

THE WORDS AND WORLD OF LIFE AND LEARNING  
AT GE BCAGS NUNNERY

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for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

by  
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## ABSTRACT

Ge bcags dgon pa is an Eastern Tibetan nunnery of female tantric Buddhist contemplatives, founded in 1892 in a highland valley of pastoral Nang chen, Khams (Qinghai Province, PRC) and still thriving today with approximately 250 nuns practising tantric deity rituals, *rtsa rlung* yogas and rDzogs chen meditation in a lifelong curriculum. Ge bcags dgon pa was endorsed by the Nang chen kingship, and evolved to become the ‘mother nunnery’ (*ma dgon*) to over forty branch *dgon pa* across Eastern Tibet that follow retreat practices and *yi dam* (tantric deity) cycles from Ge bcags’ scriptural collection. In these ways Ge bcags is an anomaly in Tibetan Buddhism, where nunneries were typically annexes of monasteries, and nuns were usually denied highest tantric studies and practices.

The overall query of the thesis is about the context and quality of knowledge that is cultivated in Ge bcags training, and the nuns’ ways of cultivating such knowledge. The thesis begins by asking what cultural and educational values in Nang chen’s late 19<sup>th</sup> century allowed for such a community of yoginī nuns to arise. It explores the education of the nunnery’s founder, Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho (1848-1909), and the people and processes that went into producing his Sixteen Volumes of scriptures – much of them adaptations of Ratna gling pa *gter ma*.

In ascertaining Ge bcags’ quality of knowledge, a core examination of the thesis is how the nuns read and derive meaning from their texts. The nuns’ highest knowledge is nonverbal, yet they spend five to ten hours each day reading texts as part of their training. What is the role of reading in a tradition of predominantly practical learning, where the nuns’ knowledge rarely becomes abstract or theoretical? To answer this question, the entire context of the nuns’ lifeworld and the components of their practice tradition are taken into account. Indeed, the need to understand the full, embodied context of knowledge is both the approach and the argument of the thesis.

The thesis’ final chapter, which looks at the nunnery’s communal ritual life through participatory observation of one of the nunnery’s annual *sgrub chen* (‘great accomplishment’; extended group *sādhanā* ceremony), serves as a focused demonstration for the overall

argument of the thesis. The various levels of the *sgrub chen*'s context are examined, from the outer atmosphere of the nuns' roles and collective engagement to the words of the scripture. A translation of a passage from the *sgrub chen* scripture helps to show how the meaning the nuns derive from the scripture is not entirely in the words, but is a holistic, experiential knowledge gradually 'accomplished' (*sgrub pa*) through the nuns' repeated ritual and meditative engagement with the text and its associated oral instructions.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis will show that knowledge and textual production at Ge bcags dgon pa are communal; there may be one author or teacher but there is a circle of voices and hands that contribute to printed works. The production of a PhD may not happen in quite the same way, but as the lone writer I was supported by a team of supervisors and proof-readers for this project, and I could not have asked for more expert help.

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Thank you to dBang drag rin po che who, through his Nang chen language and the immense kindness of his mentorship, opened my mind to the Buddhist worldview of the Ge bcags nuns and other Nang chen yogins. Kun bzang nyi ma (Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho III), Karma dam chos, mKhan po karma don ldan and other male lamas in Ge bcags' Nang chen community offered indispensable help in discussing and answering my many questions.

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## PROLOGUE: two senior Ge bcags nuns

Fifty-two-year-old Che mchog is one of Ge bcags' two rDo rje slob dpon ('Vajra Masters'). She is an exemplar of the knowledge a mature Ge bcags nun embodies – buoyant, clear-eyed and full of enthusiasm for the tradition. She is also one of a few nuns who cut up bodies of deceased nuns for sky burial on the nunnery's mountaintop cemetery (*dur khrod*), an unexpected contrast with her warm-hearted character and easy laughter. She told me of her young niece who ordained at Ge bcags, but later ran off with a boyfriend after flirting over WeChat. "The mobile phone stole her away from the nunnery!" she joked. Che mchog's most lucid quality, in my eyes, is her humility, which nestles a rare, self-aware intelligence born from prolonged introspection.

