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The Monastery Rules: Buddhist Monastic Organization in Pre-modern Tibet

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1. INTRODUCTION

*How on earth do all these thousands of monks spend their time? How are they supported? And what good, if any, do they do?*¹

Theory and Practice

The level of influence of any given religion on a society or a culture and the nature of the relationship between doctrine and reality, theory and practice, are much debated issues. It is difficult, if not impossible, to determine these relationships. As Spiro puts it: 'It is one thing to assert that religion has a specified influence on one or another of a society's social or cultural institutions, and another to demonstrate it.'² Until recently, it was common to explain social practices in societies on the basis of their religious doctrine, often with written texts as the sole source. This seems particularly to have been the case with regard to Buddhism, both within Buddhist Studies and outside of it. The result that this method of inquiry tends to yield is that – perhaps unsurprisingly – reality and doctrine are often at odds with each other. Or so they seem. The dichotomies, problems, and contradictions that are blatantly obvious to the Buddhist Studies specialist are often invisible to Buddhists themselves, including the Buddhist literati. Rather than continuously looking for paradoxes, it may be more useful to take the perspective of Buddhists as the point of departure.

In doing this, it is important to avoid 'culturalist' theoretical thinking – the notion that people do things simply *because* they are Buddhists, for this would be to ignore the question of how this 'ideological relevance is secured (and maintained) as the basis for social action in any particular context.'³ Furthermore, one also should not uncritically reiterate certain 'standard' Buddhist narratives that have evolved over time. Nonetheless, these narratives – and perhaps more importantly – the issues that they remain silent about need to be tested and investigated.

Collins' work *Selfless Persons* investigates 'how the fact of social differences in thought and practice are taken account of *by Buddhist doctrine itself*, and how they affect it.'⁴ Here I propose the inverse of this approach. In other words, I propose to explore the ways in which social differences and relationships existed within a Buddhist society in practice and, subsequently, to examine whether – if at all – these differences were seen to be justified by aspects of Buddhist thinking by figures that had an active, authoritative role within monastic communities. Here the point of departure is not 'Buddhist doctrine' but realities on the ground. Thus, the main question is essentially two-fold: What were the social differences and relationships in Tibetan Buddhist societies and how were they taken into account by Buddhist authors on monastic matters?

In this study the focus lies on pre-modern Tibet.⁵ When we examine pre-modern Tibetan Buddhism as interpreted and propounded by monastic authors, can

¹ These are questions the mountaineer and traveller Spencer Chapman, who reached Lhasa in the 1930s, asked himself. Spencer Chapman, 1984 [1938]: 171.

² Spiro, 1971: 425.

³ Mills, 2003: 340, 1.

⁴ Collins, 1982: 6, 7.

⁵ By 'pre-modern' here I mean the time before 1959 and 'Tibet' here refers to 'ethnographic Tibet', an area encompassing much more space than the Tibet on any map, however contested its borders may be. For the current purpose, the unifying factor is the presence and dominance of monastic Buddhism. While this study mainly addresses Tibetan Buddhist societies, Bon monasticism is also occasionally referred to. Because Bon monastic organizational features are largely identical with Buddhist monasticism the two Tibetan religions will be often consciously conflated. Also see Kvaerne, 1970:

we speak of such a thing as a homogenous understanding of issues of social justice, which includes all manner of general differences among people and (perceived) inequalities such as judicial matters, education, social mobility, economic distribution and opportunities, and class? Did the rules as stated in the monastic ‘law’ codes imported from India (Vinaya) and in textual materials on the individual monks’ vows (*prātimokṣa*) – shared by all Tibetan monastics – create a uniform set of morals that guided monks when dealing with both internal and external affairs? Or could it be that other factors were at play in the development of monastic rules and regulations and that, more generally, there existed an alternative set of standards that ‘dictated’ how to treat others, how to relate to the status quo? Naturally, it is to be expected that Buddhist ethics, as communicated by Buddhist texts such as biographies (*rnam thar*),⁶ *Jātaka*-tales, sūtras, ‘introductory’ works (*lam rim*), to name but a few, had some influence on monks’ sense of morality. However, it is equally plausible that there were other factors that were, to a certain extent, decided by cultural, economical, political and geographical matters, and that monks were influenced by both the religious and the political affiliation of the monastery and the charisma of particular spiritual leaders.

Social Justice, Buddhism, and Society

*The laity are tolerant both in religious and social matters, but not the priesthood.*⁷

Monasteries traditionally played a big role in the lives of ordinary people in Tibet. To date, however, relatively little is known about the role of the monks in Tibetan society. Furthermore, the impact of monastic Buddhism on other expressions of Buddhism as well as on a wide range of aspects of Tibetan culture is tremendous. To contrast, whereas Christian monasticism is only of secondary importance to its faith,⁸ Buddhist monasticism is generally seen as primary to Buddhism. Its importance is brought to the fore both in Buddhist doctrine and Buddhist practice. That Buddhist monastic institutions then not only were a religious ‘driving force’ but also became organizations that dealt with more than religion alone should, therefore, not come as a surprise. As most are aware, in countries where Buddhism was adopted as the main religion, monasteries came to be major players in politics, economics, culture, art and society as a whole.

Christianity, and particularly the Christian clergy, has historically been directly involved in the establishment of various social institutions, most notably schools, poor houses, and hospitals. The Christian Church is viewed by many to still have a strong social function. But while the Christian monastic institution, as it existed in medieval Europe, is seen as the earliest organization and a model for later institutes such as schools, orphanages and hospitals, the Buddhist monastic

188. While the phrase is used throughout this work, I am aware that a singular ‘Tibetan society’ does not, and never did, exist. Furthermore, all concepts of society should be seen in the context of a specific time and space.

⁶ I here largely follow the so-called ‘Wylie-system’, except for that generally no hyphens or capital letters are used in the transliteration, see Wylie, 1959. However, where applicable, the first root-letter of Tibetan works, personal names and place-names is capitalized. Often recurring place-names, which include the names of monasteries, are romanized, the Tibetan transliteration is given in brackets upon first appearance. Places and monasteries mentioned only once or twice are only given in transliteration. When canonical (i.e. *bKa’ ’gyur* and *bsTan ’gyur*) material is cited, the Tōhoku catalogue number of the Derge version is given.

