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PREFACE

The author first became interested in Ladakh during the early stages of his undergraduate education, attracted by its relative obscurity, isolation, and its position at the intersection of three major religions: Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam.

The author’s first trip to Ladakh came in the summer of 1997 as a member of a medical expedition led by Dr. Richard V. Lee of The State University of New York at Buffalo School of Medicine. This expedition travelled to a number of small, isolated Buddhist villages, one of which, Lingshed, became the stopping-off point for the author who – by this time already interested in investigating Ladakhi monastic life – found the moderate-sized monastery there a suitable site for his initiation into anthropological fieldwork. The author returned to Ladakh independently the following summer, again visiting Lingshed. His experiences with the community of Lingshed and its monastery formed the basis of his undergraduate honors thesis (Bridges, 1999) and later a paper (Bridges, 2003).

The author again visited Ladakh for the summers of 2003 and 2004 to visit and conduct pilot research at a number of monasteries in the central part of Ladakh, primarily for the purpose of assessing their feasibility as sites for future doctoral dissertation research. The two monasteries that are the focus of the present study, Spituk and Ridzong, were among those visited during these trips. Since 1997 the author has visited a total of seven monasteries in Ladakh, representing three of the four major monastic orders of Tibetan Buddhism present in the region. Of those seven monasteries, five belonged to the Gelukpa order, including both monasteries that are the focus of this study.
The study that follows – and the fieldwork upon which it is based – represents the author’s best attempt to focus on a single topic while resisting the temptations of history, geography, people, places and religious syncretisms that Ladakh has persistently offered to his curious and easily distracted mind.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The field research upon which this study is based was made possible by a National Science Foundation Doctoral Dissertation Research Improvement Grant. I am indebted to the late Dr. Richard V. Lee of the State University of New York at Buffalo School of Medicine who in a mysterious lapse of judgement allowed me to latch on to his expedition to Ladakh in 1997, and to my advisors during that formative undergraduate phase; Dr. Philips Stevens Jr., and the late Dr. Keith Otterbein of SUNY Buffalo’s Department of Anthropology. I would like to thank Case Western Reserve University, the faculty and staff, past and present, of CWRU’s Department of Anthropology, and especially Dr. Melvyn Goldstein for his patience and understanding, Dr. Atwood Gaines for being a standard-bearer for qualitative sensibilities, Dr. Lawrence Greksa for his professionalism, and Dr. William Deal, with whom it seems I share many interests. I wish I had known him sooner. I would also like to thank Aba-le of the Old Ladakh Guest House, my intrepid, indispensable and dog-fearing research assistant Mr. Tonyout Gyatso, and most of all the monks of Spituk and Ridzong Monasteries who by interdependence must be recognized as co-authors of this dissertation. Lama Rinchen, my ally and friend at Spituk, and the machin, Mr. Tsewang Rigzin, my advocate and lifeline at Ridzong, deserve special mention. I would also like to thank my family and, far above all, my wife Sarah, without whom none of this (and little of anything else) would have been possible.
Two Monasteries in Ladakh: 
Religiosity and the Social Environment in Tibetan Buddhism

Abstract

by
ALEX WALLACE BRIDGES

Much of the literature on Tibetan Buddhist monasticism has tended to characterize monasteries as homogenous and monks as direct representatives of institutionalized religious values. Very few studies have attempted to directly investigate the lifestyles of Tibetan Buddhist monks and the role that the social environment of the monastery plays in influencing these lifestyles. Research was conducted at two small monasteries of the Gelukpa order of Tibetan Buddhist monasticism – Spituk and Ridzong – in central Ladakh, a predominantly Buddhist region in India’s northern Himalaya. Despite sharing many similarities, these two monasteries differed in their location relative to Ladakh’s urban center, amount of integration with neighboring villages, size, and patterns in monks attending external institutions for monastic education. An array of field methods were carried out that included survey interviews, life history interviews, shadowing and traditional participant observation. It was found that there were significant differences between the two monasteries with regards to patterns in life history narratives and patterns in daily lifestyles. These patterns are suggestive of contrasting trends in the religiosities of the two communities: Spituk Monastery being pastoral – prioritizing service for the spiritual welfare of broader lay society – and Ridzong Monastery being cenobitic – concerned with accommodating the spiritual interests of the monastic community itself. This study provides insights into the details and variations in daily life, operations, social organization and career paths of the kinds
of small, traditional Tibetan Buddhist monastic communities that have historically represented the majority of the monastic population in the Tibetan cultural sphere, and of which little is known.
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW OF CHAPTERS

Introduction

This study is based on fieldwork that was conducted at two small Tibetan Buddhist monasteries in central Ladakh, a predominately Tibetan Buddhist region in India’s northern Himalayas, over the course of one year, from August of 2008 to August of 2009. Spituk Monastery and Ridzong Monastery both belong to the influential Gelukpa order of Tibetan Buddhist monasticism. Because of this, their comparable status both within the order and within Ladakhi society, and their situation within the cultural milieu of central Ladakh, they are in many ways very similar institutions. They differ significantly, however, with regards to their locations, the intensity of their involvement with the surrounding lay communities they are associated with, and their sizes. These contrasts suggest that the two monasteries represent two different social environments and that despite their similarities, monastic life at each may be very different.

The overall object of this study is thus: to show how the religiosity of Tibetan Buddhist monks is influenced by the social environment within which it is lived.

In fulfilling this objective it is hoped that this study will contribute to a more complete understanding of the lives of ordinary Tibetan Buddhist monks than what is available in the current literature on the subject, while providing an intimate portrait of a compelling religious lifestyle.

Monasticism as a cultural institution, by structurally excising the individual from “normal” society in favor of a lifestyle directed toward transcendent spirituality, implies a
certain “religiousness” to all aspects of its lifestyle. The term “religiosity” will thus be understood here in a qualitative sense of the overall orientation that religious life – activities, attitudes, “moods and motivations” (Geertz 1973, 90) - takes. This differs from the common social scientific use of the term which has tended to define it in terms of a quantitative measure of “religiousness” (see Holdcroft 2006) applied to a society as a whole and not to institutionalized, bounded religious communities. This study, while investigating both cultural and organizational aspects of monastic religious life, is more concerned with the “how,” rather than the “how much,” of religiosity.

For the “social environment,” a seemingly more clear-cut concept, this study defers to Barnett and Casper’s established definition of it as “the immediate physical surroundings, social relationships, and cultural milieus within which defined groups of people function and interact” (2001, 465). This includes specific aspects of geography, architecture, infrastructural and social organization, demographics, traditions, norms and customs that together create the overall atmosphere of a defined, human space. Monastic life, again by its nature as a bounded community, creates a special, methodologically convenient case for a study of social environment.

Tibetan Buddhist monasticism in Ladakh is particularly well-suited to a study such as this. It is one of the few remaining places where the traditional Tibetan values associated with what Melvyn Goldstein has called “mass monasticism” (Goldstein 1998, 15-16; 2010; Goldstein and Tsarong 1985, 16) have been maintained to the present, virtually unchanged for hundreds of years. What is most noteworthy about this system is its prioritization of recruiting high numbers of male individuals into the monastic system at a very young age, ensuring that most of a monk’s socialization occurs within the
monastery environment. Motivations and recruitment methods allow little consideration for the personalities or predilections of those who are selected, usually during childhood, to follow a permanent monastic lifestyle. Thus, monastic communities in Ladakh are generally not made up of individuals who have been drawn together by a common interest in living a contemplative lifestyle in community with like-minded individuals, as is the case with most other monastic traditions, but of a diversity of virtually indiscriminately selected individuals socialized into an alternative culture from a very young age.

Since the upheaval of Tibetan religious culture that began with the 1959 Lhasa uprising against Chinese occupation, little remains of the traditional Tibetan Buddhist monastic system as it existed for hundreds of years across the wide swathe of the Tibetan cultural sphere. Ladakh, as well as a few pockets of Tibetan society mostly scattered throughout the Himalayas, escaped the fate of its bigger brother and has continued to maintain its traditional monastic culture albeit with its own set of challenges by virtue of its ties to the fate of the centralized Tibetan monastic establishments and its own social changes faced in the last half century. But Ladakh is also unique among traditional Tibetan cultural areas for its situation at the intersection of three major world religions: Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam. This, along with Ladakh’s recent emergence as a tourist destination, contextualizes Ladakhi monasticism within a remarkable cultural diversity unlike that of comparable traditional Tibetan societies.

Historically, much of the scholarly work on Tibetan Buddhist monasticism has focused on its rich textual tradition – its doctrine, philosophies and liturgy. As a consequence, the face of Tibetan Buddhism has for the most part been presented through
translations and philosophical expositions based on this textual tradition. This has informed, either directly or through reinterpretation, a mass of popular literature on Tibetan Buddhism and with it a popular image of the maroon-robed Tibetan monk as a sage-like embodiment of a heady philosophy. Many scholarly studies of Tibetan monastic life have followed this same pattern, focusing on a very small minority of monastic elite; the upper echelons of large centralized institutions represented by reincarnate lamas, highly educated “scholar monks,” and initiates of esoteric doctrines. While much of this work has been of great value in contributing to an understanding of the very complex doctrine, philosophies and practices of Tibetan Buddhism, little is understood about the lives of the ordinary monks that make up the majority of the monastic populations of places where traditional Tibetan Buddhist culture still exists. By focusing on the lives of these ordinary monks, or trapa, this study is a departure from this trend.

The few ethnographic studies that have addressed what might be called “ordinary” Buddhist monasticism in Tibetan societies have tended to focus on relationships between monks and lay “householder” society, either in terms of economics and exchange, or in structural and symbolic dichotomies represented through their contrasting sets of norms and values. Unfortunately, many of these studies have tended to reproduce an assumption that the monastic lifestyle is a direct consequence of the institutionalization of core Buddhist values that Tibetan monasteries are thought to inevitably represent, or of the structural and symbolic formalities implicit in localized expressions of the monk-lay dichotomy. This study instead focuses solely on the monastery and is an attempt to directly investigate the lives of ordinary monks: their life
stories, the patterns and details of their daily lifestyles, and the specific conditions – structural, organizational and cultural – of the social environment that influence these. By doing this as a natural experiment - comparing two monasteries that, while by many standards are virtually identical, are very different with respect to key characteristics of their respective social environments - it is hoped that his study will provide an understanding of ordinary Tibetan Buddhist monks not in terms of their differences from the lay householder society or in terms of doctrine-based values that it is assumed they represent, but based on how they explain their own lives, how they live on a daily basis, and the role of the social environment of the monastery itself.

In addition to the comparative research design, this study is also a departure from the exclusively key informant and participant observation-based fieldwork that other studies of Tibetan Buddhist monasticism have typically employed, through its pursuit of a sampling strategy intended to represent the variety of the kinds of monks that typically reside in these two monasteries, and its deliberate use of an array of fieldwork methods. These include survey interviews, life history interviews, traditional participant observation and shadowing. Survey interviews were used to collect quantifiable data relating to demographics and life histories so as to provide a general picture of the makeup of these two monastic communities. Life history interviews were intended to elicit narratives of important life events and discussion of religious ideas with a variety of monks. Traditional participant observation was used to provide insights into specific elements of the social environment of the two monasteries and how daily life is lived within them. Finally, shadowing was employed as a method to observe complete days in the lives of select key informants and thus to fill any gaps in understanding left from the
less formal participant observation method. Through this combination of methods this study was designed to provide a more complete picture of monastic life in Ladakh than is currently available, and an understanding of some of the forces that influence it.

A secondary objective of this study is to provide a view from the inside of an institution about which much is misrepresented and little is known. Life histories of ordinary monks will contribute to furthering our understanding of how mass monasticism operates, where monks come from, the variety of paths that the monastic career can take, and explanations of religious ideas in the words of the monks themselves. Participant observation – taking place exclusively at the monasteries and informed by knowledge of each monastery’s social structure – will provide an understanding of the inner workings and day-to-day operations of the kinds of small monasteries that – while neither as glorious or complex as the larger and more famous of Tibetan Buddhism’s monasteries – have been perhaps the most common and widespread in the Tibetan cultural area for hundreds of years. Exposing easily overlooked, mundane aspects of an intensely religious lifestyle will help to show monks not as idealized, homogenous and unrelatable, but as individuals who live in a real world.

Overview of Chapters that Follow

Chapter 2: The Setting: This chapter provides an overview of the location of this study, Ladakh, India, including a physical and infrastructural description, a brief history, and an overview of the people and religion of Ladakh. This is followed by a general description of Buddhist monasticism in Ladakh, including its history, function and organization. Following this is a description of the Gelukpa order of Tibetan
monasticism and the social organization of Gelukpa monasteries in Ladakh. Finally, the two monasteries in this study, Spituk and Ridzong, are introduced. Much of what is presented in this chapter is based on fieldwork conducted for this study, as well as preliminary fieldwork conducted at a number of other Ladakhi monasteries since 1997.

Chapter 3: Literature Review: This chapter provides an overview of relevant literature on Tibetan Buddhist monasticism. This includes scholarly efforts at descriptions of its common characteristics across the Tibetan cultural sphere, ethnographic studies of monasticism in Ladakh, the trend of characterizing the monk-lay dichotomy, and the variety of other literature that has attempted to directly address monastic life.

Chapter 4: Study Design and Methodology: This chapter outlines the common characteristics of the two monasteries, their key differences, and the sampling strategy that was pursued. This is followed by a description of the methodology that included survey interviews, life history interviews, shadowing sessions and traditional participant observation.

Chapter 5: Data from Survey Interviews: This chapter presents quantitative data obtained through conducting survey interviews. This includes a comparative analysis of data from both monasteries regarding age distribution, social positions, and personal backgrounds of the monks sampled.

Chapter 6: Data from Life History Interviews: This chapter presents the major thematic patterns that emerged through the conducting of life history interviews. This includes an analysis of the contrasting themes in the narratives of the life event of becoming a monk that were present at each monastery. This is followed by analysis of
further contrasting themes that were present in overall narratives of the monastic career. Finally, a dominant, orienting religious idea that monks at both monasteries emphasized, that of the path to enlightenment, is described and analyzed.

Chapter 8: Data from Participant Observation and Shadowing: Based on participant observation, this chapter outlines the general characteristics of the monastery environment at both research sites, including monastery spaces, daily activities and social relations. This is followed by an illustration of daily life at both monasteries through a focus on participant observation that was conducted with key informants, reconstructing a typical day in the life of a key member of the monastic community, the komnyer.

Chapter 8: Conclusions: This chapter briefly reviews the study and its overall findings. This is followed by an analysis of the contrasting types of religiosity revealed through interviews and lifestyles that were observed at the two monasteries in this study, and how these may be affected by the social environment. This is followed by an overview of some of the limitations of this study, significance of this study for Tibetan and Ladakhi cultural studies and research on monastic lifestyles generally, and directions for further research.
CHAPTER TWO: THE SETTING

Ladakh: The Land

Situated in India’s far north, Ladakh is a mountainous, high-altitude region bounded by the Tibetan Plateau to its east, the western extremes of the Himalaya to its south and west, and the Karakoram mountain range to its north. It is bisected by the upper reaches of the Indus River which, after its source in western Tibet, flows northwest through Ladakh before entering Pakistan. Taking up the eastern two-thirds of the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir, Ladakh is a vast area, and one of India’s least densely populated. The two administrative districts that it is comprised of - the Kargil District and the Leh District - together cover around 60,000 square kilometers, or 23,000 square miles, with a population of around 290,000 (LAHDC, Leh; LAHDC, Kargil). The terrain is mostly mountainous and arid. The two main mountain ranges – the Ladakh Range and the Zanskar Range – lie in the rain shadow of the Great Himalaya Range. The population is thus mostly concentrated in villages that appear in small patches of green along the valleys of rivers and streams made larger by in some cases hundreds of years old irrigation channels that are ubiquitous in Ladakh’s settled areas, and in the three largest towns: Kargil in the west, Padum in the south, and Leh, roughly at Ladakh’s center. With a population of about 30,000, Leh is the largest town in Ladakh, the administrative capital of the Leh District, and the unofficial cultural capital of the whole Ladakh region.

In addition to the Indus, the mountains of Ladakh are cut through by a number of fast-flowing tributary rivers, the largest of which being the Zangskar River, which flows through the Zangskar region in the south before meeting the Indus near Leh, and the
Shyok and Nubra Rivers, which define the Nubra Valley region of the north of Ladakh. None of these rivers are passable except for a few that when iced over in the winter provide seasonal routes for those traveling by foot or with ponies, yaks or donkeys – an alternative to the network of rugged trails that wind their way from high mountain pass to high mountain pass all over Ladakh and are to this day the backbone of Ladakh’s more isolated villages.

Ladakh’s main artery is National Highway 1D. A feat of civil engineering, the Srinagar-Leh Highway, as it is commonly known, was constructed in the 1960’s along an old trade route running roughly 260 miles between the city of Srinagar, in the neighboring Kashmir region, and Leh. The narrow ribbon of pavement enters Ladakh at the Zoji La pass – at this point becoming a harrowing dirt road that clings to the side of mountains and cliffs – and makes its way to Kargil – the mid-way overnight stopping point – before eventually meeting the Indus which it follows the rest of the way to Leh. Most movement of goods and people in and out of Ladakh is via this road and, to a much lesser extent, the Leh-Manali Highway – a road that meanders roughly south from Leh and through southeast Ladakh before crossing into the state of Himachal Pradesh, and on to the hill station of Manali. Both of these are seasonal roads – the passes being blocked by heavy snowfalls in the winter – and susceptible to wash-outs, rock falls and bridge collapses at all times of the year. After these roads, Ladakh’s remaining lifeline is an airstrip on the southern outskirts of Leh shared by an Indian Air Force base and the Kushok Bakula Rimpoche commercial airport, the namesake of the previous incumbent of the estate of the nearby Spituk Monastery.
A Brief History of Ladakh

Ladakh can trace its history as a political entity to the middle of the tenth century when Nyima Gön, would-be heir to the dissolved Tibetan Empire established by Songtsān Gampo, fled to the western reaches of the Tibetan cultural sphere during a period of political instability that followed in the wake of the assassination of his famously anti-Buddhist great grandfather Lang Darma. After centuries of obscurity the Kingdom of Ladakh reached a brief period of expansion and influence in the seventeenth century during the successive reigns of Sengge Namgyal and his son Delden Namgyal. Their military conquests expanded Ladakh’s borders to include vast stretches of what is now western Tibet, northern regions of the Indian states of Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand, and the lower Shyok valley in northern Pakistan. It was during the reign of Sengge Namgyal, Ladakh’s most famous king, that the capital was established at Leh.

On the heels of this brief height came a period of decline for the kingdom. The fallout from a Mongol-Tibetan invasion in 1680 reduced its territories to more or less how they are recognized today, and the weakened kingdom finally fell to Kashmir’s Dogra Empire in 1842 after a series of invasions by General Zorawar Singh (for histories of the Kingdom of Ladakh see Franke [1907]1998; Petech [1939]1999; Rizvi 1996). Since then Ladakh’s fate has been tied to that of Jammu and Kashmir, in its first form as an Indian princely state during the period of the British Raj and in its current form as the Indian State of Jammu and Kashmir following the 1947 partition of India. In the latter half of the twentieth century Ladakh has endured several armed conflicts with both China and Pakistan – tensions with the latter of which continue to this day. Despite these
neighborly disputes and a limited infrastructure, Ladakh became open to tourism for the first time in 1974.

**Peoples of Ladakh**

The vast majority of the indigenous population of Ladakh is made up of Ladakhis. The Ladakhi language, a dialect of Tibetan, is spoken throughout the region and there are many localized sub-dialects associated with the different areas of Ladakh. Ladakhi is traditionally written using the Tibetan script, although in the most western areas Urdu script is used. Recently, due to schools including courses in Hindi and English in their curriculum, Devanagari and especially Roman scripts are increasingly being used. In addition to Ladakhis, small groups of ethnic Baltis and Dards are scattered throughout the region, particularly in the western parts.

In addition to these long-established indigenous groups, recent years have brought significant transient populations from farther afield. Year-round residents of military personnel drawn from all over the nation, laborers from Nepal, merchants from the Punjab and refugees from Tibet are augmented each summer with migrant laborers from the eastern Indian state of Bihar, merchants from Kashmir, and relative throngs of tourists from all over the world, especially Europe. With very few exceptions – most notably the more adventurous tourists that tackle the popular trekking routes that meander through the mountains – all of these groups are associated only with the urban areas, particularly Leh and its surrounds.

While some have argued that heavy exposure to diverse and “foreign” norms and values in recent years coupled with modernization and its material artefacts are a risk to
the cultural survival of this seemingly romantic, anachronistic land (Norberg-Hodge 1991), this is merely the most recent manifestation of a cosmopolitanism that has characterized Ladakh for over a millennium despite its geographic isolation. As early as the ninth century a small tributary of the ancient Silk Route ran through Ladakh (Rizvi 1996, 96), and in the centuries that followed Ladakh became a regional hub in the trade of pashm wool, grain and salt, bringing with it contact with goods, people and ideas of neighboring regions of Central Asia, India and especially Tibet (see Rizvi 1996, 96-128; 1999; van Spengen 2000). Ladakh’s involvement in this trade remained very active right up until 1959 when the border between Ladakh and Tibet was finally sealed. But then as now the bustling of diverse peoples, languages, fashions and goods had always been concentrated along the road and in urban areas, especially Leh, in strong contrast to the isolated rural areas deeper in the mountains.

**Religion in Ladakh**

Ladakh lies at the intersection of two great religious traditions, namely Buddhism and Islam. The population of Ladakh is roughly equally split between Buddhists and Muslims. With a few exceptions the Buddhist population of Ladakh is mostly in the larger, eastern Leh District, and the smaller but somewhat more densely populated Kargil District in western Ladakh is predominately Muslim. There are a few towns in Ladakh that have both Buddhist and Muslim populations, most of these being in the “border” areas, with notable exceptions of the village of Phyang – a Buddhist and Muslim village near Leh – and the melting pot of Leh itself (see Rizvi 1996, 203 for more about the distribution of Buddhist and Muslim populations in Ladakh).
The Buddhism of Ladakh is of the Tibetan tradition, and while all of its major monastic orders are represented, the Kargyudpa and Gelukpa orders predominate, each with numerous monasteries scattered throughout Ladakh. While the Muslims in Ladakh are mostly of the Shi’ah denomination, there are small pockets of Sunni populations, mostly in villages in central Ladakh and in the Leh area. Leh itself, of course, has populations both Shia’h and Sunni, each with a mosque downtown whose daily scheduled calls to prayer seem to compete with each other for attention. Some intermarriage between Buddhists and Muslims does occur, mostly consisting of hitherto Buddhist women marrying into Muslim households. This issue among others has been at the root of increasing tensions and sporadic clashes in recent years between Buddhists and Muslims.

Ladakh could easily be described as a part Buddhist, part Muslim land, as outlined above, and this is certainly the case for much of rural Ladakh. But Leh itself, while still mostly Buddhist and Muslim, displays considerable religious diversity. There is a small but socially prominent Christian population that is the legacy of a Moravian mission established in the late eighteenth century (Rizvi 1996, 212-213). Leh is also home to a small community of Sikh merchants that go back several generations, and many of the goods carriers that ply the Srinagar-Leh Highway are driven by Sikhs. The military presence in the Leh area and along the road has an inherent diversity among its personnel, which include mostly Hindus but also Muslims, Sikhs and Christians among its ranks. In a curious case of syncretism, perhaps the most visited Hindu temple site in Ladakh is the image of Shinje (Skt. Vajrabhairava) in the gonkhang, a chapel of wrathful
protector deities, of Spituk Monastery whom Hindus recognize as a manifestation of the Hindu goddess Kali.

The seasonal influx of tourists brings additional religious variety to the Leh area in the summer. Hinduism increases its presence with tourists from other parts of India as well as occasional-but-conspicuous travelling Hindu *sadhus* (Skt. “holy man”), additional Christians in the form of evangelical missionaries, young Israeli Jews who are catered to by a Jewish home, the Habayit Hayehudi, run by a rabbi in Leh, and myriad New Age seekers and western Buddhists who find themselves drawn to the perceived “spirituality” that is one of Ladakh’s selling points as a tourist destination.

**Buddhist Monasticism in Ladakh**

Archaeological and art historical evidence suggests that Buddhism was present in Ladakh long before any cultural influence from Tibet gained foothold, and possibly as early as the 2nd century A.D. height of the Greco-Buddhist Kushan Empire, a full five centuries before Buddhism was introduced to Tibet (Franke [1907]1998, 20-25; Petech [1939]1999, 100; 104; Snellgrove and Skorupski 1977, 6; Snellgrove and Skorupski 1980, 9). But the monasteries of Ladakh today are descendants of the wave of Tibetanization that came in the 10th century at which time the great Buddhist translator Rinchen Zangpo established Ladakh’s first truly Tibetan Buddhist monasteries.

Ladakh seems to have been well situated to play a prominent role in a burgeoning Tibetan Buddhist renaissance which drew heavily on the Mahayanist civilization that was then thriving among its neighbors in northwest India, Kashmir and the Karakoram (Snellgrove and Richardson 1995, 113). However, in the centuries that followed it was
not Ladakh but central Tibet that increasingly became the hub of Buddhism for the entire Tibetan cultural sphere, and with the Muslim conquests and subsequent eradication of the fount of Buddhist culture that had been at Ladakh’s doorstep, Ladakhi institutions became entirely dependent on a now culturally isolated central Tibet. From then onward most new monasteries in Ladakh were established as satellites of much larger Tibetan institutions and likely it was around this time or soon thereafter, that is sometime between the 12th and 15th centuries, that the practice of sending Ladakhi monks to Tibet for monastic training – a practice which continues in essence to this day – was begun (Rizvi 1996, 63-64). ¹

All currently active Buddhist monasteries, or gonpas,² in Ladakh, of which there are approximately twenty-five,³ are affiliated with one of several large monastic universities. Before 1959, following the practice typical throughout the cultural reach of the Tibetan Buddhist monastic establishment, it was common for young Ladakhi monks to travel to their parent monasteries in central Tibet to receive a traditional monastic education over the course of several years. At their height in the first half of the twentieth century these large monastic institutions housed thousands of monks, dwarfing the typically small Ladakhi monasteries which probably rarely surpassed one hundred monks in residence at any one time. Following the Lhasa uprising in 1959 and

¹ According to the Ladakh Book of Records, a small publication filled with facts and figures relating to physical, natural and cultural aspects of Ladakh, this practice began in the late 13th century during the reign of the Ladakhi king Lhachen Ngorup (Thsangspa 2008, 4-5).
² The term gonpa is widely used in Ladakh and elsewhere in the Tibetan cultural area (see Samuel 1993, 32; 309; 334-335) to refer to a host of religious complexes served by monks including large monastic universities, small monasteries, small settlements of lay religious specialists, and Ladakhi village temples. For the purposes of this study the term “monastery” is specifically chosen to imply the common definition of a bounded community of celibate male monks.
³ This is the author’s estimate based on guide books, maps, and personal experience.
subsequent upheaval of Tibetan religious culture, the administrations of the large Tibetan monasteries followed the Dalai Lama into exile in India where many of the monastic universities have since been reestablished, albeit in much reduced form. It is to these exile monastic universities that most young monks from Ladakh now travel to receive a monastic education, usually after a brief probationary period as a “novice” monk in Ladakh, before returning to serve their home monastery for the remainder of their monastic career, thus emulating the religious exchange that characterized the relationship between Ladakh and Tibet for hundreds of years prior in which the large Tibetan institutions received masses of monks to bolster their wealth, political power and cultural influence while Ladakh received monks trained in theology, liturgy, and monastic administration in return.

Perhaps what most distinguishes Tibetan Buddhist monasticism from other forms of monasticism is its traditional adherence to an ideal whereby the religious prestige of society – not only that of pre-1959 Tibet proper but also that of peripheral Tibetan Buddhist kingdoms such as Ladakh – seems to have been measured by the sheer quantity of monks it could sustain, an ideal which Melvyn Goldstein has called “mass monasticism” (2010; 1998, 15). To facilitate this, monks have customarily been recruited at a very young age, usually during childhood, so that they may become socialized early into the monastic lifestyle, presumably thus increasing the likelihood that they will remain a monk for the rest of their lives. Mass monasticism became law in Ladakh during the Namgyal Dynasty when the early 16th century ruler Tashi Namgyal decreed that every family with more than one son must send one – but not the eldest – to the
monastery (Franke [1907]1998, 85). This remains the normal pattern in Ladakh. Families, motivated by some combination of an advantage to be gained by the household in deflecting the financial burden of raising a child to the monastery, recruitment pressures from the monastery itself, and the meritorious act – of karmic benefit both to the child and the family – of sending a child off to live out such a highly valued Buddhist ideal, often opt for one of their sons to enter the monastic life. Individuals choosing to take the robes later in adulthood is a rare exception.

In Geoffrey Samuel’s typology of Tibetan communities (1993, 115-138; 309-335) Ladakh is subsumed under “centralized agricultural communities” characterized by an estate structure whereby a monastery’s holdings traditionally extended into one or more villages. While it seems that this system was formally dissolved in Ladakh after 1947, the structure – confusing in its details and varying from monastery to monastery – remains. Property owned by a monastery, mostly in the form of cultivated land and livestock, is leased for use by the laity who in turn provide the monastery with material staples such as grain, vegetables, butter, wool and dung. It is also mostly from a monastery’s associated village or villages that monks are recruited.

At the head of every monastic estate is the figure of the rimpoché. Meaning “precious one”, a rimpoché is in most cases recognized as a reincarnation of their predecessor and thus are representatives of a lineage of specific tulku, or “emanation

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4 The author has heard that this ancient law is still enforced in some remote villages. One of these, Lingshed – whose monastery seems disproportionately large compared with its affiliate villages – the author visited in 1997 and 1998. Every lay person he met seemed to have a brother in the monastery, and every monk he met did indeed have at least one older brother who was a householder.

5 In the Sakya order a hereditary lineage is recognized.
bodies,” that trace their roots to the original founder of a monastery. The most well-known rimpoches is the Dalai Lama, recognized as the incarnation of Gendün Druppa who founded Tibet’s Drepung monastery in the early fifteenth century and also sits atop a political and administrative hierarchy of other rimpoches within the Gelukpa order. Some rimpoches may have multiple monasteries under their see, thus in Ladakh many monasteries are effectively “branches” of their rimpoches’ home monastery which may not even be located in Ladakh, while still others may have branch monasteries of their own.

In Ladakh there is yet another layer to the relationship between monastery and village, what Geoffrey Samuel describes as a particularly “clericalized” monasticism, apparently unique to Ladakh, in which monks serve a priestly function in the village (1993, 113; 318-319). Every Buddhist village in Ladakh has a village temple – usually also called a gonpa but sometimes referred to as a gonlak, meaning “arm of a monastery” – that includes, in addition to one or more chapels dedicated to a deity or group of deities, called a lhakhang, accommodations for monks appointed by the associated monastery to serve such temples on a rotating basis. Villagers may visit the temple to pray and make a small offering or may even request that the monk perform a small puja (Hin.),6 or ritual. In villages that include a monastery, a common arrangement in Ladakh, the monastery itself serves as the village temple, and any given monk at any given time may be called upon to perform a ritual for a visiting lay villager or pilgrim. Isolated monasteries that are separated from any village may also be visited by laity for the same reasons. Larger

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6 The word puja, adopted from Hindi, is a blanket term widely used in Ladakh to refer to any ritual however small or grand.
family or extended household-sponsored rituals enlisting groups of monks may be performed at the monastery or the village temple, these often serving to display the wealth of the sponsor – as such productions can be a considerable investment – and add to the sponsor’s karmic accumulation of merit. Teams of monks are also frequently called upon to travel to one of the monastery’s affiliated villages to perform larger rituals such as the consecration of a household shrine, rituals aimed at treating illness, and death rituals, the last of which are very elaborate and may last several days. In addition to the ritual demands of the laity, there are numerous monastery rituals that monks perform - from simple daily chapel opening rituals, larger rites determined by the ritual calendar, to the monastery’s annual festival.

The Gelukpa Order

All four major orders of Tibetan Buddhist monasticism – the Gelukpa, Kargyudpa, Sakyapa and Nyingmapa – are represented in Ladakh. Most monasteries in Ladakh belong to either the Kargyudpa or Gelukpa order. Founded in central Tibet in the early 15th century by Tsongkhapa and his circle of disciples, the Gelukpa was a development of the older Kadampa order and sought to synthesize divergent meditative and academic approaches to mystical attainment, and often has been regarded as a sort of reformation movement that revitalized the fundamentals of monastic discipline that were perceived to be lacking among the other orders at that time (Bell [1931] 1992, 96; Samuel 1993, 506-515; Snellgrove and Richardson 1995, 181; Stein 1972, 80).

The whole variety of Buddhist doctrine that was introduced to Tibet from the Mahayanist civilization that was centered around northwest India before the Muslim
conquests, as well as most of the developments of these doctrines that took place within Tibet in the centuries that followed, were generally accepted by all the orders. But what distinguishes the orders from one another is mostly a matter of the relative emphases of some doctrines over others. It is a subtle and complex distinction, but the Gelukpa order generally places greater emphasis on the Madyamaka school of thought – a phenomenologistic philosophy that stresses the conceptual nature of the objects of direct experience – over the Cittamatra or Yogacara schools which understand the mind itself, *sems* , as the only ontological reality (Stein 1972, 165; Tucci 1980, 31). The Gelukpa order also stresses the linear and progressive nature of spiritual attainment towards enlightenment set out in the *lam rim*, or “stages of the path,” doctrine, especially as outlined in Tsongkhapa’s Lam Rim Chenmo, the “Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path.”

