཡིག་བྲིམས་ལུགས་ཚགས་བར།).

“Lonely Soul” was published in 2016 as a novella in her second collection of short stories, *Shen/Remembrance*. It is an ethnographic-style description of the nun Salé Drölma’s everyday life and religious journey, comprising three chapters, each organized into a series of vignettes. Tse-drön Kyi is expanding on this and has already written five chapters so far with plans to develop it into a book. Throughout the vignettes, as the work exists now in publication, she avoids the idealization of religious figures and focuses on the human, mundane and everyday life of ordinary Tibetan renunciants. This has resonances in classical Tibetan literature, where everyday examples and vignettes are deployed in narrative and advice literature to expose religious hypocrisy and articulate Buddhist lessons on impermanence, suffering, and more within worldly existence. One early example is the conflict between Dromtön Gyalwai Jungné (འཕྲོ་མ་སྟོན་རྒྱལ་བའི་འབྲུང་གནས།, 1004–1064) and Kutön Tsöndrö Yungdrung (ཁུ་སྟོན་བཙུན་འགྲུས་གཡུང་རླུང་།) in the *Kadam Lekbam* (*The Book of Kadam*, བཀའ་གདམས་སྒྲིགས་བཟ།),¹³ which features an admonishment of religious pride, the everyday use of proverbs in dialogue, and a range of emotions in the interaction of characters in order to illustrate the Buddhist theme of devotion. What is distinctive in “Lonely Soul” is that

11. See, for example, the short stories by Tse-drön Kyi we discuss in Gayley and Bhum 2022.

12. Her essay “Illumination and Faith discovered along this Life Path” (མི་ཚེའི་བཞུད་ལམ་ཁོད་རྗེད་པའི་འོད་སྣང་དང་དད་མོས།) appears in this anthology (Tshe sgron skyid 2017).

13. This story is found in the བཀའ་གདམས་སྒྲིགས་བཟ།, the second volume of the བཀའ་གདམས་སྒྲིགས་བཟ།, also published as a stand-alone paperback. See Atiśa 2016, 571–612.

the everyday is centered in Tsedrön Kyi's depiction of nuns' lives. And, through her depictions of the mundane aspects of their lived experience, she humanizes the lives of religious figures and delivers a social critique regarding the marginalization of Tibetan nuns.

The Banality of Nun's Lives

Apart from the autobiographies of Orgyen Chökyi (ཨ་རྒྱ་ཚེས་སྤྱི།, 1675–1729) and Lochen Chönyi Sangmo (ལོ་ཚེན་ཚེས་ཉིད་བཟང་མོ།, 1853/65–1951), it is rare in Tibetan literature to access the lived realities of Buddhist nuns, especially those of humble origins. Orgyen Chökyi candidly recounts the verbal and physical abuse she suffered as a nomad child, as well as her years serving in the kitchen of her teacher before being allowed to practice meditation in solitary retreat.¹⁴ And Jetsün Lochen tells of the hardships she endured wandering on pilgrimage with her parents throughout her childhood, including poverty, treacherous terrain, nearly drowning, and anxiety due to a violent, alcoholic father.¹⁵ The more idealized hagiographic portraits of Chökyi Drönma (ཚེས་ཀྱི་སྒྲོན་མ།, 1422–1455/67), a princess turned nun and later yoginī, and Mingyur Peldrön (མི་འགུར་དཔལ་སྒྲོན།, 1699–1769), teacher and lifelong nun born into the prominent Mindröling lineage, stand apart from these, given the third-person narration of their lives and the “power and privilege” they enjoyed due to the elite status of their respective families.¹⁶

Perhaps the closest antecedent to “Lonely Soul,” temporally and topically, is a contemporary memoir by Kelsang Lhamo (སྐལ་བཟང་ལྷ་མོ།), *Dreaming at the Sage's Abode* (དྲང་སྲིང་བསྟོ་གནས་ཀྱི་མི་ལམ་ཡུན་ཅིག)。¹⁷ It chronicles her years as a nun, describing everyday life as it unfolded for Kelsang Lhamo and her companions, as well as their mundane love and longing. This work has a literary flourish in its use of classical Tibetan that makes it less accessible than contemporary fiction. Composing in the classical literary genre of mixed verse and prose (བཅད་ལྷག་སྟེལ་མ།), Kelsang Lhamo employs literary devices drawn from Indian *kāvya* influences, such as kennings (མངོན་བརྗོད།) and ornamentation (ཚོག་རྒྱན།) and integrates dharma terminology (ཚེས་ཚོག) and songs of realization (ཉམས་མགུར།) in her writing. The result is an elegantly crafted and erudite work that is a literary feat.

By contrast, in “Lonely Soul,” Tsedrön Kyi employs colloquial language to craft a work of contemporary fiction (བརྗོད་སྒྲུབ་སྤྱང་།) in the style of social realism. In a conversational tone, she conveys the details of nuns' daily existence, their emotions and experiences, based on a deep connection to Buddhist principles and Tibetan lifeways. This kind of realism is also evident in exile testimonials,

14. Schaeffer 2004.

15. Havnevik 1999.

16. See Diemberger 2007 and Dyer 2022. The latter emphasizes “power and privilege” as a salient feature of the lives of Tibetan religious elite.

17. Skal bzang lha mo 1999.

in which oral accounts by ordinary Tibetan monastics and laity are rendered into memoirs in English by a translator and/or ghost writer as “records of pre-1959 Tibetan society,” such as *Memoirs of a Tibetan Monk* by Lobsang Gyatso.¹⁸ The narrative of “Lonely Soul” is also based on oral accounts, but instead these are recast into a work of fiction. The novella is structured as a set of vignettes in three chapters, punctuated by reflective verses, and immerses the reader into the daily rhythms of nuns’ lives and their meanderings from place to place. Giving the work a local flavor, Tsedrön Kyi uses idiomatic Amdo expressions, such as the exclamation “*a hawo na hawo*” (ཨ་ཏ་བོ་ན་ཏ་བོ།) to express shock and sorrow, the simile “like an ant stuck to pine sap” (མོག་མ་ཐང་ཚུལ་འབྱར་འདུག།) to portray an intractable situation, the phrase “demoness with an iron beak” (འདྲེ་མོ་ལྷགས་ཀྱི་མཚུ་ཉོ་ཅན།) as an insult, and the proverb “the mind points to the rock and the rock to asceticism” (སློལ་བྱས་དང་བྱས་ལ་སླུང་།) as an evocation of yogic practice. In addition, it features cultural practices like mirror divination and situates each vignette in actual locations and historical events familiar to readers from eastern Tibet, such as Lamo Yongzin Rinpoché (ལ་མོ་ཡོངས་འཛིན་རིན་པོ་ཆེ།) bestowing the Kālacakra empowerment in 1999 at Khagang Monastery in Barzong, Tongdé county. The effect is one of verisimilitude, in no small part because she draws from oral accounts of actual nuns.