⁷ Bell, 1998 [1946]: 21.

⁸ Silber, 1985: 252.

community, according to Spiro, ‘provides no model for the organization of lay society.’⁹ While it is doubtful that this remark is applicable to all Buddhist cultures, Spiro’s comment shows how this notion of the religious specialists as the guardians of social institutions and social justice is engrained in the psyche of many modern (Western) thinkers and commentators – be they academically or otherwise affiliated. People who are aware of the role Christian monasticism has played throughout history, sometimes associate the clerical role with particular worldly concerns, social service, community welfare, economic justice, and charity work. Evidence for this influence can easily be found throughout the history of the Christian church.¹⁰ This is what makes the question why certain other religions and non-Christian societies have not given rise to the same types of institutions so ubiquitous, as it is difficult to not view the other through the lens of one’s own cultural and religious background. Even though this study has to engage the above question – simply put: ‘why not Buddhism?’ – this is not primary to this research. This is because the starting point in this study is the emic position – that is to say, how (monastic) Buddhists view society, what is morally just, and the duties and rights of individuals and institutions.

Buddhism is often seen as a religion that contains strong expressions of morality: a religion that has an emphasis on orthopraxy, rather than orthodoxy.¹¹ This focus on ‘right practice’, however, has not materialized into pre-modern Buddhist societies’ development of well-organized ‘faith-based’ social institutions. This notable absence has opened up various varieties of Buddhism throughout Asia – and perhaps Tibetan Buddhism in particular – to the criticism of being insufficiently socially engaged. This accusation did not just stem from the camp of those who were heavily influenced by certain Judeo-Christian notions or from those who had a political or ideological axe to grind. The Japanese Buddhist monk Ekai Kawaguchi who travelled widely in Tibet between 1900 and 1903, comments on this lack of ‘social engagement’ by ‘Tibetan priests’.¹² He accuses them of being entirely disengaged from societal problems. Kawaguchi sees this social aloofness as a result of the Tibetan ideal of a hermitic lifestyle, in which practitioners willingly cordon themselves off from the outside world. Yet, he explicitly did not see this as a shortcoming of Buddhism itself.¹³ This is in sharp contrast with the attempts by certain non-Buddhist commentators to explain the lack of pre-modern institutions that promote social equality and justice in Buddhist countries: if the connection with religion is made at all, the finger is usually pointed at the Buddhist faith in general, and the doctrine of karma in particular. In other instances, scholars portray the Buddhist religion as nothing more than a power-grabbing ploy.¹⁴

That Buddhist societies of old did not give rise to social institutions – or for that matter well-defined concepts of social justice – in the way that they existed in the Christian world does not mean that Buddhism has had no influence on society as a whole. Rather than asking the question why Buddhist societies have developed

⁹ Spiro, 1971: 428. While Spiro’s research generally focuses on Burmese Buddhism, some of his comments – like this one – he saw to be applicable to all Buddhist societies.

¹⁰ Spiro also makes this point, *ibid.*: 287.

¹¹ This is also argued by Gombrich, 2006 [1988]: 113.

¹² It is most likely that he means monks by ‘priests’ but this is not entirely certain when one takes the notion of ‘priests’ in Japan into account.

¹³ Kawaguchi, 1909: 373.

¹⁴ This appears to be a view expressed by Parenti, who regards pre-modern Tibet as ‘little more than a despotic retrograde theocracy of serfdom and poverty, so damaging to the human spirit, where vast wealth was accumulated by a favored few who lived high and mighty off the blood, sweat, and tears of the many.’ See Parenti, 2003: 590.

differently from Christian ones, it appears more rewarding, at least from the outset, to examine the way in which Buddhism as practised has affected certain societies and conceptualisations of society. In this study the focus lies on the pre-modern Tibetan society and how monastic Buddhism has affected it.

The term ‘social justice’, a phrase most commonly associated with political philosophies on government and liberally employed when an ideal society is envisioned, was previously briefly mentioned.¹⁵ It is a notion that, while only irregularly referred to throughout this work, has influenced the topics that are discussed. Social justice can be seen as both a process and a goal. Generally speaking, the predominant notion of social justice is one that sees it as a *telos*, a universal truth, and a tool for political rhetoric. According to Minogue, social justice is a belief that the government has the duty to redistribute wealth, implying that the agent of social justice can only ever be the state.¹⁶ He sees social justice as an *a priori* notion of justice, as it depends on a ‘conception of society as a harmonious set of roles and relations.’¹⁷

For the current purpose it is important to note that social justice as it is conceived of today is a construct, a desideratum that has almost entirely originated from developments in the history, culture and religion of the West. When applying or ‘superimposing’ a Western construct onto Asian societies one thus has to tread with care. I do not believe, however, that merely because the term social justice has originated in the West, it is rendered meaningless when the focus is on a non-Western society.

For the purposes of this study, it is important to move away from anything that is prescriptive: the social justice perceived of as an ideal, sought after by politicians and the socially engaged, does not merit extensive research. The primary concern here lies with the *processes* or machinations of social justice.¹⁸ Thus, in this context the term ‘social justice’ concerns the idea of what is right or just, as well as the expressions thereof within a certain social context. Social justice has to do with the way human beings are or should be treated. This approach is not ideosyncratic, for an online sociology guide defines social justice as a process in the following way:

Social justice is also used to refer to the overall fairness of a society in its divisions and distributions of rewards and burdens [...] Social justice derives its authority from the codes of morality prevailing in each culture.¹⁹

In investigating social justice in Tibetan society (or any given society) it is thus not important to engage the question of whether people were happy;²⁰ rather, the focus should lie on the opportunities a society provided people with. Some of these opportunities seen to greatly improve lives are economic and social mobility, access to education and healthcare and – to a lesser extent – institutional justice.

If social justice derives its authority from the prevailing codes of morality, what were those codes and how did they come to be? Here, various degrees of social

¹⁵ e.g. Rawls, 1999 [1971].

¹⁶ Minogue, 2005 [1998]: 256.

¹⁷ *ibid.*: 258.

¹⁸ I agree with Palmer and Burgess, who comment that depending on the context, social justice ‘can be a near-synonym for any one of several forms of justice, including distributive justice, compensatory justice, retributive justice, procedural justice, or restorative justice.’ Palmer and Burgess, 2012: 4.