The real differences, however, are not so much in philosophy as they are in approach. Realization of doctrinal truths through logical debate and scholasticism is the specialty of the Gelukpa, where yoga, meditation and even shamanistic practices are more prevalent among the other orders. This subtle dichotomy is brought into greater relief in the social realm of religious specialists. While for the other orders the exemplary practitioner may be the *neljorpa*, or yogin, for the Gelukpa it is the *geshe*. Exemplars of monastic “literati” (Tucci 1980, 140) or “scholar-monks” (Goldstein 1998, 21), those who have been bestowed with the title “Geshe” have earned the Tibetan Buddhist equivalent of a Doctor of Philosophy degree after twenty years or more study within a philosophy and theology curriculum at one of the large monastic universities. It is important to point out, however, that most of the higher philosophical and theological
content of Gelukpa doctrine is only relevant to the minority of highly educated monks such as geshes and is far beyond the normal curriculum of ordinary monks. It is mostly the fundamental Gelukpa values of monastic discipline and the importance of being studious that distinguishes the Gelukpa community from the other monastic orders in Ladakh. Both monasteries in this study belong to the Gelukpa order.

Social Structure of Ladakhi Monasteries

Ordainment

When a prospective monk comes or is brought to the monastery, a lock of his hair from the top of his head, called a shaput, is presented to the rimpoche as a sign that they are committed to becoming a monk at that monastery. Then follows a sort of interrogation where the rimpoche asks the prospective monk or his parents if they fully understand the gravity of their commitment and determines if their intentions are sincere. The monastic career then begins with taking the first of three progressive sets of vows observed in Tibetan Buddhist monastic ordination. The monk’s head is shaved and the clothes of a layman are given up in exchange for the three-part maroon robes which he will wear for as long as he remains a monk. The three levels of monastic ordainment are as follows:

Gesnyen

This is equivalent to the traditional Buddhist title of upāsaka (Skt.), meaning “attendant.” It involves taking five simple vows such as not to kill and not to steal. This is technically not a monastic ordainment in itself, as it is also available to the laity.
Gesnyen monks, however, are distinguished from lay gesnyen by their shaved head and maroon robes. At this stage they are best thought of as “novice” or “probationary” monks. In the past such monks would be housed with a senior monk, often an uncle, who would function as the young monk’s tutor and caretaker. In recent years this system has been replaced in Ladakh by monastic boarding schools, usually located on the grounds of the monastery. Gesnyen monks sometimes participate among the monastic community, but they are not yet part of it. They live at the school during most of the year and some may return to live with their family in their home village during the mid-winter break. While a monk is a gesnyen they may be sent away to a large monastic university affiliated with their monastery to receive a more thorough education. Afterwards they may return to their home monastery, but many remain at these larger institutions for the remainder of their career.

Getsul

This is equivalent to the traditional Buddhist title of śrāmanera (Skt.), meaning “little renunciate.” At this stage they are considered a “semi-ordained” monk. In the presence of a rimpoché, a monk commits to the thirty-six vows of a getsul, including that of celibacy, and many specific proscriptions regarding killing, speech, self-adornment and behavior. Most monks become getsuls in their teen years, and at this point they are considered full members of the monastic community. Many monks become getsuls soon after they are sent to a monastic university. For monks who have remained in Ladakh, and for getsuls who return from the bigger institutions, it is at this point that they become residents of the monastery and set up house in their own quarters – usually belonging to
their family line. Most getsuls will also be appointed to serve a lower administrative occupation at the monastery and will also be expected to perform ritual duties.

**Gelong**

The highest level of Tibetan Buddhist monastic ordainment is equivalent to the traditional title of bhikṣu (Skt.), a “fully-ordained” monk. Like the previous two levels, the title of gelong is conferred upon a monk by a rimpoché. It is not necessary that it be the rimpoché of the monk’s home monastery, and many monks seek to become gelongs under the Dalai Lama. There are 253 vows of a gelong involving very specific proscriptions and codes of conduct, the memorization of which itself is a hallmark of monastic discipline. To become a gelong a monk must be at least twenty years old, although many monks do not take gelong vows until much later in their careers. In Ladakhi monasteries most gelongs serve higher administrative occupations and, like getsuls, also perform ritual duties.

**Monastic Occupations**

In a typical Ladakhi monastery there are a number of administrative occupations that monks must serve. The most important of these are what may be called the higher administrative occupations. These are served only by gelongs. They are not permanent positions, but temporary appointments that may be served for as few as three years to as

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7 According to several monks in this study, this has something to do with the notion that at any point before the age of twenty a male may transform into a female, and this proscription prevents the possibility of a female being a gelong and living in the monastery. There is a parallel ordination available to nuns, the gelongma, but this involves a different set of vows.
many as ten years or more. These appointments are set by the rimpoché, and all gelongs are expected to serve a complete cycle of available occupations during their career. The higher administrative positions are as follows:

- **Khenpo**: The monastery abbot, this is the administrative head of a monastery. While very large Tibetan monasteries may have several khenpos, only the very largest of Ladakhi monasteries have one. Neither of the monasteries in this study, Spituk and Ridzong, had a khenpo at the time of fieldwork.

- **Lopon**: In the absence of a khenpo, the lopon is the administrative head and manager of the monastic community. He is responsible for managing other administrative positions under him, assembling and distributing teams of ritual performers to different localities when needed, and in the absence of the rimpoché, is responsible for making decisions with regards to occupational appointments and overall monastery management.

- **Nastan**: This is a title unique to Ridzong Monastery, one of the two monasteries in this study. It is the equivalent of a lopon. It is derived from an old honorific term of address for a gelong.

- **Umdzad**: This is the head of rituals. He is responsible for knowing the liturgical texts necessary for any ritual that needs to be performed and is the lead chant master at larger rituals performed at the monastery.

- **Uchung**: This is the assistant to the umdzad. This occupation is served prior to becoming the umdzad.
• Geskos: This is the head disciplinary officer. He enforces the rules and regulations of the monastery and may take the role of a guidance counselor for getsuls.

• Geyok: This is the assistant to the geskos and is served just prior to advancing to that appointment.

• Chogzhi Lama: This is the manager of the estate, or labrang, of the rimpoche, including all of the monastery’s branches and properties.

• Jabje. This is the personal attendant to the rimpoche. As such he is only at the monastery when the rimpoche is present.

Lower administrative occupations are typically served by getsuls, although the most important of them may be served by a gelong. These appointments are typically given by the lopon and usually last from one to three years. Smaller monasteries often do not include many of these occupations which may be considered non-essential. Many getsuls may also serve more than one of these occupations at one time. Like in the case of higher administration, each monastery has a cycle of lower administrative occupations that a getsul is expected to serve, and, while not technically required, monks usually do not seek gelong ordination until after this cycle of occupational appointments is complete. As in all matters at the monastery, any deviations from the norm can be enforced at the discretion of the rimpoche. The lower administrative occupations are as follows:

• Komnyer: This is a manager and caretaker of monastery chapels. For chapel spaces located at the monastery it is usually a three-year appointment served by a
gelong or an experienced getsul. The komnyer at a village temple is usually a one year appointment served by a younger, less experienced getsul.

- **Nyerpa**: This is a manager of monastery holdings. He manages much of the economic relationship between the monastery and its associated villages and is often engaged in collection missions to these villages. A nyerpa is usually a three-year appointment served by either a gelong or an experienced getsul.

- **Tongyik**: The head accountant and president of a committee that manages monastery finances. This is usually a one year appointment served by a getsul.

- **Domchot**: A treasurer in charge of monetary offerings to the monastery. This is usually a one year appointment served by a young getsul.

- **Shagdzot**: An accountant and stores manager. This is usually a one year appointment served by a young getsul.

- **Gyertsa**: Alms collector. A sometimes very short appointment given to a young getsul. They are sent out to villages or cities to collect donations for the monastery.

At very small monasteries only the most essential occupations are served. Among the upper administration these are the lopon or nastan, the umdzad and the geskos. Among the lower administration these are the komnyer and the nyerpa. In such cases there may be monks that do not have any officially appointed occupation but are expected to serve as general help for whatever tasks the lopon or nastan deems necessary.

**Teachers**

In addition to the administrative occupations at a monastery, monks who have
obtained degrees of higher education in Buddhist philosophy, especially those holding a geshe degree, may be appointed to serve as salaried teachers, or gergen, at the monastery school or at the Central Institute of Buddhist Studies in Choglamsar, near Leh. While teachers remain members of the monastic community and maintain living quarters among their fellow monks, they are typically exempt from serving the usual cycle of administrative occupations.

Retirement

At Ladakhi monasteries, once a monk has completed the full cycle of occupations available at their monastery they are considered retired. This usually happens around the age of seventy. They remain residents of the monastery and continue to observe their vows and the monastery’s own rules and regulations, but they are generally free to spend their time as they wish. In some cases, the rimpoché may ask a retired monk to serve again in an administrative position if necessary, but since they had already completed the cycle of occupations, they retain their “retired” status. For a monk, retirement signifies that they have completed all the responsibilities that are required of a gelong for their monastery, and the status is thought of as tantamount to an even higher level of ordainment.

Monastic Rituals

Ritual is a major part of monastic life in Ladakh. Most rituals performed by monks are some variation on a simple format that involves chanting from a relevant liturgical text punctuated by musical interludes that signal key moments in the ritual
drama. In medium-sized rituals, those involving four to six monks, instruments typically include a ritual bell called a *drilbu*, a pole-drum, a set of cymbals, and two ritual shawms called *gyaling*. Most rituals also include the use of a number of ritual implements that are manipulated according to a set of rules prescribed in the ritual text. For larger rituals this format is multiplied, and the addition of more instruments completes a ritual orchestra. Even the smallest of rituals, performed by a single monk, conform to a miniaturized version of this format – always including the combination of chanting from a text and playing a ritual instrument as the occasion requires. Due to monks’ threefold role as priests at the service of the lay community, servants of their monastery and of Buddhism, and individuals looking after their own spiritual needs, there are a great variety of types of rituals that monks in Ladakh take part in. These can be divided into three broad categories: 1) village rituals, 2) monastery rituals and 3) broader community rituals.

*Village Rituals*

There are a variety of rituals that take place in the monastery’s affiliated villages that monks are often called upon to perform. One of the duties of the *komnyer* that is appointed to oversee the village temple is to perform small rituals at a moment’s notice at the request of a visiting villager. Other rituals may also take place at the village temple for which additional monks from the monastery may be called upon. Household rituals that take place in homes are also a common occurrence. Most of these are small and may be performed by as few as one monk – such as rituals directed at treating illness or blessing new construction.
In their role as priests for the laity, Ladakhi monks’ forte is the performance of death rituals. The most elaborate of household rituals, these take place over a number of days and are performed by a team of four or more monks with the support of the decedent’s extended family and members of a group of associated households called a phaspun. Monks also take part in larger village-wide rituals throughout the year, such as annual expulsion rituals and the blessing of the fields when bound copies of the Tibetan Buddhist canon, the Kangyur, are ceremoniously carried through the village’s grain fields at the start of the growing season.

Monastery Rituals

The monastery, in addition to housing and facilitating the lifestyle of its monks, is a center of ritual activity. The simplest monastery rituals are chapel opening rituals performed daily by the komnyer. Morning prayer assemblies are also very common, usually performed once a week by most of the monks who are able to attend. Other rituals include sojong, a confession and atonement ceremony held every new and full moon, a variety of calendrical rituals, most of which are dedicated to a particular deity or saint, and special rituals, such as those designed to prevent war or to prolong the life of the rimpoché.

Rituals performed on behalf of the lay community are also performed at the monastery. The most common of such rituals are a class of brief, usually impromptu rituals performed by komnyers at the request of lay visitors for a small fee. These include rituals of supplication such as the serkyem, or “golden drink offering” and rituals of consecration performed on personal religious images. At monasteries that receive many
lay visitors these are by far the most frequently performed rituals, occurring several times a day on most days. At monasteries with few lay visitors, such a ritual may occur as infrequently as once a week or more.

Lay households may also sponsor any number of larger rituals performed at the monastery. These may be rituals specifically requested for the benefit of the household or calendrical rituals that are performed by monks as part of the normal annual ritual schedule. Households make a large monetary donation and provide a meal for the monks in return for a significant deposit of karmic merit and the opportunity that such events provide for showing off one’s social status.

**Broader Community Rituals**

The largest ritual event that takes place at the monastery is the monastery’s annual festival. The *gustor* takes place once a year – a different time for each monastery. It involves several days of ritual performances, each monastery being famous for a particular specialty. This is a major event for the lay community as well who travel from all parts of Ladakh to attend these auspicious events. Each monastery also celebrates annual holidays such as the Galden Namchot, dedicated to Tsongkhapa, and the Tibetan lunar new year which takes place sometime between early February and early March.

Many major cultural events may also draw monks away from their monasteries to take part in their ritual aspects. The largest of these is the annual Monlam Chenmo, or “Great Prayer Festival.” Modelled after the eponymous Tibetan festival established by Tsongkhapa, Ladakh’s version, put on by the lay Ladakh Buddhist Association, is a massive prayer procession in Leh attended by the whole of Ladakh’s monastic
population, save komnyers and the infirm. Annual festivals held by other monasteries are also frequently attended by monks. Other major occasions, especially those involving rimpoches, are also attended by monks. These include death rituals, installment ceremonies, and any time a major rimpochे visits from outside Ladakh, often to perform mass initiation ceremonies.

**Spituk Monastery**

The legend of the founding of Spituk Monastery is infused with the very identity of the Gelukpa order. It was founded in the fifteenth century by the Gelukpa monk Lama Lhawang Lodos at the behest of the then king of Ladakh, Dag Bumde. According to legend, two emissaries of Tsongkhapa traveled to Ladakh from central Tibet on a mission to establish the new but rapidly growing Gelukpa order in the westernmost reaches of Tibetan Buddhism. They presented to the king a relic in the form of a blood clot “about as long as a finger joint” (Franke [1907]1998, 77) which had originated from the nose of Tsongkhapa and formed itself into an image of Amitabha Buddha. It was around this relic – placed inside a very large statue of Shakyamuni Buddha – that the monastery’s original Jokhang chapel was constructed, its centerpiece thus serving as a direct contagious magical link to the person around whom the Gelukpa order was formed, and the formulator of its doctrine.

The site that Lhawang Lodos chose for the new monastery – atop a rocky prominence in the vast plain of the Indus a few miles from Leh – may be the most conspicuous location in central Ladakh. This, and the original Tibetan name given to the monastery, Pethub, meaning “exemplary,” makes clear the founder’s intention to make
Spituk a beacon of the Gelukpa order in Ladakh. Spituk was the first Gelukpa monastery to be built in Ladakh (Snellgrove and Skorupski 1977, 107) and was the model after which the Gelukpa institutions that soon followed, such as Thiksey and Likir Monasteries, were patterned. Spituk was built near the site of a small tenth century Kadampa monastery said to have been established by the famous translator Rinchen Zangpo who founded several monasteries in western Tibetan kingdoms in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries. As if echoing the Gelukpa’s rededication of the older Kadampa order, Spituk replaced the older monastery and absorbed its community into its own.  

Spituk is the home monastery of the Kushok Bakula Rinpoche. During the period of fieldwork the current and 20th Bakula Rimpoche (b. November 24, 2005) was a four year old boy still living at his family home in the Nubra Valley region in the north of Ladakh in the care of his parents and a few monks from Spituk appointed as his attendants. The previous incarnation, the 19th (b. May 21, 1917 – d. November 4, 2003) passed away five years earlier. It seems however that Spituk did not have a rinpoche until the late nineteenth century when a prince of the royal family of Zangskar was recognized as the 18th Bakula Rinpoche (b. 1860 – d. 1917) and installed as the head of Spituk (Shakspo 2006, 10-11). It is unclear when the lineage of the Bakula Rinpoche

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8 Its current name, Spituk, is a result of the Ladakhi pronunciation of the written form of its name, which has origins in Central Tibetan (see Snellgrove and Skorupski 1977: 107).
9 Parts of the original tenth century monastery, located on the bank of the Indus opposite Spituk Monastery, still stand. Now called Drakgung Gonpa, it serves as the village temple for the Palam neighborhood of Spituk village. A getsul from Spituk is appointed as its komnyer.
10 It is not known to the author what ever happened to Lama Lhawang Lodos after the founding of Spituk Monastery, or if ever his reincarnation was recognized.
was first formally recognized, but the title at some point was retroactively applied to a variety of important Buddhist personages of the past, including Rinchen Zangpo, considered the ninth incarnation, and originating in the Arhat Bakula, one of the sixteen original disciples of Shakyamuni Buddha (Shakspo 2006).

The author estimates that there were approximately thirty monks in residence at Spituk Monastery during the period of fieldwork.11 There is a boarding school for novice gesnyen monks at the base of the monastery complex. Spituk Monastery has three branch monasteries: two – those of Sankar and Sabu – are very close by, and one – that of Tangyar – is in the Nubra Valley. It is the main Gelukpa institution that serves Leh, and in addition serves a number of small villages in the Leh area including Spituk village itself, of which it is a part. It maintains village temples and owns property in most of these same villages. It is affiliated with the Loseling College of Drepung Monastery in the town of Mundgod in the south Indian state of Karnataka.

**Ridzong Monastery**

The circumstances under which Ridzong Monastery came into existence are unusual for the founding of a Tibetan monastery. Its founder, Tsultrim Nyima (b. 1796 – d. 1872), was a married lay householder who renounced his worldly life in favor of that

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11 Most population estimates for Spituk and Ridzong Monasteries provided in guide books and other sources are much higher than their actual populations of resident monks. Virtually all available population estimates of monasteries in Ladakh are either exaggerated or misleading. Such estimates possibly include, in addition to resident monks, novice gesnyen monks attending attached boarding schools, and other affiliated monks who are studying outside and who may never return to Ladakh. On any given day, most monks at a monastery are in villages performing rituals or conducting personal or monastery-related business. A tourist may visit a monastery that a guide book claims has a population of some 100 monks only to find two or three monks evident on the premises.
of a monk. He was reputedly a trader of some note, of whom it was said “that if he started at the end of Leh bazaar selling a needle, by the time he reached the other end he would have earned enough money to buy a horse” (Samphel 1997, 422). It was while visiting Tashigang Monastery on a trading mission in western Tibet that he met his guru, the Tholing Khan Rimpoche, whose teachings of the lam rim doctrine inspired him to build a monastery (Samphel 1997, 422). According to legend, it was on another trading mission, this time between his home village of Saspol on the Indus and the village of Hemishikpachan deeper in the mountains, that he discovered a natural spring hidden in a seldom traveled dry valley. This he chose as the site for his monastery (Jivaka 1962, 195). It was at this point that he and his family renounced the worldly householder lifestyle. His son became the first monk at the new monastery, his wife and her sisters established the nearby nunnery, and he himself soon took the vows of a getsul.

Ridzong Monastery is the most recent Gelukpa monastery in Ladakh, built around 1840 during Zorawar Singh’s military campaigns in Ladakh and western Tibet, just before Ladakh lost its sovereign status. It is noteworthy for its isolation. The name, meaning “mountain fortress,” is appropriate. The site that Tultrim Nyima chose is indeed quite hidden, shrouded behind the folds of the narrow, tree-less valley. The site is not only far out of reach of any of the nearby villages, but - lacking space, greenery or stream - seems deliberately chosen to prevent any village from growing around it.

Ridzong is the home monastery of the Sras Rimpoche, the 3rd Sras Rimpoche (b. 1928) being the most recent incarnation. The lineage of the Sras Rimpoche began with Ridzong Monastery’s first monk, Tsultrim Nyiam’s son, Yeshe Rabgyas, born just before the monastery’s founding and himself having been recognized as the reincarnation of
Tsultrim Nyima’s own guru. The 1st Sras Rimpoche, however, passed away in the late 1860’s while still young, and was soon succeeded by the 2nd Sras Rimpoche (1872-1926). A reincarnation of Tultrim Nyima himself was also recognized, albeit having been born over three decades after his death in 1872, an unusually long time by Tibetan standards of *tulku* soul transmigration. The 2nd Tsultrim Nyima had apparently been born into a military family who refused to allow him to become a monk. Instead of taking on the robes, and perhaps the reigns of Ridzong, he became an officer in the Indian Army, eventually being killed in his prime in a helicopter crash during a reconnaissance mission in the 1940’s (Jivaka 1962, 197-198).12

There were twelve monks in residence at Ridzong Monastery during the period of fieldwork. Like at Spituk and many other Ladakhi monasteries in recent years, there is a new boarding school for novice *gesnyen* monks at the base of the complex. About one mile down the valley is the associated Changhubling Nunnery, known locally as the *chulichan* after the famous grove of apricot trees that it sits within. Ridzong Monastery has one branch monastery, that of Samstanling in the Nubra Valley. Ridzong is not a part of any village, but it serves four small and relatively close-by villages. It owns all property in these villages as well as some property in several villages in the far off Zangskar region. Like Spituk, it is affiliated with the Loseling College of Drepung Monastery in Mundgod, Karnataka.

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12 The author believes that a third incarnation of Tsultrim Nyima had been recognized, but the author is not aware of his status.
The Relationship Between Bakula Rimpoche and Sras Rimpoche

In recent times the rimpoches of these two monasteries have had a sort of partnership, and together are considered the co-head rimpoches of Ladakh. Each is also recognized as the second-in-command over the other’s monasteries. In the absence of the Bakula Rimpoche, for instance – such as in the intervening period between successive incarnations, during their minority, or any other time when he is unable to perform executive duties – the Sras Rimpoche technically takes charge of Spituk Monastery, and vice versa. The 19th Bakula Rimpoche and the 3rd Sras Rimpoche were in fact closely related. Both were born into a royal household in Matho, a village with a monastery of the Sakyapa order east of Leh. The elder Bakula was an uncle of the younger Sras, and their careers were intermingled from early on. The origins of this relationship predate their incarnations as blood relatives. The 2nd Sras Rimpoche served as the young 19th Bakula Rimpoche’s guru, and upon his reincarnation the favor was returned – the 19th Bakula becoming the guru of the 3rd Sras.

Despite this partnership, the two rimpoches have pursued different interests in their careers. The 18th Bakula, the first in the relatively recently inaugurated line of incumbents of Spituk Monastery, was active in political and social matters, one time securing freedom from taxation for all Ladakhi monasteries while on a diplomatic visit with Pratap Singh, Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir (Shakspo 2006, 13). The 19th Bakula followed in his predecessor’s footsteps. He served in India’s parliament, became India’s ambassador to Mongolia, and is considered the architect of modern Ladakh, securing scheduled tribe status and successfully lobbying for numerous causes in the name of development.
The Sras Rimpoches have been decidedly more inward-turned. The 2nd was an accomplished scholar, poet and painter, responsible for many of the murals that adorn the walls of Ridzong Monastery’s chapels. The 3rd Sras has focused mainly on the welfare of his monastery and its small community, and on concentrating on his own spiritual development. He has risen through the ranks of the Gelukpa order to become a very prominent - albeit not very public – lama, appointed by the Dalai Lama in 2009 to serve for seven years as the 102nd Ganden Tripa, the spiritual head of the Gelukpa order.
CHAPTER THREE: LITERATURE REVIEW

Monasticism in Tibetan Society

The term “Tibetan Buddhism” generally refers to the form of Buddhism historically practiced not only in Tibet itself, but in a very broad cultural area that includes bordering regions of western China, India, Nepal, and Bhutan, farther flung areas such as Mongolia and Kalmykia, and now includes Tibetan diasporic communities scattered throughout India, Europe and North America. The term also refers to the institutions, doctrines and practices that grew out of the philosophies developed by medieval Indian Buddhist mystics and scholars who came in waves to Tibet between the eighth and fifteenth centuries. For each of the institutions - represented by the four main orders of Tibetan Buddhism: the Gelukpa, the Kargyudpa, the Sakyapa and the Nyingmapa – the monastic establishment is the locus of its philosophy and the face of its authority. But in many ways the Tibetan Buddhist monastery is also the meeting point of the “little tradition” and the “great tradition.” The necessity for monasteries to conform to both local social and cultural conditions and the demands, doctrines and standards of the grand institution of which they are part can give each monastery unique idiosyncrasies. This is especially so with smaller satellite monasteries that were established far from central establishments.

Despite the heterogeneity inherent in a monastic system that is spread across a culturally diverse and geographically very large area, there have been several attempts over the years to provide scholarly descriptions of Tibetan Buddhist monasticism as a whole. British renaissance man L. Austin Waddell’s book *Buddhism of Tibet or Lamaism* ([1895]1972) was the first major work to attempt a comprehensive study of
Tibetan Buddhist monasticism, including a breakdown of the major orders and their branches, and descriptions of their philosophy, social and political organization, ritual, and daily life. Following Waddell’s efforts were those of Sir Charles Bell whose *The Religion of Tibet* ([1931]1992) provided the first thorough insights into the extent of the power that monastic institutions traditionally wielded in Tibetan society. In no small part due to the unprecedented access he had to the 13th Dalai Lama during his time in Tibet, Bell described the structure of the Tibetan theocratic government, the role of the *rimpoche* as an incumbent representative of a monastic lineage, and the hierarchical structure of monastic institutions - from the huge central monastic universities down to the smallest branch monasteries spread throughout the whole of the Tibetan cultural region.

The early efforts of Waddell and Bell – with their emphases on grand monastic institutions, the higher echelons of monastic social hierarchy, lofty doctrine and elaborate ritual – set the tone for much of the scholarly work on Tibetan monasticism which was to follow. French Tibetologist R. A. Stein’s (1962) *Tibetan Civilization* elaborates on the social structure of the large monastic universities, major rituals, and the relationship between the religion practiced in the monasteries and the religion practiced in lay society. Giuseppe Tucci’s (1980) *The Religions of Tibet* provides a still indispensable comprehensive outline of the doctrines, liturgy and practices of all the major branches of the four main monastic orders – a result of the Italian scholar’s intense study of Tibetan Buddhism for which he had practically gone native.

Broad outlines of the hierarchical structure of the monastic system have been provided by Miller (1961) and Tulku et al. (1977). Snellgrove and Richardson’s (1995) *A
*Cultural History of Tibet* describes the role that the large monastic establishments played as centers of religious and political power and the changing fortunes of the main monastic orders throughout Tibet’s history. Melvyn Goldstein’s (1989) *A History of Modern Tibet, 1913-1951*, through recounting the tumultuous events that led to the downfall of Tibet’s theocratic government, describes the hierarchy of the upper echelons of the Gelukpa order and the extent to which Tibet’s monastic population influenced politics and society during its height.

Geoffrey Samuel’s (1993) *Civilized Shamans* attempts a comprehensive analysis of the religion of the whole of the Tibetan cultural sphere. While acknowledging regional variations in the patterns of religious life, he presents monasticism within a broader field of Tibetan religion that also includes the spheres of a variety of other religious specialists and the folk religion of the laity. The outstanding feature of Samuel’s work is his conceptual division of Tibetan religiosity into three orientations. Following Melford Spiro’s (1982) breakdown of Theravāda Buddhism into three so-called “systems,” namely nibbanic Buddhism, kammatic Buddhism and apotropaic Buddhism, Samuel’s typology consists respectively of a *bodhi* (Skt.) orientation, concerned with “the pursuit of enlightenment,” a karma orientation, being “the sphere of death and rebirth… seen in terms of karma and the ‘ideology of merit,’” and a pragmatic orientation, directed at “the realm of this-worldly concerns, conceived of in terms of interactions with local gods and spirits” (1993, 31). While rituals directed at “local gods and spirits” may be carried out by a variety of religious specialists, including monks, Samuel strongly associates the pragmatic orientation with the laity and “folk religion” (1993, 176-198). On the opposite end of the spectrum Samuel associates the *bodhi*
orientation – focused wholly on the most lofty, esoteric reaches of Tibetan Buddhist
soteriology, its doctrines and practices – with especially qualified teachers, or “lamas,”
and the monastic elite (1993, 223-243). But the karma orientation - taking up the space
between the pragmatic and bodhi orientations in Samuel’s spectrum of religiosity – is
primarily the realm of the majority of ordinary monks, or trapa. This Samuel associates
particularly with doctrines, practices and values that are oriented around the notion of
karma and the continuous cycle of death and rebirth, or saṃsāra (Skt.) (1993, 199-222).

These orientations, or “spheres of religious activity” (Samuel 1993, 31), as he
describes them, imply a locus of practice in the social realm. Little attention is given to
the extent to which these orientations represent any lived experience of those segments of
society that Samuel so strongly associates with his respective orientations, nor is much
consideration given to the fluidity of religious experience or to the interdependence of the
concepts around which his orientations are defined, in particular that between
karma/rebirth and the path to enlightenment. An important contribution Samuel makes,
however, is his attempt to represent the variety of types of religious practice and
practitioners that typify religion in Tibetan societies, a departure from previous attempts
that focused primarily on the monastic elite and the “great tradition,” albeit at risk of
perpetuating a characterization of the religions of the Tibetan cultural sphere, especially
the monastic establishments, as monolithic.

Another conceptual distinction that runs through Samuel’s work is that between
so called shamanic and clerical Buddhism. Influenced by Max Weber’s sociological
distinction between magic – oriented toward practical, worldly matters and maintained by
freelance charismatic practitioners – and religion – other-worldly and maintained by an
authoritative, bureaucratic full-time priesthood (Weber 1963, 28-30), Samuel identifies two strains of Tibetan religious activity. Shamanic Buddhism is a mystical pursuit involving tantric ritual practice and is exemplified in the “Tantric lama, who undergoes a prolonged retreat in order to gain the shamanic power of the Vajrayāna” (1993, 9). Clerical Buddhism, in contrast, is scholastic, philosophical, and guided by the core values of monastic discipline. It is exemplified in the “scholar-monk studying texts or engaged in philosophical debate” (Samuel 1993, 10). Clerical Buddhism is the specialty of the Gelukpa monastic order. “Clericalization,” in the sense of monks performing a priestly function in society, Samuel points out is also particularly characteristic of Ladakh, which he suggests may be explained by the influence of Hindu temple worship (1993, 318-319).

**Monasticism in Ladakh**

Much of the recent ethnographic literature on monasticism in Ladakh has been focused on the relationships between monastic communities - monasteries and nunneries - and the village. The ritual relationship between village and monastery is addressed by Kim Gutschow (1997) who provides one of the few analyses of the variety of monastic rituals that are performed on behalf of villagers. Ana Marko (1994), provides a thorough description of the power relationships between the monastic and lay communities displayed through the performance of ‘cham dance at the annual gustor festival at Spituk, one of the monasteries that is a focus of this study. The other, Ridzong, is the subject of the analysis of the village-monastery relationship in two studies. Reinhard Herdick (2003) presents an interesting geospatial analysis of Ridzong and one of its associated villages, and Anna Grimshaw (1983), studying the monastery, nunnery and their
associated villages, draws symbolic parallels between celibate monasticism and married village life expressed in a symbolic and economic exchange of power and material production and reproduction and how these support a symbolic distinction between the monastic community and lay householder society. The economics and social structure of the relationship between village and monastery has also been addressed in the work conducted in the Zangskar region of Ladakh by John Crook and his colleagues (Crook 1994; Crook and Shakya 1994; Shakya, Rabgyas and Crook 1994).

Martin Mills’ (2003) ethnography of a small Gelukpa monastery and the village of which it is part is a detailed analysis of power and authority in the symbolic and structural relationships between the monastery and the village in Ladakh. This ethnography delves deeply into the world of what he calls “chthonic consciousness,” a religiosity oriented around a spirit-infested geography. In what would appear to collapse Samuel’s (1993) distinctions between shamanic and clerical modes of Buddhist practice, he shows how the pragmatic concerns of the laity are mediated by the local monastic establishment, especially in their role as ritual specialists. In a strange sort of reciprocal religious exchange, the indigenous animistic worldview that is associated with the domain of lay householder society is appropriated by the monastic establishment. The monastery asserts its authority by monopolizing village-level ritual practice and controlling the dissemination of specialized religious knowledge. In its relationship with the village, Mills shows a monastery that essentially functions as an ecclesiastical establishment that serves a decidedly pastoral role, ubiquitous in its involvement in the concerns of the local lay community.
Especially relevant to the present study is one of Goldstein and Tsarong (1985) that looked at monastic life in a small Ladakhi monastery of the Drigung Kargyud order. In it they introduce the notion of “mass monasticism.” It is the standout feature of Tibetan Buddhist monasticism characterized by monks making up an especially high proportion of the male population and by entry into permanent monastic life happening in childhood. Rooted in the Tibetan value whereby the religious prestige of society could be quantified by the numbers of monks it could sustain, the mass monasticism ideal drives a recruitment strategy whereby the “locus of decision making rests almost totally in the hands of the parents not the child” (Goldstein and Tsarong 1985, 19). Thus, it is usually some combination of parents and extended family who decide to send a child into monastic life. Motivations for doing this include displacing the financial burden of raising a child from the household to the monastery and the religious significance of the act of sending one’s child onto the path to enlightenment – the benefits of accumulating karmic merit go both to the parents and the child (Goldstein and Tsarong 1985, 19-20). Little consideration is given to individual personality or predilections and socialization occurs within an environment that represents a set of values and a lifestyle radically different from lay householder society.

Considering such circumstances, Goldstein and Tsarong sought to determine whether “one of human history’s most ambitious and radical psychological experiments” (1985, 17) is successful, that is, whether apparently indiscriminately chosen individuals could be socialized into a lifestyle that represents the institutionalization of core Buddhist values of “non-attachment, non-desire, material renunciation, celibacy and transcendental wisdom” (17), ideals that would seem counter to long held assumptions about human
Based on observations of daily routines, living arrangements and the manner in which monks engaged in social relationships, they determined that monks do in fact seem to live in accordance with these values, particularly in an approach to materialism that emphasizes “optimization” over “maximization,” and social relationships and displays of affect more consistent with *nyinje*, or “universalized compassion” than with *tsedung*, or “personal love” (26-28).

