
Monastic Organization

INTRODUCTION

In most Buddhist monastic societies, a well-developed organizational structure was in place. Nonetheless the Vinaya texts do not provide “an administrative structure or hierarchy beyond that of seniority.”¹ For the Tibetan context, the structure of monastic organization is most evident in the monastic guidelines. Little is known of the Tibetan monastic organization from the ninth to twelfth centuries. It appears, however, that monasteries expanded during and after the twelfth century. It was during this time that the first *chayik*-like prototypes emerged. This may have been because larger monasteries were seen to be in need of a more streamlined organizational structure. The *chayik* then can possibly be seen as a benchmark for the institutionalization of monasticism in Tibet. A similar argument is made in the discussion of the relative late emergence of summaries of Guṇaprabhā’s *Vinayasūtra* in Tibet, which may also be seen as indicators of increased monastic institutionalization.²

In the case of the monastic guidelines, it is difficult to confirm this hypothesis because a significant number of texts have been destroyed. Looking at the texts that were preserved, we see that the genre emerges only during the twelfth century and that a surge in new *chayik* occurred after the establishment of the Ganden Phodrang in 1642, indeed when many monasteries were forced—or volunteered—to “reorganize.” This at least indicates that the guidelines were written when an improved or new monastic organization was felt to be necessary.

HIERARCHY AND EQUALITY IN THE MONASTERY

Equality and hierarchy are often seen as dichotomies.³ Some argue that hierarchy can coexist with notions or practices of egalitarian behavior, albeit in a somewhat contradictory fashion.⁴ In many Asian countries hierarchy is more highly valued than it is in the West, and Tibet has been no exception.⁵ There is no doubt that the Tibetan monastery was hierarchical, much like Tibetan society itself. Nonetheless, certain elements in the monastic organization, many of which can also be detected in the Vinayic literature, suggest a sense of egalitarianism. The importance of hierarchy in the monastery becomes very clear when looking at the emphasis the *chayik* place on the correct seating arrangements of the monks (*grwa gral*) during the assembly (*tshogs*). While one would perhaps assume that monastic seniority is the decisive factor here,⁶ in the case of Tibetan monasteries, the arrangements were much more complex.

In Tashi Lhunpo monastery there even existed a *chayik*—no longer extant—that dealt specifically with the seating arrangements during the assembly.⁷ More generally, the seating was not only according to seniority and the level of vows taken but also involved a number of other factors. One *chayik* from 1802 notes that when arranging the seating “one should listen to the two disciplinarians, and not be pushy with regard to one’s seniority, saying, ‘I am older, I was here first.’”⁸ In the heavily populated Drepung monastery not everyone began with a seat in the assembly. In 1682, the Fifth Dalai Lama encouraged the monastery to restrict certain people’s entry to the assembly hall. Here the author takes both seniority and level of education into account. In addition, he talks of the “riffraff” who want to use “the possessions of the Sangha” (*dkor*).⁹ It appears that to deny the “riffraff” entry to the assembly hall was not directly motivated by a sense of hierarchy; instead, it was paramount to denying these people a means of income, in that wages, tea, and offerings were usually distributed during the assembly.

This policy served to disincentivize the less sincere renunciates from crowding the already overpopulated monastery. The *chayik* reasons as follows:

Nowadays, if all are allowed in, then the junior monks who are involved in study will not be able to enter [the assembly hall]. Therefore, of course not all monks [can enter], and the riffraff who have not been present for longer than eight years or those who have not passed the five higher exams should not be let in.¹⁰

In some cases, authors of monastic guidelines felt that the level of education should take precedence over seniority. The *chayik* written in 1909 for all Sikkimese monasteries reflects this sentiment:

Well-behaved monks, both *dge tshul* and *dge slong*, get—in addition to general admiration—a seat and a table, even when they are young. They also get a double share (*skal*: i.e., wages), the same as the chant master and the disciplinarian. With the monastery’s monetary allowance they should be given rewards annually, taking into account their particular conduct.¹¹

To a certain extent, this is a departure from the norm, for it was common that status was conferred on the basis of seniority and official appointment alone. The author, known by his Western contemporaries as Sidkeong Tulku (Srid skyong sprul sku, 1879–1914), here values behavior over the traditional sense of hierarchy.

On some occasions, laypeople participated in major rituals at certain monasteries. One early twentieth-century text that is only concerned with the correct execution of a commemorative ritual¹² also notes that the attending laypeople should be seated according to their (ritual) training, while always behind the monks.¹³ In fact, the Bhutanese seating-arrangement ritual, initiated in the mid-seventeenth century, in which both lay and monk participants were carefully seated according to their religious, political, and social status, is said to replicate the seating order of the monastery, which was based on both seniority and learning. The ritual was praised as creating hierarchy and order in a society where these aspects were seen to be lacking.¹⁴

As reflected in the above-mentioned Sikkimese example, monks with official positions (such as disciplinarian or chant master) are also found higher up in the hierarchy, and while most *chayik* do not explicitly mention this, reincarnations would also have a better seat in the assembly. In the guidelines for Drepung, for example, the Fifth Dalai Lama stipulates that the elder monks sit at the front according to seniority, the intermediate ones sit in the middle, while the “riff-raff that is after the possessions of the Sangha” sits at the back.¹⁵ In addition to the level of education, monastic seniority, and official position there appears to have existed another benchmark that determined an individual’s place in the assembly:

From now on, the purity of the *samāya* and the vows shall be examined on a yearly basis. And when impurities do occur, the individuals, whether they are high or low, up until the level of lamas and incarnations (*sprul sku*), are not to enter the great assembly. Judgment will be made, commensurate to the severity and the number of the impurities, as to whether individuals entirely forfeit their entitlement to inclusion in the assembly row, or whether they retain [a place] in the side assembly (*zur tshogs*).¹⁶

The level of monastic purity thus could also decide where or even whether a monk could sit in the assembly hall.¹⁷ All in all, we can surmise from this that the (spatial) hierarchy is dependent on the level of perceived qualities of the monks and that these were specified in various ways throughout time and in different monasteries. While this emphasis on the correct order of seating is found everywhere in Tibetan society,¹⁸ the ordering on the basis of the individual monk’s qualities is likely to be connected to the Buddhist idea that the worthier the recipient of offerings (*mchod gnas*), the more merit is gained by the donor (*S. dānapati, yon bdag / sbyin bdag*). Thus, in the monastery, those who sit in a prominent place are served first and monks in the front row are also likely to receive larger and better shares of offerings.¹⁹

According to Gombo's experience, for the—mostly married—lamas in the Nyingma religious institution in his village, the seating arrangement was meant to be according to learning, age, and seniority: “in practice, however, their seating positions reflected their social backgrounds.”²⁰ In Chinese Chan monasteries, the rector (*wei na* 維那), which may be equivalent or similar to the Indic *karmadāna* or *vihārapāla*,²¹ was in charge of overseeing the hierarchy and seniority at the monastery, which in practice meant that he needed to know the correct seating order.²² While I am not aware of a particular office in the Tibetan context that is similar to this, overseeing the seating arrangements was generally the task of the disciplinarian and his assistants. The importance attached to the correct order of seating demonstrates that it reflected a particular value system that is shared with other types of Buddhist monastic communities throughout Asia.

While the makeup of the monastery is thus thoroughly hierarchical, at the same time there is a sense of egalitarianism in that important positions, such as that of the disciplinarian, were chosen by means of voting. The apparent presence of elections within the Vinaya is regularly commented upon: when the Sangha met, a chairman had to be elected. This post was valid only until the end of the meeting. All *bhikṣus* had an equal right to vote.²³ In Tibet, candidates (*os mi*) for an official position would be selected by the general monastic office (*bla spyi*). However, voting was not open to all. In some cases, only educated monks could cast their vote, and in others, only those who had been living in the monastery for at least ten years were able to do so. While in the Vinaya having the status of *bhikṣu* appears to have been a prerequisite for voting, ordination status does not seem to have played a significant role in the Tibetan context.²⁴ That the voting process did not always take place in an honest fashion is suggested by the stipulation regarding the collection of nominations of candidates or actual “absentee ballots,” given in the nineteenth-century *chayik* for Tashi Lhunpo:

The tantric lamas who hold office need to appoint new functionaries. And when the lists of nominations of those lamas who had to go to faraway places in China, Mongolia, Kham or Tibet are collected, they [the appointing lamas] need to be honest and collect them, having taken the Three Jewels as a witness. They may not, out of partiality, do things that will harm or help individuals.²⁵

In the case of Ganden monastery, the office of disciplinarian is now elected by the general office alone. Previously, the Tibetan government had the authority to appoint monks to this post.²⁶ Goldstein mentions that the government also chose the abbots of the Three Great Seats from a number of candidates who were preselected by the monasteries.²⁷ Positions of any consequence were almost always temporary, however, which meant that the governing class fluctuated frequently.