¹⁹ <http://www.sociologyguide.com/weaker-section-and-minorities/Social-Justice.php> (viewed: 18-01-2012).

²⁰ Sen, 2009: 283.

justice can be found by closely studying the rights, opportunities, and the level of equality a society grants its members, but when looking at social justice in a historical context *the conceptualizations* of social justice can be understood by studying the people who comment on that society. In the case of historical Tibetan societies, these commentators, often viewed as guardians of social mores, were almost invariably monks. The relevant ‘codes of morality’ were not directly taken from the corpus of Vinaya texts themselves, but, among others, from works that existed in parallel with the Vinaya. These were works that contain rules adapted to the specific time and place. These texts, the primary sources of this research, are monastic guidelines (*bca’ yig*). These works were mostly written for the monk populations of specific monasteries but they also affected the lay population, occasionally explicitly, and – as I shall argue – always implicitly. This is not to say that social norms were not also formed by other members of the ‘elite’ in Tibet, but it remains the case that the lion’s share of written material we have access to was written by monastics.

I fully agree with Minogue’s assertion that ‘the best source for understanding what social justice means is not the writings of normative political philosophers but the point at which philosophy touches social policy.’²¹ To translate that to the topic of Buddhism and social justice, it means that what we need to look at is the point where *Buddhism* – problematic though that term may be – touches social policy and practice. From there we can explore whether and to what extent (monastic) social policy was informed by notions of justice implicit within certain doctrines of Buddhism, at certain points in time.

In the context of pre-modern Tibet, even the mere *description* of the processes of social justice is an enterprise that has hardly ever been undertaken, let alone their analysis. One reason for this is that Tibetan politics on the one hand and religious doctrine on the other have historically taken centre-stage for most scholars involved in Tibetan Studies, Buddhist Studies and (World) History. Chayet notes ruefully that ‘it is true that the economic and social history of Tibet has still to be written.’²²

Some may argue that to use the concept of social justice in the context of Tibetan society is anachronistic, or ‘presentist’. Descriptions of the past using terms that express present notions and values have been heavily criticized. Although the term ‘social justice’ has only come about in the modern period and is not perfectly or comfortably translatable in any Buddhist language of the past, simply not using the term does not help us to understand Buddhist beliefs and practices that would now fall under the header ‘social justice’.²³ The term is here used with an awareness both of the culture I write about as well as of the culture I write from.²⁴ In addition, to use ‘external categories’ or terms based on or derived from these categories provisionally is not only convenient but also beneficial as doing this has the potential to stimulate ‘useful discussion about just what it is that these terms fail to capture.’²⁵

My assumption is that the processes that decided the level of equality and opportunity for Tibetans in pre-modern Tibetan societies underlie a certain *Weltbild*, a set of notions or motivations. These motivations may be self-described as Buddhist,

²¹ Minogue, 2005 [1998]: 262, 3.

²² Chayet, 2003: 86.

²³ This point is also made by Palmer and Burgess, who are concerned with the question of whether religions actually deal with the language of social justice. They note: ‘Clearly, many do not use (or have not historically used) the language of social justice. At the same time, that a religion does not use (or has not historically used) the language of social justice does not mean that it has not struggled with issues that in some way qualify as social justice issues.’ See Palmer and Burgess, 2012: 2.

²⁴ For more on this issue see Hull, 1979.

²⁵ Pomeranz, 2007: 85.

with the possibility of them being somehow grounded in established doctrine. Alternatively, they are merely made out to be so. At the same time, certain aspects of pre-modern Tibetan culture were deliberately disassociated from the Buddhist religion, be it either by works written in pre-modern times or by contemporary Tibetans in- and outside of Tibet, for the likely reason that these phenomena did not fit the Buddhist narrative.

Beside making sense of the ways in which issues of social justice manifested in the Tibetan (monastic) society, it is the underlying motivations or notions that have in some way or the other a connection to Buddhism that I endeavour to understand and analyse. Because the monastery in Tibet took centre stage in Tibetan society and was often seen as having an undefined moral authority over Tibetans, the focus lies on these ‘codes of morality’ and notions of social justice held by monastics. In order to understand the viewpoints held by monks, it is imperative to understand the structure they inhabited: the way the monastery was organized and how it functioned.

On Sources and Lack thereof

As all are well aware, monastics played an important role in almost all aspects of Tibetan society. But the exact, or even approximate, nature of that role has hardly been studied. Carrasco, writing in 1959, comments that since ‘the church plays such an important role in Tibet, it should be examined as a whole and in its relation to the lay society.’²⁶ To date this research has not been undertaken. Tibetan monasteries have been both lionized and demonized for their impact on pre-modern society in Tibet. Critics chastized the Tibetan monastic institutions in particular for their economic dominance over large sections of the population and the apparent lack of social engagement.²⁷ However, despite the existence of conflicting views on the underlying motivations of monasteries and monastics in their management of affairs, it is undeniable that Tibetan monastic Buddhism is of primary importance for understanding not merely the culture but also the history of pre-modern Tibet.

It is estimated that between 997 and 1959 over six thousand bigger and smaller monasteries (*dgon sde*) were built in political Tibet alone.²⁸ They exerted great religious, cultural, political and economic influence over the general populace. Furthermore, monks were the authors of the lion’s share of the Tibetan language works now available to us. Although the literature these monks produced is most regularly utilized by academics for the study of complicated doctrinal conundrums, some of these texts contain valuable information on various aspects of pre-modern Tibetan society and how it was conceived of by monastic authors. It needs to be noted, however, that the majority of the documents that bear direct witness to the role of monasteries in Tibet before the 1950s appear to be lost forever. Land-deeds, contracts, monasteries’ accounts, official correspondence and the like were all but destroyed, first when the People’s Liberation Army arrived in Tibet in the 1950s and later during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976).²⁹ Thus, in the process of examining

²⁶ Carrasco, 1959: 218.

²⁷ See for example Bataille, 1988 and Parenti, 2003: 579-90.

²⁸ *Bod kyi shes yon*: 67. Here political Tibet is taken to consist of the current-day Tibet Autonomous Region, Kham and Amdo.