While they observed that the monks in their study were very much enmeshed in the world of lay householder society - by their high involvement in village-level ritual activities and economic pursuits - the renunciatory norms and values that they are socialized into allow them to remain detached from that world. The “basic building block” in the mass monasticism ideal, they maintain, is “not a family-type social group but rather the solitary monk compartmentalized as an autonomous social and economic unit” living the poetic embodiment of “a single stick of incense burning slowly and steadily in a world of chaos and suffering” (Goldstein and Tsarong 1985, 21).

Goldstein and Tsarong’s conclusions rest on the assumption that what appears to be the success of the strategy of mass monasticism is derived from the institutionalization of core values of renunciation and non-attachment, that is, that the lifestyle of the monks is evidence that these values are internalized. What they fail to consider is that what the monks are socialized into first and foremost is a social environment with specific conditions, in their case one where monastery life structurally necessitates an autonomous lifestyle and the monastery’s incorporation within a village involves high levels of monastery-lay householder involvement, conditions that exist and may exert influence independent of the doctrine-based ideals on which the monastic institution may be
founded. The question remains whether this autonomous and detached lifestyle pervades the variety of types of monasteries found throughout the Tibetan cultural sphere, and whether different local conditions can result in different lifestyle patterns, even where underlying institutional and doctrinal values are essentially the same.

**Culture and Counterculture**

Sherry Ortner (1978), in *Sherpas Through their Rituals* had taken up this characterization of monasticism as a sort of counterpoint to lay householder society in Sherpa Buddhism in Nepal. She suggests that autonomy, anti-relationalism and isolation - like that observed by Goldstein and Tsarong in Ladakh - is itself a religious ideal that monasticism aspires to (Ortner 1978, 38-39). She further suggests that more than simply representing an alternative to lay householder society, monastic ideals “imply a critique of virtually every aspect of normal social life,” in particular the impermanence and inevitable suffering that comes from attachment to social relationships and material endeavors that family life is founded upon (44). Becoming a monk or nun is thus a way to avoid the pitfalls involved in forming close human relationships or, as echoed in *High Religion*, can be a symbolic state of exile from the betrayals of the world of attachments, “the analogue of leaving an area after losing a political struggle, or migrating and setting up house elsewhere after getting the short end of the stick in an inheritance situation” (Ortner 1989, 186).

Working in the same area, Robert Paul (1990) takes a psychoanalytic approach in his analysis of Sherpa monasticism. Framed within an assumption that entry into monasticism is a choice – either of the individual monk, his parents, or some combination
of both – Paul asserts that Sherpa monks often experienced the loss of one or both parents during childhood, resulting in a sort of failed object relations. The personality traits that develop as a consequence include insecurity, “infantile mentation” and introspectiveness. The monastic lifestyle becomes especially attractive to an individual with such predispositions (264-267). He also suggests that the vow of celibacy asserts a value of self-authorship by submitting wholly to the law of karma. A monk’s “future destiny is in one’s own hands” and they cannot rely on genetic descent (260).

Like Ortner, Paul poses Sherpa Buddhist monasticism in a parallel opposition to married householder life, i.e., “the ideal of autonomy and the idea of participation in larger wholes” respectively (Paul 1990, 262). In monasticism sexuality is sublimated, narcissism replacing libido (263). This parallelism was also outlined in Paul’s (1982) earlier psychoanalytic deconstruction of Sherpa culture. The monastic community, made up of individuals “more or less identical to each other [and] linked by bonds of sublimated homosexuality” (94) accepts the child as an ego ideal, or, in Oedipal terms, the “symbolically projected senior male” represented by the reincarnate rimpoché and by submission to the Tibetan Buddhist pantheon of supernatural beings (89, 95).

This trend in the literature of framing monasticism in Tibetan Buddhist society as one side of a monks-laity dichotomy has been challenged by Martin Mills (2000). The crux of his criticism is his observation that these studies overemphasize structural and symbolic oppositions, and by focusing on monks’ supposed anti-relationalism, celibacy and structural excision from the world of so-called normal social relations, tend to define them by what they are not (Mills 2000, 18-19). He argues that monasticism, rather than representing the renunciation of the principles and terms upon which lay householder
relationships are built, is a sublimation of these same types relationships into modes of religious authority. Monks are immersed in a world of religious relationships defined by metaphors of lineage, kinship and reproduction. The monastic career is thus “an ongoing transformative process in terms of the ‘transient’ world of householders” (19), rather than a critical rejection.

As a whole, this body of literature suggests that Tibetan Buddhist monasticism is at once highly involved in village life and idealistically anti-society. This is not necessarily a contradiction, but it does imply that the realities of monastic life may be more nuanced than these structural dichotomy models suggest. The extent to which detachment, anti-relationalism, narcissism, self-authorship and so on are characteristic of monasticism as it is actually lived is unclear. Unfortunately, while some of these studies overtly imply psychological implications (Goldstein and Tsarong 1985; Paul 1982, 1990), they are all based on rather superficial observations of rather superficial structures, symbols, ideals and metaphors – seemingly addressing everything surrounding monastic life except the monks themselves: their personal backgrounds, explanations of their life and their daily lifestyles.

**Descriptions of Daily Life**

In assessing the scope of research in Tibetan Buddhist monasticism, it is clear that it is not an area that has lacked attention in a general sense, and this without considering the massive corpus of studies of scripture, iconography and philosophy that make up the vast majority of scholarly work in Tibetan Buddhist studies. One topic that seems to have received relatively little attention is the daily life of ordinary Tibetan Buddhist
monks. The few studies that have looked at the daily lives of monks are invaluable but incomplete. While broad studies such as those by L. A. Waddell and Giuseppe Tucci included some description of daily routines (Waddell [1895]1972, 212-224; Tucci 1980, 125-126), the pitfalls of any attempt to provide a broad description of Tibetan Buddhist monasticism are amplified when the focus is on patterns of daily life, much of which is determined by local conditions – traditions that are specific to a given monastery, the spiritual demands of the local community, organizational structure and the size of the institution to name a few.

Some studies exist that deal with some specific aspects of monastic life including Melvyn Goldstein’s (1964) study of the dab dob, a kind of “punk” monk that had been common in many of the larger institutions in Tibet, Monique Jacqueline Van Lochem’s (2004) study of the lives of young novice monks attending one of the large monastic universities in southern India, and two studies from Ladakh - Jamyang Gyaltsen’s (1995) study of the preparations that the oracle-monks go through at the Sakyapa Matho monastery leading up to its yearly festival, and Prince Peter’s (1953) “Peculiar Sleeping Postures of the Tibetans” that provides a very brief but thought provoking description of a sleeping monk at Ridzong Monastery. S.H. Ribbach’s (1986) ethnography of Ladakhi society includes some more general descriptions of daily life that, while told from the point of view of a layman, provides specific descriptions of many of the activities that Ladkahi monks traditionally took part in.

There have been several studies of Tibetan Buddhist nunneries that provide insights into the monastic lifestyle in Tibetan areas. Among them is a study by Karma Lekshe Tşomo (1987) that provides a description of the typical daily schedule at a
number of exile nunneries in India, and Hanna Havnevik’s (1989) ethnography of the
exile nunnery at Tilokpur, India that provides a comprehensive description of the various
duties of nuns. From Ladakh, Anna Grimshaw’s (1994) intimate chronicle of the several
months she spent living at the nunnery attached to Ridzong Monastery is a thorough
description of life inside a Ladakhi nunnery. Kim Gutschow’s (2004) study of nuns in
Zangskar, situated within a broader discussion of women and the feminine in Buddhist
history, politics and philosophy, is interspersed with detailed ethnographic insights on
monastic living.

**Personal Accounts**

One body of literature that is not necessarily academic in its approach but is
nonetheless important is personal accounts of Tibetan Buddhist monastic life. Several
autobiographies exist, and while these can be an indispensable source of insiders’
accounts of the monastic environment, there are none that provide much insight into
monastic life from the perspective of an ordinary monk. Perhaps the best of these is
Kyongla Rato’s *My Life and Lives* (1991) which vividly portrays monastic life and
education from the perspective of a monk, albeit one who was also a reincarnate
*rimpoche*, had advanced to a high level of monastic education and training, and did so
within one of the large monastic universities that flourished in Tibet prior to the 1959
uprising – a monk very different from the kind that are the subject of this study. Palden
Gyatso’s (1997) autobiography is mainly focused on his experiences as a prisoner in the
post-1959 Tibet, and the *dab dob* Tashi Khedrup’s (1998) life was likewise atypical. The
extensive and intensive training that one undergoes to become a *geshe* is chronicled by
George B. J. Dreyfus (2003), a Swiss man who entered monastic life and studied at a number of the large exile monastic universities in India, primarily at Namgyal Monastery, a large Gelukpa institution in Dharamsala. The sole example of autobiography from Ladakhi is *Recollections of Tibet* (Tharchin and Namgail 2004), which includes two stories of monks from the Drigung Kargyudpa monastery of Phyang who had travelled to Tibet in their youth to receive a formal monastic education before returning to their home monastery, a practice that was commonplace before 1959.

There is also a small collection of personal accounts of those who have spent time at the smaller Ladakhi monasteries. Of most interest are a few accounts that are centered around Ridzong Monastery such as those of Anna Grimshaw (1994, 1999) who lived for several months at the nunnery, a philosophically self-reflective piece based on a visit to the monastery (Brummans 2008), and an earlier book called *Imji Getsul* (Jivaka 1962) - a rich and fascinating description of an English Buddhist’s brief time spent as a member of Ridzong’s monastic community long before Ladakh became accessible to the outside world. These accounts, while not exactly told from an “insider’s” perspective, are some of the best descriptions available, scholarly or otherwise, of what the monastery environment in Ladakh is like.

**Psychology and Tibetan Monasticism**

Two studies from the world of psychology should also be noted. One, preoccupied with testing the cross-cultural validity of a psychological model of moral reasoning by applying it to “a non-Western historically independent society” (Heubner and Garrod 1993, 167) interviewed monks at a monastery in Nepal. While they found
this model to be “of limited use in examining the moral reasoning of monks in a Buddhist culture” (183), it was noted that the notion of karma was a common theme that came up in justifying monks’ responses to hypothetical moral dilemmas (180-181). At a level of analysis a little closer to direct experience, this would support Geoffrey Samuel’s (1993) association of clerical monasticism with a “karma orientation.” Another study, conducted with monks in Dharamsala, India (Levitt 1999), sought to enhance, or problematize, the psychotherapeutic concept of “wisdom” by looking into Tibetan monks’ emic definitions. Interestingly, Levitt boldly contemplates two parallel methods of self-development – psychotherapy and the Tibetan Buddhist development of wisdom – on equal footing. Her statement that “the Tibetan path to wisdom is based on the dissociation from the worldly self, whereas in psychotherapy one attempts to delve into the client’s experience of self” (101) is interesting when read against Robert Paul’s (1982, 1990) literally ego-centric understanding of Tibetan monasticism and the culture of non-attachment that monasticism represents according to Goldstein and Tsarong (1985).
CHAPTER FOUR: STUDY DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Research Objectives

This study was designed to fulfill the following overall objective:

To show how the religiosity of Tibetan Buddhist monks is influenced by the social environment in which it is lived.

To this end, a methodology was carried out to fulfill the following two research objectives:

1) To show how aspects of the social environments of two monasteries influence patterns in how monks narrativize their life histories.

2) To show how aspects of the social environment of two monasteries influence how daily life is lived and understood by monks.

Through fulfilling these objectives, this study will also serve to provide an intimate portrait of life within two typical small Gelukpa monasteries in Ladakh.

Study Design

Two Ladakhi monasteries of the Gelukpa order of Tibetan Buddhism were chosen to be the focus of field research: Spituk Monastery and Ridzong Monastery. Because both monasteries belonged to the same order, they were essentially identical with regards to overall doctrinal emphases, educational curriculum, and ritual repertoire. This ensured that these key aspects of religiosity were effectively controlled for across the two populations of monks. In addition, these monasteries were also similar to each other in
that both existed within the same social-cultural milieu of central Ladakh, they both sat in comparable positions within the hierarchy of the Gelukpa order, and both monasteries enjoyed comparable levels of local prestige, due mostly to their being the home monasteries of prominent rimpoches who were considerably influential cultural and political figures in Ladakh.

Despite their similarities, these two monasteries sharply contrasted with one another by several criteria significant to the design of this study: location, integration-separation, and size.

Location

Spituk Monastery is located on the south-facing edge of a large outcrop of rock overlooking the village of the same name. It is situated in the middle of a vast alluvial plain of the Indus valley and is visible from miles around. Ladakh’s main artery – the Srinagar-Leh Highway – passes within a half mile to the north of the monastery and a paved drive leads from it to the monastery’s main entrance at the top of the hill. From there it is a mere four miles by road up the gently sloping plain to the city center of Leh, whose airfield – home of a military airbase and Ladakh’s only commercial airport – abuts against the northeast edge of the monastery grounds. Busses stop at the base of the monastery road roughly every fifteen minutes during the day, all-year round, and monks often use this service or hitch a ride in a car or on a motorcycle to make an easy day trip into Leh to procure provisions for themselves or the monastery. The monastery is on the same electrical power and telecommunications grids as Leh and surrounding villages and is also in the midst of a cellular phone network that had recently been erected in the area.
To reach Ridzong Monastery from Leh one must travel northwest on the Srinagar-Leh Highway roughly following the course of the Indus for forty-seven miles to the tiny village of Ulle. The journey by bus – which the ethnographer took numerous times – lasts on average two and a half hours on the narrow, undulating road that threads through villages, above the rapids, and along harrowing cliff edges. From Ulle one must travel by foot\(^{13}\) for three and a half miles and 1,200 vertical feet up the narrow valley of the Ulle Tokpo tributary, past the small nunnery, and up another dry side valley before coming upon the compact monastery which faces south down the valley, wedged between two mountains. This far from Leh the busses that pass through Ulle are infrequent and a trip to the city to collect provisions requires at least three days. There is no electricity at Ridzong, apart from a handful of solar panels that power modest fluorescent lamps. Being well out of range of any cellular phone tower, communication is only possible via written letter or word of mouth.

Integration-Separation

Like most monasteries in Ladakh, Spituk Monastery is integrated with a village of the same name. While it stands out from the village by its prominent location on its large rock crag, there is no formal physical separation between the two. The division between

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\(^{13}\) A road to Ridzong Monastery had been built recently, but it was subject to repeated wash-outs. A year before field research was begun there was a major flooding incident and the lower portions of this road were obliterated by the Ulle Tokpo river which had become a torrent. Throughout the duration of fieldwork a new road following another route on the lower portion was under construction. This was completed during the last month of fieldwork. For most of the period of fieldwork Ridzong Monastery was only accessible by foot. The road, when intact, only leads to the monastery and is not regularly travelled by motor vehicles.
the monks’ quarters on the lowest parts of the slope and the houses of Spituk village is virtually indistinguishable. This integration is both physical and social. In addition to economic, material and ritual relationships, the patterns of daily life of monastery and village are intertwined. While this type of situation is typical at Ladakhi monasteries that are located within villages, the situation at Spituk is amplified by its central location in the Leh area, and its exposure to the cosmopolitanism that it brings. Because Spituk is also the main monastery serving the greater Leh area, and because of the prominence of its rinpoches, it is in many ways the most culturally central of all of Ladakh’s monasteries.

Ridzong, in contrast, is a fitting example of the classic stereotype of a monastery being an isolated place, albeit in defiance of the typical pattern of monasteries in Ladakh being located at the site of a village or city. It sits alone at the upper reaches of a dry, treeless riverbed, between two mountains, and with neither cultivated field nor natural greenery anywhere in the vicinity. The nearest village to Ridzong, the tiny hamlet of Ulle, is three-and-a-half miles down the narrow valley. None of the four nearby villages that Ridzong serves are reachable without significant travel. While it maintains the typical material, economic and ritual relationships with these villages, its separation from them precludes its monks from any involvement in patterns of daily life apart from those of the monastery itself. It is a relatively far-flung part of central Ladakh that Ridzong and its associated little communities occupy, and it enjoys a very low profile in the cultural conscience of Ladakh, apart for the prominence of its rinpoches and a vague but widely held perception of it being an “important” monastery with a reputation for being strict that borders on legend.
Size

While by no means the most populous monastery in Ladakh, Spituk Monastery is still large by Ladakhi standards. The author estimates that during the period of fieldwork there were approximately thirty monks in residence there. Spituk Monastery is also physically large. It consists of approximately forty structures, the largest of which sit atop the hill and are mostly dedicated to chapel space, ritual assembly halls, storage, kitchens and administrative dormitories while the numerous modestly-sized structures that make up the monks’ living quarters cascade down the steep rock face, eventually blending in with the similarly white-washed houses of the village itself.

Ridzong, in contrast, is a very small monastery. During the period of fieldwork a total of twelve monks were observed to be in residence there. Physically, Ridzong Monastery is a very compact assemblage of small structures – about twenty-five in all – spanning the narrow valley in a slightly concave arrangement reminiscent of a dam in a river. The majority of its space is dedicated to the chapels, assembly halls, kitchens and storage rooms that together comprise a cluster of larger structures on the monastery’s east side, while the very small structures of the monks’ quarters cling to the west side, never out of sight of the main buildings.

Sampling

As a study focused upon life in monasteries, only monks who were residents at the two monasteries included in this study were targeted. This excluded “novice” gesnyen monks who lived in monastery boarding schools, all monks associated with the
monasteries who were attending monastic educational institutions outside Ladakh during fieldwork, and any other monks associated with the monasteries who, for whatever reason, were not residing at their monastery during the period of field research.

Within each monastery a sampling strategy was carried out intended to represent typical ranges of the three demographics significant within Ladakhi monasteries: age, ordainment status and occupation.

Age

While most monks in Ladakh begin their monastic career in their childhood, they generally do not become permanent residents of a monastery until their late teens or early twenties, after they have become “semi-ordained” getsuls and completed their monastic education. Since monks are expected to remain monks for life, many maintain their residence at the monastery well into their elder years and until death. Sampling across this age range ensured that the study reflected variations within the monasteries with regards to elements of the personal backgrounds of monks that are a result of changing historical circumstances, experience within the monastic system, and aspects of monks’ current lifestyles that are an effect of age.

Ordainment Status

The monks who were in residence at both Spituk and Ridzong Monasteries fell into three ordainment categories. These included the two traditional ordainment status categories of getsul, or “semi-ordained” monk, and gelong, or “fully-ordained” monk. In addition, while there is no traditional ordainment level beyond gelong in Tibetan
Buddhism, monks recognized the so-called “retired” gelong status as a distinct status relating to ordainment because of its implication that all of a monastery’s occupational responsibilities associated with the gelong status had been completed. Sampling across all three categories ensured that the study would reflect variations in the daily lifestyles and life histories that are the result of ordainment status.

*Occupation*

Most monks, including in some cases retired gelongs, are appointed to serve within a hierarchical cycle of administrative occupations. These occupations can be divided into two levels: lower administration, usually served by getsuls or less experienced gelongs, and upper administration, served only by gelongs who have completed the cycle of lower administration, and retired gelongs who may be appointed to serve an occupation again on an as needed basis. In addition, some highly educated monks, especially those holding a geshe degree, may work as teachers. Other monks, whether retired or not, may for whatever reason not be serving any officially appointed occupation at any given time. Sampling was undertaken to represent variations in daily lifestyles and life histories that were a reflection of this range of occupational possibilities.

*Methodology*

Field research was carried out directly at the two monasteries that are the subject of this study. The methodology included traditional direct participant observation
alongside a formal, three-phase hierarchical methodology of survey interviews, life history interviews and shadowing sessions.

**Participant Observation**

In addition to the time spent at Spituk and Ridzong Monasteries over the course of a year of fieldwork, the ethnographer also observed various aspects of monastic life at Phyang Monastery, Matho Monastery, Sankar Monastery, in lay peoples’ homes, in villages, the city and on the road. However, the vast majority of time spent in participant observation was at the focal monasteries of this study: Spituk and Ridzong. Throughout the duration of fieldwork at these monasteries the ethnographer and research assistant were always in pursuit of fulfilling one or more of the three phases of the formal research methodology described below, but the actual time spent engaged in the interviews and shadowing sessions associated with these phases represents only a small fraction of the overall time spent at these monasteries. It was intended that through participant observation additional similarities and differences between the two monasteries would be detected that were not evident when the research design was first conceived. Also, participant observation was intended to directly address the second research objective of the study.

In his time spent at these monasteries the ethnographer was immersed in the morning routines, the rituals, the preparation of food, the social interactions, the daily comings and goings of the laity and of tourists, the evening lull and the quiet of night that marks the passage of days in the lives of these two monastic communities. The ethnographer helped prepare food, ate with the monks, sat in on rituals, lent a helping
hand for cleaning, maintenance, and the occasional construction project. He watched television with the monks at Spituk and listened to the radio with the monks at Ridzong. He observed and endured the weather, landscape and wildlife with the monks, helped track down missing monks, answered tourists’ questions and even engaged in crowd control.

Over the course of a year the ethnographer experienced the peak of the tourist season in summer, the quiet isolation of winter and the transformations in-between all from the point of view of the monasteries. He saw the atmosphere of the monasteries change as the monks prepared for annual festivals and holidays, saw the monks leave for other villages in Ladakh and even other places in India to return after a few days, weeks or months, sat with family members of monks who had paid a visit and empathized with monks as they dealt with illnesses and injuries.

Survey Interviews

The first phase of the formal research methodology was centered on the administration of an introductory, basic survey interview. These were uniform, structured, non-audio recorded interviews that followed a short questionnaire format. Questions were designed to provide specific demographic data relevant to the research design such as age, ordainment status and occupation. In addition, basic life history data was collected such as place of birth, the age at which the individual first became a monk, who was responsible for the decision for the individual to become a monk, frequency of family visits, education, attendance at other monastic institutions, and previous occupations. See Appendix B for a copy of this survey form.
Because of the small populations that these monasteries represented, and the difficulties involved in accessing individual monks, sampling for this phase of research was non-random and opportunistic, using convenience and snowball sampling methods. This phase of the research methodology was carried out for the duration of the field research period, and no limit was placed on the number of participants that would be included in this part of the study. In addition to the monasteries of Spituk and Ridzong, survey interviews were also conducted at the monasteries of Phyang and Matho in the early stages of field research.

The ethnographer made efforts to ensure that conduct of the survey interviews remained uniform throughout the duration of the research period, within each sample of monks, and across the monasteries at which these interviews were conducted. Each interview was conducted by the ethnographer directly with the participating monk and with aid from a native Ladakhi speaking research assistant. Upon recruitment, each participating monk was consented into the study on the spot following the protocol of the oral consent script designed for this study (see Appendix A), immediately after which the interview itself was administered. In every case the survey was conducted in the form of an oral interview, each question being asked in turn, and with the ethnographer writing in the answers on the survey form on the spot and in the presence of the participating monk. Each monk was allowed to elaborate on each of his answers as much as he pleased before the ethnographer proceeded to the next question. No audio recording devices were used during the conduct of this phase of the research.

The survey interview was intended to provide basic demographic and life-history data from each monastery, to create a pool of known and consenting monks from which
to draw from for the second phase of field research, to allow the monks at each monastery to become familiar with the ethnographer, the research assistant, and the general nature of the research they were conducting, and to provide a means by which to gain rapport with each community of monks. Survey interviews were also intended to detect additional similarities and differences between the two monasteries that were not evident when the research design was conceived.

In total, 46 monks and one layman were interviewed in this phase of the research. Of the two monasteries that were the focus of this study, twenty-two resident monks were interviewed at Spituk Monastery out of an estimated population of thirty monks and twelve monks were interviewed at Ridzong Monastery which included all monks who resided at this monastery during the field research period. Thus the total sample of monks that became a part of this study was thirty-four. Additionally, survey interviews were conducted with seven resident monks at Phyang Monastery, two resident monks at Matho Monastery, three non-resident monks at Spituk Monastery, and one resident non-monk at Ridzong Monastery.

Life History Interviews

The second phase of the formal research methodology consisted of conducting a number of open-ended life history interviews. These interviews were designed to follow a chronological format whereby each participant would be asked to elaborate on questions about his life before becoming a monk, how the decision was made for him to become a monk, his life since becoming a monk including occupations, and other key milestones such as ordination events and experiences attending other monastic
institutions. These interviews, while designed to follow a standard chronological format, were tailored to each monk based on the answers he provided in the initial survey interview. See Appendix B for a sample of typical questions and ordering.

For this phase of the field research, individual monks were chosen from the pool of those who had already participated in the first phase. Sampling was done primarily by convenience, but with a goal of fulfilling a purposive quota whereby at least two monks from each of three age ranges would be recruited. These age ranges were “young”, defined as being between the ages twenty and thirty-nine, “middle-aged,” defined as being between the ages forty and fifty-nine, and “senior”, defined as over sixty. These age ranges were defined merely for the sake of sampling convenience and did not necessarily reflect culturally significant divisions.

Life history interviews were conducted in a similar manner at both Spituk and Ridzong Monasteries. When possible the time and location for these interviews was arranged ahead of time, but in many cases the monk approached the ethnographer or the research assistant at the very moment he was available for the interview – the request for the interview having already been made – or the monk was ready and willing to be interviewed on the spot at the time that the initial request for an interview was made. In all cases the life history interviews were conducted in a private setting with only the monk, the ethnographer and the research assistant present. The interviews were conducted orally by the ethnographer with the research assistant acting as interpreter. While a limited amount of structure was imposed on these interviews in the form of standard questions that were asked of all participants and some specific questions that were informed by what was already known about each individual monk, efforts were
made to keep the interviews as casual and conversational as possible so as to elicit open-ended responses and allow the monk to tell his story on his own terms. All interviews were audio recorded on a digital voice recording device.

The purpose of the life history interviews was to elicit narratives of the life histories of a variety of monks and of any additional subjects that monks wished to discuss. Additionally, conducting this phase of the research methodology served to enhance the ethnographer’s rapport with the monastic communities of Spituk and Ridzong in general, and specifically with those individual monks who would participate in the third and final phase. Life history interviews were intended to directly address the first research objective of the study.

In total, twenty-one monks were interviewed for this phase of the research: ten at Spituk Monastery and eleven at Ridzong Monastery. Of the ten monks interviewed at Spituk monastery two were in the “young” category, two were in the “middle-aged” category, and six were in the “senior” category. Of the eleven monks interviewed at Ridzong Monastery two were in the “young” category, two were in the “middle-aged” category, and seven were in the “senior” category. The comparatively high numbers of “senior” monks who participated in this phase is a reflection of the demographic makeup of both of these monasteries. Also, for the purposes of maintaining comparable samples, the age distribution of the sample from Ridzong, which nearly exhausted the population of the monastery, was used to guide the sampling strategy at Spituk. The lifestyle of many retired gelongs also allowed them greater availability to participate than younger monks.
Shadowing Sessions

The third and final phase of the research methodology was shadowing sessions followed by focused interviews involving key informants. The first part, shadowing, involved the ethnographer’s following and observing the daily routine of one key informant continuously over a period of four days. The second part, focused interviews, was a follow-up interview in which the key informant was to be asked questions about specific daily activities, social interactions, and ritual duties that were observed during the shadowing session. Monks would be encouraged to elaborate on their answers by explaining what things mean and what their personal opinions are about both specific activities that they engaged in and the monastic life in general. See Appendix B for a sample of one of these interview instruments.

Because of the intrusive nature of this method only key informants, i.e., those monks with whom the ethnographer had established the highest levels of rapport, were approached to participate in this phase. Ideally the sample for this phase was to include at least two monks from each monastery who differed in at least one of the significant demographic categories of age, ordainment status and occupation. Monks who participated in this phase would also be chosen from among the sample who had already participated in the second phase.

The purpose of the shadowing sessions was to enhance data obtained through participant observation by filling in gaps of understanding of the daily life routines of the monks observed at the two monasteries. The follow-up directed interview was intended to elicit monks’ explanations of the meaning of the specific activities that were observed and personal opinions about their lifestyle and duties. Shadowing sessions and follow-up
directed interviews were intended to directly address the second research objective of the study.

A total of four monks participated in this phase of field research: two at Spituk Monastery and two at Ridzong Monastery. Of the two monks at Spituk Monastery, one was a twenty-seven-year-old *getsul* and one was a forty-nine-year-old *gelong*. Both were serving as *komnyers*, or “chapel managers.” Of the two monks who took part at Ridzong Monastery, one was a twenty-three-year-old *getsul* who served as *komnyer*, and one was a seventy-three-year-old *gelong* who served as a *geskos*, but was taking on the duties of the absent *komnyer* during his shadowing session. Unfortunately, neither of the monks at Ridzong Monastery with whom the ethnographer conducted shadowing sessions participated in the follow-up focused interview.
CHATER FIVE: DATA FROM SURVEY INTERVIEWS

Introduction

Survey interviews were designed to provide an array of quantifiable data relating to demographics, personal histories, and social status within monasteries. During field research these interviews were conducted with a total of forty-seven individuals. Of these, twenty-two were monks residing at Spituk Monastery during the fieldwork period, three were monks from Spituk who were not in residence there at that time,¹⁴ twelve were monks from Ridzong Monastery, representing its entire monastic population during the period of fieldwork, one was a layman residing at Ridzong Monastery,¹⁵ seven were monks from the Drigung Kargyudpa monastery at Phyang and two were monks from the Sakyapa monastery at Matho. For the purposes of this study data is presented only from the twenty-two resident monks at Spituk Monastery and the twelve resident monks at Ridzong Monastery who were interviewed (n=34).

All monks interviewed answered all questions included in the interview and were given the opportunity to elaborate on each question as they saw fit and to volunteer any additional information that they wanted to express. In many cases these elaborations provide important clarifications to the data presented. In addition to the similarities and differences between the monasteries of Spituk and Ridzong outlined in the study design,

¹⁴ These three monks were visiting their home monastery during a short break from their studies at Drepung Loseling, a large monastic university in south India.

¹⁵ The machin, a combination of housekeeper and cook, is a position usually filled by a layman. Due to Ridzong’s isolation, its machin must maintain residence there during his appointment instead of the more common practice of returning home each evening.
this data reveals additional similarities and differences in the culture and social environments of each monastery.

**Age and Social Position within the Monastery**

A series of questions were asked to determine the distribution of the ages, ordainment statuses, and occupations of monks within each monastery. Each of these is an important element in providing a general picture of social stratification within monasteries. In Ladakhi monastic culture younger monks are expected to show a great deal of respect to elder monks and to look after their well-being. Ordainment status is a reflection of the level of vows that a monk has taken and the progress they have made in their monastic career. Occupations reflect what kinds of tasks monks are responsible for in relation to a hierarchy of positions. Specific questions asked included age, ordainment status, when they had achieved that status, current occupation and previous occupations.

**Age**

Monks ranged in age from twenty to ninety-three. The average age was about fifty-six ($\bar{x}=56.5$, n=34; Table 1).
The distribution is notably U-shaped, possibly suggesting a sharp drop-off in the past in the numbers of monks being recruited, followed by a recent resurgence. This apparent resurgence may however be misleading as all “semi-ordained” *getsuls* that took part in this study (n=7) fell within the twenty to twenty-nine age range that represents this apparent resurgence. While the topic of monks resigning from monastic life was beyond the scope of this study, the author does know of cases in which this has happened, both among *getsuls* and *gelongs*, although it seems much more common among “semi-ordained” *getsuls*. Even so, if half of the *getsuls* that took part in this study ceased their monastic career, the numbers still would suggest a modest resurgence in the numbers of individuals being recruited into monasticism in Ladakh. It is also possible that increasing numbers of monks are staying behind at the external institutions, such as Drepung Loseling in south India, rather than returning to their home monasteries after completing their educations.
The sample of monks at Spituk Monastery (n=22) ranged in age from twenty to ninety-three years. The average age was about fifty-three (\(\bar{x}=53.1\); Table 2).

![Table 2: Age distribution of monks at Spituk Monastery](image)

The sample of monks at Ridzong Monastery (n=12) ranged in age from twenty-three to eighty-six years. The average age was about sixty (\(\bar{x}=59.8\); Table 3).

![Table 3: Age distribution of monks at Ridzong Monastery](image)
While the U-shaped age distribution of monks at Spituk conforms closely to that observed in the combined samples, the distribution at Ridzong appears flatter. Due to such a small sample from Ridzong (n=12), however, it probably should not be assumed that each monastery experienced different circumstances in their recent histories of monastic recruitment. What is noteworthy, however, is that both monasteries display a pattern whereby there are many senior monks, many young monks, but few middle-aged monks.

**Ordainment Status**

Inquiries relating to ordainment status revealed that monks classified themselves within one of three main statuses: *getsuls*, being “semi-ordained” monks, *gelongs*, being “fully-ordained” monks coming up through the occupational ranks of the monastery, and retired *gelongs*, being fully-ordained monks who have completed a full cycle of occupational requirements for their monastery.

For the combined samples *getsuls* totaled seven (n=7), non-retired *gelongs* totaled fifteen (n=15), and retired *gelongs* totaled twelve (n=12). At Spituk (n=22) six *getsuls* (n=6), nine *gelongs* (n=9), and seven retired *gelongs* (n=7) were interviewed. At Ridzong (n=12) only one *getsul* (n=1), six *gelongs* (n=6), and five retired *gelongs* (n=5) were interviewed. No novice *gesnyen* monks were in residence at either monastery during the period fieldwork and thus none were included in this study.

