
Entrance to the Monastery

INTRODUCTION

Tibetan society before 1959 is often seen as highly stratified and hierarchical, offering limited opportunities to climb the socioeconomic or sociopolitical ladder.¹ In the 1920s, Charles Bell estimated that of the 175 monastic government officials at the Ganden Phodrang government, forty came from (aristocratic) families that traditionally also supplied the lay officials. The rest of these officials were the sons of ordinary Tibetans, chosen from the many monks of one of the Three Great Seats: Drepung, Sera, and Ganden. This, along with other similar examples, is often seen as evidence that social mobility in Tibet was possible, but that becoming a monk was a first requirement to move up in life for those from a “working class” background. Bell further notes: “Among the laity it is wellnigh impossible in this feudal land for a man of low birth to rise to a high position; but a monk, however humble his parentage, may attain to almost any eminence.”² This raises the question of whether the monkhood itself was open to all. And if it was not, what were the criteria for entering a monastery? This chapter addresses these questions and explores the limits of this supposed vow-induced social mobility, shedding light on the opportunities and limitations of ordinary Tibetans in pre-modern times.

One of the few avenues for climbing the social and political ladder was to join a powerful monastery. In modern-day Tibetan monasteries in exile, “anyone who shows the slightest inclination” can become ordained and even the restrictions with regard to who can or cannot enter the monkhood contained within the Vinaya are “routinely disregarded.”³ The widespread assumption, perhaps based on this contemporary practice, is that this open-door policy is a historical continuation: that any male at any given time and place in Tibet could become a monk and make

something of himself.⁴ This idea is perhaps strengthened by the popular image of Buddhism as a religion that originally agitated against the caste system and strove toward a more egalitarian society. However, some *katikāvatas*, the monastic guidelines of Sri Lankan monasteries stemming from the twelfth century, state that men of low birth were not allowed to become monks, and elsewhere mention that it was the king who prohibited low castes from entering the order.⁵ One *katikāvata* relates that the new monk should be examined according to caste (*jāti* and *gotra*), although it is unclear how this was done.⁶ The idealized picture of both Tibetan monasticism and Buddhism in general as promoting equality does not necessarily correspond with historical realities, as we find conflicting information.

WHO COULD ENTER THE MONASTERY?

Sarat Chandra Das, who visited Tashi Lhunpo monastery toward the end of the nineteenth century, states that “the order of the Lamas is open to all, from the highest noble to the Ragyabas, the lowest in the social constitution of Tibet,”⁷ while elsewhere he notes that one from the “lower castes” could not be admitted to Tashi Lhunpo.⁸ The latter statement, along with the numerous restrictions that are contained in some of the monastic guidelines, suggests that entry to the monkhood and admission to the monastery were, in certain periods and at certain monasteries, restricted.

The custom of restricting different types of people from joining the Sangha or a monastery was not exclusively a Tibetan phenomenon. To understand what drove Tibetans to such restrictions, we first need to look at the Indic materials. Despite the widely held view that Buddhism does not distinguish people according to their birth, caste, or race, there are ample Buddhist sources that show that one’s background often *did* matter. Guṇaprabha’s *Vinayasūtra*, which is one of the main Vinaya texts used by all Tibetan Buddhist traditions, states several restrictions in the chapter on ordination, the *Pravrajyāvastu* (*Rab tu byung ba’i gzhi*).