²⁹ A fair number of documents valuable to social historians that have escaped destruction have been catalogued and published in <http://www.dtab.uni-bonn.de/tibdoc/index1.htm> and in many collections edited by Dieter Schuh. Manuscripts found on the periphery of the Tibetan state have been also collected. See, for example: Ramble and Drandul, 2008. Many valuable sources are not available to (most) academics and are kept in Beijing and in the Lhasa archives (*Lha sa yig tshags khang*). It is unrealistic to expect that access to them will be possible in the foreseeable future.

the monastery's position in Tibetan society, it is important to be aware of the lacunae regarding documents that contain information on social policy.

To fully understand the role monasteries played in Tibet throughout history it is essential to first of all look at the way in which the monasteries themselves operated and the general mind-set of the monks with regard to Tibetan (lay) society. In other words, any account of pre-modern Tibetan civilization would be incomplete without a more comprehensive appreciation of the impact of Tibetan monasticism on the society as a whole. Ellingson similarly talked of 'the need for understanding the monastic system, the most distinctive and characteristic of Tibetan socio-political institutions, on its own terms in order to develop a balanced and integral comprehension of Tibetan polity as a whole.'³⁰

The way in which scholars of contemporary Tibetan monasticism study the current state of the monastery shows how relatively little is known about the basic organizational structure of the monastery and the extent to which local and global politics as well as 'modernity' has affected this structure.³¹ A complicating factor, as is demonstrated in this study, is that organizational structures varied over time and place. However, when viewed comparatively, for example by looking at Christian monasticism, Tibetan monastic policies changed surprisingly little. While the political climate has changed entirely for monks, both in exile and in Tibet, the monkhood can be said to be for the most part 'a continuation of what came before in Tibet.'³² This study largely deals with Tibetan religion and social history before the 1950s, and therefore, when general statements are made, they are often in the past tense. This is not to say, however, that these policies practices or rationales have ceased to exist after 1959. In many cases – of which I highlight only a few – these practices continue to the present. More research on contemporary Tibetan monasticism, both in exile and Tibet, is needed to understand what has changed and what has remained the same.

By examining and comparing monastic guidelines, in which basic behavioural and organizational rules are set out and which are seen as pivotal to the monastery for which they were written, it becomes possible to describe the kinds of ideas that touch upon prevalent issues of social justice and to understand specific conditions prevailing at a certain monastery, which influenced monastic behaviour. This information is supplemented by materials that provide context: recent scholarship, monastic histories,³³ ethnographic and travellers' accounts and oral history. The combination of these sources makes it possible to obtain a more comprehensive appreciation of the historical, economic and political context. One type of source material that features in this study is oral history: interviews with elderly monks and monks in administrative positions. On the basis of the information they provide it is possible to understand how texts were used and to determine the extent to which their contents affected monastics in daily life. The primary textual material, the monastic guidelines written for the individual monasteries (*bca' yig*), is largely prescriptive and may paint an idealized picture of monastic life. However, close reading enables us to gain an understanding of the mainly religious, but also political, economic, and cultural ideas that influenced the lives of the monks in the monastic institutions as well as those of lay-people. So far, I have been able to locate over two hundred sets of monastic guidelines.

³⁰ Ellingson, 1990: 218.

³¹ For works that attempt to understand contemporary monastic Tibetan Buddhism in part through the lens of its history see Caple, 2011; Makley, 2007; Mills, 2003; Hillman, 2005.

³² Gyatso, 2003: 236.

³³ e.g. *gdan rabs* or *dkar chag*.

In order to get relatively representative results I selected texts on the basis of – first of all their availability – their locality (centre and periphery; historical Tibet and beyond);³⁴ their religious affiliation (all schools are represented); the respective economic circumstances (‘state’ sponsored, privately sponsored, partially self-sufficient, maintained by another monastery), and the age of the texts. It is noteworthy that the majority of the currently available bca’ yig hail from the 17th and 18th century. This is likely due to the organizational overhaul that took place among monasteries as well as the building of new monasteries after the establishment of the Ganden Phodrang (*dGa’ ldan pho brang*) government in 1642. In this year Tibet became politically unified under one leader, the Dalai Lama, with him taking on both temporal and religious authority. However, texts from the 12th to the 16th and the 19th and 20th centuries also feature widely in this research.

With regard to the religious affiliation of the texts, it is striking that the majority of the bca’ yig that are generally available³⁵ were written for Gelug (*dGe lugs*) monasteries. It is tempting to extrapolate from that and state that the composition of monastic guidelines was largely a Gelug enterprise and to conclude that rules and discipline in the monasteries were deemed more important in the Gelug school than in others. Taking into account, however, the greater access the Gelug school historically had over the printing presses and the fact that more collected works (*gsung ’bum*) by Gelug masters have been (re-)printed and digitized, it comes as no surprise that there is a greater wealth of bca’ yig for Gelug monasteries available at the moment. In fact, bca’ yig written for monasteries of *all* other traditions exist. Paying due attention to the unevenness in the number of available materials, this research is based on a broad selection intended to be representative of the variety of monasteries that existed in greater political Tibet and its cultural sphere, thereby including Mongolia, Sikkim, Bhutan, Ladakh, Spiti, and Nepal.³⁶

Using the above mentioned sources, this study intends to address the following questions: What was the role of the monastery and its monks in pre-modern Tibetan society? How are concepts of justice and right action in society conceived of by the religious agent (i.e. the monk-author)? To what extent are these concepts products of, or grounded in, Buddhist thought? What impact have these concepts made on society as a whole? Before engaging with these issues, the problematic nature of two pivotal terms employed here – monk and monasteries – needs to be addressed.

What Makes a (Tibetan) Monk?

There does not appear to be a consensus on the definition of a monk in the context of Buddhist Studies. Silk, while acknowledging that the monastery would have been populated with various kinds of Buddhists, appears to translate the word ‘monk’ only for the term *bhikṣu* (*dge slong*).³⁷ Similarly, Clarke³⁸ also excludes ‘novices’

³⁴ Monastic guidelines from outside the Tibetan polity can be equally informative on monastic policies. A collection of manuscripts that contains a small number of monastic guidelines for Sikkimese monasteries is found in Schuh and Dagyal, 1978.

³⁵ For example, through www.tbrc.org.

³⁶ Throughout this study, when Tibetan texts are cited, their spelling and grammar is not corrected. Alternatives or emendations are only suggested, when it affects the understanding of the contents or when it is in some other way significant.