As one might expect, ordainment status was correlated with age (Table 4). For the combined sample *getsuls* ranged in age from twenty to twenty-eight (\(\bar{x}=24.4\)), *gelongs* ranged from twenty-two to eighty-four (\(\bar{x}=52.2\)), and retired *gelongs* ranged from
sixty-nine to ninety-three ($\bar{x}=77.75$). At Spituk the ranges were twenty to twenty-eight for getsuls ($\bar{x}=24.7$), twenty-two to eighty-four for gelongs ($\bar{x}=52.7$), and seventy to ninety-three for retired gelongs ($\bar{x}=77.2$) while at Ridzong the sole getsul was twenty-three ($\bar{x}=23$) and the ranges of age for gelongs and retired gelongs respectively were thirty to seventy-three ($\bar{x}=51.5$) and sixty-nine to eighty-six ($\bar{x}=77.2$).

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>mean age</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>getsul</td>
<td>gelong</td>
<td>retired gelong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spituk</td>
<td>$\bar{x}=24.7$ (n=6)</td>
<td>$\bar{x}=52.7$ (n=9)</td>
<td>$\bar{x}=78.1$ (n=7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ridzong</td>
<td>$\bar{x}=23$ (n=1)</td>
<td>$\bar{x}=51.5$ (n=6)</td>
<td>$\bar{x}=77.2$ (n=5)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>$\bar{x}=24.4$ (n=7)</td>
<td>$\bar{x}=52.2$ (n=15)</td>
<td>$\bar{x}=77.75$ (n=12)</td>
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It is noticed that there is some overlap in the ranges of age associated with the three ordainment statuses suggesting that attainment of a status beyond getsul$^{16}$ seems not to have a fixed age associated with it. Despite this there is remarkable consistency across monasteries in the average ages of monks in relation to ordainment status. The only real difference between the two monasteries when it comes to the ordainment status of monks is the numbers of getsuls in residence – Spituk having six while Ridzong had but one.

Monastery Occupations

In order to carry out the daily operations of a monastery there are a number of administrative occupations that monks may be engaged in. These can be divided into two tiers: an upper administration which includes a hierarchically structured cycle of

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$^{16}$ The ethnographer was told on several occasions by monks that a monk must first reach the age of twenty before he can become a getsul.
occupations determined by seniority with tenures potentially lasting many years, and lower administration which include a cycle of occupations in support of upper administration that are filled by rotating and as-needed appointments with short terms from less than a month to as many as three years or more. In addition to administrative occupations, specially qualified “scholar monks” who had pursued a specifically philosophy and theology-oriented curriculum at a monastic university may be appointed as teachers at a monastery school or other educational institution. Not all monks serve an occupation at any given time, therefore a fourth category for those who were not serving an occupation must be included in the range of occupational types.

Of the combined sample 15 percent (n=5) were serving in an upper administration position, 35 percent (n=12) were serving in a position in the lower administration, 12 percent (n=4) were teachers and 38 percent (n=13) of monks interviewed had no officially appointed occupation during the period of fieldwork.

At Spituk Monastery two monks interviewed (n=2) were serving in an upper administration position, both of whom were gelongs. Nine monks interviewed at Spituk (n=9) were serving in lower administration positions, five of which were getsuls and four of which were gelongs. There were two teachers at Spituk (n=2) both of whom were gelongs and both also held geshe degrees. Nine monks at Spituk (n=9) had no occupation, one was a getsul, one was a gelong and seven were retired gelongs.

At Ridzong Monastery three monks (n=3) were serving in upper administration positions, one of which was a gelong and two of which identified themselves as retired gelongs. Another three monks at Ridzong (n=3) were serving lower administration positions, one of which was a getsul and two of which were gelongs. There were two
teachers at Ridzong, both of which were *gelongs* who had achieved high levels of education in philosophy and theology, but neither held a *geshe* degree. Finally, four of the monks interviewed at Ridzong (n=4) were not officially serving an occupation, one of these was a *gelong* and three were retired *gelongs*.

At Ridzong Monastery in particular, perhaps due to the low population of monks and high number of responsibilities, there seems to be more flexibility in the assignment of occupations. Two monks who had identified themselves as retired *gelongs*, implying that they had completed the full cycle of the monastery’s occupational requirements, were serving occupations in the higher administration. One *gelong* who was serving as the monastery’s *geskos*, or “disciplinary officer,” noted that this was his second time serving in that position. The one non-retired *gelong* who did not have an occupation was in fact the seemingly busiest monk of all those observed at Ridzong, who despite lack of official appointment carried a heavy burden of all-around tasks for the monastery. This flexibility of occupational assignments was not observed at Spituk Monastery - none of the retired *gelongs* serving an occupation and no monks noting that they had served in a particular occupation more than once.

**Personal Backgrounds**

The survey interview included questions about monks’ birth villages, the age at which monks first entered monastic life, the decision to become a monk, education and attendance at monastic universities outside of Ladakh, and contact with family members. The purpose of this line of questioning was to obtain quantifiable data relating to key events in monks’ life histories and overall exposure to non-monastic life. Data that is
comparable within and between the two monasteries speaks to monks’ monastic experience and socialization – both within the monastery and in broader society – and overall exposure that monks have had to life outside the monastery and even outside of Ladakh. This may be reflected in whether birth villages were rural or semi-urban, the age at which socialization into monastic life began, who was involved in the decision to become a monk, exposure to non-monastic education, whether, where and for how long a monk attended a monastic university, and frequency of contact with family members.

**Birth Villages**

Each monk was asked his birth village. The thirty-four monks included in this study represented a total of eighteen different birth villages. Eighty-eight percent of monks, an overwhelming majority, were born in villages affiliated with their respective monastery (n=30). Only four monks (n=4) came from villages not affiliated with the respective monastery. No monks, it should be noted, were born outside of Ladakh. For Spituk Monastery, 95 percent of monks (n=21) came from villages affiliated with the monastery and only one monk (n=1) came from a village not affiliated with Spituk Monastery. At Ridzong Monastery 75 percent of monks (n=9) came from villages affiliated with the monastery and three monks (n=3) came from villages that had no such affiliation. Reasons why a monk would attend a monastery not affiliated with their birth village seemed to vary. In the one known case from Spituk it was because the monk had an uncle who was a monk at Spituk at the time of his recruitment, and of the three cases from Ridzong one was because his father held Ridzong Monastery in high regard and pleaded to have his son accepted there, one was a monk who chose himself to take the robes
later in life and wanted to be a part of the Ridzong community despite having been a resident of a village affiliated with another monastery, and another had an aunt who was a nun at Ridzong’s sister nunnery and was sent to Ridzong despite being from a village associated with, interestingly, Spituk Monastery.

The birth villages of monks were also mostly rural. Of the whole sample of monks (n=34), 74 percent (n=25) came from rural villages, that is, villages that are not part of the greater surrounds of an urban area, and 26 percent (n=9) came from semi-urban villages in the greater Leh area. At Spituk Monastery specifically, 64 percent of monks (n=14) came from rural villages and 36 percent (n=8) came from semi-urban villages in the greater Leh area. At Ridzong Monastery 92 percent of monks (n=11) came from rural villages and 8 percent (n=1) came from a semi-urban village in the greater Leh area. The different proportions of rural versus semi-urban birth villages between the two monasteries is a reflection of the inherent differences between the monasteries themselves. Spituk Monastery is itself in the greater Leh area as are many of its affiliate villages and all villages affiliated with Ridzong, a famously isolated monastery, are rural. It is noteworthy that no monks who participated in this study claimed to have been born in Leh itself, or either of Ladakh’s other urban areas.

**Age at First Becoming a Monk**

Data collected on entry into monastic life, that is, becoming a gesnyen, or “novice” monk, was consistent with the implications of a mass monasticism ideology – families deciding to send a monk to the monastery during their childhood. For the entire sample (n=34) the ages at which monks first entered monastic life ranged from six years
old to forty years old. The average age at which monks first entered monastic life was around twelve years old ($\bar{x}=12.1$).

As Table 5 shows, the vast majority of monks, all but one, had begun their monastic career by the time they were twenty years old, many before they were even ten.

At Spituk Monastery the age at which monks first entered monastic life ranged from six years old to eighteen years old. The average age was around eleven years old ($\bar{x}=10.8$).
As Table 6 shows, all monks at Spituk Monastery had begun their monastic career by the time they were twenty years old.

At Ridzong Monastery the age at which monks first entered monastic life ranged from nine years old to forty years old. The average age was fourteen and a half years old ($\bar{x} = 14.5$).
As Table 7 shows, Ridzong Monastery displayed the same pattern by which most monks began their monastic career while very young, but in addition there was one monk present who had not begun his monastic career until later in life and had significant experience with lay life. He had entered the monastery for the first time at the age of forty after having served in the Indian Army, had been married and had a son.

The Decision to Become a Monk

All monks were asked who had made the decision for him to become a monk. All responses conformed to one of three scenarios: 1) that the decision was made entirely by the monk’s family, 2) that it was made by a combination of the monk’s family and the monk himself, and 3) that the decision to become a monk was entirely his own. For the combined sample of monks (n=34), 50 percent cited family members alone as having made the decision (n=17), 18% cited a combination of family members and the monk himself (n=6), and 32 percent of monks responded that the decision to become a monk was their own (n=11). No significant difference in the pattern of decision making was observed between Spituk and Ridzong Monasteries. For the sample of monks at Spituk Monastery (n=22), 50 percent of monks cited family as having made the decision (n=11), 18% cited a combined decision of family members and the monk himself (n=4), and 32 percent responded that the decision was entirely their own (n=7). For the sample of monks at Ridzong Monastery (n=12), 50 percent responded that the decision was entirely the family’s (n=6), 17 percent cited a combined decision of family and the monk himself (n=2), and 33 percent responded that the decision was entirely their own (n=4).
There was a slight positive correlation between the degree of self-involvement attributed to the decision-making process and age at entry into monastic life. For the total sample the mean age at entry for those who cited that the decision was made entirely by family was around ten ($\bar{x}=10.2$), for those citing combined decision making it was around eleven ($\bar{x}=11.3$), and for those responding that the decision to become a monk was made entirely by themselves the mean age at entry was fifteen and a half ($\bar{x}=15.5$). For Spituk Monastery the mean age at entry for those who cited family alone as the decision makers was around ten ($\bar{x}=9.9$), for those citing a combined decision by family and the monk himself it was ten and a half ($\bar{x}=10.5$), and for those citing that the decision was entirely their own it was around twelve and a half ($\bar{x}=12.4$). At Ridzong Monastery the mean age at entry for those who cited family as the sole decision makers was around eleven ($\bar{x}=10.8$), for those citing a combination of family and the monk himself it was thirteen ($\bar{x}=13$), and for those who responded that the decision was entirely their own the mean age at entry was around twenty-one ($\bar{x}=20.8$). This last figure includes the monk who entered monastic life by his own decision at age forty. The overwhelming majority of monks however first entered monastic life at a very young age and it is possible that some monks may have exaggerated the influence of their own agency in the decision making process.

**Education**

A number of questions were asked intended to elicit information about education. All monks who took part in the study (n=34) received some level of monastic education, some of whom achieved very high levels of monastic education including two monks
who held geshe degrees. In addition, many monks also received primary and in some cases secondary education either by having attended government school before they became monks or by exposure to a government school-style curriculum which in recent years has been provided by monastery boarding schools. Of the thirty-four monks who participated in this study (n=34), 47 percent (n=16) received some primary or secondary education at some point in their lives while 53 percent (n=18) only received a specifically monastic education. This pattern was consistent within each monastery. Of the twenty-two monks interviewed at Spituk Monastery (n=22), 44 percent (n=10) received some primary or secondary education while 56 percent (n=12) only received monastic education. Similarly at Ridzong 50 percent (n=6) of monks had received some primary or secondary education and 50 percent (n=6) only received monastic education.

Exposure to primary or secondary education was strongly correlated with age (Table 8). The average age of monks who at some point received some primary or secondary education was thirty-six ($\bar{x} = 36.3$) and the average age of monks who had only received a monastic education was around seventy-three ($\bar{x} = 72.6$). The difference is more marked at Spituk Monastery than at Ridzong Monastery, where the average age of monks from Spituk Monastery who had received some primary or secondary education was around twenty-eight ($\bar{x} = 28.4$) and that of monks who only received a monastic education was around seventy-four ($\bar{x} = 73.8$), while at Ridzong Monastery the average age of monks who had received some primary or secondary education was around forty-nine ($\bar{x} = 49.3$) and that of those only exposed to monastic education was around seventy ($\bar{x} = 70.3$). It should be noted that these differences between the two monasteries are a
reflection of the different patterns in the distribution of age in the two samples, discussed above.

**Table 8: Age and education experience**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education Experience</th>
<th>Spituk (n=22)</th>
<th>Ridzong (n=12)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary or secondary education</td>
<td>28.4 (n=10)</td>
<td>49.3 (n=6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monastic education only</td>
<td>73.75 (n=12)</td>
<td>70.3 (n=6)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The recent emergence of monastery boarding schools that include government school-style curriculums - replacing the older pattern whereby novice gesnyen monks would live under the tutelage of an established gelong monk - and the greater reach of government schools to the general populace of Ladakh certainly explains this correlation between age and exposure to primary or secondary education at both monasteries.

*Attendance at Monastic Universities Outside Ladakh*

Monks were asked whether or not they had ever attended a monastic university outside Ladakh, and if so for how long and where (Table 9). For the combined communities 71 percent (n=24) responded that they had attended such an institution and 29 percent (n=10) responded that they had not. For each monastery, however, the patterns were very different. At Spituk Monastery an overwhelming 95 percent (n=21) of the monks interviewed had attended an outside institution while only 5 percent (n=1) had not. At Ridzong Monastery this pattern was reversed. Only 25 percent (n=3) had attended an outside institution while 75 percent (n=9) had not.
Table 9: Attendance at outside monastic universities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spituk</td>
<td>95% (n=21)</td>
<td>5% (n=1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ridzong</td>
<td>25% (n=3)</td>
<td>75% (n=9)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This represents another significant difference between these two monasteries.

While the vast majority of monks at Spituk Monastery, all but one in fact, had attended a monastic university outside Ladakh, in-house monastic education seems to have been the norm at Ridzong Monastery and the majority of the monks had in fact spent their entire monastic careers solely at that monastery.

Of those monks who had attended an outside monastic university the average number of years spent of those who responded\(^\text{17}\) from the combined communities (n=23) was a little over nine years (\(\bar{x}=9.3\)). At Spituk alone (n=20) the average was slightly higher (\(\bar{x}=9.6\)) and at Ridzong (n=3) it averaged eight years (\(\bar{x}=8\)). The duration of their stays ranged from two to twenty-three years. Both of these extremes occurred at Spituk, while at Ridzong it ranged from six to twelve years.

Of the monks interviewed at Spituk Monastery who had attended a monastic university outside of Ladakh (n=21) about half (n=10) had attended an institution in Tibet and half (n=11) attended one of the newer “exile” monastic universities in India. Monasteries attended in Tibet included Drepung (n=6), Tashilhunpo (n=3) and Ganden (n=1) – all Gelukpa institutions in central Tibet. Monastic institutions attended in India included Drepung Loseling (n=10) and Tashilhunpo (n=1) – both Gelukpa institutions

\(^{17}\) One monk at Spituk had attended a monastic university in south India but did not provide a clear answer regarding the total number of years he had spent there and is thus not included here. This monk was actually a geshe, so the number of years spent was probably considerable.
located in the south Indian state of Karnataka. Clearly as a reflection of historical circumstance the ages of those who had attended monastic universities in Tibet ranged from age seventy to ninety-three ($\bar{x}=77.2$) and of those who had attended the “exile” monasteries the range was twenty to sixty-four years old ($\bar{x}=34.1$).

At Ridzong Monastery the majority of monks (n=9) had never received a monastic education outside Ladakh. Of the three who had, only “exile” institutions in India were cited. These included Drepung Loseling in south India, Namgyal Monastery in Dharamsala, India, home of the Tibetan Government in Exile, and one monk who attended the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics, also in Dharamsala. The three monks who had attended outside institutions ranged in age from twenty-three to sixty-nine ($\bar{x}=48$) and of those who had not attended an outside institution ages ranged from thirty to eighty-six ($\bar{x}=63.8$). The sample is far too small to determine whether monks from Ridzong Monastery are increasingly attending outside institutions, although two monks from Ridzong told the ethnographer that that was indeed the case. The exact reasons why the majority of monks at Ridzong had spent their entire monastic careers there are unclear.\(^18\)

Contact with Family Members

Monks were asked how frequently they see members of their family. Circumstances under which this may occur vary. Often it is on visits that family

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\(^{18}\) Possibilities may include a differential in the socio-economic statuses of the home villages of the respective monasteries – conversations with monks suggested that monks’ families sometimes play a role in providing either tuition, boarding, or travel expenses needed to attend outside institutions - a specific rule or tradition of the monastery, or an edict of the *rimpoche*. 
members make to the monastery for religious holidays or the monastery’s annual festival, and sometimes families may make the trip solely for spending time with a loved one. Monks also occasionally travel to their birth village or other village where family members may be living. Of course this is more likely in cases where the village is in close proximity to the monastery, but for monks born in far-flung villages it may be years or decades since they have been back.

In some cases, several monks at a given monastery may be related to each other. Such circumstances are not included here. Frequency of visits with family members ranged from once a week to not in many years, presumably this means decades (Table 10).

![Table 10: Frequency of visits with family members: Spituk and Ridzong Monasteries](image-url)
As Table 11 and Table 12 indicate, frequent visits with family members were more common among monks at Spituk than at Ridzong. This of course may be explained...
by the centrality of Spituk Monastery which is far more accessible to its affiliated villages than the comparably rural Ridzong Monastery to which any travel between it and its affiliated villages requires considerable effort. The relative socio-economic statuses of the affiliate villages of Spituk and Ridzong Monasteries are not known, but the relative means available to family members of these two communities may also be a factor. All monks interviewed (n=34) claimed that they still had family members living in their birth villages.

Summary

Data from survey interviews conducted at Spituk and Ridzong Monasteries reveal two communities that while in many ways were very similar, were in many ways also very different. Both monasteries displayed a particularly wide range in the ages of its monks, with young, middle-aged and elder monks sharing an environment. Both monasteries also seemed to conform to the implications of the values of mass monasticism, manifested in consistent patterns of individuals entering monastic life at a very young age, and mostly by the decision of their families. Beyond these, other aspects of the monastic career were also very similar. Ages and the occupations associated with ordainment status were very similar at both monasteries and changing patterns of non-monastic education appeared to manifest similarly.

Despite these similarities there were a number of important differences between the two communities that added to their differences previously noted in the research design. The most salient of these were the patterns of attendance at monastic universities outside of Ladakh. While the vast majority of monks at Spituk Monastery had attended
such institutions, the pattern was reversed at Ridzong – most of its monks only ever having been exposed to monastic life at this one isolated monastery. Add to this the comparatively more semi-urban origins of the monks at Spituk and their higher frequency of visits with family, and an overall exposure to the broader world outside the confines of the monastery marks another key difference between the two communities.

Some variations within each monastery were also revealed, particularly in the case of Spituk at which a pattern emerged that seemed to fall along generational lines. Differences between younger monks and elder monks at Spituk – the two sides of an especially U-shaped age distribution pattern – are brought into high relief by the greater exposure to non-monastic education among the younger monks and the distinction – made clear-cut by the circumstances of history – between monastic education having taken place in Tibet versus in India. Internal variations at Ridzong Monastery were far less marked, and its tradition of in-house education and a more flexible and apparently co-operative distribution of occupational responsibilities may suggest a relative leveling of Ridzong’s social strata.
CHAPTER SIX: DATA FROM LIFE HISTORY INTERVIEWS

Introduction

Life history interviews were designed to elicit narratives of specific life events and general thoughts on monastic life. These interviews were conducted with a total sample of twenty-one monks (n=21): ten from Spituk Monastery (n=10) and eleven from Ridzong Monastery (n=11). All monks who participated in life history interviews had previously completed survey interviews. Data from survey interviews guided a purposive sampling strategy intended to obtain a sample that represented as well as was practically possible a range in age, ordainment statuses and occupations comparable across the two monasteries. Due to the very small population of Ridzong Monastery, all of its monks were pursued to take part in life history interviews, all but one successfully. To maintain comparable samples, the range of demographics that the Ridzong sample represented was used to guide the sampling strategy pursued at the larger Spituk Monastery. The effect of this strategy was that two samples were obtained that were very similar to each other, but with an age range skewed towards elder monks. The following tables illustrate the distribution of age (Table 13), ordainment statuses (Table 14) and occupations (Table 15) for the two samples of monks who took part in life history interviews:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 13: Age</th>
<th>Spituk</th>
<th>Ridzong</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Young (20-39)</td>
<td>20% (n=2)</td>
<td>27% (n=3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle-aged (40-59)</td>
<td>20% (n=2)</td>
<td>9% (n=1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elder (60+)</td>
<td>60% (n=6)</td>
<td>64% (n=7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100% (n=10)</td>
<td>100% (n=11)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Interviews were semi-structured. The lives of the monks interviewed, while
obviously sharing many circumstances, were far from uniform. Each interview was thus
catered specifically for each monk, guided by what was known of each of them from the
survey interviews. All interviews were conducted following a chronological life history
format including questions relating to life events common to all monks such as entry into
monastic life, ordination and education, and questions relating to other specific life events
that were salient for each individual monk. Additionally, a few general questions were
asked of each monk relating to more abstract topics such as how they imagine their future
and which of their daily habits are the most important. All questions were open-ended to
allow monks to elaborate as they desired, often leading to the emergence of details and
musings that were then further pursued. This allowed for a relaxed, conversational style
while still conforming to an overall structure that all interviews shared. See Appendix B
for a list of typical questions asked in these interviews.

The narratives that emerged from the interviews can be divided into two main
categories: 1) narratives of becoming a monk – which nearly all monks elaborated on

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 14: Ordainment status</th>
<th>Spituk</th>
<th>Ridzong</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Getsuls</td>
<td>10% (n=1)</td>
<td>9% (n=1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gelongs</td>
<td>50% (n=5)</td>
<td>45.5% (n=5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retired gelongs</td>
<td>40% (n=4)</td>
<td>45.5% (n=5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100% (n=10)</td>
<td>100% (n=11)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 15: Occupational role</th>
<th>Spituk</th>
<th>Ridzong</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lower admin.</td>
<td>40% (n=4)</td>
<td>27.3% (n=3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher admin.</td>
<td>10% (n=1)</td>
<td>27.3% (n=3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>10% (n=1)</td>
<td>18.1% (n=2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>40% (n=4)</td>
<td>27.3% (n=3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100% (n=10)</td>
<td>100% (n=11)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
extensively, and 2) narratives of the monastic career – which includes diverse narratives of major events in the life of a monk since settling into monastic life. All monks provided some narratives of most of the major events in their lives, and while most freely elaborated, some very extensively, there were a few who were not as forthcoming. Further, most monks also inserted religious ideas into their narratives of major life events and when asked more general questions not specifically about their life history.

**Narratives of Becoming a Monk**

The one life event that all monks had in common was that at some point in their lives – for the vast majority while still very young – they left or were taken from their birth family and from lay society as a whole to enter the monastic lifestyle. Of the entire sample of monks who participated in the life history interviews (n=21), the average age at which they first became monks was just under fourteen years (\(\bar{x}=13.7\)), slightly older than the average for the total sample for the study (n=34, \(\bar{x}=12.1\)), skewed slightly by the inclusion of one monk from Ridzong who became a monk at age 40. Of the monks at Spituk who participated in life history interviews (n=10), the average age at entry was just over twelve years (\(\bar{x}=12.3\)). For participants at Ridzong, including the one who became a monk at age 40, the average age at entry was fifteen years (n=11, \(\bar{x}=15\)), but nearly identical to Spituk when the outlier monk is excluded (n=10, \(\bar{x}=12.5\)). Monks’ attributions of who was responsible for making the decision for him to become a monk was also very similar across the two monasteries. Of the monks from Spituk who participated in these interviews six attributed the decision to family members while four claimed it was their own decision. At Ridzong, five attributed the decision to family
members, four to themselves, and two cited a combination of family and themselves. Thus, for the survey statistics relevant to the matter of the entry into monastic life the samples for the life history interviews from the two monasteries were very similar.

In the course of conducting life history interviews it became clear that the process of becoming a monk was a very significant event in the lives of all monks. Nearly all monks provided elaborate narratives of the circumstances surrounding their entry into monastic life. Within each monastery these narratives displayed strong thematic consistencies. Significantly, despite this tendency for consistency in narrative themes within each monastery, and despite the nearly identical relevant demographics of those interviewed, suggesting, along with other similarities between the two monasteries, an apparently identical implementation of the ideals of mass monasticism and recruitment styles, there was a marked difference between Spituk and Ridzong Monasteries in the themes employed in these narratives. These will thus be discussed separately.

Spituk Monastery: Narratives of Predisposition

Despite the implication of mass monasticism that financial circumstances and merit accumulation takes precedent over considerations of individual personality, interests or abilities in families’ decisions to send a child to a monastery, the strongest common theme that emerged from narratives at Spituk Monastery was that some predisposition for the monastic life played a role in the process of becoming a monk. Of the ten monks interviewed at Spituk, seven provided narratives of becoming a monk that displayed this predisposition theme. In most cases it was some particular predilection,
that is, some talent or interest particularly well suited to monastic life, that was presented as playing a role in turning the child into a monk.

Intelligence, a talent with obvious associations with the scholasti-centric Gelukpa order, and with the monastic domain in general in Ladakhi culture, was cited by some monks:

*I was interested in wisdom and knowledge when I was at home, and for that reason my parents put me in the monastery to become a monk.*

Forty-nine year old *gelong* at Spituk Monastery. Became a monk at age fifteen.

*My father made a suggestion for me to become a monk... I was quite intelligent and I liked knowledge and wisdom, so my father made the decision for me to become a monk.*

Seventy-eight year old retired *gelong* at Spituk Monastery. Became a monk at age nine.

Others cited that an attraction to the aesthetics of monastic life, the robes and the ritual, made them natural candidates:19

*I liked the way [the monks] used to perform at the house, like reading scriptures and so on. I think something came to my mind that I also wanted to be like them.*

Eighty-seven year old retired *gelong* at Spituk Monastery. Became a monk at age ten.

Predestination, specifically karma, was cited only twice as an influence, albeit in one instance as a merely speculative support for predilection:

*I think that I learned all these things [reading scriptures, performing rituals, etc.] so quickly because of my previous life, my karma, and sometimes I think that I must have been a monk in my previous life.*

Twenty-two year old *gelong* at Spituk Monastery. Became a monk at age eighteen.

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19 This attraction to the aesthetics of the monastic lifestyle was surprisingly common and came up during survey interviews not only at Spituk but to a lesser extent at Ridzong – particularly in the fascinating story of the monk who entered Ridzong in later life – as well as at the Kargyudpa monastery at Phyang and the Sakyapa monastery at Matho, neither of which are included in this study.
In one narrative there was an outright denial of karma having had any role in his interest in becoming a monk:

> At that time I was very happy whenever I saw a monk come to our home. Because of their lifestyle, what they did and how they did things, I used to feel that I want to be a monk. This was not because of my karma that I became a monk, but because of what I saw in how monks lived.  
> Forty-eight year old gelong at Spituk Monastery. Became a monk at age fourteen.

The three remaining monks did not provide any such narratives of predisposition, but merely cited circumstances consistent with mass monasticism:

> At that time my family was a big family. So from among the brothers somebody had to be a monk. If he were to become a monk it would be good for him and there won’t be any more pressure for the family members as well because there was already a shortage of everything. So like that my family members made the decision for me to become a monk.  
> Seventy year old gelong at Spituk Monastery. Became a monk at age fourteen.

> I had no thoughts about it because I was not mature enough to think what is wrong and what is right... In ancient times in Ladakh if they had a big family, say if somebody had five or six brothers among them, somebody had to be a monk. So like that my family made the decision for me to be a monk.  
> Ninety-three year old retired gelong at Spituk Monastery. Became a monk at age six.

It should be noted that the narratives of predisposition, while suggesting greater involvement of monks’ individuality in the process than the ideals of mass monasticism might allow, did not preclude also citing circumstances associated with such ideals in their narratives. Of the monks who provided narratives characterized by themes of predisposition, four also included casual admissions of circumstances associated with mass monasticism as part of these same narratives, each noting having come from very large families that included many brothers, and one adding that his family was very poor at the time.
Ridzong Monastery: Narratives of Opposition

The narratives of becoming a monk provided by those interviewed at Ridzong Monastery were in most cases much more elaborate than those from Spituk. Further, these narratives were markedly different in their themes from those at Spituk, despite there being no discernable difference in the implementation of mass monasticism and other commonalities between these two monasteries already outlined. Despite the ideals of mass monasticism presumably streamlining monastic recruitment, the strongest theme, appearing in six of the eleven interviews conducted, was that the process of becoming a monk took place amid dramatic circumstances, often involving a struggle with or escape from the society they left behind.

Many of these narratives told of a resistant or even abusive family that had to be overcome. The following three are typical stories:

*My brother always insisted that I do not become a monk, ‘stay with us and help us in our [pashm wool trading] business.’ But I rejected my family’s decision, my brother’s decision... Once I ran away from home and stayed here at Ridzong, but my family came here and brought me back home to Yangthang. After that I always used to say, ‘I don’t want to stay at home, I will go back to Ridzong. If you don’t allow me to go back to Ridzong I will go somewhere else.’...After that my family members agreed at last that ‘now we have to take him to Ridzong to be a monk.’*

Sixty-nine year old gelong at Ridzong Monastery. Became a monk at age ten.

*I had seven siblings. I was the second last. So my parents always used to suggest that we all stay together, that it looks nice, harmonious, helping each other like a collaboration, it looks nice... But sometimes my elder brothers used to beat me when they were angry. So at that time I felt very upset and alone. So I decided that I wanted to become a monk. So at that time my father left home... to go to Hanu to do some work for the monastery... My brothers told my grandmother ‘please take care of this child because he wants to be a monk.’...So before my father returned home, I came to Ridzong with my grandmother and she asked the khenpo ‘please let him be a monk.’*

Sixty-nine year old retired gelong at Ridzong Monastery. Became a monk at age nine.
After three sisters my mother bore me. So according to the traditional farmer system I had to be there to take care of all the property. My parents ignored my request, ‘no, no we can’t [let you be a monk] because you are the only son for us. You have to take care of the property because it’s all your own, because your sisters have to go somewhere else to marry some other person, to some other house.’ So there was a lot of confusion there... I said ‘if you don’t allow me [to become a monk] I will run away to be a monk. If you don’t allow me to go to Ridzong I will go somewhere else.’... So finally some other relatives and my parents made a decision, ‘if we keep ignoring his request then someday he might run away and his life might be in danger. If he goes some far distance anything can happen on the way, if he runs away to be a monk in search of a monastery.’ So they made the decision, ‘okay, we will let you go there.’

Eighty-six year old retired gelong at Ridzong Monastery. Became a monk at age seventeen.

Another narrative, while not involving struggles with family, cast Ridzong as a sanctuary which may well have saved one monk’s life during the First Kashmir War:

At that time everybody had to join the army because there was a shortage of soldiers. So the head of the village... ordered my family ‘your son has to join the army.’ I was so scared. I didn’t want to join the army... Then my father asked me ‘will you go to study somewhere else?’ and I said ‘yes.’ My father agreed, and nobody knew that we came here for that reason. We walked through the whole night... from Hemishukpachan to Ridzong. Like that I first came to this monastery... If I joined the army I was not sure whether I would escape with my life or die in the war.

Seventy-three year old gelong at Ridzong Monastery. Became a monk at age fifteen.

In three of the six interviews that displayed themes of escape and struggle, this narrative did not end when the obstacles presented by lay society were finally surmounted. The monastery itself became one more source of resistance, eluding or interrogating the aspirant before finally opening its doors:

They asked questions both of me and my parents, ‘do you really want to be a monk? I said ‘yes.’ They also said ‘there may be lots of reasons why you want to be a monk. Maybe because of your class, low class or high class, some problem with society, that you are coming here to be a monk. Because you don’t get food at home, for that reason you came here to be a monk,’ things like that. They
asked many questions. Finally they made the decision that everything was okay, by my wish and by their wish I could be a monk.

Eighty-six year old retired gelong at Ridzong Monastery. Became a monk at age seventeen.

In the context of narrating their entry into monastic life, four of the eleven monks interviewed at Ridzong – three of whom being among those who provided a narrative with struggle and escape themes – made statements that suggested a personal distaste for lay householder society.

*If I stayed back [home] there might be lots of problems, tension and so on in my mind. When I was very young I never used to think much about that, about society and family. But if there is a person say 30 or 40 years old they might think about their family, how to take care of them, how to get money, all those things, the tension will keep coming to a person’s mind. But after coming here I was free, totally free of all those things and I’ve enjoyed it here.*

Seventy-two year old retired gelong at Ridzong Monastery. Became a monk at age eighteen.

If I stayed at home I would have to think about many things, I won’t get the chance to perform pujas and pray for other beings. As a farmer I would be so busy with other work that I won’t get time to practice and all these things. I always think that because I was an only son maybe my parents would’ve got a girl to marry me, and after that I’d have to think about my children, schools and everything. There is only one option for me, if I stayed back home I would go to hell because everything [involved in being a farmer] will cause a lot of harm for other beings as well. So it’s better for me that I came to this monastery and I feel very happy.

Eighty-six year old retired gelong at Ridzong Monastery. Became a monk at age seventeen.

Another narrative, while not employing themes of struggle or escape or of a distaste for lay society, told a tale of abandonment:

*There were no monks [from my family’s part of the village] at that time. And because of the Rimpoche’s order someone [from there] had to be a monk. There were four houses and all the parents decided together that they would make me a monk... So my parents brought me to Ridzong Monastery when the Rimpoche was supposed to be here. But the Rimpoche was not here on that day, so my parents left me here... My parents already left for [home] so I was left here and [the monks said] ‘Rimpoche is coming here so give a lock of your hair to him as a sign*
that you will be a monk.’... Like that my parents left me here at this monastery and I became a monk.