“Lonely Soul” is narrated in the first-person voice of the novice nun Salé Drölma. As a notable literary device in this work, Salé Drölma’s naïveté allows situations to gradually dawn on the reader with gentle irony as she makes sense of the discrepancies between idealized renunciation and human failings among hermits. For example, when Salé Drölma grows afraid due to an approaching light in the dark of night, her first retreat partner Jangchup Drölma (བྱང་ཚུབ་སློལ་མ།) claims that she has seen that “ball of fire moving at night many times.” Intrepid, her retreat partner goes out to check out the “inauspicious thing,” only to take her time returning. Tsedrön Kyi leaves plenty of clues for the reader to suspect a tryst, and Salé Drölma herself cannot sleep. Something is off, yet taboo, narrated in euphemistic terms. The reader’s suspicions are confirmed when the next day her retreat partner seemed “intoxicated with delight” singing popular *dunglen* songs (རྩེད་ལེན།) to herself instead of meditating.¹⁹

This literary strategy of the protagonist finding behavior “strange,” when it is clearly lustful, allows the reader to observe the scene alongside Salé Drölma and come to their own conclusion. This happens again and again as when Pöngan and a nomad woman are playing a “strange game” (ཕྱེད་མོ་ཡ་མཚན།) in which he is licking her eyes as a pretext for healing. On other occasions, the use of innuendo is a clear assessment of lustful behavior by the characters themselves, as when the mysterious light appeared again: “One night, I saw the light again. When I asked Joganma (རྫོག་ན་མ།) about it she told me it was in fact a person. The torch vanished as it reached Jangchup

18. On the manner of the memoir’s composition and emphasis on its “unusually realistic style,” see Gyatso and Sparham 1998: 7–9. See Laurie McMillan 2001 on this hybrid genre that she refers to as “new age namthar.”

19. *Dunglen* is a distinctively Tibetan style of contemporary music with vocals accompanied by the mandolin.

Drölma’s hermitage. Joganma stared at me with a different look.”²⁰ With similar acuity, when Pöngan assigns a visiting mirror diviner Alak Traphap (ཨ་ལགས་ལྷ་མགོ་པའ།) to Jangchup Drölma’s hermitage, Joganma remarks: “The he-goat Pöngan has put meat in front of the cat. It’s not right!” This proverb signals to readers the obvious problem that will arise when a man is assigned to spend the night with a woman in a small retreat cave, just as putting meat before a cat. Later in the story, Jangchup Drölma absconds with the mirror diviner, leaving her cave barren: “Except for a worn-out sitting mat, there was nothing left behind. I felt empty and tears poured uncontrollably down my eyes.”²¹ Salé Drölma expresses grief, disappointment, and a tinge of admiration for her bold friend. The scene ends with the line, “In reality, Jangchup Drölma is a free woman” (རྩོམ་གྱི་ལྷ་མགོ་པ་ནི་མི་རང་དབང་ཅན་གྱི་གུང་རེད།).

Liminality and Tibetan Nuns

By portraying the banality of their everyday dilemmas, as well as humorous antics, Tsebrön Kyi claims a narrative space for nuns in realistic terms. As she recounted in an interview when visiting Boulder, Colorado in April 2022 for the event “Emerging Voices: Tibetan Women Writers,” fiction is another way of writing history, the real history of society: “The style of dress is literary, but the story underneath is real.”²² Indeed, for “Lonely Soul” and other works, Tsebrön Kyi drew from accounts of Buddhist nuns garnered through her own research, traveling in regions of eastern Tibet, and among her own nun friends. In more general terms, she discussed how Tibetan literature historically has focused on empires and dynasties, the scholars and the realized masters. A more holistic approach, she postulated in line with subaltern studies, is to understand history through the lives of ordinary people, in this case Buddhist nuns in Tibet.

Nuns are so often left out of grand narratives of Buddhist liberation—one reason why contemporary Tibetan fiction may be better at depicting the reality of their lives than namthar. Whether the “studied reverence” of idealized accounts narrated in the third person, the bulk of namthar, or the “studied diffidence” of Tibetan autobiography (རང་རྣམས།),²³ the genre emphasizes the religious training, accomplishments, visions and/or miracles of its primarily male subjects with “the

20. Tshe sgron skyid 2016, 155.

21. Tshe sgron skyid 2016, 158.

22. The event followed and built on the foundational Tibetan Women Writing Symposium hosted by the Tibet Center at the University of Virginia, April 8–10, 2022. The event in Boulder, April 21–22, featured a smaller group of writers for a public reading and symposium with Tibet Himalaya Initiative faculty, graduate students, and alumni. We conducted the interview with Tsebrön Kyi at the end of the visit on April 23, 2022.

23. This distinction is made by Janet Gyatso (1998, 105). On hagiographic idealization in namthar with respect to gender, see also Gayley 2016, 52–61.

presumption—or at least the suggestion—that the protagonist reached full liberation.”²⁴ By contrast, instead of transcendent matters (འཇིག་རྟེན་ལས་འདས་པ།), “Lonely Soul” is concerned with the mundane aspects of human life as one vignette’s title suggests: “These Worldly Human Beings” (1.6, འཇིག་རྟེན་མི་འདི།). The term *jikten* (འཇིག་རྟེན།), literally “what is subject to destruction,” refers to the worldly, transitory, and mundane—aspects of everyday maintenance in the face of inevitable decay. Tsedrön Kyi thereby sustains attention on the maintenance work the nuns do, namely the female-coded labor of cooking, cleaning, and domestic life more generally, which takes time away from liberatory pursuits. Even in the autobiographical voice, where namthar is more likely to feature everyday struggles, it is still generally in service of a larger trajectory of the protagonist’s liberation or enlightened activities—the work in the kitchen from which Orgyen Chökyi was finally released in order to practice meditation in retreat or the difficult first marriage that Sera Khandro endured which posed an obstacle to her revelatory activities.²⁵ Diverging from these literary antecedents, “Lonely Soul” focuses on the mundane and banal details of everyday life among nuns, and that is the point. Moving between makeshift retreat hermitages, Salé Drölma is challenged to find time to practice meditation between collecting wood and supplies, dealing with rodents, interacting with the laity, and taking precautions for physical safety. Social realism allows for the challenges of renunciation to become visible, while also calling attention to the lack of institutional support for nuns.

Buddhist nuns live on the margins of Tibetan society in liminal spaces and social identities, and this is central to the ambiguity and sense of malaise in the story. The title of the novella, “Lonely Soul” harkens to this marginality. In our interview in Boulder, Tsedrön Kyi stated: “It’s lonely, because of the disappointment of false expectations.”²⁶ Of the eight nuns in her home village, only one is studying formally at Labrang Monastery. The other seven are wandering around. In her words, they became “lonely souls who wander around with no gönpa.” While the term *gönpa* (དགོན་པ།) originally meant a place apart from human habitation, over time it came to refer to monastic institutions, most often linked to a neighboring village or clan. Tsedrön Kyi discussed the liminality of nuns explicitly with us. Since she asked us not to record our conversation, the following is paraphrased in translation:

There are not many choices as women: become a nun or marry. If you do not marry, the only other option is to become a nun. The nuns described in this story didn’t go to a monastery to study. Of these two roads, they are trying to find a third option. These nuns are in the middle. They wear robes but are not really formally trained. Nuns depart from public life into solitude; they wear robes but

24. Gyatso 1998, 103.

25. On these figures and their auto/biographical writings, see Schaeffer 2004 and Jacoby 2014.

26. Interview with Tsedrön Kyi in Boulder, Colorado on April 23, 2022.

don't have a place to go since there are so few nunneries.²⁷

From this it is clear that, for Tsedrön Kyi, a nun's liminality—"being in the middle" and "trying to find a third option"—is linked to the limited possibilities for women in Tibetan society, especially in rural and nomadic areas, as well as the lack of Buddhist institutions in which nuns can find adequate training and material support.