Although the classification is not made in the text itself, we can distinguish (at least) three different types of reasons for excluding someone from becoming a monk. One could be excluded based on one’s physical disposition: people who were handicapped, ill, deformed, had one of the five sexual “disabilities,”⁹ or who were too young or even too old. Then there were those who were excluded based on their behavior: those who had committed any of the five seriously negative acts (*mtshams med lnga*); monks who had broken any of the root vows;¹⁰ known criminals, and people who generally were deemed to be too troublesome. Lastly, people could be excluded due to their background or social circumstances. Some of these were slaves (*bran*, S. *dāsa*), the king’s soldiers, and people without permission from their parents.¹¹

So far, excluding the people mentioned above appears quite commonsensical, from a socioeconomic point of view, if nothing else: allowing them to seek refuge

in a monastic community could mean ending up on the wrong side of the authorities and society, and thereby depriving the community of its workforce and sons. However, the *Vinayasūtra* also mentions other groups of people: “cobblers, and those of low caste (S. *caṇḍāla*, *gdol pa*) and ‘outcastes’ (S. *pukkasa*, *g.yung po*) may not be ordained.”¹² The Sanskrit version contains, but the Tibetan translation omits, chariot-makers from this list.¹³ The *Vinayasūtraṭīkā*, attributed to Dharmamitra, gives an explanation for each of the above terms provided in the *Vinayasūtra*:

A cobbler is someone who works with hides, a *caṇḍāla* is someone of an inferior caste, and a *pukkasa* is a barbarian. These types of people may not be given food and [thus] there also is a prohibition on ordaining them. This should be understood to mean that there is a very strict prohibition against [them becoming] *śrāmaṇeras* and the like.¹⁴

It is unclear which categories of people *caṇḍāla* and *pukkasa* are referred to here. In this context, the word *caṇḍāla* seems to denote someone who is of low birth, but who exists within the caste system, whereas the word *pukkasa* appears to carry the connotation of an outsider, a foreigner, or simply an outcaste. The explanation seems to suggest that there was no commensality between the givers of the food and the prospective receivers of the food. This may have been the main problem. Although these are important and interesting issues, for the current purpose it is not of crucial importance to understand what Buddhists in early India ultimately meant by the above terms, but rather how Tibetans understood, interpreted, and applied them.

There can be no doubt that the Tibetan society into which Buddhism was introduced was a stratified one, but the Indic notions of caste cannot have been easily adapted, or “culturally translated” by the Tibetans. It is therefore of some interest to look at what the terms “low-caste” (*caṇḍāla/gdol pa*) and “outcaste” (S. *pukkasa*, *g.yung po*) were taken to mean by Tibetan Buddhists in different times and places. While in some contexts *g.yung* seems to mean “civil” or “civilians” (as opposed to the “military” [*rgod*]), during the time of the Tibetan empire,¹⁵ in some Dunhuang texts, namely Pt 1089 and Pt 1077, the word *g.yung* appears to denote “people of the lowest order, virtually outside the pale of Tibetan society.”¹⁶ According to a Tibetan dictionary the word *g.yung po* refers to *caṇḍāla* or *bukkasah*,¹⁷ a low caste in early India. However, the second meaning given is that of a pejorative word for a group of people who eat crabs, frogs, and tadpoles.¹⁸ In the same dictionary, *gdol pa* is also taken to mean *caṇḍāla*, but the word is further explained to mean butcher (*gshan pa*) as well as “a low caste in the society of early India.” The phrase *gdol rigs* is said to denote “people who are even lower than the *śūdra* (*dmangs rigs*), the lowest caste of the four *varṇas* in early India, [and they consist of] blacksmiths, butchers, hunters, fishermen, weavers (*thags mkhan*), and bandits (*chom po*), etc.”¹⁹ This shows that the terms can denote both Indic and native notions of people at the bottom of society.

The monastic guidelines under examination here deal with these concepts in a similar way, usually displaying an awareness of them being Vinayic stipulations while translating them to the societal sensibilities of Tibetan Buddhists, in different times and different contexts. These notions crop up in the monastic guidelines when the topics of admission to the monastery and entry to the monkhood are raised. The texts state limitations based not just on one's societal background, physical condition, or past conduct, but also on one's economic position, as well as one's place of origin. To a certain extent, however, these limitations are interlinked. In the monastic guidelines, the most common bases on which people are excluded from becoming a monk are (1) one's origins, (2) one's economic position, and (3) one's societal background.