Twenty-three year old getsul at Ridzong Monastery. Became a monk at age 10.

In all, the narratives of eight of the eleven monks interviewed at Ridzong Monastery were characterized by themes of society standing in opposition to the self – be it through family resistance, unacceptable social obligations, or abandonment - during the process of becoming a monk. Of these eight, only one narrative also included themes of being in any way predisposed to the monastic lifestyle akin to the narratives from Spituk Monastery, running the gamut, in fact, with themes of attraction, karmic predestination and an innate talent for all things monastic. The narratives of the three remaining monks were unelaborate references to decisions consistent with mass monastic ideals having been at work, one citing merit for his family and himself as a motivating factor, and another adding an element of attraction to the aesthetics of monastic life.

Interestingly, while many of the narratives from Ridzong cited motivations or conditions associated with mass monasticism – much like those often cited by monks at Spituk – for both monks who noted that they came from large families with many siblings, among whom they were among the youngest – conditions particularly associated with monastic recruitment in Ladakh – those conditions were not presented as having facilitated their entry into monastic life but, ironically, as circumstances that had to be overcome: one case being that leaving for the monastery would have somehow threatened the keeping up of appearances of a harmonious family (an unusual assertion considering the high regard that monks are held in in Ladakhi society) and the other that he was needed to help with the family business.
Summary

Most monks interviewed at both Spituk and Ridzong entered monastic life in childhood, between the ages six and eighteen. It is difficult to imagine that the “locus of decision making,” as Goldstein and Tsarong put it (1985, 19), is anywhere but in the hands of the prospective monks’ parents or extended family in all but a very few cases. When narrativizing this formative event, most monks at both monasteries painted a picture that showed high involvement of themselves, often coupled with fateful or serendipitous circumstances, asserting the primacy of the self and personal agency in a process in which actual conditions suggest little such influence. But the common patterns of how this tale was told differed greatly between the two monasteries.

At Spituk Monastery the narratives were centered around the qualifications of the individual, whether it be by karmic inheritance, innate talent or attraction, that made them especially well suited to becoming monks. Their narratives were at once self-legitimizing and religion-affirming, upholding the tenets, aesthetics and values of the Gelukpa tradition while providing justification for why they in particular belong within it. These narratives also seemed to reflect the founding ideology of Spituk Monastery itself. Much like how the monastery was established as a conspicuous, exemplary model of a new religious order based on scholasticism and monastic discipline, monks suggested that they were chosen because they appeared to others as examples of what a good Gelukpa monk should be: studious, intelligent, and attracted to the trappings of the disciplined religious life. The narratives seem to suggest that the monastery’s original intentions, even though now buried under hundreds of years of history, are to this day embodied in those that come to live there and be its representatives. The realm of lay society was
hardly at the forefront of these narratives. In none of their narratives was lay society characterized in any way as having stood in opposition to their desire to enter the monastery, nor did themes of resistance, struggle or escape of any kind play a role at any point in their narratives of becoming a monk.

Narratives at Ridzong Monastery, in contrast, rarely provided explanations as to why they wanted to be monks in the first place, but instead emphasized the dramatic struggle between themselves and lay householder society that they endured before they were accepted within the monastery walls. Their narratives were decidedly anti-society while characterizing the monastery itself as a sanctuary which, once inside, protected them from hostile families, stressful obligations and the sins of the world. These narratives of becoming a monk also read as dramatic retellings of Ridzong’s founding mythos. Much like how Tsultrim Nyima rejected worldly life to establish a monastery distinctly separated from it, the monks’ origin stories likewise told of how they rejected lay householder society in favor of the sanctuary of Ridzong. At Ridzong it seems as if the story of Tsultrim Nyima’s rite of passage into his own brand of monasticism is projected onto the origin stories of the monks. Only one narrative cited having predispositions for the expectations of the monastic life. No other narratives included themes that served to highlight any special qualifications that made them standout candidates for monkhood, and religious themes such as karma or scholastic values were conspicuously absent players in the drama of becoming a monk.
Narratives of the Monastic Career

In Tibetan Buddhist monasticism monkhood, once entered, is not a static lifestyle of service and contemplation, but a career marked out by the attainment of a succession of ordainment statuses; from gesnyen to getsul to gelong, educational achievement; be it within a traditional pupil-tutor relationship or through attending a large monastic university, and serving within a cycle of occupations within the monastery, eventually leading to retirement. When all this is considered in addition to personal circumstances of individual monks and historical circumstances that affect generations, it is not surprising that the career paths of the sample of monks in this study - beyond the one life event they all had in common, addressed above - were very diverse. It is thus impractical to compare any of these specific events between the two monasteries, as was done in the above discussion of becoming a monk, because the circumstances surrounding them are especially idiosyncratic. It is possible, however, to examine how monks discussed their career as a whole: which events they emphasized and the meanings they attached to them.

As outlined earlier in this chapter, the relevant demographic data from survey interviews relating to age, ordainment status and occupations for the two samples that participated in life history interviews were very similar. The two samples are very different, however, with regards to attendance at external institutions for monastic education. For the total sample of monks who participated in life history interviews (n=21), slightly more than half (n=12) attended an institution outside of Ladakh for monastic education while the remainder (n=9) received their entire monastic education at their own monastery. For the monks at Spituk Monastery (n=10), all but one attended a large monastic university, six having done so in Tibet and three in Karnataka, India, for
an average of eight and a half years (n=9, \(\bar{x}=8.6\)). Of those at Ridzong Monastery (n=11), however, only three had attended an external institution – all in various locations in India and for an average of seven and a half years (n=3, \(\bar{x}=7.6\)) – while the majority (n=8) had received their entire monastic education within the confines of Ridzong itself.

As noted in chapter five, the trend of most of the population of monks at Spituk Monastery attending external monastic universities while most of those of Ridzong, at least at the time this research took place, received their monastic education in-house, represents one of the major differences between the two monasteries. This difference was of course reflected in monks’ narratives of the monastic career and the life events recounted therein, but there were also trends in how monks narrativized the whole of their career which may be a reflection of the totality of differences in the social environment that these two communities represent.

**Spituk Monastery: Narratives of Achievement**

The most pervasive common theme that ran through the major life events in the overall narratives of the monastic career among monks interviewed at Spituk Monastery was the importance of achievement, particularly in the scholastic field upheld by the ideals of the Gelukpa monastic order. An emphasis on the study of Buddhist philosophy, whether as a standard against which one framed his entire career or preoccupations with the opportunities for its pursuit – provided or denied by particular life events – was present in the career narratives of nine of the ten monks interviewed at Spituk, five prominently.
One monk reached the pinnacle of scholastic achievement, earning a geshe degree with highest honors, known as geshe lharampa, after twenty years of study at a Tibetan monastic university in Karnataka. For him it was the prestige associated with the geshe status that motivated him and of which today he reaps the rewards:

When I saw another geshe, some higher dignitary geshe who has knowledge of each and every thing, I admired them and I thought that I wanted to be something like them. I also wanted to be a geshe, I wanted to be like them. And like the Dalai Lama, he used to come there and he placed the geshes with the higher dignitary people. So I admired them and I became a geshe... I’m happy I became a geshe. The full credit goes to my teacher. Because of him I became a geshe and now life is very good. I have visited foreign countries like Thailand and America... Everybody respects me wherever I go, that’s really true.

Forty-eight year old gelong at Spituk Monastery. Spent twenty years at Drepung Loseling Monastery in Karnataka, India, earning geshe degree. Appointed as nyerpa but working as a teacher.

In contrast, another monk interviewed at Spituk was unable to attend a monastic university at all. He expressed regret for this, but still emphasized the importance of achieving something in his career as a monk:

From Spituk Monastery most of the monks go to Karnataka or Drepung or Tashilhunpo, but I couldn’t go because I didn’t know exactly how to get there and how to manage the money and all that. So I have always been here serving my teacher, serving the monastery... I still regret that I couldn’t go deeper into all the different categories of religious study... In my dreams I used to see that I wanted to get to the root, I wanted to understand deeper and deeper... I have already left my family, my house and everything because I wanted to achieve something. Now I want to achieve that root, the reason I became a monk, my duty, even in dreams I used to think like that.

Twenty-two year old gelong at Spituk Monastery. Did not attend any monastic university. Unofficially working as nyerpa.

The theme of regret for an education cut short was present in the interviews of four monks at Spituk, and although three of them had attended an outside monastic university, they told stories of ambitions being thwarted by unfortunate circumstances:

After I completed four years in the Buddhist philosophy concentration I started [the track towards] my geshe degree. After that I visited back home with my
family and they advised me, ‘it is better for you to go to Karnataka to continue your studies.’ And when I came back to Spituk many monks said that I must look after my teacher there because he is ninety-three years old. Then I had two opinions: whether I stay here or whether I go back to Karnataka. I was so confused, but I went to [the rinpoche] and he advised me, ‘it is time to look after your teacher’... and I decided to stay at Spituk Monastery... I’m very sad about my studies. Because I want to learn each and every thing. I left more than twenty classes that I didn’t finish so I’m really regretful that I didn’t get any opportunity to go back to my monastery, I’m so regretful about that. I hope I will soon get this opportunity. If I get this opportunity I must take it.

Twenty-seven year old [getsul] at Spituk Monastery. Attended Drepung Loseling Monastery in Karnataka, India for ten years. Appointed as komnyer.

[My teacher] took me to Karnataka and I studied there for three years. At that time I had no experience, I just went there and studied, but mentally I was not prepared. I came back to Ladakh, and after I stayed for a while I went back again to Karnataka. But because of my physical condition and the atmosphere there I couldn’t stay to study and I came back here again... Everybody used to go there for study, I also went to study there but I couldn’t stay and I feel very sorry about that. I feel that it is because of my bad luck that I couldn’t study there. I am serving as komnyer here now and I have to do a lot of hard work. If I go to the household and if I don’t know how to play the drum, how to perform the puja, but some other general person knows then it may be shameful for me. That’s why I have to do a lot of hard work.

Forty-nine year old [gelong] at Spituk Monastery. Attended Drepung Loseling Monastery in Karnataka, India for three years, divided into two stints. Appointed as komnyer.

Achievement is still a prominent theme in these narratives, for what is presented as a failure in one respect seems compensated for by highlighting other ways in which they have proved their worth. For one monk it was his involvement in the construction of statues of Tara and Shakyamuni Buddha during his stay in Tibet, their subsequent transport to Ladakh during the Chinese occupation, and later training as a mandala specialist that made up for his failure to become a geshe:

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20 A mandala, in Tibetan Buddhism, is a symbolic representation of a house, the architecture of which being specific to the deity for whom it is intended. Usually in the form of a geometric combination of polygons within a circle, it is painstakingly drawn with colored sand and, when executed properly and with all the attendant ritual, is suitable for the invoked deity to inhabit.
While I was in Tibet my intention was to become a geshe. ... At that time the statues were made in Tibet. So Rimpoché Bakula suggested that [other monks] would help me build the [statue] in Tibet. So I spent three years helping to build the statues in Tibet. For that reason I couldn’t take that track. Now I feel very proud of myself because I have done something, something that was made by me, or that I helped with, and it still exists in this monastery... At that time there were many monks to help build the statues, but so many of them ran away from Tibet because they were scared of the Chinese. So in the end only I was left to take care of everything... So I had responsibility for everything and I have done really well in the end... So I feel very proud of that. At least I have done something great... I told the Bakula Rimpoché that my intention was to be a geshe but I couldn’t, so I told [him] that I wanted to do something that will remain after I die. So Rimpoché suggested, ‘if you want to do something then go to Dharamsala.’ So I went to Dharamsala for training for the mandala. I have drawn over two hundred mandalas already. So I feel very happy about that. I have done the [Tara statues] work, I have done the mandalas, I have done lots of things for this monastery. I am quite satisfied with myself. It doesn’t matter that I can’t be a geshe, I am quite satisfied with what I have done for this monastery. Now everybody says, ‘you are so intelligent, you have knowledge in everything.’ That is why today some officials came from the government office, came to the monastery and everybody requested to me, ‘please put the [ceremonial scarves] on the officials yourself.’ I am always happy to help. I’m very satisfied and everybody loves me.

Seventy-one year old gelong at Spituk Monastery. Attended Tashilhunpo Monastery in Tibet for seven years. Appointed as geskos.

The same monk pointed out that it was the opportunity for study and achievement that was most important about life in a large monastic university in Tibet:

There was a great opportunity for every monk there to fully concentrate on their studies because the monastery was separated from the village. So there was no link with the society and the village... There was a great opportunity for every monk to fully concentrate. If somebody failed to become a geshe they can try their best to become something else, get to the root, reading the scriptures and studying hard. Their goals they can achieve there. But here it’s a little bit different. They have to go to the villages... they have to keep a link with the villagers and help with the administration of the monastery.

The narratives of the elder retired monks who had studied in Tibet were generally more stoic in their style, recounting a chronology of their monastic career, often going into great detail about their journey from Ladakh to Tibet, recounting when and where they received their ordinations, and providing an inventory of the occupations they have
served. And while they did not express regret at failing to achieve a higher educational status than they ultimately achieved, they often cited the importance of study and the opportunities that Tibet provided for this:

*We had to learn everything, every scripture, whatever a monk needs in his life as a monk. It was in classes we used to learn everything. There was not a system in Tibet to go visit the houses. Just stay at the monastery and learn... The second time I went I thought, ‘okay, I have to be mature, I have to learn something, what is the reason behind this or that... I wanted to learn something. That is why I went back to Tibet.*

Eighty-seven year old retired *gelong* at Spituk Monastery. Attended Drepung Monastery in Tibet for two years, divided into two stints. No occupation.

*I didn’t think about much. I just thought, ‘this is a special place to learn everything as a monk, nothing else to do but learn the scriptures.*

Ninety-three year old retired *gelong* at Spituk Monastery. Attended Drepung Monastery in Tibet for thirteen years. No occupation.

For the monks at Spituk Monastery attendance at a monastic university is regarded as one of the most significant and formative experiences one can have, next to becoming a monk in the first place. Achievement in this context seems especially important, possibly due to the influence of the hierarchical structure of monastic education and of the Gelukpa establishment. With so many monks at Spituk having been exposed to that system, it is not surprising that ideals of achievement permeate the social environment there, and that studiousness and an intellectual approach to religiosity seems to be strongly positively valued.

*Ridzong Monastery: Narratives of Service and Dedication*

At Ridzong Monastery only three of the eleven monks interviewed – and of the total population of twelve monks who resided there during fieldwork – had attended a monastic university outside of Ladakh. That aspect of the social environment that seems
so strongly felt at Spituk was thus not present at Ridzong, where the norm has been for most monks to spend their entire career within its confines. This was reflected in the life history interviews conducted there which contained narratives of the monastic career that emphasized the significance of ordination events, occupations, and, above all, service to the monastery. References to educational achievement and regret at missed opportunities were virtually absent. Of the eleven monks who participated in life history interviews at Ridzong Monastery, eight provided narratives of the monastic career that emphasized service, including seven of the eight monks interviewed who had not attended an outside monastic university.

Typically, the theme of service to the monastery was invoked to explain the significance of being a monk or to summarize the whole of the activities that one has done in their career:

> I used to go to Zangskar [to collect tithes] and I serve the monastery for whatever they need help with. So I’m happy to go do all these things. And sometimes I go to the villages to perform pujas when we are invited, for the sake of the householders and for the village I have to go, because I’m here for that purpose. I can’t ignore it. I accept it happily. That’s why I am a monk, to serve those in need. So I am very happy... And I also help the nyerpa whenever he needs help, so I always go to help. I used to go to many villages to collect the grain and property of the monastery. So whenever the monastery needs help from me I go happily. That is the reason I became a monk, to serve here, and I’m very happy about that. ... I give full credit to this monastery. My main intention is to serve this monastery. Whatever the rimpoche or my teachers or [my fellow monks] say, I will obey.

Thirty-five year old gelong at Ridzong Monastery. Did not attend any monastic university. Serving unofficially as general help and odd jobs.

The following story was recounted by the one monk in this study who entered monastic life in middle age, telling of a time early in his monastic career when the nastan appointed him as the komnyer, or caretaker, at one of Ridzong’s satellite village temples, a duty usually assigned to young getsuls:
He told me ‘why don’t you go to Hemishukpachan, there is a temple there and you can serve the monastery.’ I refused. I refused his order because, as I told him, ‘I am too old. I am a father and I have become a monk very late so people will laugh at me. I can’t go there.’ He said, ‘If you can’t do it, at least visit the temple. Visit the temple then come back here.’ So [a teacher] and myself went to Hemishukpachan and he sent another person with a key with me to visit the temple, and when I entered, when he opened the door, there was the Chenrezig and Tsongkhapa21 [statues]. It looked so nice. I felt like the statue was speaking to me. My heart changed on the spot and I felt it was a real opportunity to serve this monastery and I decided myself that I wanted to stay at that temple.

Seventy-six year old retired gelong at Ridzong Monastery. Did not attend any monastic university. No occupation.

In the interviews with the three monks who had attended outside monastic universities, narratives were very similar to those from Spituk, emphasizing achievement and in one case regret at falling short of becoming a geshe:

After I completed my acharya degree22 I went to Dharamsala for two or three years intending to be a geshe. So after that I wanted to be a geshe but I couldn’t complete it. The school was here [and] there was no teacher at all, no good teacher. So Sras Rimpoche requested to the Dalai Lama, ‘please allow him to go to Ladakh.’ This was very unfortunate for me that I couldn’t be a geshe and I couldn’t break the rules. In the middle I couldn’t study and I feel very sorry for that. ‘Please allow him to go back and teach the young Ladakhi monks.’ Just like that I left my geshe studies in the middle.

Sixty-nine year old gelong at Ridzong Monastery. Attended Sampurnanand Sanskrit University in Varanasi and the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics in Dharamsala for eleven years. Appointed as teacher.

This same monk frequently cited the importance of serving the rimpoché and the monastery and, interestingly, explained how ordainment was of greater significance than academic achievement:

21 Chenrezig, or Avalokitesvara in Sanskrit, is a thousand-armed emanation of the Buddha who represents the embodiment of universal compassion. Tsongkhapa, discussed in chapter two, is the founder of the Gelukpa monastic order.

22 Acharya (Skt.), is a special teacher’s degree conferred upon those who have studied classical Sanskrit Buddhist philosophy. This monk compared it to a master’s degree in contrast to the geshe being like a doctorate.
I was very happy when I became a getsul and when I became a gelong. Those were the most important events for me. This is very important for a monk, they have the opportunity to get enlightenment, through becoming a getsul or a gelong. That’s not what it meant when I went and got the acharya degree and I studied. That is only to get a degree. We can show that I have studied this much and I have this degree, like that. But the most important thing in my life was becoming a gelong... becoming a getsul and becoming a gelong.

This theme of the importance of obtaining a higher ordainment status was cited in the narratives of the monastic career of eight of the eleven monks interviewed at Ridzong Monastery. Some of these, like in the narrative quoted above, emphasized the general religious significance of ordainment status. When asked how he felt when he became a gelong, an elder monk explained its significance in the context of the path to enlightenment:

I felt very happy because as Shakyamuni Buddha said, if a monk can follow the rules of a gelong and if a monk becomes a gelong it will be very beneficial for him. Because they have a chance to get enlightenment after gelong by following another step. Step by step. I felt very happy that at least I became a gelong.

Eighty-three year old retired gelong at Ridzong Monastery. Did not attend any monastic university. No occupation.

Others provided narratives of these events that were more personal, describing them as rites of passage into a higher level of acceptance within the community and of dedication to the monastery:

When I became a getsul I felt very happy and I thought, ‘now I am a real monk.’ After becoming a getsul and becoming a gelong there is a special seat for the monks. So at that time I thought, ‘now I am ready to sit with the other monks and be a real getsul or a real gelong.’

Eighty-six year old retired gelong at Ridzong Monastery. Did not attend any monastic university. No occupation.

I followed all the rules of the getsul and the gelong. Whatever the monastery tells me I follow it. I kneeled down to Tsultrim Nyima and took a vow that I will continue my life here, whatever you tell me to do... There was uncountable happiness in my life when I became a getsul. I thought, ‘now I have a place, a permanent place where I can stay forever.’ Because I was totally hopeless. There were no options for me. I didn’t study, I couldn’t get a job or anything. So
I became fully dedicated that this is my place, this is my job. I felt so happy... After getsul I became a gelong. I thought now I really have to die at this monastery, this is everything for me.

Sixty-nine year old retired gelong at Ridzong Monastery. Did not attend any monastic university. Appointed as nastan.

All monks were asked about ordination events. The three monks at Ridzong who did not elaborate on their significance usually discussed them as matter-of-fact events, simply telling how old they were, and explaining the number of rules that correspond with the different ordainment levels. This style of addressing queries about ordination events was how virtually all monks at Spituk responded, so the fact that so many at Ridzong elaborated on their significance, as shown in the examples above, is significant. Further, the significance of ordainment status and of occupations was often tied to notions of service, dedication, and acceptance within the monastery – the dominating theme in most narratives of the monastic career from Ridzong Monastery.

Summary

The narratives from Spituk Monastery seem to suggest that for most monks the monastic career is assessed against a standard of scholastic achievement and the opportunities one has for study. These narratives were consistent with Gelukpa ideals of scholasticism which are engendered in the monks through their exposure to such ideals when they attend large Gelukpa monastic universities. Many narratives also displayed regret when achievement in this realm was perceived as being insufficient, in which cases it was common for monks to point to other accomplishments. This may suggest that monks who attend outside monastic universities import not only the ideals of scholarly achievement to the social environment at Spituk, but a high valuation of general
achievement and prestige associated with the highly hierarchical nature of the centralized Gelukpa establishment that is on display at its grand institutions.

In contrast, at Ridzong Monastery the monastic career is assessed against a standard of service and dedication to the monastery itself with great importance being given to ordination events. Very few of its monks were exposed to institutions like those experienced by most monks at Spituk, the vast majority instead spending their entire careers at Ridzong only. The monastery itself, its *rimpoche*, its community, its grounds and its property, is thus valued above all else, something expressed even among the few who had attended outside institutions. And while its monks by no means devalue the importance of the study of Buddhist philosophy, Ridzong seems to have for now escaped the influence of achievement and prestige-centric values that were prevalent in the narratives from Spituk. Ridzong instead displayed a home-grown ideology, decentralized from the Gelukpa establishment of which it is a part.

**On the Path to Enlightenment: Religiosity in the Context of Life Histories**

All monks who participated in life history interviews (n=21) spoke of religious ideas in the context of narrating life events and describing aspects of the monastic lifestyle. These included fundamental Tibetan Buddhist ideas such as prayer for sentient beings, that is, living beings that have sense and are thus subject to the continuous cycle of death and rebirth, *gewa*, which is a kind of religious merit that one can accumulate for oneself or transfer to others through virtuous action, or *sonam* - being a monk being an especially efficacious example of such action – and the importance of *semsgyud tagba*, a sincere and pure mind. Despite differences between the two monasteries, there were no
significant patterns from one community to the other in the frequency of usage of some religious ideas over others, the degree of elaboration that monks provided on such ideas, or in the employment of metaphors and parables as illustrations.

Of particular interest were frequent references to the place of human beings – monks especially - in a hierarchy of existence that all beings are subject to, one’s place within which being determined by one’s karmic inheritance from previous lives and merit accumulated during one’s present life. Of the twenty-one monks who participated in life history interviews, twelve (n=12) cited this idea in the context of narrating their life story and when describing general aspects of the monastic lifestyle. Five (n=5) of the ten monks interviewed at Spituk Monastery and seven (n=7) of the eleven monks interviewed at Ridzong Monastery cited these ideas. In addition to its presence in life history interviews, this idea was frequently brought up in casual conversation and during the conduct of survey interviews. This idea was clearly fundamental to how monks presented themselves and explained the monastic lifestyle in general at both monasteries.

When considered along with the differences in the patterns of life history narratives discussed above this idea may shed light on some differences in the religiosity of the two communities.

At the foundation of this idea is the notion that attaining rebirth as a human being is rare and that humans, as opposed to animals and other beings, are unique because of their senses and ability to think:

*I am very happy to get a human life because human life is very precious. Its very difficult to get a human life... This is why we are here as a human being, that we have done good deeds in our past life.”* 
Twenty-seven year old getsul at Spituk Monastery.
This is a very precious human life that we have. This is a great opportunity to be good and have compassion for other beings… [We] can walk very easily, see easily, smell easily, we can do all these things because of our good deeds, because of our karma from previous life. That is why we get physically well. We have everything: eyes, nose… We can see many people, those who don’t have legs, arms, nose, they lost many things from their body. So this is a good opportunity. Now we have to think about our future. If we do good in this life then definitely we can get a better life than this.

Seventy-three year old gelong at Ridzong Monastery.

Humans are thus contrasted with animals, who are lower in this hierarchy because their lack of senses subjects them to continuous suffering:

_We are the most fortunate beings in this world … we can walk, we can think, we can drive cars and everything but so many animals, in the seas, in the earth, in the sky, they cannot speak, they don’t have senses like us... In the seas the big animals eat the small animals, they are alive because of one another. So they are suffering a lot._

Seventy-eight year old gelong at Spituk Monastery.

There are lots of animals in this world and they have lots of suffering. They are always scared and they eat each other. In a big ocean the animals eat each other because they don’t know their relationship... For example, when we walk down [the trail from the monastery to the road] under our feet there are many invisible animals. They cannot make a noise and say ‘oh! don’t push me like that!’ They have many sufferings. They don’t know how to speak. We have human life. We can touch, we can cry and if we are suffering, if our hand is cut by a blade [we say] ‘oh!’ We have every opportunity. So this is the time for us to be good and do good for other beings. This is the reason we have human life.

Twenty-three year old getsul at Ridzong Monastery.

There is danger associated with human life as well, for good deeds are necessary to ensure rebirth in a human or possibly higher realm, and bad deeds can send one tumbling lower:

_Because of our karma if we do bad things in this life then maybe in the next birth we will be a dog, or a donkey, or an insect or something. That’s why this is the best opportunity for us to do good and perform better, so that we will be more fortunate in our next birth, a higher level than a human being in the future._”

Seventy-one year old gelong at Spituk Monastery.

_If the poor people, if they don’t do [virtuous actions] there is no chance to get another life and they will go to hell or [become a] hungry ghost or whatever._
According to our deeds we go. It is very important for us as human beings. We have an opportunity to think.

Eighty-six year old gelong at Ridzong Monastery.

The purpose of monasticism according to this scheme is to create conditions that allow one to concentrate solely on activities that can contribute towards gaining a propitious rebirth in a human or higher realm, removed from the distractions, attachments and temptations that afflict lay society:

The reason why monks stay alone in their rooms in the monastery, there is a big reason for that... because they have an opportunity to think for themselves, check their hearts, why they are here, what they have done for the living beings, what they have done for themselves, what they have done for the monastery. We have to check our heart by sitting alone, what we have done good, what we have done wrong. If we have done wrong we have to rectify it and put our heart in the right direction. For that reason we are staying alone. If we go out among the people then we will talk rubbish and we don’t think, we just enjoy. For that reason we stay alone in our rooms.

Seventy-eight year old gelong at Spituk Monastery.

Among humans, monks are thus special because their lifestyle allows them to concentrate solely on activities that contribute towards gaining a propitious rebirth and gives them the best opportunity to achieve enlightenment:

I felt very happy after becoming a monk and after wearing the robes and I thought this is very good for me and I have the opportunity to serve myself better. As a monk I have a golden chance for myself. As a monk I can do as much as possible for myself so that I can have a better life in the next life.

Seventy-one year old gelong at Spituk Monastery.

I always thought that if I can be a monk it will be very beneficial for me not only in this life but also if I take another life it will be beneficial for me... I thought that if I could be a monk and read the scriptures and think about all the living beings it will be beneficial for me... If I can’t get enlightenment in this life at least I have a chance. I can be a monk and perform pujas and do meditation for all the living beings, so maybe I can get enlightenment in some future life, in the next life.

Eighty-six year old gelong at Ridzong Monastery.
Finally, enlightenment, the soteriological goal of Mahayana Buddhism, puts one in a position to assist all beings in the lower stages to climb the hierarchy and likewise achieve enlightenment – the prerequisite for entering nirvana, the timeless state of non-being, which all enlightened beings could then do en masse:

_In Buddhism, until somebody has enlightenment, somebody knows each and every thing, what is wrong and what is right... if I get enlightenment then I can take all the living beings towards enlightenment. If I am not perfect then I cannot take all the living beings, those who are suffering, the poor and the needy. A blind person cannot show the way to another blind person. If I want to take all, to help the poor, if I want to help all the living beings, those who are suffering, then first of all I have to be pure myself. That is why I follow all the rules of a gelong, so I can understand fully and achieve enlightenment._

Twenty-two year old gelong at Spituk Monastery.

_It is very difficult to get enlightenment within one’s life, it’s a very long process. I may not know after I die what form of life I will take in another life... So that is why as a gelong I have the opportunity to do good and be good for other living beings... First we have to get enlightenment for ourselves, then we can teach other living beings and they can follow us._

Eighty-six year old gelong at Ridzong Monastery.

This ranking of living beings relative to enlightenment, and ideas about the place of monks within it, is a syncretism of two complimentary doctrines. One, a popular Buddhist doctrine of ancient origin attributed in legend to Shakyamuni Buddha himself, is that of the six realms of existence. The respective realms of gods, demi-gods, humans, animals, hungry ghosts and hell beings include all sentient beings, one’s karma determining which realm one may be born into. The first three realms are considered auspicious and on a higher tier than the last three, which are undesirable and especially characterized by suffering. Depictions of the six realms are prominent in the iconography of the Wheel of Life, a pictorial representation of the Buddhist doctrine of _samsāra_ (Skt.), or cyclical existence, murals of which are ubiquitous at the entryways of assembly halls and chapels at Ladakhi monasteries.
The other doctrine is that of the lam rim. Lam rim, or “stages on the path,” literature exists in the traditions of all four major Tibetan Buddhist monastic orders, but the best known lam rim work is Tsongkhapa’s Lam Rim Chenmo, the “Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path.” It further divides the human realm into three tiers according to one’s capacity for spiritual advancement on the path to enlightenment, describes numerous conditions that may enhance or diminish such capacities, and associates a massive synthesized array of the whole of Tibetan Buddhist philosophy and practice with respective stages on the path to which specific concepts and practices are appropriate (for description of the contents of the Lam Rim Chenmo see Samuel 1993, 507-509 and Lopez Jr. 1997, 421-423). Described as “the Summa of Lamaist doctrine as he saw it” (Tucci 1980, 37), Tsongkhapa’s magnum opus and commentaries upon it are core curriculum at Gelukpa monastic universities (see Dreyfus 2003, 71; 2003 113) and certainly inform the education that takes place at small Gelukpa monasteries in Ladakh (see Mills 2003, 23; 2003, 102-103).

Elements of both of the six realms of existence and lam rim doctrines are present in monks’ descriptions of an overall idea, describing a linear spiritual hierarchy within which a monk can determine for himself a definite place, based on their ordainment status, the piety with which they observe their vows and the regulations of the monastery, and additional merit they have accumulated for themselves through enhancements such as tantric initiations, attendance at rituals, associations with rimpoches, and service to the monastery.

A religiosity informed by this hierarchical ordering of beings and the stages on the path involves an interplay between the notion of karma and motivations towards
enlightenment. The goal of enlightenment was clearly on the minds of the monks as they explained these ideas, but it is one’s karma that determines where one stands on the path that leads to this goal, the accumulation of merit being what drives one upwards. Further, once a being becomes enlightened, i.e., a bodhisattva (Skt.), the assistance they provide to beings in lower conditions effectively imparts those beings with merit.

In Geoffrey Samuel’s understanding of Tibetan Buddhist religiosity these two concepts are separate. In what he calls “clerical” Buddhism, the domain of the monastic establishment of which the very monks in this study would be exemplars, religious motivation is primarily concerned with matters of karma – death, rebirth and the accumulation of merit. This “karma orientation” he distinguishes from the pursuit of enlightenment, the “bodhi orientation,” which is reserved for those select few practitioners of tantra: yogins, lamas, and a very small proportion of otherwise ordinary monks (Samuel 1993). The statements of this sample of twenty-one humble, clerical monks suggests however that enlightenment is very much a concern, perhaps the main concern that influences their religiosity. But their “path” or “lam” orientation, as the religiosity of ordinary monks may be more appropriately termed, demonstrates that concerns with enlightenment require concerns with karma. One’s karma is what needs to be focused on if one is to reach enlightenment. And karma, according to this schematic, is meaningful only in relation to the hierarchy of spiritual existence within which it plays and atop which enlightenment, “Buddhahood” itself, stands.
Summary: Religiosity and Life Histories

At Spituk Monastery religiosity seems more complicated than what any one conceptual orientation can adequately explain, for life history narratives suggest that the spiritual hierarchy is in competition with the hierarchy of educational achievement and status. This was most evident in narratives of the monastic career that placed scholastic values and achievement at the forefront. One’s achievements within the standards set by the Gelukpa establishment’s education system are the most strongly highlighted events in the monastic career. But when goals are cut short it is qualities associated with the spiritual hierarchy that are invoked. Monks point to meritorious actions such as service to the monastery when what they have accomplished in the scholastic realm is thought unsatisfactory. In narratives of becoming a monk as well, monks’ predispositions, their talents and attractions, already separate them from the lay householder society that monasticism is designed to avoid, seemingly putting them on the path to enlightenment even before the robes are worn. But stages on the path to enlightenment are not as clearly visible as those of educational achievement and status. The institutional hierarchy that promotes scholastic values was on full display at the monastic universities that nearly all monks at Spituk attended, and this has trickled down to the social environment of the Spituk community. Everyone is aware of their own and each other’s status in the hierarchy of educational achievement.