This liminality is explicitly addressed within "Lonely Soul" in a vignette titled "Neither Lay nor Ordained" (3.2, ལྷོ་མིན་སེར་མིན།). At this point in the narrative, in the third chapter following the portions translated here, Salé Drölma and Joganma are storing up provisions of meat, yogurt, butter, cheese, *droma* (a bean-like root) and *tsampa* (roasted barley) donated by the laity as well as collecting firewood and trading provisions with nomads for yak dung with which to cook. Exhausted by these chores and the domesticity they entail, Salé Drölma states:

If truth be told, I wanted to abandon the comforts of this life so as not to regret at the time of death, and work hard towards taking rebirth in *Dewachen*, the blissful pure land. I shaved my hair, took oaths, and received vows. However, I am wandering in the midst of desire and attachment. In this way, I am turning into a demoness that is neither lay nor ordained.²⁸

Note the disappointment expressed here. Salé Drölma became a nun in order to abandon "the comforts of this life" entailed in domesticity and dedicate herself to religious practice, so as to earn the merit of a favorable rebirth in a Buddhist pure land. Instead, she finds herself engaged in the same activities as a nun that she would have done as a laywoman. This leads Salé Drölma to question her status as a nun.

There is a contemporary debate over whether the full ordination of nuns ever made it to Tibet as well as whether full ordination should be (re)instated.²⁹ While historical examples of women who became fully ordained do exist (notably Chökyi Drönma),³⁰ historically there were not (so far as we know) ongoing communities of fully ordained *bhikṣuṇīs*. Without full ordination and proper facilities, Tibetan nuns occupy a liminal space akin to the *dasa sil mata* in Sri Lanka or the *maechi* in Thailand, "neither lay nor ordained."

27. Interview with Tsedrön Kyi in Boulder, Colorado on April 23, 2022.

28. Tshe sgron skyid 2016, 175–176.

29. On this debate, see *Dignity and Discipline: Reviving Full Ordination for Nuns* (Mohr and Tsedroen 2010).

30. See Diemberger 2007.

Dysphoric Affect in “Lonely Soul”

As narrator, Salé Drölma is a keen observer of the hypocrisies around her. Her remark above points to enmeshment in the world of desire due to a renunciation that does not feel complete. As her second retreat partner Joganma’s stature as a religious figure increases, and with it donations from the laity, Salé Drölma inadvertently gets relegated to serving as her assistant, something that happens to non-elite male monastics as well. She bemoans this turn in her fortune as an anathema to religious practice: “Our cave filled with all sorts of food and drinks, and yuan notes increased. I couldn’t properly practice my daily rituals because I had to receive guests, prepare good meals, and see them off.”³¹ Moreover, with stature creeps in the possibility of greed and corruption. Referring to her retreat partner’s success in healing rituals, she continues in a critical tone, “With an increase in the number of patients and improved living conditions, Joganma became fond of those who offered yuan notes but was not as pleased with those who offered bread and *tsampa*.”³² Critiques of religious hypocrisy go all the way back to the Indian tantric siddhas and their Tibetan successors. Whereas Saraha or Milarepa (མི་ལ་རས་པ།, 1040–1123) use the hypocrisy of clerics as a foil for their superior yogic renunciation and realization, the nuns in “Lonely Soul” are enmeshed in *saṃsāra*, living with a quasi-monastic status and close ties to the laity.

In one episode after another, Salé Drölma is overcome by loneliness and disappointment as she bears witness to the *kleśas* (ཉེན་མོངས།) among her renunciant companions: pride, greed, lust, anger, etc. There is a continuous thread of tension between expectation and actuality: Buddhist ideals and the realities on the ground. In *Ugly Feelings*, Sianne Ngai discusses dysphoric affect and its associated emotions as “unusually knotted or condensed ‘interpretations of predicaments’—that is signs that... render visible different registers of a problem (formal, ideological, sociohistorical).”³³ As represented in literature, such emotions are thus “diagnostic rather than strategic,” involving observation and reflection of “predicaments,” personal and social, without a strategy for resolution.³⁴ Here the predicament is the protagonist’s own struggles as a renunciant as well as nun’s marginalized status overall. Salé Drölma surmises her predicament as follows: “At that time, no longer a hermit, instead I had become the caretaker of offerings. Since then, I’ve become more and more lonely, abandoned without friends.”³⁵ She is the “lonely soul” of the novella’s title, but not the only one. Tse-drön Kyi’s penchant for pedagogy in her writing signals a broader message about the state of Tibetan nuns. Evoking an aesthetic of malaise is one of the many ways she illuminates nuns’ struggles to survive and dedicate their lives to religious practice.

31. Tshe sgron skyid 2016, 161.

32. Tshe sgron skyid 2016, 162.

33. Ngai 2005, 3.

34. Ngai 2005, 22.

35. Tshe sgron skyid 2016, 163.

For Ngai, dysphoric affect leads to a “general state of obstructed agency” with attendant feelings of “disconcertedness” and “loss of control.”³⁶ For the time being, Salé Drölma resigns herself to her “fate to work as a cook in the Dzokchen valley.” Not only is she disappointed with human failings and constant disruptions, but her spiritual aspirations have been frustrated. Now the cook and caretaker of the offerings (དཀོར་གཞིར་བ།) rather than the hermit (མཚམས་པ།), she can no longer focus on religious practice. Here is her lament in the reflective verse at the end of chapter one, punctuating her observations and experiences in the vignettes thus far:

འདོད་པ་བསམ་གཏན་དབེན་གནས་ལུང་པ།
 ཐོབ་པ་ཉེན་མོངས་བདུད་ཀྱི་བཙོན་ར།
 ལོ་བརྒྱར་མིས་པའི་རེ་ལྷའི་མི་ལམ།
 ཚོ་འཕུལ་སྟོང་གི་སྤྲུགས་མས་བསུབས་ཐལ།

What I wanted was a solitary valley for meditative concentration;
 what I gained was a demonic prison of afflictive emotions.
 The dream I had imagined for a hundred years
 was swept away by the broom of a thousand magical illusions.³⁷

Note the quintessentially domestic metaphor of the broom here. Salé Drölma expresses frustration with her outer circumstances and internal responses, at one point referring to herself as a “powerless woman” (བྱས་མེད་ཀྱི་སྲུང་མེད།). Eventually, she leaves retreat to seek more teachings, rejoining Joganma down the line as a companion on pilgrimage and retreat partner again.