EXCLUSION BASED ON ONE'S ORIGINS

We know that monasteries in the Tibetan Buddhist world had different functions. Some were small local monasteries that mainly served their direct community with ritual, prayers, and ceremonies. Others were large and had a focus on education, some concerned themselves with retreat and practice, and yet others had a strong administrative function. These different monasteries required and attracted different types of monks. Small village monasteries were usually populated with monks from the immediate surroundings, while certain large, prestigious, and well-positioned monasteries had a more interregional and sometimes even international character.

Because Das accurately noted in 1893 the restrictions with regard to certain people entering the monastery of Tashi Lhunpo, which was both a large educational and administrative institution, he may have seen or known of its *chayik* written in 1876.²⁰ This work provides a long list of people who were not allowed to enter the monastery as monks.²¹ It stipulates that people from the direct surroundings of the monastery could not join Tashi Lhunpo.²² Sandberg notes that this rule extended to all Geluk monasteries in the Tsang (gTsang) area in Central Tibet: one was not to enter a monastery less than forty miles from home.²³ A similar restriction was in place at the Bon monastery of Menri—local men were discouraged from joining. Most monks living at Menri monastery before 1959 were said to be from the east of Tibet.²⁴ Cech's informants said that this rule was to guard against the danger of nepotism. We can perhaps then deduce that nepotism was something certain monastic institutions—particularly those that conducted “business” with laypeople in the immediate surroundings—tried to avoid.²⁵

The reasons that some larger and more prestigious monasteries did not enroll monks from the neighborhood would therefore seem to be largely pragmatic. Such monasteries were well known for their multi-ethnic makeup. Drepung monastery in the late seventeenth century had monks from almost all of Tibet's

neighbors. Its *chayik*, written by the Fifth Dalai Lama in 1682, notes the presence of Indian, Newari, Mongolian, Hor, and Chinese monks.²⁶ Even though in Drepung the multi-ethnic monastic society was a *fait accompli*, the Fifth Dalai Lama viewed the presence of so many foreigners as a possible security threat, mentioning that this might result in the Barkor (Bar skor) being set on fire.²⁷ This mistrust of foreign monks may also be implicit in the admission policy of Namgyel Dratsang (rNam rgyal grwa tshang). Although the only extant set of monastic guidelines does not state any restrictions at all,²⁸ Tupten Yarpel, the current general secretary of the monastery in Dharamsala, India, informed me that its admission policy has historically been very strict. He mentioned that traditionally only “pure” Tibetans (*bod pa gtsang ma*) could become monks there, as Namgyel Dratsang was the Dalai Lama’s monastery. It could prove harmful to the Dalai Lama’s government if a foreign monk stepped out of line. Tupten Yarpel noted that since the Dalai Lama resigned from his political role in 2011, this policy that effectively excludes “Himalayan peoples”²⁹—that is, Tibetan Buddhists who are not Tibetan—has become less relevant. However, the rule of only admitting Tibetans is upheld to this day.³⁰

In Sikkim, people were also prevented from entering the monastery on the basis of their origins. According to the “History of Sikkim” (*Bras ljongs rgyal rabs*) only Tibetan stock was admitted in the Sikkimese “Pemionchi” (Padma yang rtse) monastery,³¹ thereby effectively excluding the Lepchas, many of whom practiced Tibetan Buddhism. In the *Gazetteer of Sikkim* it is mentioned that the “novitiate” is questioned by the disciplinarian and chant master with regard to his descent, and if he has “a good strain of Tibetan blood he is let off cheaply and vice versa.”³² As this citation suggests, the entrance fee was not equal for all. Carrasco notes that in Sikkim in the second half of the twentieth century, all new monks had to pay an admission fee, with the notable exception of those belonging to the nobility.³³ This admission fee was formalized at certain monasteries, while at most monasteries the price was not fixed but rather an offering by the parents.³⁴

Monasteries were (and are) fundamentally pragmatic: those that were short of monks would invite boys in, for little or no remuneration.³⁵ It remains likely, however, that certain—possibly more prestigious—monasteries did demand relatively high fees from monks-to-be and that this fee was higher for certain groups of people. Theoretically, therefore, in some cases the poorest families would have been unable to afford to send their sons to the monastery, suggesting that another factor that limited access to the monastery was an individual’s economic situation.