SOCIAL STRATIFICATION WITHIN THE MONASTERY:
THE *CHOS MDZAD* AND OTHER CASES

The privilege of sitting in the front row was not always “earned” by being educated, serving the monastery, or being an incarnation of some variety. This privilege could, in some cases, also be bought or obtained through other means. As indicated in the previous chapter, while the view is widespread that entering a monastery would do away with one’s previously held status in lay society,²⁸ there are indications that in Tibet socioeconomic stratification persisted among the monks. Stein notes, casually and without providing any sources, that “social classes are maintained in the monasteries.”²⁹ Even though it is very likely that merely entering the monastery would not do away with preexisting class differences, not much research on the social dynamics within the monasteries has been conducted to date.

In the previous chapter, the need to pay “fees” to enter the monastery was briefly discussed. Alternatively, the family of a prospective monk could pay additional fees, taking the shape of offerings made to the whole community of monks, thereby buying their son certain privileges. The monks entering the monastery in that way were sometimes called *chos mdzad*, which translates as “practitioners of the dharma.” In the Geluk school, these “monk-sponsors,” as Dreyfus calls them, often came from aristocratic families and were usually housed in the more influential monastic residences (*bla brang*), “which were like small dynasties of monastic administration.”³⁰ While these monks tended to be aristocrats, they were not always noblemen: often they were simply wealthy. In Sera Je they were, like the incarnations, also allowed to wear fine wool on the backs of their garments.³¹ The main privilege granted to these monks was the exemption from menial tasks,³² such as sweeping and fetching water, that junior monks had to carry out for one or two years. While it does not use the term *chos mdzad*, a modern history of Tsurpu monastery describes how relatives of a newly enrolled monk, in order to prevent him from having to perform these menial tasks, made offerings to the monks during the assembly. This involved giving an “enrollment tea” (*sgrig ja*) and handing out some money to each member of the Sangha.³³

In theory, this could be seen as a way to allow these monks to spend more time studying, but this suggestion was vehemently rejected by my monk informants, who were generally dismissive of the *chos mdzad*. Rendo Senggé explains:

The *chos mdzad* was a position in the monastery that could be bought; it had nothing to do with the level of education. It was for the rich. The advantage was that one had more rights: one did not have to work and one would get a prominent place in the monk rows. It was not for incarnations, except for the very minor ones, who would not get a good place in the rows to begin with.³⁴

Lobzang Döndrup lived in Drepung monastery for five years until he was forced to leave and return to his native Ladakh in 1959. His description of the *chos mdzad* concurs with the above, while it also suggests that a prominent place in the rows was only allotted to the *chos mdzad* in the monastic houses,³⁵ but not in the main assembly:

They were often of aristocratic background. Their quarters were much nicer. The physical space was the same, but they had the means to furnish the rooms nicely. They did not have to do chores: they were not used to working hard. There were other exemptions as well; they did not have to go to the assembly—well . . . maybe except when there was a major assembly. They also did not have to go to the debate ground: they could just hang out. When a communal tea³⁶ was served at the monastic house they could sit at the head of the row. But this was not the case at the college level (*grwa tshang*). There, the senior monks got to sit at the head. Their special treatment often did not do much good for their studies. The poorer monks usually turned out to be the better students: they worked much harder. The life of the *chos mdzad* was just easier, not better.³⁷

While the term *chos mdzad* is not employed by Cech, she notes that a lama (here: a monk) could “buy off” his duties by providing tea for each monk in the Bon Menri monastery. Thus, in the case of two monks who had taken their vows on the same day, the one who had the financial means to offer a communal tea-round achieved seniority over the one who had not.³⁸

Actual references to the *chos mdzad* are rare in the monastic guidelines. In fact, the guidelines for Tashi Lhunpo appear to be the only set of monastic guidelines, apart from the *Tshogs gtam chen mo*, that explicitly mentions the term. Das states that monks in Tashi Lhunpo bore titles reflecting their social status. He writes that when the boys who were to be ordained took the vows, the “Grand Lama” (i.e., *Ta bla ma*) added certain titles of aristocratic distinction to the names of those from the upper classes: old nobility and descendants of earlier tantric families were given the title of “shab-dung” [**zhabs drung*] and sons of landholders and high officials³⁹ were called “je drung” [**rje drung*], the class of gentlemen, and the “sha-ngo” [**zhal ngo*] family⁴⁰ were called “choi-je” [**chos mdzad*].⁴¹ Although not stated, Das appears to have taken this information directly from the guidelines for Tashi Lhunpo.⁴²

The author of these guidelines singles out the titles that are given to certain people on the basis of their birth,⁴³ while specifying that other titles, and in particular academic ones, should be bestowed with the utmost care. He goes on to say that only those who are genuine aristocrats or from Kham or Mongolia—in other words, the incarnations and the others, mentioned above—may hold an aristocratic enrollment ceremony.⁴⁴ This ceremony may indeed refer to the price (in the guise of gifts to the Sangha) that was paid so that monks of good families and those from areas such as Kham and Mongolia could obtain a position of privilege. Again, the author states how certain privileges could be bought, whereas others

could only be earned; he explicitly rules that titles that were earned through passing exams could no longer be bought.⁴⁵ This suggests that in the Tashi Lhunpo of the late nineteenth century, the attempt to move up in the monastic hierarchy by offering financial incentives was persistent and occurred with some regularity. Buying a title, as described above for the *chos mdzad*, was often simply a way to get an easier life in the monastery.

Having such a title was not always merely ceremonial, however. In the early twentieth century the *drung dkyus*, a type of middle-rank government official, was drafted as a sort of tax from the Three Great Seats by the Ganden Phodrang government. It appears that these officials were chosen from among the *chos mdzad* monks. It was reasoned that the position was unpaid and these wealthier monks could be supported by their families. As a *drung dkyus* one could rise to higher positions within the government,⁴⁶ which allowed the nobility to get an even stronger foothold in the political arena. While Goldstein does not link the two, it cannot be a coincidence that at that time some aristocratic families were made to send an unspecified number of sons to the Three Great Seats so that they could become monk officials there.⁴⁷ The same families presumably were rewarded for their contribution through their sons being given the opportunity to exert influence on a state level.

Gombo argues that while one's family's socioeconomic background did, to a large extent, determine one's position in the monastic institution, this was less pronounced in the larger monasteries that had a strong focus on learning.⁴⁸ Although it is difficult, if not impossible, to gauge the extent of this type of monastic social stratification within the smaller monasteries, examples given above demonstrate that—while it is possible that this type of class disparity was less prominent there—a lot could be gained by entering one of the larger monastic institutions as a member of the higher strata of society.

The history of Buddhist monasticism in, for example, Thailand shows that the monastic life was at a certain point in time only attractive to the poor: the permanent monks were (and are) almost invariably the sons of farmers or underprivileged city dwellers.⁴⁹ As we have seen in the previous chapter, to have a monastery consisting of just the poor and needy was seen in Tibetan societies as detrimental to the continuation of the Sangha. In order to attract sponsors, it needed to have not just good but also well-connected monks. The position of *chos mdzad* made becoming a monk for those accustomed to a life of relative luxury less unattractive. By incentivizing the entry of wealthier and aristocratic monks, the monastery opened itself up to ties with their affluent lay relatives and friends. In a way, the incentives offered by monasteries to encourage certain people to join were balanced against the disincentives developed to ward off the less influential and affluent. This policy clearly did nothing to improve education or discipline but did strengthen the bonds between the monastery and well-to-do laypeople. Having an ongoing connection with high society could ensure the survival of the monastery. A degree of inequality along

with the contempt many ordinary monks clearly felt toward these *chos mdzad* may have been seen by the monastic administrators as a small price to pay.

THE SIZE OF THE MONASTERY, DISCIPLINE, AND
SOCIAL CONTROL

But do not take as important for there to be many monks. . . . Leading a large assembly of monks but being outside the Way is completely wrong.

—DÖGEN (1200–1253) 1996: 156

In secondary literature, there seems to exist contradictory information with regard to the monastery's social organization and the position of the individual monk therein. Some argue that the family situation is replicated within a monastery,⁵⁰ while others opine that a Tibetan monk is often seen as a person with a high level of individuality (in particular when compared to laypeople with comparable social backgrounds) and even that Tibetan Buddhism itself affords a "high degree of individualism."⁵¹ The level of individuality and group identity was no doubt also dependent on the size and the level of control at the monastery. From Welch's research one can generally conclude that in China in the early twentieth century, the bigger monasteries had more control and kept strict discipline, whereas the smaller temples had a more relaxed attitude.⁵² The observance of the rules was heavily dependent on contact with laypeople and the economic situation of the monastery.