We had an interesting exchange with Tse drön Kyi in Boulder about disappointment and doubt. The author sees these as integral to Salé Drölma’s spiritual journey. She stated, “Without doubt (ཐེ་ཚོན།), there’s no ‘why,’ no questions.”³⁸ For Tse drön Kyi, disappointment and doubt are, in the end, generative. This is quite a different assessment from Sianne Ngai for whom dysphoric affect is not only painful, but also associated with “socially stigmatized meanings and values.”³⁹ However, Buddhism valorizes revulsion (ཞེན་ལོག) with saṃsāra and thereby recuperates dysphoric affect and renders it into something soteriologically useful and potentially transformative. Thus Salé Drölma’s struggles with and yearning for religious ideals also could be understood as generative for her Buddhist path.

36. Ngai 2005, 3 and 14.

37. Tshe sgron skyid 2016, 164.

38. Interview with Tse drön Kyi in Boulder, Colorado on April 23, 2022.

39. Ngai 2005, 11.

The Human and Nonhuman World of Retreat

In “Lonely Soul,” numerous encounters with the laity alongside pikas, mice, snakes, and other animals show the nuns’ entanglements with the human and nonhuman world as well as their not always exemplary reactions. The types of affect range widely, including humor, anger, fear, and sadness. There are several humorous exploits with a touch of pathos. For example, when a pika sips from the water offering bowls every morning, Jangchup Drölma chases it away and one time threw a pebble that hit the pika in the eye, causing it to bleed and go blind in one eye. The “blind one-eyed pika” disappeared. This improbable image counters romanticized Shangri-la notions of Buddhist meditators at peace in solitary retreat, and the absurdity of it is laughable. Much later Salé Drölma finds it dead, and out of compassion buries it and says mantras on its behalf. This is the kind of attention to detail, regarding the nitty-gritty of everyday renunciation, that makes the novella moving, while also illuminating human fallibility in pursuing religious life. When Somtso Bhum read her translation of the first part of this episode in “Lonely Soul” at the Boulder event, Tsedrön Kyi was delighted to hear the laughter in the audience—that the humor and pathos translated across linguistic and cultural milieux.

On another occasion, a mouse irritated the nuns by stealing their flour and littering their cave with droppings. Jangchup Drölma could not control her rage and chased the mouse away until it jumped off a cliff below their hermitage. In a humanizing moment, she cried with sadness and regret after Salé Drölma shouted at her, “Demoness, we came here to meditate, not to chase a mouse off the cliff.”⁴⁰ Note that the term *demoness* (འདྲེ་མོ།) is used colloquially as a reprimand for female behavior that is out of line, here a nun responsible for the death of an animal. In the everyday of their retreat, Tsedrön Kyi narrates such human-animal interactions with a skillful use of irony, although the encounter ends in the tragic death of the mouse due to Jangchup Drölma’s anger.

In the renunciants’ encounters with humans and nonhumans alike, another emotion that frequently surfaces is fear. For instance, at the outset of chapter two, Salé Drölma meets her former companion, Joganma, and they travel to Padma county to practice at an abandoned hermitage, where the great Shabkar Tsokdruk Rangdröl (ཞབས་དཀར་ཚོགས་རྒྱལ་རང་སྐལ།, 1781–1851) once engaged in retreat. Things are in disarray when they arrive at dusk, and Salé Drölma is left to clean up while Joganma went immediately into retreat. Some days later a group of Hui Muslim men arrived at their hermitage. Out of fear and suspicion about their motives, Salé Drölma (the younger) hid and Joganma (the elder) sat stoically reciting mantras. Afterwards, they realized that one of the Hui men was injured and sought out Joganma to cure him. They laughed out loud.

40. Tshe sgron skyid 2016, 153.

Beyond gender, this encounter with Hui Muslims captures both the historical memory of Amdo Tibetans being ruled by Hui warlords as well as contemporary interethnic tensions in the region.

Likewise, the novella describes several instances of Salé Drölma's encounter with and fear of snakes. Unable to control their craving for chives, one day the nuns skipped their daily practice to pick wild chives. When they saw a big snake, Jangchup Drölma grabbed it by its tail and hurled it toward Salé Drölma. She was petrified and ran away, shouting and cursing at Jangchup Drölma, who rolled on the ground with laughter. Once Joganma and Salé Drölma were so frightened by a "dragon-like black snake" that coiled around the tip of their furnace that they ended their retreat prematurely. On a different occasion, they went to a nearby village to get beetroots and arranged them on the edge of a cliff to deter a poisonous striped snake that appeared over and over again at their hermitage. These human-nonhuman interactions add levity to the portrayal of everyday life in retreat, and Tse-drön Kyi employs them to express moments of bias, suspicion, irritation, and attachment that renunciants grapple with during solitary retreat, otherwise aimed precisely at cutting such emotions. Humor is thus a device for the characters to laugh at their own limitations. It also functions to draw the readers closer to the mundane and humanizing aspects of their lives.

Out of such interactions come moments of reflection, which have a pedagogical function in the story and serve as a tool for contemplation. This gives the story a Buddhist tone, even as Tse-drön Kyi's deployment is different from didactic Buddhist teachings in which everyday examples are used primarily to illustrate doctrinal points. Expressing her disappointment at Shabkar's abandoned retreat hermitage, Salé Drölma reflected:

As the saying 'the mind points to the rock and the rock to asceticism' goes, I thought I could practice authentic meditation with a clear mind if I lived in solitude. However, my mind wouldn't stay calm, and I couldn't cut all kinds of discursive thoughts. Even though I have a solitary environment, because my mind is distracted, I couldn't generate certainty in the dharma. Unable to tame my own mind, I had no mental peace.⁴¹

This reveals how renunciants in "Lonely Soul" are trapped in the Buddhist concept of *namtok* (རྣམ་རྟོག) or discursive thoughts. The discursiveness of mind is both a universal problem for Buddhist meditators to overcome but is also related more specifically in the story to gender and ethnic biases. By evoking human and nonhuman entanglements in the everyday life of the nuns, Tse-drön Kyi demystifies religious figures, again revealing their humanity.

41. Tshe sgron skyid 2016, 170.

Conclusion

For Tse-drön Kyi, human weaknesses can be encompassed within a Buddhist framework, given the obstacles encountered on the path of awakening and the challenges of wearing the Buddhist robes while still mired in saṃsāra. Her work offers the realistic flip side to idealized hagiographic portraits in order to foreground how ordinary renunciants are not exempt from negative emotions, corruption, bias, and self-importance. In this way, the affect of disappointment within social realism may function as an unexpected gateway to contemplate genuine renunciation.