At Ridzong Monastery educational achievement is of little importance. Life history narratives suggest a religiosity focused on the spiritual hierarchy and the path to enlightenment. Without preoccupations with educational achievement and status competing for attention, stages on the path to enlightenment seem more clearly marked
for the monks at Ridzong. In narratives of the monastic career ordination events -
becoming a *getsul* and especially becoming a *gelong* - were considered for their
significance in relation to the ultimate goal of enlightenment. Service to the monastery,
acceptance within its community, and submission to its high standards of discipline all
serve to enhance their position on the path relative to clear and present examples of its
higher stages embodied in the Sras Rimpoche and the monastery’s founder, Lama
Tsunltrim Nyima. Narratives of becoming a monk at Ridzong at once distinguished its
monks from the realm of lay householder society in a much more emphatic way than did
the narratives from Spituk, and placed Ridzong on a pedestal, casting it as a sanctuary
from the sins of the world, acceptance into which requiring a passage through trials and
having an elusiveness akin to that of a low soul attaining human birth.

It must be acknowledged that data from life history interviews consists solely of
statements made by individual monks during interviews conducted by two individuals
(the ethnographer and his research assistant) that were not members of either, or any,
monastic community. It is impossible to know the extent to which their statements were
a product of perceptions of their role as representatives of their community and as
religious specialists relative to the status of the interviewers. Regardless, quantified
qualitative differences between the two communities was demonstrated. Patterns in the
religiosity and the social environment that seem evident through these interviews are still
but one part of a bigger picture. Religiosity as a religious orientation of a lifestyle in a
specific social environment must be explored in addition to life history narratives if a
more complete understanding is to be gained.
CHAPTER SEVEN: DATA FROM PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION AND SHADOWING

Introduction

In the course of conducting research in the field, differences were observed in the patterns of daily life at Spituk and Ridzong Monasteries respectively. Based on participant observation, shadowing sessions, focused interviews and additional material from life history interviews, these differences will be shown by first outlining key contrasts in the general characteristics of the environments of the respective monasteries, then, by focusing on a central figure in monastic communities in Ladakh, the komnyer, illustrate how daily life is lived at each monastery.

General Characteristics of the Monastery Environment

The following description of the monastery environment provides a breakdown of the elements that make up the social field in which life is lived in the respective settings of Spituk and Ridzong Monasteries. These elements will be described through addressing in turn three broad categories: 1) monastery spaces, 2) daily activities, and 3) social relations. For each of these, contrasting themes that define key differences between the two monasteries will be highlighted. This outline is based on participant observation that took place at these monasteries throughout the course of field research in Ladakh. Quotes are from casual, non-recorded conversations and from recorded life history interviews.
Monastery Spaces

The physical environments of Spituk and Ridzong Monasteries were comprised of a variety of types of spaces. While in a general sense the two monasteries shared many of the same types of spaces and were in no way unusual among monasteries in Ladakh, there were differences in the details of the arrangement and use of the spaces at the two. Spaces will be here divided into the following four analytical types: 1) sacred spaces, being the chapels (lhakhang) and assembly halls (dukhang) designed mostly for ceremonial and ritual use; 2) living quarters, being residential spaces occupied by an individual monk or, in a few cases, two or three monks; 3) common areas, including a variety of non-sacred spaces shared by the entire monastic community, most notably kitchens, dining halls and courtyards; and 4) social hubs, defined here as areas where most social interactions take place, covering a variety of spaces on monastery grounds that may include any of the aforementioned spaces.

Spaces at Spituk Monastery

Sacred spaces

The sacred spaces at Spituk Monastery were especially noteworthy for their accessibility by the public. Like most Ladakhi monasteries of the hilltop fortress type (see Snellgrove and Skorupski 1977, 106), its assembly halls and chapels were clustered about its upper reaches. There were two assembly halls, a dukhang or “main assembly hall” and a chikhang or “general assembly hall.” Above these, at the uppermost part of the main monastery complex, was a group of chapels. The most important of these were the chokhang or “offerings chapel” and the Dolma lhakhang or “chapel of 21 Taras.” On
the very highest point of the rocky crag that Spituk Monastery clung to and separated from the main complex by a long flight of stairs was the gonkhang or “chapel of the guardian deities.”

For the lay Buddhist population, the chapels served as important places of prayer and were thus served by full time caretakers who kept them open for use by the laity every day from morning until evening. Tourists, of which many visit this monastery, were also welcome to enter any of these chapels as well as the assembly halls which were frequently open for viewing, especially during occasional larger monastery rituals which were usually public. Photography was permitted in all of these spaces, except the gonkhang. The gonkhang at Spituk was especially noteworthy, for in addition to serving as a chapel dedicated to the guardian deities, or Dharmapala (Skt.), of Tibetan Buddhism – large, veiled statues of their fierce, wrathful forms amassed like a charging platoon in the gonkhang’s sanctuary – it is an unintended Hindu temple of the goddess Kali who is recognized by pilgrims as manifested in the gonkhang’s image of Shinje (Skt. Vajrabhairava).23 Ironically, as the most popular Hindu temple site in Ladakh, Spituk’s gonkhang attracted far more Hindu visitors than lay Buddhists and non-Hindu tourists combined.

The sacred spaces at Spituk Monastery were its most active areas on any given day, and most of this activity was not that of the monastic community but of the public. For the monks these spaces thus served as an interface not just with the supernatural, but

23 There is much overlap in the respective pantheons and iconographies of Hinduism and Tibetan Buddhism, and while Palden Lhamo (Skt. Shri Devi) - of whom there is also an image in the Spituk gonkhang – is usually associated with Kali, one of the gonkhang attendants did in fact confirm to the author that it was the image of Shinje, not Palden Lhamo, whom the Hindu visitors claimed as a manifestation of Kali.
with the world at large who came to Spituk in an eclectic blend of local lay Buddhists, transient Hindus, and tourists from all parts of the globe.

**Living quarters**

The monks’ living quarters at Spituk were apartment-like units, and each usually housed just one monk. Separated from each other by a maze of paths and stairways, these structures made up the lower portions of the monastery complex clinging to the steep hillside from top to bottom. Each unit, called a *shak*, was comprised of a number of small rooms built with thick mud-brick walls and usually also included a partially enclosed veranda. The main living space was in the largest of its rooms, often floored with carpeting, vinyl or wood. Typically, these rooms contained two or more small mattresses topped with rugs which were used for sitting and sleeping, two or three low tables, a small wood and dung-burning space heater (although a few modern electric space heaters were also observed), one or more fluorescent light fixtures, a chest for storing extra bedding and robes, and one or more cabinets which often held books, photographs, the monk’s personal shrine, and sundry small belongings. Every *shak* that the ethnographer visited at Spituk also contained at least one radio, and many also had a television set.

Every monk’s *shak* at Spituk also included a kitchenette, usually located in a smaller room. These typically contained a small two-burner range fueled via a liquid propane gas cylinder, a large lidded bucket for water, a small wash basin, a modest collection of cookware and dishes, and various foodstuffs such as rice, flour, butter, eggs, vegetables, spices and tea. The veranda, in addition to providing an outdoor sitting area
with views of the village and surrounding valley, was used for personal care tasks such as washing, shaving, doing laundry, sewing, etc. Toilets – of the traditional Ladakhi kind\textsuperscript{24} – were attached to many shaks, although these were usually shared by two or three monks. The living quarters at Spituk facilitated an autonomous lifestyle, providing everything a monk needed for the practical activities of daily life.

\textit{Common areas}

The common areas at Spituk Monastery were its least active on a daily basis. There were two large kitchens, one associated with each of the assembly halls. Both of these kitchens were equipped for producing large quantities of food and tea and were only open and operating when large monastery rituals, or preparations for such, necessitated fueling the large number of monks and visitors present on such occasions. Because these kitchens only operated when monks and visitors were congregated in and around the adjoining assembly halls, it was in such spaces that they were served. Thus, there were no dining halls at Spituk. There were three courtyards, one associated with each of the assembly halls and one with the collection of chapels at the top of the monastery. While the latter of these was often quite busy with lay visitors and tourists, the former two were the scene of little activity when a big event was not taking place – on most days just a monk or two might have be seen intermittently passing through en route from one area of the monastery to another. The monastery also had a small number of reception rooms reserved for entertaining visiting dignitaries, various store rooms, and a

\textsuperscript{24}Toilets in traditional Ladakhi dwellings consist of a small dark room with one or more holes cut into a loose dirt-covered floor which is elevated over a collection room. The contents of the collection room are emptied annually for use as field fertilizer.
few common toilets used mainly by visitors and the *komnyers* who oversaw the areas in which they were located.

*Areas of social foci*

The places where most social interactions occurred on a normal daily basis were many and dispersed at Spituk. There was in fact no one place where one could reliably expect to find a gathering of even as few as two monks at any given time. Areas of social foci included the vicinities of the chapels (at which at least one monk, a *komnyer*, was usually present), the area of the *chikhang* assembly hall, the courtyards, the base of the stairs at the backside of the monastery by which most visitors arrived, water taps at the top and bottom of the main monastery complex, the paths between *shaks*, and the *shaks* themselves.

This characteristic of Spituk’s environment was what most affected the daily conducting of field research there. Tracking down a specific monk, or finding any monk at all for that matter, usually required the ethnographer and research assistant to reconnoiter the entire monastery upon arrival, knocking on doors and calling out until their quarry was discovered. Gatherings of monks in these areas, when they occurred, rarely exceeded three at a time. Further, because of the size and layout of the monastery, most of these areas were cut-off from each other, and what had been going on in one area was rarely known to a monk in any other area.
**Spaces at Ridzong Monastery**

*Sacred spaces*

The sacred spaces at Ridzong Monastery were generally not accessible by the public, and the little access provided was controlled and guarded. Like at Spituk there were two assembly halls located towards the top of the monastery – a small and little used *dukhang* and a newer *chikhang* where most of the monastery’s rituals took place. The handful of small chapels at the monastery’s upper tier included a *takchen* – a chapel dedicated to the Mahayana lineage and containing a reliquary of the monastery’s founder, Lama Tsultrim Nyima – and a small *gonkhang*.

Only the *dukhang* and the *takchen* were regularly made viewable by tourists or any non-Buddhist visitors. When they happened by, they were led to each of these spaces in turn by the *komnyer*, who unlocked and opened the doors to allow the visitor to enter and have a brief look around before closing them off to the outside once again. Otherwise, the chapels remained locked but for a very brief daily early morning ritual performed by the *komnyer*, or when a lay Buddhist visited and requested to offer prayers, which was infrequent. Perhaps the most sacred space at Ridzong was the original meditation cave of Lama Tsultrim Nyima around which the monastery was first constructed. This cave remained sealed at all times, even from the monks themselves.

Ridzong’s sacred spaces were primarily intended as such for the monastic community and not as public places of prayer or wonder. Apart from occasional rituals performed in one of the assembly halls, they displayed very little activity. These were in fact the quietest spaces in a monastery which by its small and isolated character was a quiet place to begin with.
Living quarters

Like at Spituk, the living quarters at Ridzong were mostly distinct units, housing only one monk each. Ridzong’s shaks, however, were markedly more cell-like. Most of them were located on the western flank of the monastery complex. Of mud brick and stone, they were very small and generally uniform in their layouts. Each shak was comprised of just two small rooms, one being a mostly enclosed veranda on the structure’s upper story and the other being the main living area accessible below via a tight, dark, stone stairway. Floors of these rooms were of compacted mud, often covered by a mat. Contents usually included one small mattress topped by a rug used for sitting and sleeping, one or two low tables, a small wood and dung-burning space heater, a small solar panel-powered fluorescent light, some spare bedding and robes, a small personal shrine – usually consisting of no more than a picture of a deity and a few photographs of rimpoches – a small single-burner kerosene stove, a teapot, cup and bowl. Like at Spituk, the veranda was used as a fair weather sitting area and for personal care tasks.

In the wall of each shak there was a very small pass-through window. Remnants of this monastery’s not-too-distant past, it was through these windows that monks received their daily meal, prepared in the central kitchen, when they were expected to remain in their quarters at all times, save for ritual and other communal occasions. Under the 3rd Sras Rimpoche this – as well as many other severe practices for which Ridzong had become famous – was abolished in favor of communal meal times in the central kitchen – one of many small reforms that have been implemented in recent years to improve the overall welfare of the monks.
But these _shaks_ still revealed a lifestyle more severe than what is typical in Tibetan monasteries. There were no radios – and certainly no television sets – in the _shaks_ at Ridzong. The _shaks_ did not include toilets, nor did they include kitchens of any kind. The only food that was prepared in the monks’ quarters was _tsampa_ - a roasted barley flour often eaten dry or mixed in a bowl with water – and tea, usually embellished with a small pat of butter. The making of tea was in fact the only cooking that was permitted in the monks’ _shaks_ and which for one elder monk was reserved “for visitors who are too shy to go to the kitchen.” In such quarters, spartan and restricted by design, it was near impossible to fulfil the practical needs of daily life. They were discouraging to autonomy and necessitated a dependence on the common areas of the monastery.

*Common areas*

The common areas at Ridzong, its kitchens in particular, were its most active areas. There were two kitchens at Ridzong. The old one, situated near the base of the monastery on its east side, was one of Ridzong’s original structures and was spoken of as an almost sacred space. Centrally located and adjacent to the old kitchen, the new kitchen was part of a small complex of rooms that included a dining hall and a washing station and was completed during the earliest stages of fieldwork. This kitchen was permanently manned by a lay _machin_, or “kitchen manager,” who was assigned to cook all meals served at the monastery. Both the kitchen and the adjoining dining hall were used for dining, and both rooms were active at most times of the day whether it was the whole community or just one monk and any other visitors who were present at any given time. In addition to its cooking surfaces – which included one liquid propane gas range
and one very large wood burning stove – and two large plastic barrels filled with water, the kitchen contained the monastery’s one radio, a small portable AM receiver that the machin usually had control over. Together, the kitchen and dining hall served as the main living space for the entire community during waking hours. There was one common toilet at Ridzong, shared by all the monks and any visitors, and was located at an upper back corner of the monastery complex at a point farthest from most of the monks’ shaks.

The single reception room and single courtyard were used in much the same way as at Spituk Monastery.

Areas of social foci

The kitchen at Ridzong was a true social hub - a single concentrated area that the social life of the monastery revolved around. It was the main area at which monks congregated not only for meals, but for meetings with each other and visitors, for taking care of monastery business, preparing for ritual activities, free time, was the first place one visited upon arriving at the monastery, and the last place one visited when leaving. When conducting field research at Ridzong, to know who was present at any given time or to hear anything about what might transpire in the upcoming days, hours, weeks or months, one merely had to visit the kitchen, which was always the first place the ethnographer went upon waking, once prepared to face another day. But the small size and orderly layout of Ridzong made it so that no social interactions, when not in the kitchen, were never far from it, nor were they far from each other. Monks often stood on the rooftops of their respective shaks and talked to each other. It was an environment in which social interaction was a communal activity.
Summary

While the two monasteries shared many of the same types of spaces, differences in their layouts and uses influenced the daily lifestyles of monks and how they related to these spaces. Sacred spaces at Spituk Monastery were characterized by openness, accessibility and activity. As places of prayer and sight-seeing by visitors of all kinds, they served as an active interface between the monastic community and the outside world. In contrast, sacred spaces at Ridzong Monastery displayed very little activity, were mostly closed-off from the outside world, and their accessibility to visitors was controlled and guarded. Other spaces at Spituk Monastery revealed a community characterized by a highly autonomous and individual lifestyle. Living quarters were conducive to an independent life while other areas intended for group activities displayed very little activity. Ridzong Monastery, in contrast, was a place that had communal living seemingly designed into it. This was exemplified in the common kitchen and dining area that served as the monastery’s social hub, and the austerity of the monks’ living quarters.

Daily Activities

Neither monastery was every day the same, and while the variety of types of activities that might have taken place on any given day will be discussed when appropriate, this section focuses on the most common routines and activities that occurred on most days, and at the monastery itself. It thus does not include major events in the yearly calendar such as the monasteries’ yearly festivals and other major monastery
rituals, both of which usually include the convergence of all of a monastery’s resident
monks and other monks and nuns from branch monasteries and nunneries, as well as
considerable numbers of lay people. Also, activities that monks participated in at other
sites, such as village rituals, other major ceremonies that took place at Leh or at other
monasteries, while making up a considerable proportion of the totality of the kinds of
activities that most monks in this study took part in, are not included. While the kinds of
typical daily activities that monks at the respective monasteries took part in were
essentially the same, there were significant differences in how these activities were
carried out. The following four types of activities will be covered: 1) ritual activities,
focusing on how the most common rituals that monks participated in were organized and
managed, 2) activities associated with occupations, especially the contrasts in
independence versus cooperation associated with carrying out occupational
responsibilities, 3) meals, being the content and context of the daily cycle of breakfast,
lunch, and the evening meal, and 4) free time, being how time was spent when not
engaged in activities relating to one’s occupation, rituals, or meals.

Daily Activities at Spituk Monastery

Ritual activities

For the monks at Spituk Monastery, a large proportion of their time was spent in
the performance of ritual. Typical rituals performed at the monastery ranged from small
daily chapel openings and brief, spontaneous rituals requested by lay visitors, both of
which were the ritual specialty of the komnyers who, because of the nature of their
occupation, were not among those available to take part in larger rituals, either at or away
from the monastery. Morning prayer assemblies, most of which took place in the 
dukhang assembly hall, were also very common. Most monks who were present and 
available usually participated in these, and they took place on average about once a week. 
Most mornings, however, most monks were dispatched to participate in village rituals 
away from the monastery, and these were always given priority over morning prayer 
assemblies at the monastery.

For special rituals that required groups of four or more monks - including 
calendrical rituals and special rituals sponsored by the laity that took place at the 
monastery, or larger village rituals away from the monastery - ritual teams were 
assembled based on the availability of individual monks. This was the main task of the 
lopon at Spituk, who needed to be aware of the ritual needs of both the monastery and the 
lay communities that it served. Ritual demands of the laity in particular often came with 
little notice, and the lopon had to assemble ritual teams from among those monks who 
were not already engaged in an ongoing ritual or with occupational tasks that could not 
be abandoned. These ritual teams thus had little consistency in their membership. A 
team of five monks, for instance, could be assembled from almost any combination of 
available monks drawn from the monastery’s entire population. Because of the proximity 
of Spituk Monastery to most of the villages it served and the transportation options 
available, monks usually commuted to village rituals that took place over several days, 
such as death rituals, heading to them early in the morning and returning to their shaks 
each evening.
Activities associated with occupations

Because of the size of the monastery and level of interaction with surrounding communities, much of monks’ daily routine was spent engaged in fulfilling occupational responsibilities. These responsibilities were very well defined for each monk and carried out independently for the most part. Cooperation in occupations was limited to cases which called for its necessity, such as in the cooperative efforts of the two komnyers of the very busy gonkhang. Retirement meant complete freedom from occupational responsibilities for most.

Meals

Apart from during larger rituals where meals were provided either by the monastery or a lay sponsor, monks at Spituk were responsible for preparing meals for themselves. Monks typically ate three meals each day, which they prepared for themselves in their shak’s kitchen. Breakfast, prepared mid-morning after the completion of early morning tasks, was simple, and typically consisted of bread with eggs or vegetables. Lunch was normally the largest meal of the day and was usually prepared in the early afternoon. It usually consisted of a large portion of rice and some combination of dal (a small legume and a staple of South Asian cuisine) and vegetables cooked with spices. The evening meal was prepared sometime after 6:00 pm and eaten just before retiring to bed. This was usually some variation of a simple stew called skyu which included potatoes, simple flour noodles, and a combination of vegetables. These meals were unceremonious events, consumed alone or in the company of another monk while watching television, listening to a radio or reading. Monks also prepared cha ngarmo, tea
made with milk and sugar, at all times of the day, the copious consumption of which is a staple of monastery life.

Free time

A lifestyle dominated by ritual activities and occupational responsibilities meant that most monks at Spituk had very little free time. During the day, opportunities for leisure tended to be brief. A monk might go to his shak to take a nap, listen to the radio, watch television or read. Younger monks especially were often observed with a book close at hand. Interestingly, self-study of the English language was a priority for the younger generation of monks. Books of English grammar and books about Buddhism written in English (almost invariably authored by the Dalai Lama) were very popular. It was also common for monks to socialize with each other during the day. Monks would visit each other in their shaks or gather in a favorite spot from which the comings and goings of the monastery, village, road or airstrip could be observed. Such gatherings were rarely larger than groups of three monks.

Most free time, however, was spent engaged in some solitary activity. In the evenings most monks retired to their respective shaks, and apart from preparing their evening meals and other personal care tasks, this was when monks were free to read, watch television or listen to the radio undisturbed. For the elder, retired monks, there was naturally much more free time available. As one retired monk explained, “there used to be a lot of tension and a lot of responsibility, but now I am very relaxed. I am free to go about doing whatever I want, I can attend or not attend any puja I want, or just sit around in my shak.” Such sentiments were shared by other retired monks, as well as other
monks looking forward to retirement. Free time for the monks at Spituk, whether found in brief moments in the lives of workaday monks or in the freedom of retirement, was an opportunity for individualistic pursuits.

**Daily Activities at Ridzong Monastery**

*Ritual activities*

Like at Spituk Monastery, Ridzong’s *komnyer* performed daily chapel opening rituals each morning. Spontaneous pujas requested by lay visitors, so commonplace at Spituk, were very rarely observed at Ridzong. Morning prayer assemblies also took place, but were no more frequent than once per week. The small population of Ridzong was responsible for the ritual needs of four villages and other events that took place away from the monastery, leaving little opportunity for any but the most essential rituals that took place at the monastery.

Because of the small size of the Ridzong community, rituals – be they village rituals that took place away from the monastery, calendrical rituals performed at the monastery, or very rarely lay sponsored rituals that took place at the monastery - were performed not by modular ritual teams, but by a core group of monks that varied little in its membership. This ritual core consisted of the *nastan*, the *umdzad*, the *geskos*, one or two of the elder retired *gelongs*, and whomever was available of the two monks who did general tasks for the monastery. Because of the remoteness of Ridzong from the villages that it served, for village rituals that took place over several days the ritual core did not return to the monastery in the evenings, but instead stayed together in the village for the duration of the ritual before they returned again as one. Due to the nature of their
occupations, the *komnyer*, the *nyerpa*, and the two teachers were rarely available to participate in larger rituals, especially those that took place away from the monastery.

*Activities associated with occupations*

While most monks at Ridzong Monastery had occupations assigned to them, many of the responsibilities associated with all occupations were carried out through the efforts of many. Monks who were not formally assigned any specific occupation were often engaged in a variety of duties for the monastery. Retirement status was not necessarily associated with freedom from occupational responsibilities, as some retired monks also served some of the most important administrative positions. Due to its small size and limited interaction with associated villages, however, very little time on a day-to-day basis was spent in the carrying out of formal occupational responsibilities.

*Meals*

All meals served at Ridzong were prepared in the new monastery kitchen by the lay *machin* with occasional assistance from monks. While it was related to the ethnographer several times that lunch was the only meal that the monks at Ridzong were permitted to eat - this fact being highlighted as one of the monastery’s restrictions for which it is notorious – this was not the case. Nonetheless, lunch was by far the largest meal of the day as well as its main event. It was always served in the early afternoon, and all monks present at the monastery on a given day would converge at the kitchen and dining hall to sit on the floor and be served their fill. Lunch meals rarely diverged from consisting of a large quantity of rice topped with a thin spiced sauce containing dal and...
vegetables. Lunch time was also the main social hour. Monks typically talked amongst themselves while eating. Any lay visitors, including any tourists who might have been present, were encouraged to join in.

Other meals were much smaller and casual affairs, but similarly communal. The evening meal was normally served in the late evening, any monks who wished to partake would already be assembled at the kitchen by this time. A simple soup or stew, usually a small quantity of skyu, was common, along with tagi, a type of flatbread. Those present would gather around the pot for this late-night snack, often corresponding with the nightly broadcast of the local news on the radio. Leftovers from this meal often became the next morning’s breakfast which was reliably available in the kitchen for monks to eat once early morning tasks were complete. Gur gur cha, tea mixed in a churn with butter, salt and sometimes evaporated milk, was available at all times in the kitchen, and the rudimentary teaware that monks kept in their shaks was rarely needed. The monks at Ridzong thus depended on the central kitchen and its machin for all meals at the monastery, which were communal and social events.

_Free time_

There was much more free time available to the monks at Ridzong than the monks at Spituk, and much of it was spent in each other’s company. The one activity that monks sometimes retreated to their shaks for during the day was napping, and this was not restricted to the privacy of the shak. On any given day one could expect to encounter a napping monk almost anywhere in the monastery. But for the most part monks spent their free time together, the kitchen being the center of activity even at times when no
meal was being served. Typical activities included talking and joking with each other, or simply standing together watching for visitors arriving up the narrow valley below. Little changed in the evenings. After the late meal it was typical of the monks to gather at some other part of the monastery to keep each other company. It was also very common for groups of monks to sleep together in one shak or, weather permitting, under the stars on the roof of the old kitchen. For the monks at Ridzong free time was an opportunity to come together and was thus little different from how they spent time in ritual or occupational activities, except that they were free to do what they wished to do.

Summary

The kinds of activities that monks at both monasteries took part in were typical of life in Ladakhi monasteries. There were differences between the two, however, in how activities were carried out. At Spituk there was a modularity to the teams of monks assembled to conduct rituals whereas at Ridzong it was a core group of monks, with little variation in its makeup, that conducted rituals as a unit. Occupational activities at Spituk were well-defined and carried out independently, whereas at Ridzong many responsibilities were carried out through a group effort. Meals and free time at Spituk were mostly solitary and allowed a monk to engage in individual pursuits, while Ridzong was characterized by displays of communality and group socialization both at meals and during free time.
Social Relations

Social relations here include the types of social interactions that took place at the monasteries and the dynamics in the relationships that monks had with other people. The respective monasteries of Spituk and Ridzong were very different in both respects and highlight further differences in the lifestyles of each. What follows are descriptions of social relations between monks and 1) the laity, being the local Buddhist population, 2) tourists, being transient visitors to the monastery from diverse backgrounds, and in the case of Spituk, Hindus, and 3) the community, being the other monks that resided at the monastery in question.

Social Relations at Spituk Monastery

The laity

For the laity, Spituk Monastery served as both a place of prayer and a reservoir of religious specialists. Social interactions between monks and laity were cordial and reciprocal. Monks were generally accessible and accommodating to lay visitors and most interactions were one-on-one. Afternoon visits from monks’ family members were not uncommon. These were times when monks got caught up on family news, the gossip of their home village, or simply enjoyed the company of a loved one while entertaining with tea, a meal, or a television. On most days there were many more lay visitors to the monastery than there were monks present, and on days of the full moon, “when the effects of good deeds are multiplied by 1000,” as one monk explained, there were many more still. Spituk Monastery, while being the monastic community’s domain, was in
many ways also a community center, a focal point for the religiosity of the villages it
served and beyond.

Tourists and Hindus

In their interactions with the tourists who visited Spituk, monks were generally
friendly and, with certain exceptions, accommodating. Because of its proximity to Leh
and conspicuous location,25 tourists visited Spituk Monastery in high numbers, especially
in the summer months when tourism in Ladakh was at its peak. A most extreme example
of this accommodation at Spituk was found at the gonkhang chapel. The large numbers
of Hindus who visited it as the Kalimata mandir (Hin.), or “temple of Kali,” were catered
to by the komnyers who grudgingly took on the role of Hindu priests. When Hindu
visitors entered the inner sanctuary of the gonkhang, a komnyer followed to distribute to
them a handful of misri (Hin.), a type of rock candy that absorbs the blessings of the deity
by virtue of its presence in the temple. Along with viewing the image of the deity, the
consumption of this prasād (Hin.), the “gift” of the deity, is one of the two fundamental
acts of Hindu temple worship (see Eck 1996, 47;1996, 63), and was here facilitated by a
monk of Tibetan Buddhism.

The community

At Spituk Monastery there was an undercurrent of a generation gap that existed
between the elder monks, specifically those who had travelled to Tibet for monastic

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25 Tourists arriving by air see Spituk Monastery very close and at eye level as landing airliners
pass it just before touching down. It is the first monastery that arrivals see, and it may even be
seen from a distance in many parts of Leh.
training before 1959, and the younger monks who attended the exile monasteries in India since then. This was often expressed in the idiom of the “real monk.”26 One elder monk explained that one was not a “real monk” unless they had gone to Tibet to study and that the monks who have gone to study in monasteries in India were not “real monks.” Younger monks tended to cite different criteria, deriving their legitimacy not by where they have been, but how they behave, “a ‘real monk’ has to lead a simple life with few possessions, to not drive a car and things like that. It takes maturity. You grow into it after years at the monastery.” The younger generation of monks were also much more interested in learning about the wider world than their elder counterparts. They were aware of global issues and conscious of what their role as Buddhist monks might play in them.27 Idealistic divisions and petty disagreements rarely led to conflict in daily life. Younger monks were happy for the most part to help the elder monks when needed and in normal social interactions monks got along very well.

Social Relations at Ridzong Monastery

The laity

While the monastic community did serve as a body of ritual specialists for its associated villages, the monastery itself was not so much a place of prayer as it was a place of pilgrimage for those who visited. Lay people who made the trip to this isolated setting usually did so for skorla – repeated circumambulations of the monastery - the

26 The word Sangyespa, literally meaning Buddhist or “of the Buddha,” was in this sense taken to mean a true follower of the Buddha, or a true monk.
27 Much of this attitude can be credited to the efforts of the Dalai Lama, particularly as an author. Environmental issues, global warming especially, are topics that younger monks at Spituk were surprisingly well versed in, and are subjects of which the Dalai Lama frequently writes.
beneficial effects of which ranged from improving one’s karmic net worth to curing disease. Ridzong Monastery thus served the lay as a magico-religious site that required very little facilitation or interaction on the part of the monks who resided there. Magical contagion took the place of clerical interaction and the boundaries between the monastic community and the lay community were maintained without threatening the high regard with which Ridzong was held.

This is not to say that the laity had no involvement in monastery life. Visits for prayer and to give offerings at one of the chapels did occur. Villagers also came to negotiate the terms of a village ritual, discuss matters relating to lease arrangements and management, and to do hired work for the monastery, such as construction. These visitors, when familiar and in small numbers, were treated with hospitality. The machin, in many ways a central figure around which much of the daily social life of the monastery revolved, was also a layman. There were many times when the intimate group that the ethnographer joined on late nights in the kitchen included more laymen than monks. But the monastery as a religious space was not something shared between the monastic community and lay society as it was at Spituk. It functioned foremost as a home and sanctuary for a community within which select outsiders must be invited.

Tourists

Tourists had very little involvement in the daily life of Ridzong Monastery. Far fewer tourists visited it than visited Spituk, and with the monastery located along a trekking route, most of these were adventure tourists who would arrive by foot in the afternoon for a brief respite before soldiering on. When the road was opened in the late
part of fieldwork, some tourists arrived by taxi - Ridzong sometimes being included as a side trip for tourists who visit the nearby ancient monastery of Alchi, one of Ladakh’s better known sites for cultural tourism. Most tourists came in the summer months. Virtually no tourists made to trip to Ridzong in the winter.

There was a routine for handling tourists at Ridzong: the komnyer was notified by monks who spotted them slowly trudging up the valley, if he did not spot them himself first, and upon arrival he showed them in turn to a few select chapels. If they had unwittingly timed their arrival right, tourists were usually invited to join the monks for lunch in the dining hall. Interactions with tourists were normally limited to proclaiming how unique and special the monastery was, and explaining with pride how lunch was the only meal they were allowed to eat. Some of the elder monks habitually invited tourists into their shaks to sit for a while. Once while the ethnographer was present a lone male tourist arrived in the evening intending to stay for the night, and, without any other options, he was provided a room in a nearby dormitory sometimes used by visiting construction workers and was also invited to the evening meal. This was not an uncommon occurrence at Ridzong in the summers. While the monks at Ridzong could be very guarded, they were not unwelcoming provided nothing much was asked of them. Tourists were tolerated and kept at arms-length, and apart from upholding the monastery’s reputation, monks expressed very little concern for how tourists perceived them.
The community

Social interactions among monks at Ridzong and the attitudes they express about each other reveal a community remarkable in its solidarity. The ethnographer never witnessed any interactions between monks that displayed any degree of conflict, nor did any monks ever express opinions that were in any way critical of any other monks. The monks seemed aware that their harmonious environment was not typical of monasteries in Ladakh. The nastan remarked that the monks are very comfortable around each other, there is no gossip, and they are united “like a family.” This social atmosphere among the monks was a salient feature of this monastery, and the nastan was proud of the community’s commitment to their avoidance of the world outside: “The monastery is very precious for us… the scriptures and the prayers are very important for us. There is nothing else in our lives. We don’t study English, or mathematics, or science. This is all we have and we want it to continue.” But he also added that it may not be like this for long, “because so many monks now study outside before they come here, so I cannot say exactly about the future.”

Summary

The quality of social relations at the two monasteries was very different. In their relations with outsiders, including the local lay Buddhist population, tourists and Hindu temple worshippers, the monks at Spituk Monastery were very accommodating, particularly with regards to their stewardship of sacred spaces. Monks at Ridzong displayed less interest in accommodating outsiders, limiting and controlling their access to sacred spaces and the community itself. Internal relations at Spituk, while not
contentious, were fragmented along generational lines colored by concerns over legitimacy. Most social interactions occurred in small groups. The Ridzong community, on the other hand, behaved as a close-knit, intimate group – interactions were voluntarily communal and displayed no apparent generational disharmony despite sharing an age distribution similar to that of Spituk.