In the case of Tibet, there exist two divergent views on the correlation between a monastery's size and the level of monastic discipline. The one currently held by many (lay) Tibetans in exile is that discipline is (and was) better in the larger monasteries,⁵³ whereas at the beginning of the twentieth century, Bell observes the exact opposite.⁵⁴ This may be because Bell was in Tibet during a particularly tumultuous time when the larger monasteries were asserting their political influence. Miller connects the position of the monastery within society to the level of discipline. Discipline then was a way for the institution to "enforce its demands and obtain the support needed for large numbers of non-productive residents." She also notes that the small monasteries have relied more on the communities in their immediate surroundings and were more likely to show a relaxation of "orthodox dGe lugs pa practices." She connects this relaxation of the rules to the economic needs of monks in local (read: poorer) monasteries, which necessitated that some monks do farmwork or engage in trade.⁵⁵

Goldstein reports that the large monasteries neither placed severe restrictions on comportment nor demanded educational achievements.⁵⁶ Presumably there was simply less social control in bigger communities. One abbot told me that while his moderately sized nunnery did not need a *chayik*, his home monastery Sera Je in South India did, because "it is a very big place."⁵⁷ The guidelines for Drepung are witness to the problems caused by overpopulation in what was arguably once the largest monastery in the world. Drepung's massive monastic population may have been a contributing factor to the challenges the monastery faced when its guidelines were written, such

as the members of monastic houses and the smaller compartments therein fighting with each other.⁵⁸ The guidelines that the author, the Fifth Dalai Lama, composed are clearly geared toward curbing the unbridled growth at the monastery during the late seventeenth century. The uncontrolled nature of the increase in monks was seen to be the root of the problem, though not the size itself.⁵⁹ The Eighth Panchen Lama (bsTan pa'i dbang phyug, 1855–1882) notes that in the smaller monasteries affiliated with Tashi Lhunpo discipline was much more relaxed.⁶⁰ He observes that certain practices, such as openly drinking alcohol and accepting livestock, presumably to be slaughtered on behalf of the monastery, were not uncommon in the smaller monasteries.

The greatest differences in discipline between monasteries are perhaps most pronounced not when it comes to size but where the overall orientation of the monastery is concerned. Smaller monasteries that were related to larger institutions often saw the brightest and most ambitious monks leave to further their studies. This was more than a brain drain; it also left the local monastery with those people who were less motivated to be good monks.⁶¹ The discipline at monasteries that mainly ritually served the local lay population were often more in danger of slipping, perhaps exactly because of their closer ties to the lay community, but possibly also because educational standards were lower. Many *chayik* demonstrate the corruptive force that laypeople could present, while the same texts also call on the importance of maintaining a good reputation and a harmonious relationship with the lay population. The correlation between the level of discipline and the contact with laypeople on the one hand and that of discipline and the monastic economic situation on the other is important to examine, for it shows the degree of dependency between the unordained and the ordained.⁶²

THE MANAGERIAL MONKS AND THEIR QUALIFICATIONS

The terminology denoting the people who hold official positions in the monastery varies. Colloquially, among monks in exile, perhaps the most commonly used term is simply *las byed*,⁶³ a word that is also used for those (laypeople or monks) who hold any kind of government job. In the monastic guidelines the terms *las tshan pa*,⁶⁴ *las sne*,⁶⁵ *las thog pa*,⁶⁶ *las 'dzin*,⁶⁷ and *mkhan slob*⁶⁸ all occur, each having a slightly different connotation. In the Tashi Lhunpo of the nineteenth century the monks in office were called *rtse drung*, whereas those in a lower position were called *las tshan pa*.⁶⁹ We see that particularly the earlier *chayik* contain idiosyncratic, and now obsolete, titles.⁷⁰ Later, specifically after the seventeenth century, a more standardized and homogenous set of titles developed. This may also have had to do with the fact that later (post-seventeenth-century) guidelines are often primarily directed toward the officials, whereas the earlier ones speak more directly to the general monk population. The growth of monks in the seventeenth century may also have had something to do with this development. It is furthermore safe

to assume that by this time the guidelines for the bigger monasteries served as something of a template for the smaller monasteries of the same school.

Some *chayik* contain detailed information on the selection criteria for monks in official positions, others only address this when the officials were known to have behaved badly in the past, and yet others do not contain any job descriptions. The fact that many of these texts direct their attention to these roles reflects how important these “managers” were for the monastery and the maintenance of its rules. The selection criteria vary: in some cases, the monk had to have reached a level of education,⁷¹ while in others the monk needed a certain level of economic independence. Dungkar Lopzang Trinlé (Dung dkar blo bzang ’phrin las, 1927–1997) remarks that in the Indian context there was a strict system of economy in place in which the managers of the general possessions (*spyi rdzas*) then could only be a *śrāmaṇera* (*dge tshul*) or an *upāsaka* (*dge bsnyen*), but never a *bhikṣu* (*dge slong*).⁷² Dageyab mentions that it was unusual for highly educated monks to be appointed to managerial positions.⁷³ However, in Sakya the *zhabs pad*, who had the most actual power, had to have reached the level of “doctor of theology” before he assumed the position.⁷⁴ The general character and reputation of the candidate was also taken into account.⁷⁵

In other cases, the only requirement was that the officials remained impartial and honest. The importance of an unbiased attitude is regularly stressed, which gives the impression that monks in these managerial positions *may* occasionally have tended to enrich themselves by having others (both monastic and lay) pay in exchange for favors, or that people in these positions simply had a tendency to favor their own friends or kinsmen. Monk officials also were required to be decisive and could not let bad behavior go unpunished.⁷⁶ The guidelines for Drigung Jangchub Ling state, for example, that in the case of someone breaking the rules, “the two disciplinarians should not turn a blind eye but should give a fitting punishment.”⁷⁷ Both favoring certain individuals and being lax in enforcing the rules were apparently not uncommon among functionaries. So much so that some *chayik* stipulate punishments for those officials who let monks get off scot-free or displayed a bias toward a certain group. Several sources mention that monks born in the vicinity of the monastery could not be appointed to official positions out of fear of bias, or accusations thereof.⁷⁸

The guidelines for Drigung Jangchub Ling note that if a *pārājika* offense went unpunished, those in charge of punishing the manager needed to prostrate themselves five hundred times; when the disciplinarian and the chant master were found guilty of letting misbehaving monks go unpunished, they would have to do a thousand prostrations each.⁷⁹ Although most *chayik* are clearly not intended to function as monastic management self-help books, the guidelines for Mindröl Ling monastery provides a mission statement for all monks in a management position: “In short, all those burdened with managerial positions, by providing for the livelihood of this place, protect the tradition of liberation of those who are wise, disciplined and good.”⁸⁰ The monk officials at Sakya had equally high

expectations to live up to. The guidelines remind them of the workings of karma and ask them to sacrifice their lives for the monastery:

Therefore, once one has been assigned a duty, one shall—for the sake of the very integrity of the religion and politics of the glorious Sakya—have the courage to be able to give up one’s body, life, and possessions without reservation, and one shall have the perseverance to be able to serve the higher lamas, the lineage, and the religious community ceaselessly, and one shall hold a sincere wish for the subjects of the monastery to expand, prosper, and remain for a long time.⁸¹

Here, working for the monastery is presented as virtuous and, in line with sentiments held by monk officials today, there is no sense of incongruity with regard to the monks filling managerial positions “taking them from their life of meditation and religious observance and putting them in charge of secular matters.”⁸²

THE MANAGEMENT TEAM AND MONASTERY OFFICIALS

Particularly in modern times the “management team” is very important for the organization of the monastery. This committee, depending on the size of the institution, may decide on internal issues, such as the education program, as well as on external issues that have to do with financial matters, for instance. This team or council is sometimes referred to as the *lhan rgyas* and can consist of the abbot, the disciplinarian(s), the chant master, and the secretary.⁸³ According to Nornang, the monastery of Dakpo Shedrup Ling counted three “offices”: the *gnyer tshang*, the *spyi bso*, and the *lhan rgyas*. The former two dealt largely with financial and external matters, whereas the latter appointed its members to those two offices and was primarily concerned with the general monk population.⁸⁴ The most important member of this *lhan rgyas* was the *zhal ta pa*, an educated monk who was in charge of supervising the kitchen and its staff. He and the chant master were the only ones to have access to the boxes in which the official monastic documents were kept.⁸⁵

In Sera Je, during the eighteenth century, the term *spyi so* denoted the committee that gave out the wages (*phogs*) to the monks at certain times.⁸⁶ In other textual materials we often see the word *bla spyi*: the monastery committee,⁸⁷ which is similar, if not the same, as *spyi so/ bso/sa*.⁸⁸ Miller explains that *spyi sa* refers either to a place where goods are stored, to goods donated for a particular purpose, or to funds from which interest is drawn to pay for monastic rituals.⁸⁹ In many ways, this office served as the treasury for the general populace of monks. To confuse matters further, the term *spyi bso* refers in some cases to an individual rather than to a team of monks.⁹⁰ The same is true for *bla spyi*.⁹¹ The most generic and widespread name, however, is *dgon palpa'i gzhung*:⁹² “the monastic authorities.”⁹³ In the large monastery of Drepung during the first half of the twentieth century, the committee for the management of an individual college (*grwa tshang*), called

phyag sbug, consisted of four or five members. This committee was responsible, on a lower level, for the distribution of certain goods, such as tea, food, and money that came to the monastery, to the members of that college.⁹⁴