We conclude where Tse-drön Kyi does, with the reflective verse at the end of chapter three, the final portion of “Lonely Soul” as published in *Shen/Remembrance*. When confronted with the death of Joganma’s daughter, Salé Drölma expands the sense of “lonely soul” to include all who wander in saṃsāra, ascribing a liminal state (*bardo*, བར་དོ།) to transitory existence altogether in the following verse. We offer our experimental translation here, paying attention to the poetic feature *sandaṣṭayamaka* (མཐའ་ཐོག་སྐྱེར་བའི་བྱང་ལྡན་གྱི་རྒྱན།), an ornament that uses the same syllable or word at the end and start of subsequent lines:

མཐོང་ན་མཚར་མཚར་འདྲ་ཡང་སྐད་ཅིག་མའི་རྗེས་འགོ། །
འགོ་ལམ་སྐྱིད་རེས་སྐྱུག་རེས་ཞག་གཅིག་གི་མི་ལམ། །
ལམ་ཐག་རིང་མོར་བསྐོད་པའི་ཁེར་རྒྱུད་གི་རྣམ་ཤེས། །
ཤེས་དང་མ་ཤེས་བར་ནས་བར་དོ་རུ་འབྱམས་སོང་། །

Though all this appears strange and wondrous, it’s gone in a moment,
moments of joys and sorrows—as in last night’s dream—along the path.
The path is long for the lonely soul who traverses [and weathers] it.
Whether knowing it or not, beings roam in the bardo.⁴²

This is an evocation of impermanence and the dream-like nature of existence, so central to a Buddhist understanding of reality or the lack thereof. In these reflective verses, even though contemporary fiction is far from classical Buddhist literature in Tibet, Tse-drön Kyi mirrors the reflective first-person voice of “songs of experience” (ཉམས་མགྱུར།) nested within namthar and also gestures to a time-honored tradition dating back to Dromtön and Kadam literature by engaging in the pedagogical uses of examples from everyday life to offer spiritual reflection.

42. Tshe sgron skyid 2016, 196–197.

Lonely Soul

By Tse-drön Kyi
Translated by Somtso Bhum

Chapter One: Miracles at Dzokchen Hermitage

1. My Retreat Partner

On a snowy spring day, my younger brother accompanied me to a sacred site called Dzokchen valley. All the retreatants lived in caves on the rocky slopes. By the time I arrived, the nun Jangchup Drölma had been on retreat for a year. She had red cheeks, wide eyes, and big upper eyelids. A nomadic woman in her youth, she had a clear and melodious voice. She became my retreat partner because I stayed at the same cave where she resided.

Jangchup Drölma's food, clothes and other supplies were running out. So, I offered her my food, mattress and my favorite *tögak* (maroon or yellow wrap shirt with cap sleeves) which cost seventy yuan. I didn't know what meditation she was practicing. But she told me she had received a mind-to-mind transmission. Two more hermits resided in Dzokchen valley: a Tantric practitioner named Gephel and a nun called Dedröl.

Everyone called them Pöngan, the old practitioner, and Joganma, the old nun.

2. The Versatile Jangchup Drölma

It was the season of wild chives in my hometown when people made chive momos. Jangchup Drölma and I craved chive momos to the point that we were salivating. Unable to satiate our craving, we skipped our daily practice to collect wild chives.

We saw a big snake while picking the chives. Jangchup Drölma grabbed the snake by its tail and tossed it towards me. I was so petrified I nearly lost my *la* (vital spirit) and met *chögyal* (the god of death)! I ran away from the snake and yelled at her with all sorts of curses. I said, "You are the demoness with an iron beak!" Jangchup Drölma held her stomach and rolled on the ground, unable to restrain her laughter.

Jangchup Drölma was a real heroine.

We spent many nights meditating under the light of a single candle in that narrow cave. As soon as we blew the candle out, an odor always filled the cave. Curious, I switched my torch on in the middle of the night and saw many black beetles stuck on the *tsampa* (roasted barley) bag.

Right after we put out the water offering, a pika rushed in to take a sip. That was always the case. And Jangchup Drölma would always chase the pika away.

One day, Jangchup Drölma hit the pika with a white pebble and bloodied one of its eyes. Since that day, the blind one-eyed pika disappeared. Furthermore, a small reddish pika always gathered grasses and stored them in its burrow near the cave. This smart and charming pika was always in a hurry and worked hard.

A mouse was also busy, day and night, stealing our white flour. Its droppings filled the cave and its surroundings. Filled with rage, Jangchup Drölma chased the mouse around until it jumped off the cliff in front of our hermitage. “Demoness, we came here to meditate, not to chase the mouse off the cliff,” I shouted at Jangchup Drölma. She cried for a long time, and I felt sorry after seeing her in that state.

I didn’t know what the inner and outer conditions were. If it was not my illusion, Jangchup Drölma liked to wear makeup whenever she had leisure time and didn’t chant her prayers on time. One night when it was pitch dark, a light moved at the end of the valley. Scared, I asked Jangchup Drölma what it was. “Dzokchen valley is not pure. I have seen a ball of fire moving at night many times,” she replied. When I observed it closely, the light disappeared as it gradually approached our hermitage. I was frightened and reached out to block the window with a pillow.

“Don’t be afraid! Let me check out what inauspicious thing that is,” she said and stepped out of the hermitage with a torch. She took a long time before she returned.

“There is nothing at the end of the valley,” she said. She flashed the torch in my face and warned disdainfully, “A small-hearted coward cannot become a real nun.”

I couldn’t fall asleep that night.

I didn’t see that light for many days. Jangchup Drölma sat with one leg folded over the other, intoxicated with delight, as she sang popular *dunglen* songs. My mind was contaminated with unutterable doubt and hesitation.

Jangchup Drölma was used to traveling around. I missed my lama too much, so Jangchup Drölma and I agreed to visit Shingtri monastery. On our way back, I was so hungry that my legs started to shake, and my footsteps became clumsy. But Jangchup Drölma was neither hungry nor tired. She walked like a mad elephant leaving me far behind. I got so thirsty that my tongue was parched. As Jangchup Drölma approached a nomad family, a woman appeared and invited her over for a cup of tea.

Just as I arrived, Jangchup Drölma declined the invitation. “We are good. We don’t need to drink tea.”

I nearly died of anger. She was probably bullying me; it might also be that she was challenging me. She continued walking with her head down, not even looking back at me.

“That inauspicious one has an evil heart!” I yelled after her. At the same time, a sense of admiration for her strength arose from the depth of my heart.

After that, I didn't want to live with Jangchup Drölma anymore. Pöngan invited me to live with him and Joganma asked me to stay with her. After thinking it over, I moved to Joganma's place because if I decided to live with Pöngan, then Joganma would be upset. Joganma was practicing yogic exercises involving the channels and winds at the time. The practice was done on the upper part of Dzokchen valley where there was no direct sunlight. It is said that this site has been the place for practicing these yogic practices for a long time. So, I went to visit it. It was inconceivable that the pika that was blinded by Jangchup Drölma was dead there. I buried the rotten pika in a hole and chanted a full *mālā* of Maṇi mantras on my prayer beads.

One night, I saw the light again. When I asked Joganma about it she told me it was in fact a person. The torch vanished as it reached Jangchup Drölma's hermitage. Joganma stared at me with a different look.

3. Since Traphap Arrived

Days passed like shooting stars. On a summer day when greenery covered the surroundings, a man with a rucksack was coming from the end of the valley. I thought he was a hermit but soon learned that he was a reincarnated lama. He went straight to Pöngan Gephel's hermitage. This young man in his thirties who had a gold tooth was not just a lama. He was also a specialist in mirror divination. Anyhow, people called him Alak Traphap, the Mirror Diviner Rinpoché. Pöngan assigned Alak Traphap to Jangchup Drölma's hermitage. Jangchup Drölma carried Traphap's belongings and walked toward her hermitage. Alak Traphap followed her in a manner appropriate to religion and custom.