EXCLUSION BASED ON ONE’S ECONOMIC SITUATION

It appears that in pre-modern Central Tibet, an ordinary family had to ask their landlord for permission to send a son to the monastery. Surkhang notes that this permission had to come from the district officer,³⁶ and that if permission were

granted, one would be presented with an official document called a “seal of release.”³⁷ Dargyay, who bases her research on oral accounts, mentions that consent was always given due to social and religious pressure.³⁸ Even in the unlikely cases that this consent was everywhere and in all instances given, it still does not mean that ordination was always financially possible. A modern Tibetan-language book on Tsurpu (mTshur phu) monastery gives a rather detailed list of what one was expected to donate upon entrance. At least one communal tea to all the monks had to be offered, for which seven round bricks of tea and ten measures of butter were required.³⁹ This was called the “enrollment tea.”⁴⁰ The book further provides a long list explaining which quality of ceremonial scarves had to be given to whom by the new monk. This process of providing tea and scarves could then be repeated for the group of monks who shared a home monastery, but only when the monk came from another institution.⁴¹ In Dakpo Shedrup Ling (Dwags po bshad grub gling) during the first half of the twentieth century, monks arriving from other monasteries to study were required to pay one silver coin⁴² upon entering and one such coin upon leaving.⁴³

In Phiyang monastery (Phyi dbang bkra shis rdzong) in Ladakh the requirements for the enrollment tea were adjusted according to the affluence of the family. I was told that all families could always afford to pay for it.⁴⁴ The originally oral version of the monastic guidelines for Sera Je, which now has been written down, also mentions that the entry fee depended on what the individual could afford. For a layman to enter the monastery: “he should offer the master at least a needle and some thread and [if he is well off] a horse or even an elephant.”⁴⁵ According to Snellgrove and Richardson, however, prospective monks at Drepung, after having made an application with the chief teacher of the monastic house⁴⁶ of choice, had to provide a large amount of gifts and offerings just before the start of the Tibetan New Year.⁴⁷ The admission fee thus varied greatly over time and among monasteries.

Although it is by no means clear how affordable it was for average-income or poor families to provide such offerings, the above instances show that the monkhood was not as easily accessible as is sometimes imagined. In certain monasteries in Ladakh, a new monk had to have a “monk field.”⁴⁸ This was a field that was owned and worked by the monk’s relatives. The proceeds of the field would go toward the upkeep of the monk.⁴⁹ A son of a family that did not hold any land could therefore not become a monk.⁵⁰ The so-called monk field was not always provided by the monk’s family: Könchok Chönyi, an elderly monk at the Ladakhi Phiyang monastery, was assigned a field by the monastic authorities upon entering the monastery at eight years old in the 1930s. His relatives worked the field for him and he was able to live off the harvests.⁵¹ This meant that in certain monasteries in Ladakh the concept of “monk field” was flexible, and that actual ownership of the land was not a requirement, although it is obvious that one had to have relatives willing and able to work the field one was assigned.

A thirteenth-century *chayik* for the monastery of Drigung Til states that an aspiring monk needed to have provisions that would last him at least a year: it is likely that poorer people would not have this level of resource. This text, one of the earliest works actually (but probably posthumously) called a *chayik*, written by Chennga Drakpa Jungné in the thirteenth century, also asks that monastic officials not ordain people who had not gained permission from their superiors, or those who lacked superiors.⁵² This indicates that there were indeed people, perhaps runaway servants, who sought refuge in the monastery, and that their presence was not welcomed. This is in many ways understandable: to allow landowners' servants to become monks would upset the social and economic balance, particularly in Central Tibet, where there tended to be a chronic shortage of laborers.⁵³ The materials available to me suggest, however, that concerns regarding the entrance to the monastery of "lowly" individuals and fugitives were not simply of an economic nature.