The above names and titles serve to demonstrate that there was no single system of monastic organization in Tibet. For the current purpose, we are interested in how the people in charge of maintaining the monastery behaved and were expected to behave. The guidelines are very informative on the subject of monastic job descriptions and general management. Some of these monastic guidelines in fact solely address those monks with an official position.⁹⁵ They thus convey the monk officials' status, background, remuneration, and duties toward monks and laypeople. It is important to understand that, in much the same way as in Buddhist India, monks did not have as their main vocation administration or management.⁹⁶ It is thus not necessarily the case that, as Michael has argued, monks of all schools in Tibet "were trained for the management of human affairs as well as for religious service."⁹⁷ Most offices were temporary and tenure was rare. The posts most commonly described in the *chayik* are those of disciplinarian,⁹⁸ chant master,⁹⁹ and steward,¹⁰⁰ whereas the positions of treasurer¹⁰¹ and the various types of maintenance personnel¹⁰² are referred to occasionally.¹⁰³ Notoriously absent from this list is the abbot,¹⁰⁴ the head of a monastery or college. This important role that carries with it "not just responsibility, but real power and prestige,"¹⁰⁵ is hardly commented upon in the monastic guidelines. This is, in part, because the abbots were often the authors of the *chayik* or those who informed the authors, but also because they may have been regarded as having a distinct (religious) status that set them apart from the rest of the monks.¹⁰⁶

Generally speaking, the members of the committee and the others who held official posts were monks. This is by no means standard Buddhist practice. In Thailand, the monastery committee (*kammakan wat*) consists of the abbot, one or more junior *bhikkhus*, and several laymen.¹⁰⁷ The lay presence in monastic organizations is widespread throughout the Buddhist world.¹⁰⁸ However, Welch maintains that in China laymen, generally speaking, "played no role whatever in the internal administration of monasteries."¹⁰⁹ While Tibetan monasteries do not advertise the involvement of laypeople, the *chayik* convey their presence occasionally. In the sections that follow, the various offices and their roles are discussed in more detail.

While with regard to Buddhist terminology the Tibetans have been consistent and meticulous in translating and employing Indic terms, this practice has been not extended to titles that denote monastic offices. Most Tibetan official titles appear to be native ones, perhaps with the notable exception of the terms *dge skos* (disciplinarian) and *zhal ta pa* (manager), which have been briefly mentioned earlier. Many of these words, however, turn out to be used in a wide variety of ways in different monasteries and at different times. Not infrequently these terms have lay-world counterparts. This leaves one to wonder whether the monks emulated

the laypeople or vice versa.¹¹⁰ The treatment of various monastic official terms and roles below is merely an initial—and necessarily incomplete—venture into a territory that demands further elaboration.

THE DISCIPLINARIAN

I never saw a master of discipline in the lamaseries wearing a delightful smile. More often they seemed to be the type of tormentors that might step out of a picture of the Eighteen Buddhist Hells.

—SCHRAM [1954] 2006: 374

The word *dge skos*¹¹¹ occurs in the *Kṣudrakavastu* of the *Mūlasarvāstivāda vinaya*, the *Vinayasūtra*, and the *Mahāvīyūtpatti* as a translation for the Sanskrit *upadhivārika*.¹¹² The Tibetan term, which is not a literal translation from the Sanskrit, may be short for *dge bar skos pa*: he who establishes [others] in virtue, or he who is established in virtue. In the Indic context, the term is translated as “supervisor” or “provost” of the monastery. He is in charge of the material possessions of the Sangha, and in the *Kṣudrakavastu* his task is to beat the dust from cloth seats.¹¹³ In Tibetan-ruled Dunhuang, the *dge skos* appears to have been in charge of loaning out grains from the temple granary against interest.¹¹⁴

The connection of the *dge skos* to the maintenance of discipline appears exclusively in later Tibetan sources. He is a supervisor of the standards of discipline, but he does not have a consultative role,¹¹⁵ solving problems according to Vinaya scripture.¹¹⁶ Rather, his is an executive role, and he is to punish those who are in breach of the rules. His judiciary arm was said to stretch beyond the monks in the monastery itself, as a recent work on Tibetan monasteries notes: “The disciplinarian has the authority to take charge of things related to the discipline of the general monk populace. Previously, he could also take charge of the judiciary issues of the laypeople and monks at the monastic estate.”¹¹⁷

While the word *dge skos* has older Indic precedents, the earliest extant *chayik* do not mention the term. Discipline in Drigung Til in the first part of the thirteenth century was kept in the following way: “In order for the new monks to listen to the honorable preceptor (*slob dpon*, S. *ācārya*) who holds the vinaya (*’dul ba ’dzin pa*, S. *vinayadhara*), you, supervising monks (*ban gnyer ba*), must encourage them. Unfamiliarity with the trainings and the precepts will cause annoyance to all.”¹¹⁸

Some of the available sources state that the disciplinarian required a certain level of education, whereas others stipulate a preference for non-intellectuals. Nornang, for example, notes that in his monastery before the 1950s the disciplinarians were appointed from among the monks who did not study logic.¹¹⁹ The colleges of Drepung monastery found middle ground by choosing their disciplinarians during the summer period from among the scholars and those who would serve in the winter from among “the lay brethren.”¹²⁰ Per college two

disciplinarians thus served terms of six months at a time.¹²¹ This half-year term was the same for Mindröl Ling monastery in the late seventeenth century.¹²² Its *chayik* explains the ideal disciplinarian as someone who has good intentions, is strict, and is incorruptible.¹²³

The disciplinarian is in charge of the day-to-day maintenance of discipline: his permission must be gained before leaving the monastery grounds; he makes sure all dress appropriately; and he is responsible for the comportment of the monks, during assembly, but also outside of it.¹²⁴ He confiscates improper attire or forbidden objects, such as weapons, but also divides the shares of donations to the Sangha among the various monks.¹²⁵ He furthermore is responsible for keeping the register of the total monk population.¹²⁶ In Drepung monastery during the late seventeenth century, the disciplinarian was also charged with handing out degrees. According to the Fifth Dalai Lama the disciplinarian did not always remain an impartial judge: “It is well known that when taking the *gling bsre* [exam],¹²⁷ one would be let off the hook without having one’s level of education examined, if the disciplinarian had received a present (or bribe: *rgan pa*).”¹²⁸

The guidelines for Tashi Lhunpo monastery describe its ideal candidate as someone who is not just well educated, but also affluent, from a reliable background,¹²⁹ and with a physically imposing appearance.¹³⁰ The text then states that suitable candidates should not try to get off the short list, and that those not on the list should not try to get on it. The monk selected for the job would be given a seal or contract,¹³¹ which lists his responsibilities, and from that moment on he was not to go back on his word.¹³² While describing the procedure, the text then warns that no one should try to give orders to those who exercise the general law, such as the disciplinarian.¹³³

The above selection procedure for Tashi Lhunpo was for the position of “great disciplinarian.”¹³⁴ This position is similar to that of *zhal ngo* in Drepung, Sera, and Ganden. This is a disciplinarian who oversees the great assembly and has a position of considerable power. The word *zhal ngo*, literally meaning “presence,” is also used in the secular world. Aside from referring to “someone who does the Sangha’s work” the term is also simply explained to mean “manager.”¹³⁵ In Bhutan, *zhal ngo* are the “hereditary chiefs,” i.e., the leaders of the clans.¹³⁶ The sense of an exalted social status in the secular world is also affirmed in the guidelines for Tashi Lhunpo, which mention that the *chos mdzad* have come from a lineage of *zhal ngo*.¹³⁷ In the early twentieth century, the word referred to a low ranking military officer.¹³⁸ Although there is no clear evidence for this, it seems unlikely that the monastic institution borrowed this term from the “secular world” or vice versa. The term in all cases appears to imply a certain natural authority that the *zhal ngo* possessed.

In Tashi Lhunpo, the disciplinarians for the individual colleges were called *chos khrim pa*. These disciplinarians exercised their own set of rules with the help of their own guidelines:

The disciplinarian is one who, without hypocrisy, enforces the rules with regard to the duties allotted to each tantric functionary. By praising the good and putting an end to the bad and by taking the contents of tantric college's own *chayik* as his starting point, he enforces the rules and guards their upholding.¹³⁹

A large monastery could thus house a sizeable number of disciplinarians, whereas in smaller monasteries there was often just one.¹⁴⁰ While the role of the disciplinarian was seen by some monks as a burden or a distraction, within the Geluk school in particular it was an important stepping-stone. For the selection of the position of Ganden Tripa (the head of the Geluk school),¹⁴¹ one had to have served as a disciplinarian at either Gyütö or Gyümè (rGyud smad).¹⁴²

It can be surmised from the above that the disciplinarian, as the enforcer of unspoken rules and the monastic guidelines, was not required, generally speaking, to have an in-depth knowledge of Vinayic literature, whereas a thorough understanding of the local monastic rules was pivotal. He had high levels of responsibility and power and was therefore corruptible. This is perhaps one reason that the Bon monastery Jatilo (Bya ti lo) in Lithang (Kham) only replaces its disciplinarian yearly, leaving all of the other administrative monks in place.¹⁴³ While, as shall become apparent from the discussion below, the disciplinarians did not stand alone in maintaining discipline in the monastery, the day-to-day activities depended greatly on the moral standing of these monks.