"The he-goat Pöngan has put meat in front of the cat. It's not right!" Joganma said before taking a deep breath.

The next day, Alak Traphap visited Joganma's hermitage with a *khadak* (silk scarf) and fifty yuan. From the conversation, they found out that he was a disciple of Joganma's uncle. Since he was a specialist in mirror divination, Joganma asked him about the whereabouts of her son Dawa who had been lost for over ten years. Alak Traphap told her he needed a bottle of *chang* (barley beer) to perform the divination. He drank the *chang* that was offered and proceeded to light a butter lamp. He planted the corner of a mirror into a heap of barley on a clean plate. He chanted many prayers and instructed Joganma to prostrate to the Three Jewels. Looking into the mirror from the corner of his eyes, and without blinking, he said, "Your son is going through hardship and suffering, like an ant stuck to pine sap. But he will come back."

Having developed faith in him, I requested a mirror divination about my brother who hadn't returned from his trip to Lhasa.

"Your brother doesn't have any problems; a rainbow appeared on a meadow," he responded. My faith even grew stronger in that very moment.

That night, Jangchup Drölma and I made wild chive momos at Joganma's hermitage and brought

a full plate to Pöngan's place. On our way, a momo fell off and went down the cliff like a rolling stone. I felt it was inauspicious and suddenly became unhappy.

After seven days, Jangchup Drölma left to visit a reincarnate lama who had arrived at a certain monastery. Alak Traphap, who was wearing Jangchup Drölma's favorite *tögak*, held her precious lotus seed *mālā* with turquoise and red coral spacer beads, put up an umbrella and looked to the distance from the top of the mountain behind the hermitage. When Jangchup Drölma returned, they locked arms and entered the hermitage together.

On the thirteenth day of the fourth month of the lunar calendar, Joganma and I went to the county town to prepare food offerings for the monks at Shingtri monastery. We made five thousand pieces of deep-fried bread and bought the meat of three sheep, more than thirty pounds of butter, and ten packs of inexpensive tea. On the full moon day, we made food offerings to the monks and offered five yuan to each monk. Alak Khenpo gifted us a *khadak*, his portrait, silk clothes and much more. We had to spend a night in the county town on our way back. There was thunder, lightning, and heavy rainfall throughout the night.

The next day, our path to the hermitage was muddy. Two fresh pairs of footprints stretched toward the end of the valley. I recognized them to be the footprints of Jangchup Drölma and Alak Traphap.

"They probably went to the county town," Joganma commented. At that very moment, the sound of Pöngan Gephel's drum reverberated across the sky above the valley. As we approached our hermitages, we saw that Jangchup Drölma's cave was dark and missing its curtain covering.

Inside the dark cave, there was a heap of barley on a flat rock and a *khadak* and book of prayers on the top. Except for a worn-out sitting mat, there was nothing left behind. I felt empty and tears poured uncontrollably down my eyes. When I asked the nomad girl at the end of the valley, she said Jangchup Drölma and Alak Traphap left for somewhere in Golok.

In reality, Jangchup Drölma is a free woman.

4. The Tall and Dark Nomad Woman

Around that time, a small conflict occurred regarding the county governor's wife.

A woman was coming up from the end of the valley. Observing from afar, Pöngan claimed her to be his guest while Joganma asserted that she was coming to see her. It turned out that the woman was the county governor's wife, Tsomo, coming to visit Joganma. Pöngan became upset and stopped talking to Joganma.

On a different day, a tall and dark nomad woman came from the end of the valley. She was Pöngan's guest. Reportedly, she was a patient and stayed at Pöngan's hermitage in a manner appropriate to the custom.

A week or so later, Pöngan invited me to eat boiled meat. When I arrived, I encountered a strange game that Pöngan and the nomad woman were playing. Pöngan caressed the nomad woman's eyes

with his tongue because she told him that her eyes felt uncomfortable. The nomad woman displayed a strange behavior as she laughed with “ha ha ho ho” sounds. Pöngan was also not normal.

The next day, Joganma and I went to collect firewood on the other side of the valley. When we returned, Pöngan was washing his hair. The nomad woman was also washing her hair, her face lit up with smiles.

While I was fetching drinking water, Pöngan called me and scolded us: “You two greedy nuns! You should pile your firewood like a mountain in a visible place. You two wicked women, wicked nuns, you are only greedy! It’s not proper for a renunciant to be that greedy with your things.” I said nothing. But upon thinking twice, I found his words apt.

The day after, Pöngan and the nomad woman couldn’t resist from collecting firewood. Due to a combination of carelessness and old age, Pöngan slipped on a rocky slope and fell into a crack. “*A hawo na hawo*,” shouted the nomad woman as she tried to pull him up. Pöngan’s face was bleeding, and his hips were hurting too much for him to walk. So, the nomad woman helped him to his hermitage.

As I watched them leave, I laughed out so loudly that I nearly lost my consciousness. It is an act of harmful intention to be delighted by the downfall of adversaries from their negative karma. Yet the image is forever etched on my memory like a painting.

The nomad woman nursed Pöngan well for two months. When he fully recovered, the nomad woman left Dzokchen valley as her mission was completed.

Not long after the nomad woman had left, I had a funny dream. I was singing love songs and herding livestock on the mountain behind my home. An unfamiliar shepherd was singing love songs back to me from the mountain slopes. A warm and gentle sunlight hit my face. I was delighted. I am not sure if it was a positive sign or a bad omen. Nevertheless, it was a strange dream that was beyond my comprehension.

5. A Fragment of Impermanence

One day, Pöngan took me to Serlak monastery soon after hearing that there would be a *chöd* (severance) empowerment ceremony. When we returned to our hermitage after receiving the empowerment, we left to practice *chöd* in the wild for seven nights. One night, in the upper part of the valley, I saw someone making fire inside a white tent—its flames were shooting up into the air. When I checked the spot in the morning, I couldn’t find any traces. I witnessed sparks at the end of the valley again while practicing *chöd* on the seventh night.

We came back to our hermitage the day after. A nomad woman from the other side of Machu River had also arrived. She was short and plump. She came to see Pöngan because she was ill. She looked smart and adept at work. On the third day of her time there, she asked me to help with making *thenthuk* noodles because she didn’t know how to make them herself. When I went over, I noticed that a strange relationship had developed between Pöngan and the nomad woman.

After the nomad woman left, Pöngan brought carpenters and nomads to remodel his hermitage, create more space, decorate the window fascia with various carvings including *khyung* and *druk* (garuḍas and dragons) and shield the front porch with glass walls. The hermitage became beautiful and spacious. Magnificent new statues of Padmasambhava and Tārā were constructed inside it. I was assigned as the cook for the workers.

Pöngan went back to retreat in the radiant, newly built half-cave and half-greenhouse.

In the middle of a late summer night, thunder rumbled, and rain poured as if the sky had cracked. The next morning, it was beyond the realm of thought that Pöngan's newly remodeled hermitage had turned into rubble like the aftermath of an earthquake. Although Joganma hadn't talked to Pöngan for days, that day, she took refuge in the Three Jewels and stumbled forward towards Pöngan's hermitage. Perplexed, I hurried after her. Pöngan was seriously injured. Nomads from the end of the valley were in tears as they rushed Pöngan to the county town.