³⁷ Silk, 2008: 65.

³⁸ He simultaneously points out that by choosing the word ‘monk’ as a translation of *bhikṣu* the Buddhist renunciate is burdened with ‘unwanted cultural baggage.’ See Clarke, 2014: 164.

(*śrāmaṇera*, *dge tshul*) from the classification of monks.³⁹ Were we to follow such an ‘exclusive’ definition of the term monk – the English word itself is of course also not without its own semantic problems –⁴⁰ we would probably not be able to class the majority of Tibetans living in monasteries, today and in pre-modern Tibet, as monks. For the above reasons, the word ‘monk’ covers a broad range of Sanskrit and Tibetan terms, throughout this study.

In the texts studied here, we come across several terms referring to (male) inhabitants of a monastery,⁴¹ such as *ban de*⁴² *grwa pa*, *btsun pa* (S. *bhadanta*), *bla ma*,⁴³ and *dge ’dun pa*. This overarching group of people who have ‘renounced’ lay-life, or ‘have gone forth’ (*rab tu byung ba*, S. *pravrajyā*) is most regularly subdivided into *dge tshul* (S. *śrāmaṇera*)⁴⁴ and *dge slong*. Sometimes, when an author wants to include everyone in the monastery the *dge bsnyen* (S. *upāsaka*) are also mentioned, but in this context this word refers not simply to lay-practitioners but to ‘aspiring monks’. These are usually young boys, who have not yet been allowed or are not (yet) able to take *dge tshul* vows.⁴⁵

Although Seyfort Ruegg is right in claiming that the division between lay-men and monks was not always straightforward throughout the history of Buddhism,⁴⁶ the Tibetan normative distinction between a member of the Sangha and a lay-person is fairly clear-cut. Of course, there were (and are) what scholars often perceive as grey

³⁹ *ibid.*: 171, n. 2. In many works, the term *bhikṣu* is translated as ‘fully ordained monk,’ probably referring to the fact that this person has taken the full gamut of vows (*bsnyen par rdzogs pa*, S: *upasampadā*).

⁴⁰ Students and scholars of Buddhism are less likely to conflate the Buddhist monk with his younger Christian counterpart, the latter of whom has taken vows of poverty, obedience, and stability, and so on. I ask other readers to keep an open mind every time the word ‘monk’ is mentioned.

⁴¹ On the – equally problematic – term ‘monastery’ see below.

⁴² Various spellings of this loanword exist. According to Snellgrove it is derived from Sanskrit *vandya*, from which the anglicized Japanese term ‘*bonze*’ is also derived, see Snellgrove, 2002 [1987]: 419, n. 71. However, there is now a consensus that the word *ban de* is more likely to represent the honorary Sanskrit appellation *bhadanta* (T. *btsun pa*). Davidson mentions a group of historical agents called the Bendé (*ban de*) who were intimately associated with the ancient royal dynasty. He describes them as ‘part clergy, part laity, and intermittently observing some monastic traditions.’ See Davidson, 2005: 11. Later on, it appears that the word became somewhat less ambiguous; a prominent example is the Fifth Dalai Lama’s penname *Za hor gyi ban dhe*: ‘the monk from Za hor’. The development and use of the term *ban de* is in need of further investigation.

⁴³ The word *bla ma* (in this work mainly written as ‘lama’ for ease of reading) is another very problematic term. The multifarious nature of this word has caused no end of serious misunderstandings (for a recent example, see Hillman, 2005: 34, n. 16). While acknowledging that this term is in desperate need of a thorough examination on the basis of emic descriptions from both written and oral materials, here, when ‘lama’ is used and the context is not immediately obvious, I mention whether the word refers to the category of ‘monks’ or otherwise.

⁴⁴ While the translation often given for this term is ‘novice’, the English term does not cover the ontological status of a *dge tshul*. The word novice suggests that one will, one day, become something more than that, that it is just the start of something. In most Tibetan traditions, however, many monastics never take *dge slong* ordination, nor do they intend to, for various reasons. One will thus find many elderly ‘novices’ in Tibetan monasteries, who will have been in robes for almost their whole life. For this reason – and for lack of a better translation – when the texts clearly differentiate *dge slong* from *dge tshul* I give the Tibetan or Sanskrit, instead of an ambiguous or misleading English translation.

⁴⁵ For this and other reasons it is problematic, even for scholars of Indian Buddhism, to translate *dge bsnyen* (S. *upāsaka*) as ‘householder’ or ‘lay-man’, as is oftentimes done. An *upāsaka* is someone who has taken certain vows, which sets him apart from other non-monastics, who are usually referred to as *khyim pa* (S. *grhin*) or *khyim bdag* (S. *grhapati*) in the Indic traditions. Also see Seyfort Ruegg, 2004: 24-6.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*: 24.

areas, such as the ‘yellow house-holders’ (*ser khyim pa*), a community of religious specialists who wore robes but married,⁴⁷ and the lay tantric practitioners,⁴⁸ who sometimes lived in ‘monasteries’ of their own.⁴⁹

In this study I use the term monk to refer to someone who has taken some sort of vow of celibacy and wears the monastic robes.⁵⁰ One of my informants, a scholar monk at Kirti monastery in Dharamsala, remarked that for him – being from Amdo – the word *grwa pa* to denote monk appeared foreign,⁵¹ but that *grwa* in his dialect – as it does in classical Tibetan – means edge or side (*zur*). This would thus make a *grwa pa*, a monk, someone who lives on the edge of society.⁵² As is demonstrated in this study, while the above explanation is unlikely to be etymologically correct, it does describe the position of the Tibetan monk: not outside of society, but on the edge of it. As Collins so aptly put it, ‘religious figures do not leave society, but merely exchange one social position for another.’⁵³

What Makes a (Tibetan) Monastery?

In this study, I delimit the monastery as an institution that demands celibacy of its members. By so defining the monastery, I exclude certain types of hermitages (*ri khrod*) and religious encampments (*chos sgar*) to name but a few, within which a commitment of celibacy – although common – was not a prerequisite for admittance. The reason for excluding those religious institutions in which celibacy tended to be optional is not because the various religious groups consisting of non-celibate practitioners or a mixture of lay- and monk-members do not merit scholarly attention, but because one of the objectives of this research is to explore the connections between Tibetan monastic policy and organization and the Vinaya. This approach furthermore facilitates comparison with various kinds of Vinaya materials and procedures in place at monastic establishments in other Buddhist cultures that are similarly defined. Thus, despite the fact that there are a number of scholars working in different fields who call places inhabited by non-celibate religious practitioners ‘monasteries’, I define the monastic institution in a narrower fashion. Considering that celibacy is ‘the *raison d’être* of Buddhist monasticism,’⁵⁴ the monastery is the very centre of that celibacy.