THE CHANT MASTER

In many guidelines the chant master and the disciplinarian are mentioned together as *dbu chos*, a contraction of *dbu mdzad* and *chos khrims pa*. This indicates that these two offices were seen to be of similar status. The Fifth Dalai Lama, however, allots the disciplinarian six shares, while the chant master receives only five shares.¹⁴⁴ The guidelines for Tashi Lhunpo describe the duties of the chant master in the tantric college, noting that he needs to make sure that the intonation, pace, and “melody”¹⁴⁵ of the prayers that are recited during the various rituals are carried out exactly in accordance with tradition.¹⁴⁶ This is obviously not the chant master's only job, as he was often also part of the administration.

As with the disciplinarian, for bigger monasteries such as Tashi Lhunpo, there also were—aside from those for the smaller congregations—one or more chant masters for the great assembly,¹⁴⁷ who were in charge of keeping the traditional ways of reciting and restoring them where necessary.¹⁴⁸ The maintenance of the ritual traditions is also stressed in the *Abbatial History of Pelyul (dPal yul gdan rabs)*, in which it is said that the chant master was to make sure that “innovations do not stain them.”¹⁴⁹ In Gyütö monastery, a position not dissimilar to that of great assembly chant master exists, which comes with more responsibilities. There the one who serves as “great chant master” (*bla ma dbu mdzad*, a position higher than

that of *dbu mdzad*) keeps the monastic guidelines in a box¹⁵⁰ to which only he has access. This position can only be obtained by a monk with the highest educational degree who has finished the three-year tantric exam.¹⁵¹ The other monks of similar stature can vote in a new great chant master. Only those who have served in such a capacity can become the abbot of the monastery, and only those are eligible to become Ganden Tripa.¹⁵² Despite the fact that leading prayers is still an important part of the job, the great chant master's position is significantly distinct from the normal chant master post. It even gets translated as "assistant abbot."¹⁵³ The post of "chant master" is not always an exalted position, however. In Drepung, the *lag bde dbu mdzad* appears to have been the supervisor of the kitchen staff and was paid—on par with the scholar monks—one share of the offerings.¹⁵⁴

The term *dbu mdzad* does not appear in canonical texts. It may simply be the honorific for leader (e.g., *'go byed*), a term used to denote the head of a lay organization. A variant of the title is found in the 1845 *chayik* for Rinchen Gang, one of the very few extant sets of monastic guidelines for a nunnery. There the nun in charge of leading the assembly is called *dbu byed*.¹⁵⁵ While it is tempting to surmise from this that authors felt less need to use honorifics when addressing female clergy members, it actually appears that the term is used to denote a chant master in the Sakya school, regardless of gender.¹⁵⁶ Another word that denotes the same position is *byang 'dren pa*, literally "the one who begins" (in this case the prayers or rituals). According to the *Abbatial History of Pelyul*, this person is in the best case a lama, but if education, voice, and behavior are all adequate it can also be a practitioner monk who has completed retreats.¹⁵⁷ Aside from having a good character and voice, he also needs to be able-bodied.¹⁵⁸ While the position of chant master is presented as a temporary one in most sources, Nornang reports that in his monastery it was a lifelong position. The chant master, together with the *zhal ta pa*, had sole access to the boxes that contained official documents.¹⁵⁹

MANAGER OR SERVANT? THE ZHAL TA PA

This official title was mentioned briefly above as a translation of the Sanskrit *vaiyāpṛtyakara*,¹⁶⁰ and is equated with a Tibetan word that denotes manager.¹⁶¹ The tasks covered by this person in the Indic context range from doing domestic jobs to making important financial and managerial decisions. While the term *zhal ta pa*¹⁶² appears to be obsolete in contemporary Tibetan monasteries, older Tibetan sources suggest a range of meanings comparable to those found in Buddhist texts from India. The initial connotation of the word is someone who serves, derived from the verb *zhal ta byed pa*: to do service.¹⁶³ The seventeenth-century *chayik* for Mindröl Ling gives the prerequisites for the *zhal ta pa* as follows:

A suitable candidate should be appointed with care, as the *zhal ta* needs to be of middling vows,¹⁶⁴ intelligent, and good at handling the stove. He has a sound sense of responsibility with regard to the welfare of the community and good hygiene. He

does not discard supplies or allow them to go to waste. . . . Doing these things will become a cause for himself and others to accumulate merit. Furthermore, he is not to manage matters privately, by loaning out and giving away water, wood, and kitchen appliances.¹⁶⁵

This suggests a post for someone who is not a *dge slong* and who is involved in kitchen work. After serving as a *zhal ta*, one could become the “seat steward,”¹⁶⁶ someone who manages the laying out and clearing away of seats during the assembly.¹⁶⁷ The fact that this position gets full mention in the text suggests that it is of some import. A person doing kitchen work had access to both food and (costly) pots and pans that needed to be managed carefully.¹⁶⁸ Here the author also connects the *zhal ta*’s role to a larger issue: by guarding the contents of the kitchen carefully, one would thereby ensure that offerings given by the faithful would not be wasted, thereby allowing the donors to accumulate maximal merit.

The *chayik* written for Sera Je by the Seventh Dalai Lama lists the kitchen staff required to provide all the monks with tea. The kitchen needed one supervisor, three tea-makers, two people in charge of the fire, two people to fetch water, and finally two *zhal ta pa*.¹⁶⁹ The suggestion here is that in Sera Je in the eighteenth century the *zhal ta pa* were servants doing odd jobs. Another *chayik* states that the two horn blowers,¹⁷⁰ the clean-handed *zhal ta ba*,¹⁷¹ the shrine-keeper,¹⁷² and the disciplinarians’ assistants¹⁷³ needed to be chosen from among the young monks. This suggests that all these posts are junior positions.¹⁷⁴ Equally, the guidelines for Tengpoche monastery in Nepal from 1918 note that the junior workers—the tea server,¹⁷⁵ the shrine-keeper, and the *zhal ta ba*—should not be lazy in carrying out their tasks.¹⁷⁶

The fourteenth-century *chayik* written by Tsongkhapa mentions the *zhal ta pa* a number of times. He is named together with the disciplinarian as having a position in which one was exempt from certain rules, such as having to ask for permission to leave the monastic grounds and so on. Here, this title refers unquestionably to a post equal to that of the disciplinarian, and the task of managing the monastery is clearly part of his duties.¹⁷⁷ Similarly, in Tsurpu monastery in the sixteenth century, the “Sangha’s” *zhal ta pa*¹⁷⁸ was responsible for investigating those monks who had stayed at laypeople’s houses without permission.¹⁷⁹ In Drepung there seems to have been a variant of this title, namely *zhal ta dpon*. This *zhal ta dpon*, together with the disciplinarian, was in charge of examining and enrolling new monks.¹⁸⁰ This task of selecting members of the monastic community appears similar to that of the **vaiyāpṛtyakara bhikṣu**¹⁸¹ as portrayed in the *Pravrajyāvastu* of the *Mūlasarvāstivāda vinaya*.¹⁸²

It is unclear why this term has not survived the test of time, whereas most other organizational titles have remained unchanged for centuries. The above sources suggest that what a *zhal ta pa* was meant to do varied greatly, ranging from performing menial tasks such as kitchen-corrée to supervising and managing the monks. It is perhaps exactly this range of meanings that made the title unworkable

in the modern context, in which—generally speaking—there is a drive toward uniformity among the monasteries, regardless of their affiliation.

HEAD MONK OR HEAD OF FINANCE?

Earlier, the ambiguity of the term *spyi sa/ bso/so* was briefly discussed. That it could refer to both a group of people and individual monks makes it slightly problematic. The word *spyi pa/ ba*, however, appears to refer solely to a person.¹⁸³ The sources at hand suggest, however, that this term may refer to disparate roles. Some texts speak of the *spyi pa* as someone in a supervisory position, while others suggest that this post was strongly linked to monastic moneymaking. Starting with the former, the guidelines for the Sakya nunnery Rinchen Gang appear to ascribe a role to the *spyi pa* that is rather similar to that of disciplinarian in other institutions:

If one is an enrolled nun, one's own clothing should conform to tradition. One is not allowed to wear clothes the color of which has not been altered, such as [any] light colors. When one goes against the above, then an appropriate punishment will be given. The *spyi pa* should not hold back. The incumbent *spyi pa* has to enforce the religious rules,¹⁸⁴ taking responsibility for [adherence to] the monastery's regulations regarding order.¹⁸⁵

The text further specifies that “the contribution of the *spyi pa* is to bring those subtle matters of behavior and rules that are not clarified here but that are in line with the old system to the attention of all and to make sure that they are put in practice.”¹⁸⁶ Similarly, in Pelri Chödè's (dPal ri chos sde) monastic guidelines, the *spyi pa* is named together with the chant master and the disciplinarian as someone who needs to be contacted should monks misbehave.¹⁸⁷

In the guidelines for Mindröl Ling it is said that when monks travel as a group the *spyi pa* is to confiscate “unsuitable” items of clothing that monks are found to carry with them. When a crime occurs that falls under the “general law,”¹⁸⁸ the monk in question needs to be brought before the *spyi pa* once he is back at the base.¹⁸⁹ The same text states elsewhere that unless one has been assigned to do so by a *spyi pa* and is accompanied by a monk friend, one is not to wander around the village of Pergya (’Pher brgya) as a guide for one's acquaintances.¹⁹⁰ Clearly, the above-cited instances of the term suggest the *spyi pa* to be someone with authority, but not necessarily someone with financial responsibilities.