I walked into her room, a private hut she built with mud and stones below the main buildings of the nunnery, in which she cared for her aged mother for many years. She was engrossed in her morning recitation, barely distracted by me standing at the door, and wildly spinning a hand-held prayer wheel. She continued spinning it for our whole conversation. When Che mchog finished her prayers, she welcomed me to sit closely next to her. She knew I was there to ask her questions about learning at Ge bcags, and opened by saying, "At Ge bcags we have *tsam pa!* Other *dgon pa* have a tasty selection of food. We just have *tsam pa!*" I joked about the Ge bcags nuns eating their food with twigs, and she understood the point I was making – sharing an anecdote about two yogins who never bothered to use the two spoons they shared. Like other older nuns I talked to, Che mchog was highly conscious that Ge bcags seems unpolished in the eyes of modernising Tibetans, but echoed what others had told me, that Ge bcags' inner life is rich (*nang sems dpe skyid po gda'*). She told me there was a saying among renowned lamas of the past that while there may not appear to be much at Ge bcags, there is really a lot going on there.

Like all the other nuns I asked, Che mchog told me she had nothing to teach (*nga bshad shes kyi mi gda'*), and suggested that I ask other, more articulate nuns my questions. I suspect that she meant nuns who are more confident in speaking, although such a nun at Ge bcags is hard to find. She explained that the way of learning at Ge bcags is like pouring the contents of one vase into another (*bum pa gang byos kyi tshul du*). For example, if she receives pith oral

instructions from bLa rgan Padma dri med (a nearby senior yogin-guru to the nunnery), there is nothing she could possibly say about the teachings without first fully embodying them in practice.

She agreed that Tibetan women are timid when it comes to speaking up and quoted a folk song that says so. But she also admitted that older Ge bcags nuns can pass on all practical instructions on yogas, ritual recitations and meditation, while forever claiming they are not capable of giving pith instructions (*gdams ngag*). *gDams ngag* is reserved for senior male lamas.



Ba chung is another older nun raised in the 1980s by elder surviving nuns from Ge bcags' pre-Cultural Revolution days. She lives in a little rock hut near the lamas' residence at the very top of the nunnery. Her hut has holes in the walls and rats in the ceiling, but she was born and raised in a yak hair tent, so this rock house was a step up for her at one time. Ba chung is responsible for looking after Ge bcags' male lamas and their hallowed quarters at the top of the nunnery. I once went to visit her there and she offered me a piece of stone-hard bread – not the part that was touching the wet, gritty table, but the other part. I pretended to enjoy it, but she could tell I did not want to eat it and said so. Luckily Ge bcags is a place where people don't easily take offense. In these mountain highlands of Buddhist nomads, you can say almost anything in any tone and it just hits the person like a ball of clean dirt on the ground.

Like Che mchog, Ba chung is self-conscious about being gritty in the eyes of modernising Tibetans. "I'm too old and dirty to live here anymore," she said, referring to her hut near the lamas' residence. Ba chung is from the pre-modern time, when all Ge bcags nuns were raised in nomad camps and ate roasted barley flour three times a day. Now more and more nuns are raised in towns with rice cookers and Chinese TV promoting the virtues of newness. Ba chung is an unwashed relic of the old world, living contentedly at the top of the nunnery. Like the other senior Ge bcags nuns, Ba chung has a stable air of self-possession. She is sweet and humble, but can hold her own with the most important visitors to the lamas' residence. She never seems to lose her cool. The lamas don't want a new nun to take over Ba chung's role as

their residence manager because she knows the whole background of the nunnery and they trust her. The nuns in the three-year retreat centre gave her status as a doctor, so she is one of a few outside people who can visit the nuns during their long retreat. She has no medical training, but she always seems to make them feel better.

## INTRODUCTION

This thesis is an ethnographic investigation of the nuns' way of life and learning at Ge bcags Nunnery (a.k.a. Ge bcags dgon pa<sup>1</sup>) in Nang chen, Khams, Eastern Tibet (in present-day Nang chen [Ch. Nangqian] County, Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai Province, People's Republic of China [PRC]). The Ge bcags nuns are not, nor have they ever been in the nunnery's 128-year history, scholars of Buddhist philosophy. They are instead full-time practitioners of tantric Buddhist (Vajrayāna) deity rituals, *rtsa rlung (nāḍī prāṇa)* 'subtle body' yogas and rDzogs chen meditation. Ge bcags Nunnery has its own large corpus of scriptures including sixteen volumes composed by its founder, and the nuns spend many hours a day reading these written texts that describe and direct them in their practices. Ge bcags Nunnery is the only large Tibetan *dgong pa* today that practises eighteen annual extensive *sādhana* rituals (*sgrub chen*), and the only one with an annual ceremony in which the members demonstrate their *gtum mo* (Skt. *caṇḍālī*; inner heat yoga) expertise by drying off wet sheets in winter with their bodies' inner heat<sup>2</sup>.