EXCLUSION BASED ON ONE'S SOCIAL POSITION

Persons whose social position was low, whose position could not be verified, or who were simply destitute, were not always welcomed by the monasteries in Tibet.⁵⁴ The author of the guidelines for Drigung Til, mentioned earlier, clearly does not conceive of the monastery as a charitable institution: "Ordaining all beggars and bad people without relatives will bring the Buddha's Teachings to ruin."⁵⁵ It is clear from this text that the population at this monastery was growing rapidly at the time of writing. There were too many people, possibly placing too much of a strain on the local population and its resources. Clearly, the author Chennga Drakpa Jungné wanted to put a stop to the unregulated population growth at the monastery: "These people do all kind of things that are not in accordance with the Dharma here in greater Lung (Klungs) in Central Tibet. Because they cause annoyance and bring [us] disgrace, I request that from now on these types of people do not get ordained."⁵⁶ It is possible that the author's main reason for not letting beggars and drifters become monks was that certain people had been abusing the system, becoming monks just so that they could acquire food or even enrich themselves. The problem with these types of people may have been that they lacked a support system, a family, which would ensure a level of social control. This does not mean that the author did not also entertain certain notions of class.

Kawaguchi mentions that in the beginning of the twentieth century, people such as blacksmiths who normally would have difficulties gaining access to the monastery sometimes went to places far away and concealed their background upon entering monkhood.⁵⁷ It is thus not surprising that a prospective monk who arrived from farther afield and who had no one to vouch for him would often be suspected of belonging to a lower social class. Although in Tibet caste, as

understood in the Indian context, was never an issue of much import, this did not mean that *class*, in the broadest sense of the word, did not matter.⁵⁸ A late seventeenth-century *chayik* for the monastery of Mindröl Ling (sMin grol gling) states that people desiring to enter the monastery had to be *rigs gtsang*. This can be glossed as being of a pure “type,” “class,” “background,” “lineage,” and even “caste,” making the phrase very open to interpretation. When I mentioned this term to a monk official from Mindröl Ling in India, he immediately suggested that it refers to people from blacksmith and butcher families.⁵⁹

According to Cassinelli and Ekvall, butchers were not allowed to become monks at Sakya monastery. Men from blacksmith families were also not accepted into the monkhood, “because they disturb the earth gods and make the implements of killing.”⁶⁰ Kolås cites a propagandist Chinese work, which states that in pre-modern Tibet all lowly types (*rigs dman*) or impure people (*mi btsog pa*) were barred from entering the monastery. These low-ranking people included butchers, blacksmiths, carpenters, leather workers, and corpse-cutters (people who were tasked with cutting up corpses to feed to the vultures as part of the traditional “sky-burial”).⁶¹ Spencer Chapman, a mountaineer who visited Lhasa in the early twentieth century, despite being rather ignorant of Tibetan culture, writes that those whose line of work had to do with taking life were excluded from becoming a monk. He names tanners, butchers, gunsmiths, body-cutters, and leather workers.⁶²