The Komnyer, and Daily Life in a Monastery

In many ways the komnyer is the central figure in the daily life of a small monastery in Ladakh. Literally meaning “gonpa manager,” monks are normally appointed to serve this occupation either at a village temple, or at the monastery itself. Komnyers appointed to village temples are usually young getsuls and they typically serve for one year. While still among the lower administrative positions, a komnyer at a monastery is a higher position that brings with it more responsibility. It is typically a three-year appointment that is served by either an experienced getsul or a gelong, depending on availability and the discretion of the rimpoche. It is an essential occupation at any monastery, and all monks must serve it at least once in their career. The main responsibility of a komnyer is to oversee and control access to the monastery’s sacred spaces and other rooms associated with them. In this capacity they are the only monks who, with certain exceptions, are required to remain at the monastery at all times. Because of their constant presence and management of sacred spaces, they are more aware than any other monk of the daily comings and goings of the rest of the monastic community, their social and ritual activities. It is also through the komnyer that visitors - be they local, laity, tourists, or any others – gain access to the monastery, particularly its
sacred spaces. The komnyer is thus very much the interface between the monastery and the world outside of it.

At Spituk Monastery, three monks served full time as komnyers during the period of fieldwork, all of whom participated in the overall study. One komnyer was in charge of the chokhang and Dolma lhakhang chapels and their associated rooms including the rimpoche zimkhang, literally “rimpoche’s bedroom,” and the adjoining Sangdu lhakhang, a chapel dedicated to tantric deities that was rarely open to the public. He was a middle-aged gelong who was serving his seventh year as komnyer of this area by special appointment of the rimpoche. There were two komnyers at the gonkhang chapel. One of these was a young getsul in the final year of a three-year appointment, and the other was an elder gelong who had just begun a one year appointment during the early stages of fieldwork. There was also one part-time komnyer at Spituk who divided his time between serving as the komnyer of the chikhang assembly hall and its associated rooms and serving as a nyerpa.

There was one komnyer at Ridzong Monastery. He was a young getsul who had returned to the monastery after spending six years studying at Drepung Loseling Monastery in Karnataka and began a one-year appointment as the komnyer of Ridzong during the early stages of fieldwork. He remained in this position through the duration of fieldwork. One other monk served temporarily as the komnyer at Ridzong when the aforementioned komnyer needed to be in Leh for a period of time. This was an elder gelong who’s regular occupation was the geskos, or disciplinary officer. Both of these monks participated in the overall study.
The following descriptions of a day in the life of a *komnyer* are based on observations of daily life at Spituk and Ridzong Monasteries throughout the duration of field research during which time three *komnyers* were key informants. In addition, a total of four shadowing sessions were conducted with four monks (n=4) who had served as *komnyers* during field research, including the three aforementioned key informants. Two monks participated in shadowing sessions at Spituk Monastery (n=2), one being the *komnyer* of the *chokhang* and *Dolma lhakhang* area and the other being the younger of the two *komnyers* at the *gonkhang*. Two monks participated in shadowing sessions at Ridzong Monastery (n=2), one being the regular full-time *komnyer* and the other being the elder monk who was temporarily serving in the capacity of the *komnyer* during the shadowing session. Each session involved the close observation of the daily routines of the individual *komnyer*, from morning until late night, over a period of four days. This served as a formal means to fill in gaps of knowledge about complete daily routines left from what was known through participant observation. Finally, quotes from the *komnyers* at Spituk Monastery are taken from follow-up focused interviews that were conducted with the two *komnyers* who had participated in the shadowing sessions (n=2). Quotes from the *komnyer* of Ridzong Monastery are taken from his life history interview.28

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28 Focused follow-up interviews were planned for the two monks who were shadowed at Ridzong Monastery, but these did not take place. When the ethnographer and research assistant returned to Ridzong to conduct these interviews, the monks, upon the advice of a newly arrived monk from Karnataka, decided to no longer participate in interviews. Formal research at Ridzong was terminated at that time.
A Day in the Life of a Komnyer, Part I: Spituk Monastery

For a komnyer at Spituk, the day begins before dawn, usually around 5:30 am. After putting on robes and using the toilet, his first task is to unlock the chapel doors and prepare the deities within for the day ahead. This involves some minor ritual performance such as the simultaneous ringing of a ritual bell, or drilbu, and beating a small waisted drum called a damaru – both intended to summon the deity with their pleasing sound – or filling a set of seven water offering bowls, or yonchap, so that the deity has a supply of fresh water for the day. Exactly what is done depends on the deity, and to some extent the discretion of the komnyer himself. After this, the komnyer will waft incense through the chapels and the surrounding area and thoroughly sweep the adjoining courtyards of the dust that settled in the night – all in the name of cleanliness, which is important for the deities and for the visitors who will soon come. As the komnyer of the gonkhang explained:

The deities will be very happy if we keep the area clean. They will come to us easily... and if some tourist or any visitors come here and they see that the area is very dirty, it doesn’t look nice for the visitor as well.

In the quiet of the early morning these tasks are completed without disturbance. The komnyer may even get started on some personal tasks, such as washing a set of robes or making the first of many pots of milk tea that will be consumed throughout the day. This is also a time that a monk can devote to his own personal spiritual pursuits. Every monk has a personal tutelary deity, called a yidam, around which much of his religious activity as an individual is oriented. Each monk’s yidam is chosen for him by the rimpoche. For lamas and other advanced practitioners, the yidam is the focus of very
sophisticated tantric practices, but for an ordinary monk the yidam simply serves as an object of personal devotion. This devotional practice consists mostly of chanting a personalized mantra and reading from a pecha, a loose-bound copy of a religious scripture, both dedicated to the yidam. Neither of these practices requires much ritual performance and – especially in the case of chanting mantras – may be done while taking care of other tasks in a kind of monastic multi-tasking that typifies a lifestyle that constantly juggles personal practical needs, administrative duties and spirituality.

The first visitors usually arrive at around 7:00 am. Lay Buddhists, and at the gonkhang also Hindus, come for a quick prayer before work. They come in small numbers at this time of day, usually just a single person at a time. Buddhists who come to pray usually bring a token offering for the monastery in the form of a bundle of incense and a small bottle of soybean oil which they hand to the komnyer. The soybean oil, a convenient modern alternative to the traditional clarified yak butter, is used for filling votive butter lamps. Of brass, copper or silver, these marme, as they are called, are simple oil lamps, curiously similar in design to a Christian sacramental chalice. Their light serves as a beacon to attract wandering souls to the presence of the deities. One of the duties of the komnyer is to keep these lamps lit. When Hindus arrive at the gonkhang the komnyer accompanies them and fulfills his priestly duty by distributing prasād.

In these early hours such visits demand little of the komnyer’s time, and other tasks can be taken care of. Among these are the cleaning and maintenance of ritual implements, such as the offering sets and ritual vessels used in small rituals that may be performed in the chapel, and other ritual instruments like bells, drums, cymbals and trumpets that are used in larger rituals. The chapels that the komnyer is charged with are
where such instruments are kept, and at this time of the morning it is not uncommon for a
monk – usually a young *getsul* sent as a gofer – to breathlessly appear and collect
instruments for a village ritual that came with short notice. The *komnyer*, knowing every
corner of his domain, directs him to his quarry.

Occasionally, a small monastery ritual may take place in one of the very chapels
that the *komnyer* oversees. While the *komnyer* does not take part in such rituals, he plays
a supporting role in preparing for them. He may work at making *tormas* – sculptures
made of flour and butter of which there are many variations and range from simple
unadorned cones to large elaborate shapes with intricate painted features and are
presented to a deity as an offering – or set up a seating area for the monks. It is usually
also around this time that morning prayers assemblies may take place. There is little
ritual involved in these assemblies and the *komnyer’s* assistance is rarely needed. On
such occasions these mass prayers lend a distinctly spiritual atmosphere to the monastery.
Each monk’s praying is done at his own tempo and melody, the resulting cacophony of
low, guttural mumbling carries beyond the walls of the *dukhang* for about an hour. An
effective attractant to any early-arriving tourists, morning prayers may briefly lighten the
burden of the *komnyer* who because of the nature of his duties never takes part.

Some moments of free time may become available now, and a *komnyer* at Spituk
often spends them reading. The *komnyer* of the *choskhang* and *Dolma lhakhang*, for
example, often read from his *yidam*’s *pecha* or some other religious book, and the young
*komnyer* of the *gonkhang* read English language books about Buddhism or grammar.
Whether engaged in such activities or simply sipping a cup of tea while looking over the
scene beyond the monastery – traffic on the roadway, a caravan of laden ponies snaking
through the village, a commercial flight landing on the airstrip – the *komnyer* must always be at the ready to attend to visitors.

By around 8:30 or 9:00 am, the *komnyer* prepares breakfast. This, of course, he does in his shak’s kitchen. But the *komnyer*’s shak is not located amongst those of the other monks at Spituk. Because of the nature of his job it must be close to the action – it is a shak designated for the holder of this occupation. For the *komnyer* of the choskhang and Dolma lhakhang it is down a flight of steps within earshot of his chapels. At the gonkhang it is even closer, right next to the entrance of the chapel itself. Breakfast may be as simple as a bowl of *tsampa* and some tea, or something more satisfying, like some bread with scrambled eggs, tomatoes, or onions.\(^{29}\) If there are visitors around, breakfast may be eaten outside the shak so that they may be attended to. If no visitors are present, the *komnyer* may feel free to eat in his shak while listening to the radio or watching television.

By 9:30 am the number and frequency of visitors starts to increase. Lay Buddhists rarely come in groups larger than three members, and many of these come to request the *komnyer* to perform a ritual. The most common requested ritual is the *serkyem*, or “golden drink” offering, which is a rite of supplication directed at a specific deity. These are often requested for worldly concerns such as to gain employment, for a child to pass exams, or for someone to recover from illness. Performing such rituals is an

\(^{29}\) In Buddhism onions, along with garlic, scallions, leeks and chives, are among the so-called “five pungent roots”, the consumption of which, particularly by monks, is discouraged if not outright prohibited. One of the *komnyers* at Spituk explained that the small chapel opening ritual he performs early in the morning and the recitation of certain prayers purifies himself enough so that he may eat onions, and that is why he never eats first thing in the morning. Monks at Ridzong, it should be noted, were never observed eating onions.
important part of the komnyer’s occupation which at Spituk prioritizes service to all comers, as the komnyer of the gonkhang explained:

Because they have some problem, that is why they ask me to perform such pujas. It is very important for me to help other people because I’m appointed here to help these people.

The same goes for the komnyer’s accommodation of Hindu visitors, who by this time begin to arrive in large groups. The komnyer stands patiently inside the gonkhang and distributes prasād to Hindu families, groups of friends, and tour groups who have come to see Kali.

The first tourists arrive at around 10:00 am. They come from all parts of the globe, Europe in particular, and many are from other parts of India. They come as singles, as large groups numbering in the teens, and everything in-between. Many come with a local guide that they have hired to show them the sites. Most are cultural tourists who may have preconceptions about Tibetan Buddhism, and some are Buddhists themselves. The komnyer treats them all the same. After directing them to remove their shoes he shows them into the chapel and tries his best to explain what it is they are seeing. The komnyer of the gonkhang explained:

It has become very important for us because so many visitors don’t know exactly what is in the gonkhang. So our main duty is to show what is this and what is that. For example Vajrabhairava. What does Vajrabhairava look like? How many hands does Vajrabhairava have? How many heads? What does Palden Lhamo look like? Palden Lhamo sits on a mule, like that. So each and every detail we have to tell the people so they can understand.

This is an important duty of the komnyer at Spituk. The presence of such a diverse cross-section, not only of local culture – remarkably cosmopolitan in itself – but of the whole world, is taken as an opportunity to spread Buddhism, to help in some small
If I tell other people about the monastery, about the scriptures, about the statues, about the Taras, those who don’t know anything, it will be very good and very helpful for them. It is written in the scriptures as well: ‘those who are in darkness, lift them up into the light.’

Many tourists come with questions and all come with cameras. The komnyer does his best to oblige. Questions can be very challenging, but posing for photographs is easy.

It goes like this into the afternoon. Lay Buddhists, Hindus and tourists constantly come and go and the komnyer attends to all of them. Occasionally there are opportunities to keep up with other tasks – top up some butter lamps, wash dishes that were used at breakfast, hang robes to dry. Amidst the chaos there may even be opportunities for the komnyer to sit down – or lay down – for a moment to ward off complete exhaustion. A bored monk may wander by and stay for a while to kill some time. Little more than small talk takes place in these interactions.

At around 1:00 pm there is a lull in the action and the komnyer has an opportunity to do some more time-consuming tasks. Keeping the chapels clean is always a priority. The floors of the choskhang and Dolma lhakhang are of wood and vinyl respectively and the komnyer shuffles around with a towel on his feet and a lit stick of incense in his hand while chanting his yidam’s mantra. The carpeted gonkhang is swept with a broom. Some butter lamps are emptied, collected in a plastic tub, and taken to the water tap for washing. A sewing project is resumed. An improvised repair is made on a ritual drumstick.

Sometime between 1:30 and 2:00 pm the komnyer will close the chapel doors and go to his shak to prepare lunch, knowing he may be called away at any moment. Rice
with dal and vegetables, lightly spiced, is typical, but skyu and some flatbreads may also be prepared. The komnyer turns on the radio or the television and sits on one of his mattresses to eat. The radio is the source for local news, but the television is a window to a larger world. If the komnyer understands some English, BBC or CNN news channels are very popular, as are Animal Planet and the Discovery Channel – wildlife and nature shows can be enjoyed regardless of one’s language proficiency. If no visitors have arrived by the time he has finished eating, the komnyer usually reads for a few minutes.

The hours after lunch pass by in much the same way as do those before lunch. There is a resurgence in visitors. In addition to serkyem, more small rituals may be performed for lay Buddhists. They may bring a painted thangka\textsuperscript{30} or a statue for a household shrine for which consecration rituals, rabs and zhungs respectively, are performed. The komnyer may also try to keep up with his own personal religious activities, reading from a scripture for a moment or chanting his personal mantra while rinsing out a tea cup or wiping accumulated soot from the insides of a cabinet full of butter lamps. These personal religious activities, however, are at the bottom of a hierarchy of priorities for a komnyer. As the komnyer of the gonkhang explained, accommodating visitors and providing guidance in religious matters is always paramount:

\begin{quote}
It is very important to share with other people. If I know something about religious scriptures, how to pray… I need to tell the people how to do prostrations, how to pray, how to chant mantras, how to spin the prayer wheel… If I explain these things to other people, about religious teachings, about the environment, whatever, if they get some benefit from me, then I am working for human beings, not for myself.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{30}A thangka is a pictorial scroll, usually painted, depicting a specific deity, saint, or collection thereof. They can be used as devotional icons or iconographical references.
Personal tasks are readily sacrificed. On one occasion the komnyer of the choskhang and Dolma lhakhang had a moment free in the afternoon and was aware of the fact that he was overdue for a shave. With razor, a shaving soap and a can of water he crouched in a sunny corner of the courtyard and lathered his face. Just as he touched razor to skin to begin his first pass, a family of Indian tourists appeared at the top of the stairs. Tossing down his razor he leapt up to show them through the chapels. After they left he ran back to his can and razor and quickly finished shaving.

Around 5:00 pm things begin to finally slow down. Monks who had been away performing a village ritual are returning home for the night. One may stop by to see the komnyer for some small talk or to drop off some ritual instruments. Very few lay visitors are coming by now and tourists have slowed to a trickle. The komnyer goes through the chapels for one more round of cleaning before starting to shut things down for the night. The seven yonchap in each chapel are emptied of their water into a plastic bucket and the komnyer sits and wipes out each one with a cloth. The butter lamps he continues to top up, relighting those that had gone out. These will keep going through the night, but many will have extinguished themselves by morning. The action has decreased considerably, but tourists and Hindus may still show up. Even at this late point in the day a very large group may appear. The komnyer sits and reads, keeping at the ready to receive any more arrivals. A few more personal tasks are completed. Robes are taken off the line and placed in his shak. He goes to the tap and collects a supply of water. Around 6:30 pm the komnyer closes the chapel doors and locks them. The komnyer’s responsibilities for the day are now complete. He has the rest of the evening to himself, and like most of the monks at Spituk Monastery, he is likely to spend it alone in his shak.
After turning on the radio or television, he sets to work preparing his evening meal in his shak’s small kitchen. Neither skyu nor thukpa are elaborate dishes. Both are very simple stews that simmer in water for a while after some combination of diced onions, potatoes and greens are fried in oil with some spices. Noodles, to be added later, are made by hand. The komnyer sits in his main living area with some flour and water and presses small balls of dough into flat, irregular shapes. These are added to the stew and it continues to simmer. The evening meal is eaten late, usually around 9:00 pm. Some evenings the meal is simpler still – some flatbreads or tagi, with curd, or any of a number of simple roasted grain concoctions. Like all monks at Spituk, the komnyer is responsible for providing his own meals and a life as a monk here has shaped him into a proficient cook. Occasionally, a monk may visit another’s shak for the evening to share a meal. Companionship is reciprocated with domestic hospitality.

After finishing his meal, the komnyer shuts off the radio or television and reads. If it is a pecha, he may read aloud – the virtues of the scriptures are more effective when vocalized. Otherwise he may read some other book, likely about Buddhism or English grammar, the latter of which, like the pecha, most effective when vocalized. Around 9:30 or 10:00 pm the komnyer may show himself to the toilet by flashlight, and upon returning to his shak remove his robes, switch off the fluorescent light, and lay down to sleep for the night.

A Day in the Life of a Komnyer, Part II: Ridzong Monastery

The early morning is cold at Ridzong, even in summer. The komnyer wakes shortly after 5:00 am. He puts on his heavyweight robes and leaves his shak, or
whichever *shak* or rooftop at which he made his bed for the night, and heads off to take care of his first duties of the day. The *komnyer’s shak*, it should be pointed out, is not centrally located. In fact, his is in the upper western corner of the monastery, the farthest point from the chapels he looks after. But this is of little consequence because no part of this compact monastery is very far from any other part and the *komnyer* will not be spending much time in his *shak* anyway. The *komnyer* makes his rounds to the chapels, unlocking the doors, greeting the deity with the ringing of the *drilbu*, the beating of the *damaru* and a chant, and locking the doors upon exiting, each in turn. Butter lamps are topped up with oil or clarified yak butter, and those that failed to survive the night are re-lit. After stopping by the toilet he may get started on some personal tasks, such as soaking a set of robes if the weather is warm and water is coming from the spring, but it is most likely that he had insufficient sleep by this early hour, and he will return to his bed to pick up where he left off.

It could be any time between 7:00 and 9:00 am that he *komnyer* wakes up again. He makes his way to the kitchen where activity has already begun. The *machin* has prepared breakfast. Nothing substantial, just a light snack in case a monk would like a little something to start the day. *Tagi*, curd, maybe some leftover stew from the previous night, and *gur gur cha* of course. A few other monks are already in the kitchen, others will pass in and out throughout the morning. The *komnyer*, having spent a few years in Karnataka, is an important source of information about the outside world and he is happy to pass tales of it on to the monks, many of whom know of little beyond the immediate area around Ridzong. He relates how many of the monks at Drepung, for instance, are actually spies working on behalf of the Chinese government. And the *hijras* of India –
members of a transgender subculture – he explains are actually zombies who will try to steal your soul if they draw you into a conversation. Such topics are not all that is shared over breakfast. Other monks exchange information about other tasks that might be on the day’s schedule as they pass in and out of the kitchen.

If a morning prayer assembly is to take place, it is at this time that monks will make their way one by one from the kitchen to the chikhang. Sitting in order of seniority, as is typical of all monastic ritual assemblies, Ridzong’s small community produces a modest din, but it carries nonetheless throughout the complex. When these prayer assemblies take place, well before any visitors arrive, little other activity occurs in the monastery. If some ritual event at another location is on the to-do list - an occurrence much more frequent than morning prayer assemblies - the ritual team will be gathering their supplies before heading off down the valley. But in either case the komnyer must stay behind.

In summer the first tourists arrive by 10:00 am. The early ones always arrive by foot, having gotten off on a head start for their day’s trekking itinerary. When they arrive at the monastery they usually sit to take a rest – it has been an uphill climb all morning for them – before wandering around to take a look. If the komnyer notices them he will intercept them at some point to show them the chapels. If he had not, other monks will alert him of their arrival. He shows them first to the dukhang assembly hall, opening its doors to let them in long enough to attempt to take a few photographs through its darkness, closing and locking the doors again when they have had enough. The same routine is followed at the takchen. If there is a calendrical monastery ritual taking place it is in full swing by now and the tourists are allowed to view it. Later in the morning
larger groups may arrive. Expeditions of up to thirty people – and twice as many trekking poles – ascend upon the monastery where they will sit and eat pre-prepared lunches while the monks stand timidly aside and observe the exotic strangers from a distance. The komnyer is at the ready to lead any takers on the tour. For adventure tourists such as these, and others who may arrive later by car, Ridzong is a mere rest stop or side trip, and they rarely linger for long.

Scenes like these are only a summer occurrence, and even then, half of the days pass without any visitors coming to Ridzong. The hours between breakfast and lunch often leave the komnyer with little to do. Butter lamps need to be attended to, and he will take his time topping them up and lighting them. He may look for another monk to talk to, wander off on a walk, or take a nap. Chanting of his yidam’s mantra usually accompanies most of these activities, and on many days this might be the only sound heard around the monastery during the day’s slowest hours. For a komnyer used to the structured and stimulating lifestyle of Drepung Loseling Monastery, life at Ridzong can be challenging:

*When I was at Drepung in Karnataka there was lots of activity, different things we have to do, keeping busy and studying and all the activities. So I never felt bored at all. The time goes very fast. But after coming here I felt like ‘oh, what is there to do?’ The day is so long.*

The kitchen is always an option, and by noon the machin has begun preparing lunch. Other monks may be there at this time, even lay visitors who have come for whatever reason, so there is certain to be some conversation to take part in. When the machin is finished preparing lunch, usually sometime between 12:30 and 1:00 pm, a monk or layman volunteers to walk up to the corner of the courtyard where he repeatedly strikes a large resonant rock, its bell-like ringing heard throughout the monastery and its
surrounds heralds the service of lunch for any monks who have not already made their way to the kitchen. When few monks are around this is rarely necessary.

Lunch is the highlight of any day at Ridzong. It is a relatively elaborate meal always involving rice and dal, and may include a variety of vegetables or even paneer, a type of firm cottage cheese often featured in Indian cuisine. When many monks are present, they gather to sit on the floor together in the dining hall, or sometimes in the courtyard when the weather is good, where they are served large platefuls of rice and several rounds of tea: cha ngarmo at first, gur gur cha following. Sometimes the young gesnyens come up from the school and assist in serving. Lunch is a communal event, and of course the komnyer is there. Any tourists or lay visitors are encouraged to join in. The monks do not eat in silence. They share with each other what business they have been up to, what obligations are upcoming, when might someone need to travel to Leh, and so on. The komnyer may share some more tales about life in Karnataka. When they have had their fill the monks gradually disperse, leaving the machin to clean up.

After lunch the komnyer is back to his usual routine. By now some lay visitors may have arrived, but this does not occur every day. Most of them may only perform circumambulations of the monastery, or skorla, but some may also want to offer prayers in the chapels. The komnyer will open the door, the visitor will enter, prostrate, chant, have a look around, and leave. The komnyer shuts the door and locks it once again. The obligatory offering of incense and a bottle of soybean oil is collected. In his capacity as caretaker of the chapels at Ridzong this is all that is required of the komnyer for most of the day.
As a Ridzong monk, however, his obligations go beyond his job description. If there is some chore that the community needs taken care of and he is available, he will do it. The natural spring at Ridzong does not always give up its water, and in the afternoon warmth the komnyer may volunteer to collect a day’s supply elsewhere. The komnyer straps two jerry cans to the old horse and leads him down the dry valley path to where it meets the swift-flowing stream of the Ulle Tokpo. This might be a task that the nyerpa could take care of, but he may be occupied collecting grain or butter in a nearby village or harvesting vegetables in the garden at the nunnery. Another monk may be in Leh collecting supplies, another still overseeing a construction project. The remaining elder monks would not be expected to perform such tasks, and besides, they may already be occupied in some ritual activity or sorting out the arrangements for such. The komnyer’s duty as the overseer of the monastery’s chapels, while essential, is a light burden. He is aware that in a broader sense his main duty as komnyer of Ridzong is to be of service to the whole monastic community:

The reason I came back to Ladakh is that the old monks are becoming very old. So it is a chance to help them... At least one monk is coming regularly from Karnataka so that they can give them some help... They stay as komnyer for one year so that these old monks can go to other places and do some other work, or they can take a break. For that reason I came back to Ladakh for one year and in another year some other monk will be here for one year.

But even with such tasks, the afternoon is mostly free time for the komnyer. He may walk down to the same spot by the stream to bathe himself or wash his robes. Whatever the reason, if he leaves the monastery for a time he will be sure to leave the keys with another monk who will fill in for him if any visitors come by. With no such tasks to take care of, he may go to his shak or a shady corner of the monastery to take a nap. In the event that any visitors arrive, he knows he can rely on a monk or an
ethnographer to wake him. It is like this with all tasks at Ridzong Monastery. There are no hard boundaries dividing the domain of one monk from any other monk. The duties of the komnyer are dispersed amongst the community.

Like at Spituk, this can be a time that a monk spends engaged in personal religious activities. Neither chanting his yidam’s mantra or reciting from its pecha are formal activities, and a komnyer can do either while still keeping an eye or an ear open to any occurrence that necessitates his attending to. At Ridzong, additional personal religious activities performed by monks are oriented not only around the monk’s yidam, but around the monastery itself. Most common of these is skorla. Monks frequently perform this circumambulation of the monastery, though rarely more than one at any given time. It is always done in a clockwise direction and monk’s usually chant their yidam’s mantra while they walk. With each round the monk passes a series of prayer wheels31 that he diligently spins – always clockwise – the largest of which strikes a bell that rings out through the valley with each turn, momentum keeping it going long after the monk has passed. Due to Ridzong’s compact size, many circumambulations can be performed in one day and the komnyer may perform them with little risk to his duties.

By around 4:30 or 5:00 pm no more visitors are likely to arrive. If any rituals had taken place at the monastery, they would have finished long before now. If monks were away performing a village ritual, they will not be returning for a few hours yet, if they are to return at all on this day. The monastery is very quiet at this time. The komnyer has a couple books. Brought from his studies in Karnataka, he reads books on religious

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31 Prayer wheels are cylinders mounted on spindles within which are placed large rolled-up scrolls upon which mantras have been printed. Small hand-held and table-top prayer wheels are very popular items amongst the laity. Larger ones, ranging from foot-high models built into a wall to huge, six-foot wheels set in a dedicated structure, are typical at monasteries.
instruction written in bodyik script. He may find a quiet corner or wander down to the kitchen to sit and read while the machin stares out the window listening to the radio. Reading like this is not part of the normal routine for a monk at Ridzong and the komnyer does not do it very often:

The main thing in Karnataka is to study, but here it is very, ‘no.’ I don’t mean that I don’t study here, I also study here but I also have to do my duty and everything according to the schedule and what’s happening. So I have been a little bit, not much.

Activity in the kitchen starts to increase again around 6:00 pm. If there will be a monastery ritual the next morning, now is the time that monks will gather together in the kitchen to make the requisite torma out of flour and butter. The komnyer also makes very simple, conical torma to place as an offering in the gonkhang each evening. After doing so he is back in the kitchen. It gets very cold very quickly in winter. The machin and a few monks take a large old copper brazier, once used for heating a teapot, outside the kitchen. Placing firewood and kindling across its top they light it. The fire burns until the wood turns into hot coals that drop down inside the brazier. This they bring back inside the kitchen to gather around for warmth. In the summer this is hardly necessary, but gatherings in the kitchen happen every evening.

The only other activity in the area now is that of the local wildlife. Bharal, a kind of wild goat native to the Himalayas, are very common in this area. Small herds pass by on the mountain slopes around Ridzong on most evenings. The komnyer relates how if you hear a fox yelp it means there is ghost in the area. Ghosts enjoy teasing foxes by chasing them and slapping them on their rear ends. And if you sleep outside alone, the alpha male of that group of bharal might capture you and turn you into a zombie. Bears
are in the habit of stealthily following people so they can imitate their lives. That is why it is sometimes difficult to tell the difference between a human and a bear.

The monks exchange tales and tease each other while the machin gets to work preparing dinner. The radio is on if it is propagating well, but the monks take little notice until the evening Ladakhi news report comes on. Each other’s company is of more interest than most of what the radio has to offer. Dinner is usually served around 8:00 pm. A big pot of thukpa, a very simple stew with barley flour noodles and spinach, is placed on the floor and everyone gathers around. The machin ladles the thukpa into the monks’ bowls. Other nights it may be leftovers from lunch. Not every monk partakes, but most stop by for butter tea at the very least. Soon there is more chatting and teasing going on than eating. Someone hears a sound outside, like the yelp of a fox. A few monks jump up and run out with flashlights, shooting them around on the dark mountain sides and the valley, but seeing neither fox nor ghost.

Sometime between 8:00 and 9:00 pm monks will gather some bedding and stake out a place to sleep for the night. While a few monks will opt to sleep in their shaks, most, including the komnyer, will sleep together. In warmer seasons the choice spot is on the roof of the old kitchen, under the stars. In winter they may all gather in one monk’s shak. The favorite shak is that of the nyerpa. It is unlike the other shaks. Nestled below the monastery’s older chapels and above the old kitchen, it is spacious, well-lit with old white stucco walls carved from the rock, with a wood and dung-burning space heater in the middle. Sleep does not come quickly. One winters night in the nyerpa’s shak was filled with scary tales. Led by the komnyer and the nyerpa, stories were recounted of Chinese solders killing Tibetan babies and using their bodies to make soup, and how
sometimes at this very monastery the terrifying Dharmapala will come alive, exit the gonkhang and visit a monk in his shak. Tall tales, teasing and taunting keeps the komnyer awake until one by one the monks drift off to sleep, sometime between 10:00 and 11:00 pm.

Summary

As revealed through their respective environments and patterns of daily life, the two monasteries in this study represent two very different lifestyles. Differences were reflected in how the monasteries operated, how duties were performed, monks’ perceptions of these duties, and other daily activities. For each monastery, structural, organizational and cultural aspects of the social environment influenced these.

At Spituk Monastery, pastoral values and an autonomous lifestyle predominated. Pastoral values were especially evident in the daily life of the komnyer, much of which was oriented around serving and facilitating outsiders – lay Buddhists, tourists and Hindus alike. This was also reflected in how the duty of a komnyer was perceived, which was decidedly ministerial. The broader responsibility of the chapel manager was to provide ritual services and guidance in religious matters to the outside community. This pastorality was a characteristic not just of the komnyer occupation, but of the monastery as a whole. Much of the daily life of the monks at Spituk was engaged in the performance of rituals on behalf of the local lay Buddhist population, and the monastery itself, its sacred spaces in particular, was an open and accessible focal point for the spirituality of an eclectic blend of outsiders. The life of the komnyer also demonstrated the relatively autonomous lifestyle of Spituk’s monastic community. The monks lived as
mostly self-sufficient isolates who, when not engaged in occupational responsibilities, pursued individual interests and solitary activities.

Life at Ridzong Monastery reveals a community that values the service and protection of the monastery and a communal lifestyle. The komnyer’s facilitation of visitors from outside was minimal, and his duties as chapel manager prioritized the protection and control of sacred spaces. The perceived duties of the komnyer were decidedly oriented towards the monastic community. He understood that the purpose of his appointment was to ease the burden of his fellow monks. Such values were not only evident in the komnyer, but were characteristic of the Ridzong community as a whole. The day-to-day running of the monastery was done through cooperative effort, boundaries between the inner life of the monastery and the outside world were protected, and great importance was placed on upholding the institution’s reputation. The lifestyle at Ridzong was markedly communal and dependent. The monks lived daily life as a cohesive unit to the extent practical matters and other obligations could allow it, and they relied on their collective efforts and the traditions of the institution to provide for their needs.
CHAPTER EIGHT: CONCLUSIONS

Review of the Study

The overall objective of this study was to show how the religiosity of Tibetan Buddhist monks is influenced by the social environment in which it is lived. Two small Tibetan Buddhist monasteries in Ladakh, India were chosen to be the focus of this study: Spituk Monastery and Ridzong Monastery. These monasteries were nearly identical to each other in several respects. First, they both belonged to the Gelukpa order of Tibetan Buddhist monasticism. Second, they held comparable positions within the hierarchy of that order. Third, they both existed within the same socio-cultural milieu of central Ladakh. Finally, both were the home monasteries of rimpoches of comparably high status and influence in Ladakh. The two monasteries differed, however, in three respects:

1) Location. Spituk Monastery was centrally located on the outskirts of Leh, Ladakh’s cultural and infrastructural hub. Ridzong Monastery, in contrast, was decentralized, located in a little populated and difficult to access area of Ladakh, far from Leh.

2) Integration-Separation. Spituk Monastery was physically and socially integrated with a village of the same name and to the city of Leh and its surrounds. Ridzong Monastery was separated from its affiliated villages and isolated, physically and socially, from lay society.

3) Size. Spituk Monastery was large by local standards, both in the population of its monks and in its physical size. Ridzong Monastery was very small in comparison, both in its population and its physical size.
Field research took place over a period of one year and used a combination of informal and formal research methods that were carried out concurrently at both monasteries. These included traditional participant observation, general survey interviews, life history interviews and shadowing sessions.