Since that day, all the disciples and patients from the area belonged to Joganma. Our cave filled with all sorts of food and drink, and the yuan notes increased. I couldn't properly practice my daily rituals because I had to receive guests, prepare good meals, and see them off.

It's funny that there are people who are also afraid of snakes like me. On a sunny day, a nomad woman who was accompanied by her son came to visit Joganma to treat her illness. However, when they were just about to arrive at the hermitage, a snake frightened her son and took his *la* away.

"He will be fine. We need to restore his *la*," Joganma assured her. The boy was silent and bewildered.

Joganma filled a pan with water above the half line and added three red dates into it. Two of the dates floated together but the third headed away in a different direction. She explained that the behavior of the third date represents the boy's *la* which had wandered off. Then she wrapped a red cotton thread around a rolling pin and tied its other end to a mirror that was placed on a wooden pole hoisted outside the hermitage. Joganma stirred the pan with the rolling pin while calling out the boy's name. She put some fruits, candies, bread, etc. on the boy's lap. Joganma advised me to respond with "*O ya ya*, I am coming" each time she called out the boy's name. Instead of following her instructions, I laughed so madly that tears rolled down my eyes. Eventually, the boy started to respond with a mumble. We continued the ritual for three nights and the boy became more lucid.

Normally the boy was a talkative kid. Truly Joganma was a skillful woman.

6. These Worldly Human Beings

With an increase in the number of patients and improved living conditions, Joganma became fond of those who offered yuan notes but was not as pleased with those who offered bread and *tsampa*.

As her patrons increased, Joganma frequently asked her disciples to bring whatever she needed and wanted to eat. Moreover, she summoned her patients to prepare five hundred deep fried

bread per household for her food offering on the full moon of the fourth month of the lunar calendar.

The hermitage resembled a warehouse or a grocery store. It was filled with lamb skin, brown sugar, wool, and other necessities. Seizing every opportunity, Joganma made a long dress with the lamb skin and sent it to her eldest daughter, Tashitso. She packed the brown sugar into many bags and sent them to her daughters and sons. Of course, I understand that all mothers are the same in that they are mothers. Yet I had also become someone who consumed *kor* (unreciprocated food) offerings with her. I could not sleep!

Insatiable desire for food, clothing, and wealth leads people towards a non-virtuous path. Just like the mist atop a rocky mountain, it's an established truth that worldly wealth has no essence. Yet it is difficult to practice authentic dharma if one is unable to completely abandon one's *phayul* (homeland): failing to do so increases one's desire and lack of contentment.

Joganma gave away our leftover food and surplus cloth to the poor nomadic family who lived at the end of the valley. The family's snotty kids enjoyed our leftovers, but we ate the best offerings from the devoted disciples. At the time, I turned solely into a caretaker of the offerings rather than an actual hermit. I gradually became lonely. Where could I find someone to share my feelings with? There was no way I could find anyone! In that way, it was my fate to work as a cook in the Dzokchen valley and my suffering to pass days eating *kor* offerings. I was confused, disappointed, and scared. I laughed and cried, and eventually left my retreat.

What I wanted was a solitary valley for meditative concentration;
what I gained was a demonic prison of afflictive emotions.
The dream I had imagined for a hundred years
was swept away by a broom made of a thousand magical illusions.

Chapter Two: Life in Padma Dzong

1. Travel Companion by Karma

In June 1999, Lamo Yongzin Rinpoché bestowed the Kālachakra empowerment at Khagang monastery. Joganma's attendants saw me as I was there to receive the empowerment. By karma, Joganma and I reunited again in the middle of a crowd.

Joganma was thrilled to see me and exclaimed: "Excellent! Everything is due to our accumulated karma." After Rinpoché concluded the empowerment, Joganma and I headed towards Padma Dzong.

The path wound through a precipitous cliff like a white thread pulled without any purpose. As I looked down from the cliff, which could well be the gorge to hell, I saw the murky water of the

Machu River. My heart pounded like leapfrogging lambs. Even though the clattering noise of the tractor and the loud voice of the driver's mother added some excitement on that road, they also sent chills down my spine.

At the end of the drive, which vigorously shook our intestines, we finally arrived at Kyalpuk Rabgo village which is located at the bank of the Machu River. Kyalpuk is a fertile land where a variety of fruits and grains grow in abundance. The weather there is as hot as a pan on fire. The kind and virtuous householder Dorjé sent his son to accompany us to the marvelous hermitage of Jé Shabkar Tsokdruk Rangdröl in Padma Dzong. We arrived at our destination at 6pm. Folios of texts were scattered everywhere on the middle and lower parts of the hill. There was nothing left in the hermitage except for a worn-out sitting mat, a bowl and a pan, and traces of burglary. I went to fetch some water from the Machu which had already turned murky because it was summer. I couldn't help but make tea from the water that hurt our teeth. Dirt filled the cup halfway. Joganma instantly initiated her retreat. I collected the pieces of text scattered on the base of the mountain and buried them under a rock in a cliff.

The next day, when I was about to make a fire to prepare breakfast, a mother and a daughter from Kyalpuk village arrived. The daughter, Chomotso, carried drinking water in a twenty-five-liter plastic container. Her mother, Drukto, brought a basket-load of firewood and a tray of warm bread. After enjoying the delicious breakfast, Chomotso and I went to the Machu River to wash the dirty plastic that was on the altar. We also cleaned the rocky face of the hermitage until colors and the painting of a lotus became visible. There were handprints on the mud ceiling. The handprints were so wide and deep that they were probably the handprints of Shabkar Tsokdruk Rangdröl. They must be! There is no doubt.

The mother and daughter returned to their home near Padma Dzong after cleaning the hermitage.

The shape of the rocky mountain on the left of the hermitage resembled a blossoming lotus. A prominent rock in the middle of that mountain looked like the head of a deer. It gives one the impression that this rocky mountain was carefully crafted by an artist. A doe and its kid were trapped right at the mouth of the deer-like rock. They seemed terrified and were bleating in desperation. But what could I do apart from just watching them?

If I were a noble being who had a hundred manifestations, I would obliterate the sufferings of all sentient beings and lead them onto the path of bliss. However, I am just me. A wanderer in the human world, a powerless woman. *Könchok sum khyen no*—prayers to the Three Jewels!

2. The Devout People

The scorching heat made me dizzy and my vision blurry. I carried red earth in big plastic bags from the base of the rocky mountain to the hermitage and transported water from the Machu River. I built a *bhumkhang* by imprinting an image of Tārā on reddish-yellow mud mixes. I assembled many white pebbles to create a *deubhum*, a hundred thousand white stones. At the time, the most difficult task at the hermitage was fetching water. One day when I was planning to get some water, a set of twin boys appeared. The boys were six years old and had beautiful yellow hair. I went to Machu River with the two boys, gave them a lot of food from the feast-offerings, and sent them home.