⁴⁷ In certain contexts, these people also lived in ‘*dgon pa*’, a word most commonly translated as monastery. For more on these communities in South-West Tibet, see Aziz, 1978: 76-92. *Tshig mdzod chen mo* glosses the word *ser khyim pa* as lay-people who wear yellow, i.e. people who look like monks but have wives (p. 2948: *ser chas can gyi khyim pa ste dbon ser gzugs*). It appears that these ‘yellow house-holders’ were in their earliest guise a type of wayward or run-away monks. sPyan snga grags pa ‘byung gnas instructs the monks in his 13th century bca’ yig for Drigung thil (‘*Bri gung mthil*, also spelled thil or thel, in this study this text is referred to as ‘*Bri gung mthil bca’ yig*), to make the *ser khyim pa* in the area of the monastery retake their vows and if they would refuse to expel them from the monastic estate. See ‘*Bri gung mthil bca’ yig*: 250a.

⁴⁸ The ‘politically correct’ term in use for these practitioners is ‘the white-clad, long-haired ones’ (*gos dkar lcam lo can*), whereas colloquially they are often known as *sngags pa*.

⁴⁹ For the rules and regulations of a contemporary community in Amdo, see Dhondup, 2013.

⁵⁰ See Cabezón, 2004. He states that a monk is either: ‘a renunciate’ (*rab ’byung*), which he takes to mean someone who has taken the *dge bsnyen/ upāsaka* vows), a novice (*dge tshul*), or someone with full ordination (*dge slong*).

⁵¹ There the word *ban de* is commonly used to indicate monks.

⁵² In his words: *spyi tshogs kyi zur la gnas pa*. Personal communication with Re mdo sengge, Dharamsala, July 2012.

⁵³ Collins, 1988: 106.

⁵⁴ Spiro, 1971: 294.

So far, the English word ‘monastery’ has been used to describe a (Tibetan) Buddhist phenomenon. There is a danger of confusing a number of terms here, however. According to Vinayic⁵⁵ texts, a physical establishment of the Sangha was only created by putting down a *sīmā*; a monastic ‘border’,⁵⁶ after which certain essential ritual practices could be performed. To be counted as a place where a Sangha lives, a set of three monastic rituals described in the Vinaya need to be performed (*gzhi gsum cho ga*). These are: the fortnightly confession for *bhikṣus* (*gso sbyong*, S. *poṣadha*), the ritual start of the summer retreat (*dbyar gnas*, S. *varṣā*) and the ritual closing of that retreat (*dgag dbye*, S. *pravāraṇa*).⁵⁷ In practice, this does not mean, however, that each individual monastic community is required to have its own *sīmā*. In Dharamsala in India, the established ritual border is so large as to include at least fifteen monasteries and nunneries, all belonging to different schools. The fortnightly confession ritual is performed in the main temple there.⁵⁸ Thus, practically, a *sīmā* does *not* define a monastery or a monastic community, at least not in terms of a distinct institutional identity of any kind.

Scholars of Indian Buddhism often translate the Sanskrit *viḥāra* with ‘monastery’, which brings with it another set of problems. *Viḥāras* often refer to the (potential) living-spaces for monks, but according to Schopen, in the *Mūlasarvāstivāda vinaya*, the sole Vinaya in use in Tibet, they are not ‘presented here primarily as residences for monks to live in, but rather as potential and permanent sources of merit for their donors.’⁵⁹ *Viḥāra*, in Tibetan translated as *gtsug lag khang*, thus does not represent the ‘intentional’ celibate communities we see in Tibetan Buddhism. There are a number of Tibetan terms, however, that *can* denote these monastic communities that live in well-defined physical spaces, and which I choose to translate with the word ‘monastery’. These are: *gdan sa*, *grwa sa*, *dgon sde*, *chos sde*, *grwa tshang*, *dgon pa*. In these places, the three rituals mentioned above may or may not be performed.⁶⁰

The word *dgon pa* does not necessarily cover what Tibetans understand to be a living community of monks, for it refers more to a physical space than to a community. The contemporary Tibetan author and monk Re mdo sengge writes the following on the notion of *dgon pa*:

Generally speaking, when one takes the word *dgon pa* to mean a secluded place, away from the hubbub, such as in the word ‘remote monastery’ (*’brog dgon pa*), then it is the case that, at the time of the Dharmarāja Srong btsan sgam po, the Brag yer pa temple (*lha khang*) [built by] Mang bza’ khri lcam, the Brag lha mgon po temple [built by] Ru yong bza’, and likewise the subduing temples and the minor subduing temples, and similarly even ‘Samye temple’ (bSam yas gtsug lag khang), etc. are then in fact also *dgon pa*.

However, Tibetans will not generally identify the place as *dgon pa* but as hermitages (*ri khrod*); it is more common to understand *dgon pa* to be an institution where there is an organized community of ordained people who

⁵⁵ In this study, I use the word ‘Vinayic’ to refer to anything derived from either the canonical Vinaya (*’dul ba’ ’dul ba’i lung*) or commentaries and sub-commentaries on monastic discipline.

⁵⁶ Gombrich, 2006 [1988]: 150.

⁵⁷ Dreyfus, 2003: 45.

⁵⁸ Personal communication with Thub bstan yar ’phel, Dharamsala, July 2012.

⁵⁹ Schopen, 1996a: 123.

⁶⁰ According to one of my informants, however, a *dgon pa* becomes a *dgon pa chen mo* if it carries out the three rituals (*gzhi gsum cho ga*), mentioned previously.

maintain the three rituals (*gzhi gsum*).⁶¹ In this way, there is no dispute over what needs to be in place for something to qualify as a *dgon pa* in the sense mentioned above.