It appears to be more common, however, for the term *spyi pa* to refer to a post that is of substantial economic import. Unlike in countries such as Thailand, where a lay bursar called *waiyawachakon* handled all money on behalf of the monastery,¹⁹¹ there was (and is) no perceived problem with monks being involved in financial matters. Ekvall, speaking largely from the experience he had accumulated by living and working as a missionary in the border areas of Tibet (mainly Amdo), describes this post in great detail. He notes that the monastery's wealth

is “administered by a formally and tightly structured organization and is headed by a sPyi Ba (superintendent). Often there are two of these, who are elected or appointed from among the monks and serve terms of two to four years.” He goes on to relate that the stewards (*gnyer pa*) aid the *spyi pa*, who may also have assistants.¹⁹² Ekvall’s description of the duties of the *spyi pa* merits citation *in extenso*:

To be successful, the sPyi Ba must combine the talents of good business executives, the acumen of investment bankers, and the special gifts of salesmen. They must be able to plan and manage such business ventures as the dispatch of trade caravans, the management of livestock herding, the cultivation of fields, and various handicrafts activities, building projects, and the general upkeep and maintenance of all the projects. They must know how and to whom to lend wealth at interest to the best advantage, avoiding unprofitable enterprises and defaulters. In addition, they must be effective salesmen, advertising and proffering the religious services of the monastery so as to elicit, if not directly solicit, gifts to the Grwa Tshang [monastic college]. Salesmanship is also required to induce individuals, families, and communities to accept capital funds as an investment from which the Grwa Tshang may be assured of regular income. In Central Tibet, the collection of taxes is one of their principal duties.¹⁹³

The above account is confirmed by the 1938 monastic guidelines for the Central Tibetan Dophü Chökhör Ling (rDo phud chos ’khor gling) monastery. It warns of the temptations that accompany the post of *spyi pa*:

Those who hold the post of *spyi ba* at the monastic residency¹⁹⁴ are involved, during their service, in efforts to sustain the general good [such as] farmwork, sales and loans, horses and donkeys. They have an exemption, but only up to a certain level. It is not allowed to do more than what’s necessary, which would be both contradictory and harmful to the general rules and good behavior.¹⁹⁵

It appears that they not only involved themselves in business but also that they managed the treasury for the general population of monks. It is said, in the monastic guidelines for Sera Je monastery, that when there were gifts that were unsuitable to divide among the Sangha, they were to be placed in the treasury of the *spyi pa*.¹⁹⁶ In other instances, the *spyi pa* also serves as the liaison for the benefactors who wish to sponsor tea for the monks.¹⁹⁷ Together with the disciplinarians they inform donors on how their money is spent. However, when the sponsors fall short, they may not argue with them about it and put them under pressure.¹⁹⁸

While previously the word *spyi bso/so* was connected to an institutional office,¹⁹⁹ this term can be equated with that of *spyi pa* in a number of cases, thus referring to an individual post.²⁰⁰ According to Dakpa, in Drepung the *spyi so*, of which there were two, were responsible for the finances.²⁰¹ The same was true for the *spyi bso* at the Kongtö Dungkar (Kong stod dung dkar) monastery in 1943:

Two people serve as *spyi bso* for a period of three years. They make sure there is no decline by keeping clear account of grains, silver, animals, and household items in the record of income. They also ensure that what needs to be given and offered,

which includes the interest on grains and butter and the income from dairy products, accords with the record of expenses.²⁰²

This shows that the *spyi bso* had tasks that are similar to that of a modern-day accountant. The big difference is that, in line with Ekvall's description, the *spyi bso* had to make sure that the monastery would not incur any loss, by managing its income and expenses in the ledgers. At some monasteries, the *spyi bso*'s assistants were called "keepers of offerings."²⁰³ Together with the *spyi bso* they enjoyed several exemptions. The monastic guidelines the Thirteenth Dalai Lama wrote for Rongpo Rabten (Rong po rab brtan) monastery in 1930 state that except for the *spyi bso* and the keepers of offerings, no one was ever "allowed to do farmwork, cattle herding, business, and the like."²⁰⁴ As with other managerial posts, this position was vulnerable to abuse:

The general office, of which the keepers of offerings are the heads, is [to record] meticulously all that is deducted, invested, reduced and subtracted from what was given by the faithful to the field of merit—the Three Jewels—according to how it is stated in the allowance ledger that has been issued by the government. No selfish unmeritorious evil actions may ever be permitted.²⁰⁵

The above statement reveals a number of important issues, aside from the fact that the keepers of offerings were seen to be corruptible. It shows that the things offered by "the faithful" were in some cases not exactly voluntary,²⁰⁶ for these offerings could be increased or reduced by the keepers of offerings, suggesting that they were susceptible to bias. Further it indicates that the allowance ledger contained rules on how to deal with and record offerings and other types of income. Generally speaking, the allowance ledger²⁰⁷ stated how much the different classes of monks received.²⁰⁸ At the same time, this ledger indicates that the monastery was economically accountable to and dependent on the government, which appears to be part of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama's political policies. Presumably, it gave the government the leverage it needed to impose stricter rules regarding "playing favorites" (or simply corruption).

Yet another similar term is *spyi gnyer*, which also may refer to the assistant of the *spyi pa*. In Sera Je there were two of them, and they were allowed to keep up to three horses,²⁰⁹ something that was forbidden for the ordinary monks. This suggests that they had to venture out of the monastery on a regular basis. In the guidelines for Drigung Til from 1802, the *spyi gnyer* are mentioned together with the disciplinarians.²¹⁰ They appear to play an important supervisory role in the monastery. The *spyi gnyer*, as did others who held official positions, had to make sure that their robes were in order, in particular when venturing outside of the monastery.²¹¹ This suggests the *spyi gnyer* had a representative role.

THE STEWARD OR THE FINANCIAL CARETAKER

While the above terms *zhal ta pa* and *spyi pa* now seem mostly obsolete, the word *gnyer pa* is in active use in contemporary monasteries. It indicates a monk who

is in charge of the finances of the monastery—a steward. A monastic institution could have several stewards. Khenpo Chöying Lhundrup, referring to the contemporary situation in Khampa Gar in India, explains that the different sections of the monastery function more or less independently. They have separate economies and they each have a steward. However, the “owner” of the entire monastery (*dgon pa'i bdag po*) is an incarnated lama, Kamtrül Rinpoche (Kham sprul rin po che). When one section faces difficulties, the others help out.²¹² Similarly, for Sakya Chökhör Ling (Sa skya chos 'khor gling) in India, the two stewards look after the monks during certain rituals and other religious congregations. They are also responsible for food expenses.²¹³

In pre-modern Tibet, the stewards appear to have filled positions often similar if not equivalent to that of the *spyi pa*. The elderly monk Könchok Chönyi, speaking of his time in Yangri Gar²¹⁴ in the 1950s, notes that in Tibet certain types of incarnations or the richer monks would fill the position of *gnyer pa*. More generally, the monks who worked in the administration needed to be affluent (*rgyu chen po*). They would travel around, making investments, buying and selling things, and doing business for the monastery. They needed to have some startup capital, so this kind of enterprise was not for the poorer monks.²¹⁵ Dargyab notes that, at least in the years prior to 1959, in the case of a deficit, such a monk would have to replace the losses himself, whereas he could assume that, in the case of a surplus, he could keep it.²¹⁶ That this post is strongly connected to being both wealthy and business-savvy is highlighted by the fact that in the modern Mongolian language the term “*Jisa nyarab*” (**spyi sa'i gnyer pa*) carries a special meaning, namely “that of a person who has money but is very careful and not willing to use it.”²¹⁷

This notion that a person who does business on behalf of the Sangha needs to have money of his own does not occur solely in the Tibetan tradition: the rules in the Theravāda Vinaya state that monks were liable to pay damages when their actions lead to the Sangha incurring a loss. One can therefore deduce that monks tended to own property.²¹⁸ In the Tibetan case, this Vinayic concern for illegitimately using the Sangha's possessions translates into a general rule that the people investing those very goods had to be of some means themselves.²¹⁹