The nineteenth-century guidelines for Tashi Lhunpo, in addition to excluding would-be monks on the basis of their place of origin, also add further restrictions to do with social background: “[Those not allowed are] outcastes (*gdol pa'i rigs*) who deal with killing, such as butchers, fishermen, hunters, and those who are here in Tibet considered a bad ‘class,’ namely blacksmiths and tanners, as well as villagers who are after sustenance and clothing, or those who have no land.”⁶³ This demonstrates that the author of this *chayik* was well aware of the Vinaya rules, as he refers to outcastes, but he also includes a local angle by stating “here in Tibet,” which shows his awareness that certain restrictions had to do with indigenous sensibilities. One set of monastic guidelines, written by the Seventh Dalai Lama (1708–1757) for Sera Je, stipulates that “black people⁶⁴ such as blacksmiths, cobblers, beggars, and the like may not be allowed to become estate residents (*gzhis sdod*).”⁶⁵ Unfortunately, it is not clear whether this refers to monks who do not have “resident” status or to all people living on grounds owned or managed by the monastery. However, earlier on, the text mentions that people from Kham and Mongolia who already belonged to a subsidiary monastery (*gzhis dgon*) may not become residents (*gzhis pa*).⁶⁶ This suggests that the restriction in place against blacksmiths, cobblers, and beggars becoming estate dwellers might not necessarily have meant that their admission was refused outright but that, if they were admitted at all, they would maintain an outsider status.

Smiths—and blacksmiths in particular—were traditionally considered to be very low on the societal ladder and to be of a “polluted” or unclean type (*rigs btsog pa / rigs mi gtsang ma*). The reason for this pollution is interpreted by some as due to blacksmiths making implements of killing, thereby implying that the justification for their low status is based on Buddhist ethics.⁶⁷ Other Tibetans simply state that smiths are despised because they have always been despised. However, when pressed to give reasons, they commonly replied that the work is dirty and dishonest, that they make weapons—the tools of killing—and that they work metal, the mining of which was prohibited because it was perceived to disturb the spirits, which in turn would bring ill fortune.⁶⁸

The notion of pollution is not just a thing of the past—in certain Tibetan and Himalayan communities it is still very much a feature of everyday life, and similarly the exclusion of people from entering the monkhood due to their birth is something that was, until very recently, a commonly accepted occurrence among some communities of Tibetan Buddhists. In Spiti, boys from the lower classes were not allowed to become monks at the local monasteries. Traditionally only sons of the land-owning and thus tax-paying class could become monks, while the blacksmiths (*bzo ba*) and musicians (*bedas*) were excluded. In 2006, sixteen blacksmith boys from Spiti were admitted into Ganden Shartse (dGa’ ldan shar rtse) monastery in South India. The rest of the community summoned them to return to Spiti and punished the boys’ families by banning their access to water and fire,⁶⁹ amounting to social ostracism.⁷⁰ This ban was only lifted in 2009 after letters of support by the head lama of the local monastery and the Dalai Lama were sent. The community still maintained that the boys of lower backgrounds should only become monks in monasteries outside of the Spiti area.⁷¹ It is important to note here that the resistance to admitting people of “blacksmith” background originated at the community level, not the monastery level, showing the influence a lay community could have on monastic organization.

It can be surmised from the various examples given above that the exclusion of people on the basis of their societal status occurred throughout the ages, in monasteries of all different schools and in a variety of areas. It has been argued that in Tibet “social inequality was based mainly on economic and political criteria”⁷² and that the perception of pollution and the resulting “outcaste” status is grounded in the present or original socioeconomic status of these groups of people.⁷³ However, it may be more complex than that.

REASONS FOR EXCLUDING ENTRY INTO THE MONASTERY

It is rare for monastic guidelines to give explanations or justifications as to why a certain rule is made, aside from citing certain authoritative Buddhist texts. This in itself is telling of both authors and audiences of this genre of texts. It implies

the assumption on the part of the author that his moral authority will not be questioned and that the justifications are already known by the audience. Thus, the mere absence of explicit reasoning as to why certain individuals could not become monks does not mean that this policy always grew out of socioeconomic concerns alone. It is imaginable that specific restrictions were imposed in certain areas so as not to upset the precarious equilibrium of labor and to prevent the monasteries from becoming tax havens and shelters for runaway peasants. We also can see quite clearly that monasteries tended to act in accordance with the ruling societal norms, because they had to be careful not to upset society in general. However, by making rules and regulations that reiterated these societal norms, the monasteries further solidified existing inequalities. This is in line with how the *Mūlasarvāstivāda vinaya* positions the Sangha in society:

The Buddhist rule that *dāsas* [“slaves”], *āhrtakas*, etc., could not become Buddhist monks or nuns does not seem simply to accept the larger cultural and legal fact that such individuals had no independence or freedom of action (*svatantra*) and were a type of property; it seems to actively reinforce it. There is in any case no hint of protest or reform.⁷⁴

From a purely pragmatic point of view, it made sense to exclude certain people: Who in pre-modern Tibetan society would have been willing to make donations to, or to have prayers and rituals carried out by, a monastery filled with beggars and outcasts?⁷⁵ It is tempting to look toward the doctrine of karma to explain why people of low birth, and who thus had accumulated less good karma, were not seen fit to become monks. This is, however, an argument that I have never come across reading pre-modern Tibetan texts.⁷⁶ I suspect that the aspect of pollution plays a larger role than previously acknowledged.

This notion of impurity existed both inside and outside the monastery. The ideas of pollution continued into the monastic institutions not just because they had to accommodate the sensibilities of laypeople, who may have been unwilling to have monks from, for example, the blacksmith class perform the death rites for their loved ones. In addition to societal concerns, there are reasons to believe that these “polluted” people were also excluded due to apprehension related to the presence of local spirits, which were often transformed into protector deities,⁷⁷ connected to a religious institution.

One of the earliest works actually called a *chayik* gives an indication of the problem the presence of impure people could present for the deities living within the physical compound of the community. This short text by Rongzom Chözang (Rong zom chos bzang, 1012–1088) was not written for a monastery but for a community of tantric practitioners, who were, in this case, preferably celibate but not (necessarily) ordained as monks. It names five types of people who should not receive tantric vows (*dam tshig*, S. *samaya*): butchers, hunters, thieves, robbers,

and prostitutes. These people are classified as sinful (*sdig can*), but it is further mentioned that one should not sleep alongside persons who are impure (*mi gtsang ma*). The text names nine problems that may occur if these people “and tantric vows are mixed.” One problem is that allowing such people to receive vows will upset the protectors and the unpolluted *vajra-dākinis*, and from that will arise unfavorable conditions and obstacles. The text then further explains how these unfavorable conditions would affect people’s religious progress and how this in turn would debase the Teachings, and that the end result would be strife and disharmony in the community.⁷⁸

There is further evidence to suggest that the behavior and “purity” of the religious practitioners and the benevolence of the protectors were seen to be intimately related. The set of monastic guidelines for Mindröl Ling concludes by stating that those who go against the rules stipulated in the text will be punished by the protectors and their retinue. The author Terdak Lingpa (gTer bdag gling pa) calls for the monks to behave well for that reason.⁷⁹ Another *chayik* in fact does not connect the mere keeping of the vows and behaving correctly to the munificence of the protectors, but suggests that if one does not perform certain rituals or even the style of incantation of prayers according to one’s own religious tradition, the wrath of the protectors might be invoked. The text in question is a set of monastic guidelines for one part of Samyé monastery, called Chokdra (lCog grwa), where the mediums of the oracles⁸⁰ and the monks who were charged with performing the necessary rituals were based.

These guidelines, written by the Sakya master Kunga Lodrö (Kun dga’ blo gros, 1729–1783), suggest that even though Samyé was at that time affiliated to the Sakya school, at some point monks started to carry out certain rituals, in particular those that had to do with the oracles entering the bodies of the mediums, that were derived from other religious traditions. This change, according to the work, upset the oracles, which caused upheaval among the people living in the immediate surroundings. This text, in fact, is primarily an admonition asking the monks to keep to the Sakya tradition. The author mentions that he had asked the Dalai Lama⁸¹ for advice on the situation at Samyé and that the latter replied: “It is not only at Chok (lCog) but in any monastic situation one should adhere steadfastly to one’s own original religious tradition—whichever that may be—so that no enmity damages the tantric vows [linking one] to one’s deities and teachers, and the wrath of the Dharma protectors is not provoked.”⁸² It thus appears that protector-deities were not well disposed to change. The monastery then also had to negotiate the local protectors, who were naturally conservative, in addition to maintaining a balanced socioeconomic relationship with the local laypeople and benefactors.⁸³ The monastic guidelines were witness to this process of negotiating the changing times and socioeconomic and political contexts, while the overall objective was to maintain the status quo.