The Ra sa 'phrul snang gtsug lag khang built by the Nepalese wife Khri btsun, the rGya stag ra mo che gtsug lag khang built by the Chinese wife Kong jo, the Thim [sic: Them] bu bkod pa temple built by Zhang zhung li thig sman⁶² are mere places where the representations of deities are kept and where offerings can be made and not places that are centres of education and learning that contain an organized community of monks.⁶³

It is clear that the word *dgon pa* as part of a name of an institution, and the common understanding among Tibetans of what the term means are here seen to be at odds with each other. While this author emphasizes the educational aspects of the *dgon pa*, it needs to be noted that this learning does not necessarily imply scholastic knowledge but may also include, or even solely refer to, ritual education.

The word *grwa tshang*, often glossed as 'college' although this translation does not apply to all instances, has a stronger communal aspect, although in contemporary Tibet many monks will primarily still refer to their *dgon pa*, and only to their *grwa tshang*⁶⁴ when they, for example, belong to one of the Three Great Seats (*gdan sa gsum*)⁶⁵ and want to specify the subdivision within the large institution to which they belong, i.e. their college. The sources discussed in this study are selected on the basis of their representation of Tibetan Buddhist monastic communities before the 1950s, but also on the basis of the information they contain. Occasionally, the names of the geographical places mentioned in these works may suggest that they were hermitages (*ri khrod/ nags khrod*) or temples (*gtsug lag khang*). However, the texts written for these institutions clearly suggest that they were seen, or saw themselves, as monastic celibate communities, using the word *grwa tshang*.⁶⁶

Monastic communities often have different primary functions, such as education, ritual practice, and meditational retreats, although there may be

⁶¹ This is a shortened form of *gzhi gsum cho ga*, mentioned above.

⁶² According to Tibetan historiography these three women were all wives of Srong btsan sgam po.

⁶³ Bod kyi shes yon: 53, 4: *spyir dgon pa zhes pa ni 'brog dgon pa ste 'du 'dzi'i dang 'bral ba'i dben gnas la 'jug pa'i go ba'i thog nas bsltas na/ chos rgyal srong btsan sgam po'i sku dus su mang bza' khri lcam gyi brag yer ba'i lha khang dang/ ru yong bza'i brag lha mgon po'i lha khang/ gzhan yang mtha' 'dul dang yang 'dul gyi lha khang/ de bzhin bsam yas gtsug lag khang sogs kyang dgon pa yin pa'i gnas lugs shig yin kyang/ de ri khrod red dgon pa ma red zer ba lta bus mtshon pa'i bod mi'i (54) 'du shes kyi ngos 'dzin la dgon pa zer ba ni/ gzhi gsum gyi nyams len dang ldan pa'i rab tu byung ba'i sgrig 'dzugs kyi sde khag cig la go ba rgyugs che bas/ gong gsal de dag 'di lta'i dgon pa'i khyad chos ji bzhin tshang ba zhi yin tshod mi 'dug la/ bal bza' khri btsun gyis bzhengs pa'i ra sa 'phrul snang gtsug lag khang dang/ rgya bza' kong jos bzhengs pa'i rgya stag ra mo che'i gtsug lag khang/ zhang zhung li thig sman gyis bzhengs pa'i thim [sic: them] bu bkod pa'i lha khang rnam ni lha rten bzhugs yul dang mchod gnas tsam ma gtogs grwa pa'i 'dus sde sgrig 'dzugs kyi rang bzhin ldan pa'i shes yon slob sbyong gi ste gnas shig min/*

⁶⁴ According to a Tibetan dictionary, a *grwa tshang* is a rather big division among a community of monks; see Tshig mdzod chen mo: 417: *grwa tshang – dge 'dun sde tshogs kyi tshan khag cung zad che ba/*; and a *dgon pa* is either a secluded place at least one *krośa* removed from the village (as a translation of *arāṇya*) or the residency of the Sangha, see *ibid.*: 461: *dgon pa – (arāṇya) grong las rgyang grags gcig gis chod pa'i dben gnas sam/ dge 'dun gnas sa/*

⁶⁵ The Three Great Seats refer to the three large Gelug monasteries in Central Tibet: Drepung, Ganden and Sera.

⁶⁶ Examples of this are the bca' yig for the 'forest hermitage' (*nags khrod*) of Phabongkha (*Pha bong kha bca' yig*) and the 'temple' of Ramoche (*Ra mo che bca' yig*). The latter's title actually calls this institution a *grwa tshang*.

crossovers.⁶⁷ Tibetan monasteries can be characterized by being monastic residencies, by being ritual communities organized around the performance of rituals, and by being corporate entities.⁶⁸ While the specific ritual functions of monasteries are not examined in this study, the sense of community and identity, strengthened by shared vows, the shared spiritual teachers, and the shared geographical location – eventually amounting to the sum of the monastery – plays an important role in this study.

Authority, the State and the Monastery

*Had it not been for the Buddhist dictum of humility [...] the monks could have considered themselves as the ruling elite of Tibet.*⁶⁹

While it is unlikely that the ‘Buddhist dictum of humility’ – a highly problematic notion to begin with – had any impact whatsoever, it is important to appreciate the nature of the Tibetan government in order to understand the role of the monasteries in Tibetan society and the extent of their authority. There exists a common misconception that – particularly from the start of the Ganden Phodrang government in 1642 onward – the Tibetan state was a single unity, with a high level of control and influence.⁷⁰ In fact, the Tibetan government always had a predisposition towards loose government, i.e. it controlled certain aspects of Tibetan society, but it certainly never even attempted to govern on a local level. Power-vacuums were thus filled by local landlords, chieftains, nobility, *and* monasteries.

Conceptually, from the mid 17th century onward all land belonged to the Dalai Lama and his government, which meant that local leaders ultimately answered to the state. The position of monasteries was different from that of other ruling parties, because their authority was regularly both political and religious. This both facilitated and complicated relations with the government. The networks of Gelug monasteries were seen as safeguarding the ultimate authority of the state, whereas the larger monasteries of certain other schools were less likely to eagerly accept influence of the state. At the same time, it was the influence of the large Gelug monasteries in Central Tibet that occasionally destabilized and undermined the authority of the government. The sheer amount of monks living in these institutions was a force that had to be reckoned with: the Three Great Seats alone housed up to twenty-five thousand monks.