In the course of conducting research in the field, additional similarities in the social environments of the two monasteries relevant to the overall objective of the study emerged. Two such similarities are especially notable. First, the age distribution of the samples from both monasteries displayed a pattern whereby there were many senior monks, many young monks, and few middle-aged monks. Both monasteries were very similar, therefore, with regards to any extent to which the social environment may be influenced by high numbers of a particular generation or cohort. Second, there appeared to be no difference in the monasteries’ conformance with mass monasticism. The samples of monks from both monasteries were nearly identical with regards to the average age at entry into monastic life, monks’ attributions of who was responsible for the decision, and the conditions present at the time. Therefore, there was nothing to suggest that the recruitment styles of the two monasteries were in any way different, both seeming to conform to values associated with mass monasticism.

Also in the course of conducting research several additional differences emerged. Most notable of these was the differential in where the monks at the two monasteries received their monastic educations. At Spituk Monastery the vast majority of monks had attended large monastic universities for several years, either in Tibet or in India, whereas
at Ridzong Monastery most monks had received their monastic education at Ridzong itself, never having spent time at any other institution.

It was found that the monks at the two monasteries were different in terms of the patterns in how they narrativized their life histories and in patterns of their daily lifestyle. These are summarized as follows:

For Spituk Monastery:

- In narratives of becoming a monk, monks frequently cited having some predisposition for the monastic lifestyle.
- In narratives of the monastic career, monks were frequently preoccupied with matters of study and achievement, particularly within the monastic educational system.
- Monks lived a highly autonomous lifestyle and engaged in individualistic pursuits.
- Monks had high levels of exposure to the outside world, both through their interactions with visitors to the monastery and access to media.
- Monks prioritized service to the local lay Buddhist population as well as a diversity of other outsiders who visited the monastery.

For Ridzong Monastery:

- In narratives of becoming a monk, monks frequently characterized society as having stood in opposition to their desires to become a monk.
• In narratives of the monastic career, monks emphasized the importance of ordination events and service to the monastery.

• Monks lived a highly communal and cooperative lifestyle and engaged in group activities.

• Monks had very little exposure or concern for the world outside of the monastery.

• Monks prioritized service to the monastic community.

Religiosity and the Social Environment

In literature, both popular and academic, as well as in the broader society within which they are situated, Tibetan Buddhist monks are often regarded as idealized representatives of the religious values that the monastic institution is founded upon, and their lifestyle is seen as a direct consequence of the institutionalization of these values. All too often it is assumed that to know these values is to know who monks are. But between religious fundamentals and their expression in a religious lifestyle lies a social environment that conditions how this lifestyle is lived. Both monasteries in this study represented unique social environments, each a combination of specific local conditions, social organization, cultural norms and histories. Together these characteristics form a set of constraints within which each monastery must operate and that mediate the expression of religious values.

The core religious values that Tibetan Buddhist monasticism is founded upon – renunciation, non-attachment and universal compassion – were essentially the same for both communities of monks. Both monasteries have sustained communities of monks who do not pursue the accumulation of wealth, intimate relationships or reproduction,
and they engage in religious activities ultimately aimed at the salvation of all living beings. Despite their differences, both monasteries are “successful” by the standards of Goldstein and Tsarong’s (1985) study. They have transformed seemingly indiscriminately chosen individuals into those idealized beacons of the possibility of enlightenment, the “single stick of incense burning slowly and steadily in a world of chaos and suffering” (Goldstein and Tsarong 1985, 21). And it is indeed the idea of the path to enlightenment that informs the religious lifestyles of both monasteries. But differences in how these monasteries operate, differences in these lifestyles, and differences in how they talk about themselves suggests that there are nuances in how this idea is expressed.

**Spituk Monastery: A Pastoral Religiosity**

Much of what typifies the lifestyle of the monks at Spituk Monastery suggests a religiosity very much oriented to the outside world. There is a high level of involvement in the social life of the surrounding village and beyond, and a particularly high amount of ritual activity that monks take part in on behalf of local lay Buddhists. Monks also interact on a daily basis not only with these local Buddhists, but with a remarkably diverse array of other visitors to the monastery. Monks exposure to the outside world is not limited to these interactions alone, but is intensified through their use of a variety media made easily accessible by the monastery’s location in the Leh area – itself providing a backdrop of cosmopolitan activity that the daily lives of Spituk’s monks play out in front of. The atomistic structure of the monastery necessitates an autonomous lifestyle optimized to best create conditions for the monk to fulfil core monastic values as
an individual. The environment of the monastery – dominated by the insistent presence of the outside world – provides a field of opportunity for the monk to express these values. Priority is given to service to the broader community, not just local lay Buddhists but all-comers to the monastery, particularly with regards to matters of religious stewardship.

The atmosphere at Spituk Monastery may also be responsible for patterns in how monks narrativized their life histories. Both in narratives of becoming a monk – often emphasizing monks’ predispositions for the monastic lifestyle – and in narratives of the monastic career – frequently preoccupied with study and achievement – legitimacy was a major concern. The fact that the monastic community was overwhelmingly made up of monks who had attended the premier institutions of the Gelukpa establishment far from Ladakh to receive their monastic education contributes to a social atmosphere in which one’s qualifications are of great import, particularly when pastoral care is such a major part of what is expected of a monk at Spituk.

Monasticism with a pastoral emphasis is typical in Ladakh due to the clerical role of monks in society and the norm being for monasteries to be integrated with a village. This kind of pastoral monasticism is demonstrated in great detail by Martin Mills in his study of Lingshed village and its monastery (2003). But at Spituk Monastery this pastoralism seems to extend beyond service to the local lay Buddhist population to include not only all those who visit the monastery but, by extension, a wider world of which the monks know they are a part. This may to some extent be due to the atmosphere of Drepung Loseling in Karnataka. Exile monasteries such as these, and the authorities that oversee them, recognize the importance of the global promotion of
Tibetan Buddhism as a strategy for the long-term survival of these institutions. The
monks are aware of their identity as religious authorities, exemplars of Buddhist values,
and the role they play in the world in facilitating the incremental movements of others
along the path to enlightenment.

*Ridzong Monastery: A Cenobitic Religiosity*

The monks at Ridzong Monastery live a lifestyle that suggests a religiosity
strongly oriented around the monastic community itself. Ridzong’s isolation precludes
its monks from being involved in the social life of any community besides its own on a
day-to-day basis. Monks’ involvement in the performance of ritual on behalf of the local
lay community is limited. This is especially so at the monastery itself which not only is
rarely the site of lay religious activity, but rarely active with anyone besides the monks
themselves and their staff of one lay resident. Their lifestyle involves very little exposure
to the outside world and their quiet surroundings bring into high relief their isolation from
it. The monastery is organized in such a way that each individual is dependent on the
total efforts of the group and its lay staff – centered on the monastery kitchen. The
lifestyle is highly communal and cooperative. The monastery – its location, organization,
unique rules and traditions – seems a symbol of renunciation itself, and the communal,
cooperative efforts of the monks allow for the severity of each individual’s renunciation
to be greater than what would be possible in an autonomous lifestyle. It is a cenobitic
religiosity – oriented around optimizing the collective spiritual interests of the
community itself and the monastery that houses it.
Narratives that the monks at Ridzong Monastery provided of their life histories were consistent with these values. Their narratives of becoming a monk - many of which portrayed society in opposition to their desire to live the monastic lifestyle - served to distance themselves from ordinary householder society and highlighted their defiance of it. Narratives of the monastic career emphasized service to the monastery and its community and the importance of ordainment – placing fundamental standards of monastic discipline above the standards of academic accomplishment.

While Ridzong Monastery is a part of the Gelukpa order, the central establishment’s displays of authority and elitism remain out of sight and out of mind, but for the rimpoché himself. It is the monastery that is the main concern. With little involvement of lay outsiders and very little exposure to the wider world beyond, the pastoral aspects of the monk’s position within the scheme of the path to enlightenment are suspended. The limited extent to which Ridzong engages in pastoral activities is necessitated by local lay demands for clerical authorities to carry out village rituals and not by values being promoted by the central Gelukpa authorities, as seems to be the case at Spituk. Core Buddhist ideals are expressed in a lifestyle oriented around the maintenance of conditions that allow each monk to move forward on the path through submission to the disciplinary standards of their vows and the specific rules of the monastery, enhancing their capacity for renunciation, and separating themselves from the lower realm of lay householder existence.
**Gelukpa Ideals: Scholasticism and Discipline**

It is apparent that the differential in monks’ exposure to outside monastic education between the two monasteries has a major influence on their respective social environments. At Spituk Monastery, the generational divide between elder monks who had studied in Tibet and younger monks who studied in south India brings to light an ongoing discourse within the Gelukpa order about what makes a “proper” monk. In his study of the recent history of Drepung Monastery in Tibet (1998), Melvyn Goldstein points out how in the old society, before 1959, the ideals of mass monasticism necessitated a liberal approach to standards of recruitment and discipline. There has thus been a long-established division between between so called “serious” monks who pursued a scholastic curriculum and ordinary monks who had not. Before 1959, these ordinary monks who enjoyed the low standards of discipline made up the vast majority of the populations of large monasteries like Drepung. After 1959, however, mass monasticism ceased in Tibet, and with the modest revival of Drepung Monastery following the Cultural Revolution, the fortunes and proportions of scholar monks at Drepung improved dramatically.

The recent shift in in monastic ideals favoring quality over quantity has not been confined to Tibet, but also appears to be characteristic of the ideals promoted by exile Gelukpa institutions in India (see Dreyfus 2003, 41). But while the reasons for this shift as it manifested at Tibet’s Drepung were based on restrictions imposed on the maximum population of the monastery by the Chinese government and the promotion of apolitical, non-activist contemplative religion – both on the part of Chinese cultural authorities and monastic administrators concerned with the monastery’s survival (see Goldstein 1998) –
at India’s Drepung, and other exiled Tibetan monasteries, this shift is motivated by an interest in promoting the spread of Tibetan Buddhism globally – never a concern of Tibetan authorities prior to 1959.

The scholastic values of the Gelukpa order have thus become especially important in recent years and the standards of education at the exile monasteries are now much higher than they were in Tibet’s old society. At Spituk Monastery, this shift from quantity to quality seems to have resulted in a generation gap. For the elder monks who had attended large monastic universities like Drepung in central Tibet prior to 1959, their experience – which had been normal for hundreds of years – is now seen in a new light. The younger monks who have been exposed to the higher standards of the new exile institutions in south India have raised the bar, and relative to them the educational experience of the elder monks is diminished.

The quality of the education that monks have received presumably would not have been a problem in the past, but the presence of the younger generation now highlights the quality of every monks’ experience with attending outside institutions and the status that comes with it. If the elder generation cannot compete with the standards of the education that the younger generation has enjoyed, they can reconstruct their claims to legitimacy along different lines. Invoking the pseudo-magical significance of having set foot on the sacred ground of Tibet, attended its legendary monasteries, enduring the hardships of another era and pointing out enduring accomplishments and good works are the counter-point to quality religious education that the elder monks have brought to the debate over what makes a “proper,” or “real,” monk.
None of this is apparent at Ridzong Monastery, where very few of its monks have been exposed to outside monastic education. It seems to be an example of a different kind of Gelukpa monastery, one where the focal point of its culture is not the values being promoted by the order’s central authorities, but by those established by the monastery’s founder. Tsultrim Nyima founded Ridzong not to serve as an example of scholastic values, but as a revitalization of the Gelukpa order’s standards of monastic discipline – as if reproducing in miniature Tsongkhapa’s reformations of the Kadampa order based on these same values. It was for its severe restrictions and high standards of discipline that Ridzong had become locally famous. Among other legendary restrictions, in the past monks were not permitted to leave the monastery, were served a single daily meal in their shaks, and even had to make their own robes.\textsuperscript{32} While many of these disciplinary standards appear to have recently become lax, or modified, they remain a major source of pride for Ridzong’s community. Renunciation, central to the Ridzong monk’s identity, is not so much about restriction and denial, but rejection – of kinship-based relationships, domesticity and worldliness.

\textit{The Varieties of Tibetan Buddhist Monastic Religious Experience}

This study has presented only two monasteries that by many standards are identical. Yet upon closer investigation it was found that there were significant differences in the respective daily lifestyles of their monks shaped not by differences in foundational doctrines or values, but by differences in local conditions, organizational structure, and cultural norms. The extent to which there are variations in the lifestyles

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{32} See Jivaka (1962) for descriptions of the strict controls that were imposed on the Ridzong community as recently as the 1950’s.}
and social environments of the broader field of Buddhist monasticism across the Tibetan cultural area may be much greater than superficial resemblances may suggest. Scholars of Tibetan Buddhism must take care not to give the impression of homogeneity when characterizing monastic institutions. Ethnographers in particular must resist the popular temptation to make generalizations about Tibetan Buddhist monasticism – an institution extremely varied in its traditions and social manifestations – based on what is seen at one monastery.

Monasteries are unique, architecturally bounded communities. While representing and promoting separation from society for the purpose of service, contemplation and spiritual aspiration, they are subject to the local geographic and socio-cultural context, operational standards that exist out of structural and organizational necessity, and historical circumstances that they have inherited. These factors work in concert to influence the social environment of a monastery. When the doctrine-based religious ideas and institutional values that it is founded upon are expressed in the lifestyles of the monks who call these places home, it is as much this environmental material that they have to work with as it is religious foundations that influence this expression. When examining the lives of monks one must recognize not only their religious foundations but the social environment in which their lives take place.

Religiosity in Tibetan Buddhist monasticism may be more plastic and variable than how it has been represented in the anthropological literature. What has been seen as antirelationalism (Ortner 1978, 38-39), economic optimization and emotional detachment (Goldstein and Tsarong 1985, 27-28), self-authorship (Paul 1990, 260) and other characterizations of Tibetan Buddhist monks may not be the direct expression of the
institutionalization of foundational religious values, but may result in no small part from the conditions of the social environment that mediate such values.

Not only by Ladakhi standards but by the standards of Tibetan Buddhist monasticism as a whole, Ridzong Monastery appears to be unusual in its organizational structure, operations and the daily lifestyle of its monks. Common core Buddhist monastic values of renunciation, non-attachment and universal compassion are at the root of their religiosity, but their communal and insular lifestyle brings out nuances in their expression. Based on some observations and conversations with monks at Ridzong Monastery, there are indications that it has very recently become the norm for monks associated with Ridzong to attend Drepung Loseling Monastery in south India, as is the norm at Spituk, and that there were several monks from Ridzong attending that university while fieldwork was being conducted. If this is true, the monastic population at Ridzong will gradually shift from one where most monks are educated in-house, to one that resembles Spituk, with monks being educated outside Ladakh and with a greatly expanded exposure to the world. Whether patterns of religiosity will likewise shift to something more pastoral or the influence of Ridzong’s isolation, founding ideology and intimate, communal lifestyle will maintain its more inward-turned religiosity will be of great interest for future study.

Limitations of the Study

Monastery Economics

Much of the organizational peculiarities of Ridzong Monastery – cell-like monks’ quarters, dependence on a centralized kitchen, and communality – may be due in part to
the possibility of having an economic system that is different from that of Spituk Monastery and from the norm of Tibetan Buddhist monastic organization. Typically, monks are economically independent units, their living quarters usually belonging their family line, and their income is derived from the maintenance of “salary fields” that are leased to lay villagers and, especially in Ladakh, and payments received for their work as freelance ritual specialists (see Goldstein and Tsarong 1985, 22-23). A different system is imaginable considering other aspects of Ridzong’s organization that are unusual. However, while this study did not directly examine the economic systems of the two monasteries, there was no evidence to suggest that the economic system of Ridzong was in any significant way different from that of Spituk which, like many other aspects of its organization, appeared to operate in a standard fashion. If this is the case, much of the way that Ridzong operates would suggest that funds are somehow pooled into a central account. Monastery economics are complex however, and in modern times there is an increasing involvement with external, even global, entities through the efforts of rinpoches and non-government organizations.

Ethnographer as Outsider

Relationships with the monks at both monasteries were certainly affected by the ethnographer’s status as chogspa, literally “outsider,” a word used by Ladakhi Buddhists to refer to non-Buddhists and foreigners of any kind. At both monasteries, the status of the ethnographer seemed to shift over time from that of a tourist, to a foreigner interested in learning about Buddhism, to a scholar interested in writing a book about the monastery. Perceptions of the ethnographer, informed by monks’ experiences with a
variety of foreigners and perceptions of the place from which he came, America, surely influenced how monks chose to represent themselves, their monastery and their religion in interviews. It is thus possible that monks’ emphases on achievement and legitimacy at Spituk Monastery and the propping up of the status and reputation of the monastery at Ridzong may have been exaggerated, and that some information or personal feelings may have been withheld. All monks understood that the statements they made in interviews and observations of their behavior in the presence of the ethnographer had a future fate that they would not be able to control.

**Study Design Limitations**

It is possible that the ethnographer could have achieved a greater level of intimacy in participant observation, detail in life history interviews, and knowledge of monastic social organization, economics and operations had research been focused on only one monastery or a greater emphasis been placed on pursuing rapport with key informants. These strategies were deliberately limited in favor of dividing research between two monasteries for the sake of comparison and including to the fullest extent possible a variety of monks resident at both for the sake of representation. Both of these strategies were essential to the research design and, to the best of the author’s knowledge, novel in the anthropological literature on Tibetan Buddhist monasticism. There were also practical advantages to this strategy. It was known from previous experience that a foreign, non-monastic, outsider spending a great deal of time at a monastery can become distracting, burdensome, or even a nuisance after a certain period of time. Dividing time between two monasteries allowed the ethnographer to avoid over-staying his welcome.
with each visit – research being pursued at one monastery while the other enjoyed a period of relief.

**Significance of this Study**

*Religious Lifestyles*

This study has served to illustrate that the force that culture exerts on a person is unavoidable, even within institutions designed to remove a person from “normal” society to follow more transcendent aspirations. But a monastery is inevitably a social, cultural and physical space. As such, monasticism does not necessarily create the conditions for a person to renounce society in favor of pursuing a higher lifestyle governed purely by religious values that transcend society, but creates an alternative culture, parallel to that of the society that it renounces. The fact that a monastic lifestyle is intended to be governed by specific religious values does not necessarily mean that a monk’s religious experience is any more a direct expression of such values than the religious experience of anyone else, for, as this study has shown, the forces that shape it can be very mundane, circumstantial and un-religious.

*Insights into Tibetan Buddhist Monastic Life*

Beyond demonstrating the importance of the role that the social environment plays in influencing patterns in the lifestyles of monks of Tibetan Buddhism, this study represents a contribution to Tibetan and Ladakhi cultural studies by providing an intimate look at some details and variations in the lives of ordinary monks that are hitherto little understood. While it is a well known feature of Tibetan Buddhist monasticism that
monks are first recruited and enter monastic life during childhood, this study is novel in its presentation of data on monks’ ages at entry for two samples of monks. Additionally, stories about the circumstances under which monks entered monasticism as told by the monks themselves provides an insightful look into a little known process. The monastic education process, the recent emergence of monastery schools in Ladakh, and in particular the system whereby monks attend outside monastic universities to receive an education before returning to their home monasteries – or not – is likewise not well understood and appears to be constantly changing. Acquiring data on this, collecting narratives of the process, and collecting narratives of other key events in monks’ careers in their own words is a significant contribution.

While organizational and lifestyle differences between the two monasteries in this study have been highlighted, much of what was common to each also represent details about monastic life in Ladakh that have been given very little attention. Taking a back seat to more overtly religious aspects of monastic life, accurate descriptions of monastic occupations are virtually absent in the literature, in particular the hierarchized cycles of occupations that monks move through during their careers, their association with ordainment status, and especially the notion of retirement in the context of monastic life – unknown to the author before conducting research in the field. Finally, the mundane details of the daily routines of ordinary monks within the confines of the monastery – what monks do and how they live – have unfortunately been given very little attention by those who have taken up the subject of Tibetan Buddhist monasticism in Ladakh and elsewhere. It is hoped that this study has succeeded in satisfying some curiosity about Tibetan Buddhist monastic life.
Study Design and Methodology

The comparative study design has proven especially fruitful for exposing the influence of the social environment on religiosity. If this study had been confined to one monastery, to what extent, if any, the patterns of religiosity that permeate the community are the consequence of local social environmental conditions would not be understood. Nearly all ethnographies of Tibetan Buddhist monasticism confine themselves to one community, and all too often it is to the analysis of doctrine, symbol and the norms and values of the broader cultural milieu that they turn to for explanations of the actions of monks. Not only might answers be found in the immediate environment in which monks live, but by systematically observing the monastic lifestyle and inquiring directly about who monks are, explanations of life within a monastery and its relationships with that which stands outside of it may be readily at hand within the monastery itself. Studies of monastic communities that follow a similar comparative model, employ a sampling strategy that represents the variety of its members, seek life stories and explanations of the monastic lifestyle through direct inquiry, and engage with patterns of daily life can provide an intimate portrait – with an understanding of the importance of its context – of monastic religious lifestyles that, while universal, are little understood.

Directions for Further Research

It became clear through this study that much more needs to be understood about the education of ordinary monks. Monastery schools, for gesnyens, in place of the traditional pupil-tutor system at the monastery, is a very recent development, as is the incorporation of government school-style curriculum in early monastic education. The current system where monks attend monastic universities in other locations scattered
It is the author’s impression that there are many more monks associated with the two monasteries in this study presently in residence at Drepung Loseling Monastery in Karnataka than there are at their home monasteries. It is unclear what circumstance are responsible for monks remaining at these institutions rather than returning to their home monasteries.

While there have been a few studies focused on the education system in institutions much like Drepung Loseling, for example Van Lochem (2004), Dreyfus (2003) and Lempert (2012), these have mostly focused on the curriculum of scholar monks, such as geshes, and their lifestyle. It would be important to know what the social environments of such places are like, the amount of exposure monks have to life outside of their walls, and how the lifestyles of such monasteries differ from that of the small traditional Tibetan monasteries that still exist in places like Ladakh. An increasing trend of Ladakhi monks attending these institutions, coupled with the same institutions’ increasing global profile – a trend that seems supported by the powers that be in the Tibetan Buddhist establishment, and a radical shift from the very isolationist attitude of these same institutions in Tibet before 1959 – may mean that Ladakhi Buddhist monasticism may gradually become centralized and orthodox, which might perhaps increase the gulf between monastic and lay society.

It should also be pointed out that there are many more potential permutations of types of social environments to be found in Tibetan Buddhist monasteries than the two represented in this study. There may be monasteries that have even more involvement with and exposure to lay and global society than Spituk Monastery, and there are certainly many monasteries in Ladakh and throughout the Tibetan cultural sphere that are
much more isolated than Ridzong Monastery. Also, because most monasteries in Tibetan Buddhism operate as mostly independent entities, “normal” patterns in the organizational structure and day-to-day operations of monasteries may be just that, and unusual and idiosyncratic monasteries such as Ridzong may be more prevalent across the Tibetan cultural area than has been assumed. Geoffrey Samuel’s broad survey of the varieties of types of religious communities that exist throughout the Tibetan cultural sphere (1993, 309-335) scratches at the surface of an area of inquiry that will show the true variety of Tibetan monastic institutions. More comparative studies such as this one may not only reveal a greater diversity of daily lifestyles, attitudes and religious orientations in Tibetan Buddhist monasticism than is presently understood, but may also help to pinpoint which aspects of their social environments have the greatest impact in shaping religiosity.
APPENDIX A: CONSENT MATERIALS

ORAL CONSENT SCRIPT: Religiosity in Tibetan Buddhist Monasticism: Phase One

I am doing a school research project about monks in Ladakh. I would like you to participate because I am interested in your life. I go to school at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio in the USA. I want to learn about your monastery and what life is like for monks. I plan to live in Ladakh for one year.

I want to learn what kind of people live at the monastery. I may want to have conversations in more detail about your life as a monk in the future, but for now I want to ask about your age, place of birth, age when you first became a monk, your level of religious education, and what your role is at the monastery. This will only take a few minutes of your time and if it is okay I would like to tape record our conversation and take photographs. Throughout the year I will visit the monastery regularly and would like to observe some of your activities. These visits will not disrupt daily routines. If it is okay I would like to take photographs. If at any time you do not wish to be observed, just tell me and I will not record any data about your activities.

There are no foreseeable risks beyond those of daily life to participating in my study. There are no direct benefits to you for participating in my study. I hope this research will help people learn about the lifestyle of Ladakhi monks and to learn more about Buddhist monasticism in Ladakh.

Everything you say will be kept private. Records and tapes will be stored in a locked cabinet. In reports about my study I will use different names to protect the identity of the monks who participate. My professor, my research assistants, and a committee at my university that helps protect human rights will be able to look at my records. Photos will be kept and may be published.

Your participation is voluntary. There is no penalty for not participating in the study. It is okay if you do not want to participate in interviews, be tape recorded, be photographed or have photographs published. You can stop participating in any of these activities or take a break at any time. To show my gratitude to the monastery, I will leave a donation of $200 (Rs. 8000) for the monastery at the end of research. If you have any questions, please ask before you agree to participate.

Are you willing to be interviewed? (yes/no)
Are you willing to be audio taped? (yes/no)
Are you willing to be photographed? (yes/no)
Are you willing to let your photograph be published? (yes/no)
Are you willing to be observed in your daily activities? (yes/no)

I will provide you with contact information for me, my teacher and my university. Whenever you have any questions or concerns about this study you can contact me, my teacher or my university.
ORAL CONSENT SCRIPT: Religiosity in Tibetan Buddhist Monasticism: Phase Two

I am doing a school research project about monasticism in Ladakh. I would like you to participate because I am interested in your life as a monk. I go to school at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio in the USA. I want to learn about monasticism and what life is like for monks.

In the future, I may want to ask you more details about your life as a monk, but for now I would like to ask you some simple questions about becoming a monk, your daily life, the activities you do as a monk, your experiences since becoming a monk and the practice of Buddhism. I would like to spend a couple hours over the next few days talking to you about your life. These visits will not disrupt daily routines. If it is okay I would like to tape record our conversations and take photographs.

There are no foreseeable risks beyond those of daily life to participating in my project. There are no direct benefits to you for participating in my project. I hope this research will help people learn about the lifestyle of Ladakhi monks and to learn more about Buddhist monasticism in Ladakh.

Everything you say will be kept private. Records and tapes will be stored in a locked cabinet. In reports about my study I will use different names to protect the identity of the monks who participate. My professor, my research assistants, and a committee at my university that helps protect human rights will be able to look at my records. Photos will be kept and may be published.

Your participation is voluntary. There is no penalty for not participating in the study. It is okay if you do not want to participate in interviews, be tape recorded, be photographed or have photographs published. You can stop participating in any of these activities or take a break at any time. You will receive a small gift of appreciation for your time. If you have any questions, please ask before you agree to participate.

Are you willing to be interviewed? (yes/no)
Are you willing to be audio taped? (yes/no)
Are you willing to be photographed? (yes/no)
Are you willing to let your photograph be published? (yes/no)
Are you willing to be observed in your daily activities? (yes/no)

I will provide you with contact information for me, my teacher and my university. Whenever you have any questions or concerns about this study you can contact me, my teacher or my university.
I am doing a school research project about monasticism in Ladakh. I would like you to participate because I am interested in your experiences of being a monk in Ladakh. I go to school at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio in the USA. I want to learn about monasticism and what life is like for monks.

I would like to talk to you more about your life as a monk, your religious experiences, and about the practice of Buddhism. These visits will not disrupt daily routines and can be scheduled at times that are convenient for you. I would like to talk several times over the next nine months. If it is okay I would like to tape record our conversations and take photographs.

There are no foreseeable risks beyond those of daily life to participating in my project. There are no direct benefits to you for participating in my project. I hope this research will help people learn about the lifestyle of Ladakhi monks and to learn more about Buddhist monasticism in Ladakh.

Everything you say will be kept private. Records and tapes will be stored in a locked cabinet. In reports about my study I will use different names to protect the identity of the monks who participate. My professor, my research assistants, and a committee at my university that helps protect human rights will be able to look at my records. Photos will be kept and may be published.

Your participation is voluntary. There is no penalty for not participating in the study. It is okay if you do not want to participate in interviews, be tape recorded, be photographed or have photographs published. You can stop participating in any of these activities or take a break at any time. I will be giving a donation to the monastery on behalf of those who participate in this study and you will receive a small gift of appreciation for your time. If you have any questions, please ask before you agree to participate.

Are you willing to be interviewed? (yes/no)
Are you willing to be audio taped? (yes/no)
Are you willing to be photographed? (yes/no)
Are you willing to let your photograph be published? (yes/no)
Are you willing to be observed in your daily activities? (yes/no)

I will provide you with contact information for me, my teacher and my university. Whenever you have any questions or concerns about this study you can contact me, my teacher or my university.
APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW INSTRUMENTS

Monastery Survey Form (Phase One)

Date _______________                                    Monastery ____________________________________________

Name _______________________________________ Age/d.o.b. __________________

Current residence _____________________________ Marital status _________________________

Ordainment status ______________________________________________________

When did you attain this ordainment status? ________________________________________

Have you ever spent time at any monastery outside Ladakh? _____________ If yes:
   Name of monastery _____________________________________________
   Location ______________________________________________________
   Dates ______________________________________________________

What is your level of education _____________________________________________

What languages do you speak? _____________________________________________

Do you have any education in subjects other than religion? ________________________

Current occupation ______________________________________________________
   Since _________________________ Until __________________________

Previous occupations ______________________________________________________

Place of birth ____________________________________________________________

Do you still have family members in that village? _______________________________

How often do you see members of your family? _________________________________

At what age did you become a monk? _________________________________________

Who made the decision for you to become a monk? ______________________________

With what monastery were you associated when you became a monk? _______________

If other than current, for how long were you there? ______________________________

Oral consent confirmed

Phase One: _____ Phase Two: _____ Phase Three: _____
Life History Interview Instrument: Types and Ordering of Questions (Phase Two)

Tell me about your life before you became a monk?
How was the decision made for you to become a monk?
What was it like when you first became a monk?
What was it like to become a getsul?
What was it like to go to [Tibet/Karnataka/Other]?
What was life like during your studies at [Tibet/Karnataka/Other]?
What was it like to become a gelong?
What was it like to return to Ladakh after being away for your studies?
What is your occupation like?
What has your life been like here?
What are some occupations you’ve served?
What was it like to retire?
How do you imagine your future?
What daily habit would be beneficial for others to do for themselves?
Anything else?

Shadowing Follow-Up Focused Interviews: Sample Interview (Phase Three)

I have many questions to ask you about your daily life activities. I want to ask questions about what some of these activities mean and what kinds of thoughts you have about them. We have no time limits. So please take as much time as you would like to answer these questions.

I noticed that almost every morning you perform a *puja* by yourself in the Dolma Lhakhang.
   Can you please tell me what is that *puja*?
   Do you know what is the meaning of that *puja*?
   Do you know what is the effect of that *puja*?
   Why is it important for you to perform that *puja* every morning?

I noticed that a big part of your daily life is keeping the butter lamps full and lit throughout the day.
   Do you know what is the meaning of the butter lamps?
   Why is it important for you to keep the butter lamps always full and lit?

In the mornings you fill the water offering bowls in the chokhang, the Dolma lhakhang, and the Sangdu lhakhang, and in the evenings you empty them and clean them.
   Do you know what is the meaning of the water offering bowls?
   Why is it important for you to fill them in the morning and empty them at night?

You spend a lot of time cleaning things in this area. You clean the insides of the chapels and the outside area everyday and sometimes you clean the butter lamps and the cabinets that the butter lamps are in.
   Why is it important that you always keep things clean?
Do you know any Buddhist teachings about keeping things clean in the monastery?

Sometimes you also do some maintenance work in the chapels and in all the areas you look after.
  Why is it important for you to do this kind of work?
  Do you like doing this kind of work?

Sometimes people visit here and request you to perform some *puja*.  
  What kinds of *pujas* do you perform for these people?
  Why is it important for you to perform these *pujas*?
  Do you like performing these *pujas*?

Many other visitors come every day to pray in the chokhang and Dolma Lhakhang and you always stop what you are doing to open the doors and do whatever is needed to make it possible for them to pray.
  Why is it important for you to always allow these people to pray?
  Do you know any Buddhist teachings about helping other Buddhist people to pray?
  Do you like doing that kind of work?

You have these dogs here and the cat.  You spend a lot of time feeding them, taking care of them, talking to them, and treating them with such kindness.
  Why is it important for you to take care of these animals?
  Do you know any Buddhist teachings about taking care of such animals?
  Do you like taking care of the animals?

Whenever you have time available you sit and read *pechas*.
  What kind of *pechas* do you like to read?
  Do you know what is the meaning of these *pechas*?
  Do you know what is the effect of reading these *pechas*?
  Why is it important for you to read these *pechas*?

Often while you are doing work you also say the mantras a lot.
  What mantras are you saying?
  Do you know what is the meaning of these mantras?
  Do you know what is the effect for you to say these mantras?
  Why is it important for you to say these mantras?

Many times during the day you have to go to your *shak* to prepare tea or some food for yourself.
  Do you enjoy preparing food for yourself?
  Why is it important for you to always take time to prepare tea and food?

Often you also have to wash your robes and take care of other personal items.
Why is it important for you to take care of these kinds of items? Do you know any Buddhist teachings about taking care of these kinds of items?

In the evenings you go to your shak and relax a bit. Sometimes you listen to the radio or watch television. Do you think that taking some time to relax every day is an important thing for you to do?

Sometimes other monks come to visit you or sometimes you meet some other monks at the water tap and you talk to each other. Do you think that it is important for the monks at this monastery to talk to each other?

When you were a young gesnyen and during the years that you spent at Drepung Loseling in Karnataka you learned a lot of Buddhist teachings. What kinds of teachings that you learned while you were a young monk are most important to you for the way you live your life now? Why?

I think your life is very important and I think that all kinds of people can benefit from learning about the monk’s life. What do you enjoy most about your current life as a monk? Why? What do you enjoy least about your current life as a monk? Why? If you had the ability to make any kind of change to this monastery, what would you change? Why?
REFERENCES CITED