One day, three people from Kyalpuk village came to receive blessings from Joganma. They said, “We have heard of you before, Ani Jomo! You are a yoginī who has mastered yogic exercises of the winds and channels. We are here to request you to prevent heavy rain. Our grains are still in the field. Please consider this request, the compassionate Ani!” They offered fruits, breads, and Chinese tea to Joganma. She also recounted each story of her previous retreats with pride and dignity. Their faith and admiration toward Joganma grew. They left the hermitage with joy; they left as if all their desires were fulfilled.

The following day, we saw an old, white-headed Hui man and three young men coming from the base of the rocky mountain. Joganma was frantic and spoke to me with a trembling voice: “Salé Drölma, Salé Drölma! It’s not good. White hats (Hui) don’t believe in karma and the law of causality. I am old so I will be fine. But they might harm you because you are young. Hurry up and hide somewhere!” I also got frightened. So, I hid my shoes under the mat and covered myself with a blanket. I took gentle breaths and stayed silent. Moments after, the four white hats arrived at the hermitage. Joganma mumbled some chants and acted dumb.

“I came here to see you because my legs hurt. People say you are a great healer,” I heard them saying these words in Chinese. In response, Joganma raised her hands to show her *mālā* but remained silent.

“She is chanting prayers, so we shouldn’t interrupt her. Let’s go,” said the old man as he limped down the mountain. One of the young men sported a rifle on his shoulder.

Joganma and I laughed out loud over our unfounded fear. Jé Shabkar obtained realization through his great efforts in this great place of solitude. He performed incredible acts of benefit to all beings. Yet I couldn’t even practice my daily rituals without interruption and meditate with pure concentration.

3. All Kinds of Discursive Thoughts

On the 22nd of July, I went to the Machu River to fetch water. Some farmers were harvesting crops on the other side of the river. A few women and children were washing clothes. So I was not as scared. Just as I was lifting my fully filled barrel on a stand, I heard an unbearable cry from the

other side of the river. A woman was sobbing and running madly towards the river. There were many people moving around her in circles. I became despondent.

After lunch, I squatted in front of the hermitage and drew the lotus-shaped rocky mountain on the ground with the tip of a stone. I thought of erasing the drawing with a frayed broom. When I was just about to pick up the broom, I saw a poisonous snake with black and white stripes coiled around it. I stumbled over it as I ran towards the hermitage. Joganma asked me what happened. I told her about the snake. Frightened, she screamed and ran towards the innermost part of the cave.

Moments later, that little dark snake showed up at our front door. Slightly lifting its head, it closely surveyed the hermitage gawking around for a long time. I held a stick and threw pebbles to try to scare the snake. After a while the snake turned back and slithered towards a rock. The snake was cunning. It took me a long time to chase it away. I couldn't continue my practice that afternoon due to fear.

At night, Joganma started to scream out of fear when the plastic window cover fluttered from the wind. She thought the snake was coming back. "Don't be afraid! Snakes are like humans. They sleep at night," I assured her by pretending to be knowledgeable. She trusted me and went into a deep sleep. Joganma prepared breakfast after finishing her practice in the morning. After breakfast, she requested me to visit Kyalpuk village on the other side of the *gyabri* (the posterior mountain) to collect some beetroots. When I reached the village, the villagers had nearly finished harvesting. There were many beetroots that grew between the bright flowers of potato plants.

The village is very pleasant and consisted of eight families. The mother and daughter who brought bread and water to the hermitage the other day also lived in that village. They offered generous amounts of beetroots without any greed. Her son wanted to go to Thangnak, so we left together. He was very talkative. He shared that the other day, a woman was washing clothes by the river with her son. When the son tried to catch one of his mother's shoes that fell into the river, he also fell into the water. The mother called after him in distress, but his body never floated to the surface of the water.

I sincerely felt sympathy towards the woman I saw the other day who was running and crying.

Back at the hermitage, Joganma and I arranged the beetroots on the edge of a cliff. At night, we erected two beetroots on either side of the door as protectors. I do not know if it's true, but it is commonly believed that beetroots can deter snakes.

As the saying "the mind points to the rock and the rock to asceticism" goes, I thought I could practice authentic meditation with a clear mind if I lived in solitude. However, my mind wouldn't stay calm, and I couldn't cut all kinds of discursive thoughts. Even though I have a solitary environment, because my mind is distracted, I couldn't generate certainty in the dharma. Unable to tame my own mind, I had no mental peace.

4. An Irrevocable Disaster

One early morning, it was so hot that even fetching water was difficult. In the afternoon, heavy and dark clouds blanketed the sky. Thunder constantly rumbled producing a frightening image of the sky cracking. Hailstorms clattered against the earth. Harvesting wasn't finished yet, so I pleaded to Joganma: "Ani, it's timely to chant whatever prayers you have. Otherwise, the farmers' good harvest will be destroyed." Joganma made *sang* (juniper smoke) offerings and conducted rituals to the eight powerful worldly deities and nāgas, as well as other nonhumans.

When the hailstorm stopped, the sky reverberated with a dreadful sound. Like rolling stones, a deluge surged from the sky and swept away the fine local farms towards the Machu River. An older couple from a household in Takyugthang (the land of galloping horses) managed to run afar with their three-year-old son. But they witnessed the vicious flood engulfing their house and farm in shock. The huge flood eventually turned into dark mud. In a flash the flood transformed the beauty of the season into an unbearable realm of hell.

In the narrow precipice of an irrevocable disaster,
I saw dramatic dances of illusion and impermanence.
The true, eternal protector of present and future lives,
I take refuge in the unfailing Three Jewels.

5. Companion in Joy and Sorrow

At noon on a sunny July day, Samdup from the village behind us came with a big bag of beans. The three of us boiled the green beans and ate until we satisfied our craving. Samdup, who just turned thirteen, shared with us a sad story. An astrologer named Pöngan Jamyang from Dartso county prophesized that Samdup should become a monk when he grew up; otherwise, he would turn into a murderer. This made Samdup extremely anxious. He asked for Joganma's advice. She told him that Pöngan Jamyang is not an ordinary person. So, it is better to listen to him and become a monk in the future. Samdup promised to do so accordingly, and his worries were slightly relieved.

When I was about to take the remaining beans out of the pan, a dragon-like black snake slowly wriggled out of the rock wall and coiled around the tip of our furnace. I was very scared and couldn't even breathe. Samdup immediately chased the snake away using a long rod. The snake eventually went down a crack and I threw the remaining beans after it. "Our obstacles are wild. So, it's okay to end our retreat tonight although we originally planned to conclude it tomorrow," Joganma said. We ended our retreat and Samdup left for home the same day.

It was dark when we reached Rabgo village. We spent the night at Dorjé's home. They made comfortable beds for us in the courtyard after dinner. At midnight, the two daughters of the house made deep fried breads, milk tea and a dish of stir-fried pepper and meat. We had a fulfilling

breakfast. On top of that they offered us a bag of apples they picked. The younger daughter also accompanied us until Gyarak village. I will not forget these generous people for *kalpas* (eons).

Joy provides company to sorrow;
and sorrow to joy.
Pure attitude, like the nature of milk,
is the companion of both joy and sorrow.

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