The adherence to the status quo by Tibetan monastics has often been commented upon by outside observers. Here the hypothesis is that this conservative attitude, in part, has to do with the main self-proclaimed objective of the Sangha as a whole—though not necessarily that of the individual monk: namely, to maintain, preserve, and continue the Buddhist Teachings. Another major factor in the Tibetan monastics' rejection of most types of change, as alluded to above, is not grounded solely in the mere fear of change but also in the fear of the local deities' reaction. Their wrath would not necessarily be limited to the monastic compound but would also affect surrounding lay communities and their harvest.

While the monastic communities saw the preservation of the Teachings as their primary *raison d'être*, the lay population was probably—and understandably—more concerned with the effect that preservation would have on the disposition of local deities. This may have been the perceived fundamental purpose of the presence of the monastery and its monks in the first place—at least, for the local lay population. This demonstrates the rather fluid relationship between laypeople and monastics, which was—in contrast to what is commonly thought—not merely a benefactor-recipient or patron-priest alliance, nor simply a hegemonic relationship, but rather a mutual dependency in which both parties had an obligation to care for each other's livelihood and continuance. The adherence to the status quo was too firmly grounded in concerns regarding the continuity of Buddhism and the sensitivities of the deities for any significant societal change to take place.⁸⁴ When changes were implemented in traditional Tibetan society, they most commonly were initiated or authorized by people of high religious standing—exactly those people who were seen to have more control or power over the local deities.⁸⁵

SOCIAL MOBILITY AND CHANGE

While one of the few possibilities for social mobility in traditional Tibet was entrance into the monkhood, specific groups of people at certain points in time and in certain areas did not have that option. This gives us a rough idea of the layers of Tibetan society for which social mobility seems to have been severely restricted.⁸⁶ It had an impact on more than just social mobility—in pre-modern Tibet, education most commonly was only available in a monastic context, and it is probable that those who were excluded from becoming monks were also usually excluded from formal education.⁸⁷ Later nonmonastic educational institutions largely followed the organizational patterns of the monasteries, with admission restricted to the children of aristocrats and government officials.⁸⁸

It should be noted that most of the monasteries mentioned here that excluded certain types of people were in one way or another prestigious and important. This makes it likely that these monasteries, at the time their monastic guidelines were written, could in fact *afford* to turn away such types of people. It is furthermore

noteworthy that no monastic guidelines written for monasteries in Amdo and Kham—at least that I have come across—contain restrictions on the basis of an individual's social background. This may then confirm the suggestion that historically the east of Tibet had a more egalitarian society,⁸⁹ but for now, this is a mere argument from silence.

In sum, there were three grounds upon which a person could be denied entry to the monastery: a person's birthplace (for fear of nepotism); a person's economic situation (for fear of profiteering); and a person's social background (for fear of pollution and social concerns). Some of these prohibitions can be traced to the Vinaya, although the categories found in Vinayic material often underwent a process of cultural translation in order to bring them in line with Tibetan social norms. These social norms were not based only on concerns of a purely pragmatic nature but also on notions of pollution and purity. I hypothesize that these notions of pollution, in turn, were closely related to the perceived presence of local deities and protectors, at monasteries and elsewhere. This perceived presence might have contributed—in part—to the aversion to change, regularly commented upon by outside observers of pre-modern Tibetan society. A proverb from Sakya echoes this general attitude: "No progress could be made unless the gods were offended."⁹⁰ Although the local deities were clearly not advocates for change, they presented lay and monastic Buddhists with a common cause: to appease these supernatural yet worldly beings.