The broader issue of why, compared to other countries where Buddhist monasticism thrived, the amount of monks was so much higher in Tibet, has not yet been answered satisfactorily. Various sources give estimates of the monastic population that range from ten to as high as twenty-five per cent of the male population.⁷¹ I suspect that while these numbers may have been accurate at certain times, from a demographical point of view, they are open to misinterpretation. In particular, it is often not taken into account that for the largest monasteries in Central Tibet (for usually the percentages of monks only pertain to that area), the number of ‘immigrant monks,’ e.g. people from Mongolia, Kham, Amdo, and beyond must have been very high. Most of these monks were not permanently residing at the monasteries. Thus, even though one in four males residing in Central Tibet may

⁶⁷ Gyatso, 2003: 219.

⁶⁸ Dreyfus, 2003: 52.

⁶⁹ Michael, 1982: 57.

⁷⁰ For a critique of this notion, see Samuel, 1993: 142-6.

⁷¹ Samuel gives an overview of the amount of monks in different areas based on secondary sources and concludes on the basis of this that overall the monk-population consisted of perhaps ten to twelve per cent in the agricultural areas and a considerably lower number in other areas. *ibid.*: 578-82.

indeed have been a monk, this does not mean that a quarter of all boys born in Central Tibet would eventually be sent to the monastery. The percentages – however high or low the estimates – are therefore nearly *always* misrepresentations, for these numbers would not necessarily have a direct effect on Central Tibetan society and its taxable workforce. Immigration and semi-permanent residence are issues that need to be taken into account when making umbrella-statements about the state of Tibet's societal composition.⁷²

On a local level the monastery was a crucial agent in Tibetan society. Taken as a whole, it had more influence on the day-to-day life of ordinary people than the state ever had. In examining issues of social justice in a given society, the starting point is the main authority in place, which, in most cases in the modern Western context, is the state. This is taken as the point of departure when the way in which that authority deals with the general populace is scrutinized. In the Tibetan context, however, the direct authority was often, though by no means always, the monastic institution. It is for this reason that, while state involvement must be taken into account, the role of the government is not the starting-point of this study. In the *longue durée* of Tibet's history, it was the monasteries that have been more influential in shaping the government than the government has been in shaping the monasteries. Thus, the focus must lie in the first place on these monasteries as the *de facto* loci of influence and power.

A Preview

In order to contextualize the primary sources that form the backbone of this study, Chapter 2 focuses on the genre of the *bca' yig* as a whole and the way in which these texts relate to the larger corpora of both Indic and Tibetan Vinaya texts. In this chapter I demonstrate that the *bca' yig* were often written in reaction to realities on the ground, to issues that were seen to be in need of attention. They thus contain mention of corruption, bribery, nepotism, maltreatment of lay-servants and political scheming. The texts furthermore give us insight into the internal hierarchy and organization of the monastery, its judicial role, monastic economics, and the social stratification within the monastery. For this reason, I argue in this chapter that these works are rich sources for monastic social history and, despite the fact that they do not overtly deal with matters of social justice, a great deal of insight can be gained from close reading of the *bca' yig*.

Chapter 3 provides a background of the monastic system that was prevalent in pre-modern Tibet. It looks at the development of monasticism in Tibet and the various types of monasteries. In this chapter I elaborate on the status of the monastery and the monk in Tibetan society and how it has influenced monastic attitudes toward issues of social justice. The chapter explores the extent to which these monastic attitudes are grounded in Buddhist thought.

Chapter 4 looks at the restrictions to entrance to the monastery. The *bca' yig* provide information on who were and were not to become monks. This chapter explores both Vinayic and local justifications given for barring certain people from entering the monastery and thereby – potentially – making social advancement.

In Chapter 5 I focus on the organization of the Tibetan monastery, how the community was formed and how monastic official roles were divided. This chapter considers the internal hierarchy and the social stratification within the monastery.

⁷² I also make this argument in Jansen, 2013a: 121, 2.

Chapter 6 deals with monastic economy, how the monastery balanced the Vinayic need for limited possessions and how monks made a living. In this chapter I deal with the issue of individual monks' business, and trade conducted by the monasteries, monastic property in general, the monasteries' functioning as banks, and the theoretical economic separation of the individual and the institutional as featured in the monastic guidelines and the Vinaya.

Chapter 7 deals with the relations between the monastery and the laity. Here particular attention is given to issues of charity and to the relationship between sponsors and their monastic beneficiaries. The rules regarding monks giving alms to the needy are also examined. It further looks at family ties, the role of the monastery as an educational facility and at healthcare in and around the monastic institutions.

Chapter 8 examines the judicial position of the monasteries in Tibet. It looks at the extent to which these institutions were legally allowed *and* obligated to punish both lay-people and monks, paying some attention to what kind of punishments were given. It furthermore explores cases in which monks were to be tried according to state law and looks at what happened with monks who broke their vows.

The concluding Chapter 9 sums up the main points and arguments made throughout the study, and indicates issues that have yet to be examined.

Throughout this study some references to other Buddhist cultures and even to other types of monasticism are offered. This is done in order to emphasize the point that Tibetan monastic Buddhism cannot and should not be viewed in isolation, as has been a general tendency of previous scholarly works. In contemporary academia, the mystification and idealization of the Tibetan monkhood – and more broadly, Buddhist monasticism in its entirety – continues. Ellingson, writing in 1990, notes that: ‘Tibetan monasteries are still widely characterized as mysterious enclaves of “priests,” Rasputin-like powers behind thrones, and hordes of ignorant fanatics who periodically and inexplicably march forth to topple governments.’⁷³ This depiction is still current, while it is alternated by the cliché of monasteries filled with enlightened beings, all striving to bring happiness to this world. While being aware of the fact that to represent past Tibetan societies is an undertaking ‘permeated with uncertainty and subjectivity,’⁷⁴ this study aims to present a picture of Tibetan monks and monasteries that remains close to the Tibetan sources, without taking them at face-value and without needing to pay lip-service to any political agenda. Monastic policy and ideology are the focal points of this study, although all assertions are made with the understanding that ‘to categorize human actions as ideal or material is philosophically absurd, they are always both.’⁷⁵ The monastic guidelines are works that contain both the ideal and the material, to which I now turn.

⁷³ Ellingson, 1990: 206.

⁷⁴ Childs, 2005: 5.

⁷⁵ Sewell, 1993: 25.