The steward may have also held an important position with regard to managing the lands that belonged to the monastery. In Ganden, the steward²²⁰ had two ways to do so: he could let it to others and set up a contract for that purpose, or alternatively, he could appoint a subject of the monastic region to look after the affairs and collect the revenue.²²¹ In the same monastery, before 1959 the individual monastic houses each had three financial managers²²² in Lhasa, who accepted repayment from debtors and busied themselves with collecting rent. These managers were supported by two “pursuers”²²³ who acted as debt collectors.²²⁴ That the steward had to be mobile is apparent in the guidelines for Drepung, where it is stated that while the two disciplinarians were allowed to have just one horse each, the steward of Pendè Lekshé Ling (Phan bde legs bshad gling) college could have five horses

and the steward of Deyang (bDe yangs) college could keep two horses and two *dzomo* (*mdzo mo*).²²⁵

Of those who conducted business that required traveling outside of the monastery, it was not just the steward who had to be of means. This is witnessed by the guidelines for Mindröl Ling, where it is indicated that a *rtsis 'dzin pa*—someone taking account of loans (against interest) and repayments of those loans—had to make up for any loss that would occur:

All the things that are given as loans, to which the *rtsis 'dzin pa* of the treasury and a suitable assistant are assigned with utmost care, may not be loaned out to others, except for when there is an exceptionally great need. And even if something needs to be used, the official to whose care it was given needs to make sure its value does not decrease. In the case of loss, he needs to replace it. When the loss is great a replacement and a surcharge may be taken. When it is minor, recompense should be made. When there is a recollection of who the persons in question are, then they should be held to account. But when they are not identified, the bookkeeper (*rtsis pa*) himself, as it was explained above, needs to carefully make sure that it is taken care of by offering recompense himself.²²⁶

It is not clear here whether this person loans to monks or to laypeople—but in light of other accounts,²²⁷ I assume that laypeople would visit the monastery to take out loans. The role of the *rtsis 'dzin pa* might be comparable to the post of steward in other monasteries at other times.²²⁸

The Bon monastery of Menri also had a different term for the persons managing its finances. There two monks held the title *phan tshun dge rgan*.²²⁹ They were chosen for their abilities and appointed for three years. Each year one of them would go to the Jangthang area (encompassing northern and western Tibet) to collect funds from the nomads there. Wealthy families would then donate thirty to forty yaks and butter. The donations would be transported to Tsang (in Central Tibet) to be sold. With the money this monk official then would buy grain. The other steward had to oversee the production of *tsampa* (*rtsam pa*). The *tsampa* was distributed during the daily tea-round²³⁰ in the assembly hall.²³¹ Another term found for a similar position is *kha 'go ba*.²³² According to Nietupski, in Labrang monastery these representatives were chosen because they were natural leaders and good speakers, bold and publicly aggressive. They had to know “the fundamental corpus of rituals and doctrines” but they were “not scholars or even very pious.” They were generally wild and rough and some allegedly renounced their vows temporarily.²³³

The above sources clearly suggest that the financial managers were monks. Other sources are more ambiguous regarding these officials. Könchok Chönyi expressly states that in the monastery in Yangri Gar a steward had to have either *dge tsul* or *dge slong* vows,²³⁴ while Lobzang Döndrup maintains that in Spituk, Ladakh, both the steward and the treasurer were chosen from among the *dge*

slong.²³⁵ Partly because the term *gnyer pa* is also used in secular organizations,²³⁶ some confusion remains regarding the identity of this steward. Furthermore, in Ladakh, the families that are financially responsible for certain ceremonies also get called *gnyer pa*.²³⁷ Ekvall, however, in describing the role and function of ex-monks,²³⁸ notes that they “are the doers of secular deeds when the monastery needs them to be done; they have the time and opportunity for economic and political activity; they often hold managerial positions in the monastery, such as the *gnyer pa* and the *spyi ba*.”²³⁹

In other places it appears that laypeople managed the entire monastery.²⁴⁰ Likewise, in Samdè Ling (bSam bde gling), in the first half of the twentieth century, the steward was also a layman.²⁴¹ Michael further notes that managers of monastic estates were often laypeople and that they could make the monastery rich.²⁴² These “managers,” however, could also be the people contracted by the monk stewards to manage the fields.²⁴³

In many ways, the *spyi pa* and the *gnyer pa* had very similar functions. In Dakpo Shedrup Ling, the offices that took care of financial matters were split into two: the steward’s office²⁴⁴ controlled the agricultural land and the general department²⁴⁵ controlled the livestock, grain, cash, and other donations. The steward’s office was responsible for paying the monks their allowance and also had to provide them with soup on a regular basis. In the years before the 1950s, the general department fared much better financially, but it was not allowed to help out the steward’s office.²⁴⁶ Naturally, not all monasteries had access to income from both land rent and livestock, so having two distinct departments was unnecessary, which may account for the crossover in the meanings of the terms.

EX-MONKS AND THE MONASTERY

As briefly alluded to above, ex-monks can still play important roles in certain aspects of the monastery’s running. Ekvall, describing the situation he found in Amdo between 1925 and 1941, speaks of the so-called *ban log*, which he translates as “monk rebel.”²⁴⁷ According to him, these were individuals who had been debarred from remaining as monks for having violated the basic rules (i.e., the four root vows). However, for various reasons, they continued to live in their quarters in the monastery, wear the garb of monks, and maintain their high standing outside the monastery. An ex-monk could engage in extensive trading for himself or the community, often using his residency at the monastery as a storage and trading post. He was also able to hold managerial positions such as steward. In some cases, he had a family living outside the monastery.²⁴⁸ This “rebel monk” thus bought and sold, collected debts, and lent out money. He was particularly important when monasteries went to war and monks became armed mobs or private armies. Such a person, even when he killed during a conflict, would still have a

place in the monastery. Ekvall states that “by his activities he both exercises political power on behalf of the monastery and increases and enhances such power.”²⁴⁹ The ex-monks became the “doers of secular deeds” on behalf of the monastery.²⁵⁰

In Sakya too, a former monk could maintain his official position, provided he made a generous offering to his monastery.²⁵¹ In other words, there was little correspondence between religious standards and political propriety.²⁵² To house ex-monks who nonetheless displayed loyalty to the monastery may have been a practical solution to the limitations posed by holding monastic vows. This was solved in Sri Lankan Buddhism by employing a *kappiyakāraka* (*rung bar byed pa*, S. *kalpikāra*): a layperson appointed to procure necessities for the Sangha and make them allowable.²⁵³ At first glance, the ex-monk that Ekvall describes appears to be a (Eastern) Tibetan equivalent. However, as the next chapter demonstrates, the handling of money was comparatively less problematic for Tibetan monks—or simply for any monk within the *Mūlasarvāstivāda vinaya* tradition.²⁵⁴

While Ekvall’s observations on these ex-monks are no doubt accurate, they are far removed from the ideal scenarios set forth by most of the monastic guidelines. The authors of these texts appear keen to remove these less desirable presences from their monastery, or at least to prevent them from partaking in any of the offerings that were divided among the monks.²⁵⁵ Contrary to what is commonly thought, it was possible for a monk who had been expelled to retake the vows and return to the monastery. This return to the ranks was under strict supervision and with the proviso of certain stipulations.²⁵⁶ Furthermore, according to the monastic guidelines of Pelyul Darthang monastery, these ex-monks who retook their vows could not hold positions of ritual importance such as that of religious teacher, chant master, or teacher of ritual dances.²⁵⁷

While in some Tibetan societies disrobing was seen as the greatest shame,²⁵⁸ it was a common occurrence in others.²⁵⁹ Often the economic outlook for monks who disrobed was bleak, and this may have been one of the reasons why relatively few monks returned to lay life. Contrastingly, Dargyay notes that former monks were in demand to become secretaries in noble households.²⁶⁰ Naturally this only pertained to educated monks. The elderly Sakya monk Shéráp Gyatso explained what happened to monks who disrobed in his monastery:

Ex-monks would usually go to Kham: they did not stay around. Life must have been difficult for a former monk, because he would not know a lot about work. If you would have a good family to fall back on, it would not be that bad. Otherwise it would be quite difficult.²⁶¹

The role of ex-monks is underappreciated in current scholarship, mainly because our sources—the monk authors—are wary to report about them, for obvious reasons. However, the ex-monk’s affiliation with the monastery, which was in some cases an emotional bond, in others a pragmatic and financial one, often remained. This contributed to the development of informal networks.

THE ABBOT: FIGUREHEAD OR FRONTMAN?

Like most other offices in the monastery, that of the abbot is not straightforward. As mentioned above, the abbot's position is less regularly commented on in the monastic guidelines, likely because the abbots were often either the authors or the people who requested these rules.²⁶² Still, the guidelines provide information on the role of the leader of a monastery or college. In the Geluk system *mkhan po* is commonly used to denote the ruling head of a monastic institution, although in some cases the leader was called a "throne-holder,"²⁶³ which usually, but not always, referred to an incarnation instated as head of one or more monasteries. In non-Geluk schools the latter position is more akin to what is called the "owner of the Teachings"²⁶⁴—the highest authority possible.²⁶⁵ The throne-holder of Sakya is called *khri thog pa*. It is tempting to suppose that, in the case of there being both a temporary head (such as a *mkhan po*) and an incarnated leader-for-life (such as the *khri pa* or *bstan bdag*), the latter has the function of acting as religious figurehead, whereas the former is more involved in practical matters. It is not clear-cut, however.

Taking monasticism as it occurs in Ladakh as a starting point, Mills makes a case for ritual authority being extended over both the monastery and the laypeople as the prerogative of the incarnates, and claims that ritual authority often extended into organizational authority.²⁶⁶ Nietupski shows a similar presupposition, as he casually mentions that the Fourth Jamyang Zhépa (1856–1916) served as throne-holder of several monasteries and that "he was thus no stranger to diplomacy, administration, legal or economic matters."²⁶⁷ This raises the question of what a throne-holder's duties involved.

Presumably, a successful throne-holder needed to have charisma and religious authority so as to legitimize his exertion of power and diplomacy. The *chayik* of Drigung Til states that its monks, "in order not to destroy oneself and others by means of dispute and the many grounds for disputes," needed to look to the acting abbots as role models and follow their example.²⁶⁸ Cassinelli and Ekvall state that in Sakya, the abbots of the monasteries were not meant to concern themselves too much with governmental—and thus managerial—affairs and that often officials (presumably those with a "religious rank" in the monasteries) had less political power than ordinary monks.²⁶⁹

It appears that there was—at least at the larger monasteries—a dual system in place, in which a group of monks would effectively run the monastery, dirtying their hands if necessary, without "incriminating" the religious figureheads. This arrangement is comparable to that in place in Thailand where "it is quite common for the real business of running the *wat* [monastery] to be undertaken by the deputy, whilst the abbot preserves his charisma by remaining aloof from these affairs."²⁷⁰ It can thus be argued that it does not follow that a throne-holder, or any religious figurehead for that matter, was also necessarily assigned a practical,

administrative, or managerial role. This dual system may have its parallel in the way most of the Dalai Lamas related to their regents.²⁷¹

It is also possible, however, that in smaller monasteries the abbot, or throneholder, held dual functions. This would probably be seen as far from ideal because it meant that the position of the “spiritual head” of the monastery could be compromised through (public) involvement in worldly affairs. During the reign of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama, there was a concerted effort under way to keep abbots from participating in governmental affairs.²⁷² A *chayik* written in 1889 by the Thirteenth Dalai Lama on the occasion of the establishment of an unnamed and unidentified educational college²⁷³ gives the job description of the abbot as follows:

An abbot mainly needs to manage affairs. The abbot also definitely needs to be a spiritual teacher who is endowed with the qualities of being learned, disciplined, and kind. In the best case, he has already gained higher degrees at one of the big monasteries. If not, he should have completed the studies of the five main subjects.²⁷⁴

Naturally, because the monastic institution in question is one that focused on education, the abbot also needs to be knowledgeable. However, here—without going into details—the dual function of the abbot as a “spiritual friend” and a manager is clearly indicated.

While the size and function of the monastery was thus a factor, much also appears to depend on whether the appointment is for life or merely temporary. Schram, describing the Tibetan Buddhist Monguor people at the beginning of the twentieth century, notes that the abbots had in principle the power to address malpractices, but that they declined to do so because they were elected by the intendants and after their three-year term they still had to remain in the monastery. Thus, the abbots were in the words of Schram “practical Orientals” and chose not to introduce reforms. This reduced their powers to “theoretical and honorary dimensions.” An abbot furthermore had to be a rich man, for he had to be able to entertain the more highly placed inmates of the monastery with sumptuous banquets several times a year. The poorer monks who were put forward as candidates for the position of abbot often declined for that reason.²⁷⁵

In the Nyingma monastery of Pelyul Darthang in Golog, Amdo, during the first half of the twentieth century, the abbot was also responsible, along with the disciplinarian, for the maintenance of discipline.²⁷⁶ The abbot had a supervisory function (*klad gzigs*), whereas that of the disciplinarian was executive (*do khur*).²⁷⁷ This suggests that the abbot was the one who held the ultimate responsibility. Indeed, when in the early twentieth century monks from Sera monastery were found to have cashed in debts by forcibly seizing goods from laypeople, the Thirteenth Dalai lama fined the abbot, making him “legally” responsible for the conduct of his monks.²⁷⁸ In Pelyul in Kham, consulting the head of the monastery was seen as a last resort. Only when other officials such as disciplinarians could not come to a satisfactory solution was he asked for advice. Alternatively, the officials could

come together in council and reach a decision after discussing the matter.²⁷⁹ In the hierarchy of the monastery, the abbot had the highest authority. It was his name and his deeds that would be set down in the monastery's abbatial record.²⁸⁰

It is suggested that in both China and Thailand abbots were expected to be on good terms with government officials and lay donors and to regularly meet with them. The monastery was greatly dependent on these relationships for its economic and political survival.²⁸¹ While in many regards the Tibetan monastic economy was such that it depended to a lesser extent on sponsors, it is highly likely that the abbot was responsible for the promotion and maintenance of good relations with important players on the outside world. The guidelines I have seen do not discuss this, but if the situation in contemporary Tibetan monasteries is a continuation of the past, then—in particular concerning non-Geluk monasteries—the presence, charisma, and amicability of the abbot is indeed crucial for the reputation, discipline, and finances of a monastic institution.

MANAGERIAL AND RELIGIOUS OFFICES: A TWO-TIERED INSTITUTION?

Senatores boni viri, senatus autem mala bestia.

There is a perceived relationship between the level of discipline and the presence of an important master. Lama Tsültrim complained to me that discipline had deteriorated dramatically in his monastery, and when asked to give a reason, he explained:

This is because the main spiritual head used to always be present in the monastery, making sure the monks would behave well and that all would go to the assembly. Now both our main lamas travel to the West frequently, and they also have a lot of responsibilities elsewhere. Now there is no one with authority whom the monks will respect. Actually, I think that important lamas need to stay at the monastery to look after its affairs. Previously, the lamas lived here, also because they did not really know English and did not have the opportunity to travel. Now this is all different: they speak English and teach all over the world. The monastery suffers from their absence.²⁸²

This is also echoed by Mills who, in examining the state of smaller Geluk monasteries in Ladakh, writes that “the monastic discipline of ordinary monks is in some sense linked to, and constituted by, the activities of incarnates.”²⁸³ While this may be the case in the smaller Geluk monasteries and in the other schools that have a tradition of assigning important administrative positions to the higher incarnations, we find that according to the examples given above, the abbot is important for the maintenance of discipline, but only for setting an example or being an inspiration. The day-to-day matters were (and usually still are) taken care of by the disciplinarians, the chant masters, and the various types of managers. Thus, while

the abbot has a degree of what could be called “ritual authority” over the monastery’s inhabitants, it is important to understand the practical limitations of that authority. In other words, there appeared to be a two-tiered institution, in which the abbot was able to maintain the moral high ground, while the managers were burdened with the upkeep of the monastery and—when push came to shove—took certain measures, which could be perceived as reprehensible.

It appears that some *chayik* attempted to close the gap between the behavior of the managerial and symbolical powers. In the opinion of their authors, *all* monks should behave in an exemplary way. The monastic guidelines thus address this disjunction between what authority figures prescribed for a monastery and what the monks actually did. Therefore, when attempting to understand how monasteries were actually organized, not too much should be made of this “ritual authority,”²⁸⁴ for the *chayik* demonstrate that often no more than lip service was paid to this authority.

Another point is that there existed a high degree of authority, embodied by the offices that have been described in this chapter. This “combined” authority was hardly ever called into question. When leaders have a lot of authority and control over resources, the level of organizational flexibility may decrease, as people become unable or unwilling to challenge the organization’s leadership.²⁸⁵ This lessening of adaptability is, in the case of Tibetan monasteries, clearly visible: the organizational structures were relatively stable over a number of centuries and any change was viewed with great suspicion. Similar to the Christian monasteries in the Middle Ages, which are described as “institutions designed to stem the tide of change,” it seems that their Tibetan counterparts too were “living symbols of immutability in the midst of flux.”²⁸⁶

In the context of Tibetan monasticism, the identity of the institution is clearly distinct from that of the individual monk. This may have further ramifications: when monks act in the name of their monastery, the ultimate (moral) responsibility lies with the inanimate institution. As long as there was no perceived self-interest among the monks involved, monks may not have been held accountable for actions that would have otherwise been seen as “unethical.” It would have been unimaginable to blame “the system,” i.e., the Sangha as a whole, for any wrongdoing, as this was (and is) seen as bearing severe karmic consequences. Viewed in this way, we can understand how the actions of the monastery as a whole were rarely criticized, whereas individual monks, government representatives, and local rulers were more easily reproached. This would in turn have maintained the status quo.²⁸⁷ The Tibetan system of monastic organization—despite it being in no way entirely homogenous—was geared toward maintaining the monastery and thereby the Sangha as a whole. This outlook also had an impact on how the monastic institution and its monks dealt with economic issues, to which we turn next.