Many large Tibetan Buddhist *dgong pa* are thriving in and outside of China today. In China, bLa rung sgar and Ya chen sgar in Sichuan Province each have thousands of Tibetan, and some Han Chinese, male and female monastics studying and practising rNying ma teachings. There are also numerous large Tibetan Buddhist *dgong pa* thriving in India, Bhutan<sup>3</sup> and Nepal. My Masters thesis (McDougal 2016) was about the recent increase of degree-oriented programs of dialectical study (*bshad grwa*) in most large Tibetan 'practice lineage' (*sgrub brgyud*<sup>4</sup>) *dgong pa*, where traditional emphasis was on liturgical, contemplative training and the oral

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<sup>1</sup> I tend to use the Tibetan term *dgong pa* rather than its often translated 'monastery' in this thesis. The term is broader and includes nunneries as well as large hermitages, and therefore better describes the type of monastic community that was common in Nang chen, the regional setting of this research. In Nang chen vernacular, nuns are called *dge ma* ('virtuous female') and the common name for 'nunnery' is *dge dgon*.

<sup>2</sup> This ceremony is called *chu ras* ('wet sheet') at Ge bcags. See Huber (1999) for a discussion of this in a community of 'Brug pa bka' brgyud yogins at Tsa' ri mountain, where the ceremony is called '*rephu*'. Many communities still perform this *gtum mo* ceremony at the end of three-year retreats.

<sup>3</sup> In Bhutan they would not call themselves 'Tibetan' Buddhist, although the origins of many of their traditions are common with Tibetan.

<sup>4</sup> I have generally used the term 'practice lineage' to refer to bKa' brgyud and rNying ma communities where most dedicated followers traditionally prioritised practical engagement with tantric rituals and other practices. A more detailed definition follows in Chapter Two.

instructions of a qualified guru as the highest learning principle. This increase of degree-oriented *bshad grwa* has occurred over the last few decades in India under the influences of globalised sponsorship and educational values, and in China, under the influences of Han Chinese sponsorship and a scientific-materialist Communist Party of China (CCP) government. It has been especially noticeable in the erstwhile kingdom of Nang chen, where bKa' brgyud and rNying ma sub-lineages have formed the majority of its overall *dgon pa* population, and characterised the kingdom's pre-Mao Buddhist culture as a self-titled 'sGom sde' ('Realm of Meditators'). Ge bcags is one of few Tibetan practice lineage *dgon pa* with a pre-Mao history that has not introduced more textual studies to its curriculum in recent decades. Ge bcags' knowledge goals are subjective and experiential, and learning progress at the nunnery is not measured by any form of standardised accreditation.

Over the same time that this shift in *sgrub brgyud* learning culture has been taking place in Tibetan and Himalayan communities, Tibetan Buddhist meditations (*sgom pa*, Skt. *bhāvanā*) have been gaining increasing attention in spheres of academic and scientific research. Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche posited that academic Buddhist Studies in universities will serve as an insurance policy for the long-term posterity of Tibetan Buddhism<sup>5</sup> (Dzongsar 2014). The study of concrete texts in academia, and the written word in general, can survive the test of time while orality and intangible contemplative experience can be overlooked and forgotten (Ong 1986: 31). Yet what if the texts that are studied in academia were neither written by nor traditionally read by textual scholars?

Another consideration is the growing awareness of the need to nuance methodological approaches in studies of meditation in order to account for the contexts in which meditation is practised. After considerable neuroscientific research on meditation styles and an attempt to create a conceptual framework for future studies, Dahl et al. concluded:

It is important to note that here we have explored these families through the lens of cognitive neuroscience and clinical psychology, focusing our attention on the primary

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<sup>5</sup> The Khyentse Foundation in fact funds the current Khyentse Foundation and University Buddhist Education Foundation Lectureship in Tibetan Buddhism (KF-UBEF) held by my supervisor, Dr. Jim Rheingans, at the University of Sydney.

cognitive mechanisms and phenomenological targets of specific forms of meditation. However, if we are to fully understand these practices, it will also be important to study the wider context within which these practices are engaged. This context includes, but is certainly not limited to, issues of ethics ... embodiment, interpersonal dynamics, cultural setting, and the role of belief and expectation in shaping subjective experience. (Dahl, Lutz & Davidson 2015: 521)

This need for more culturally contextualised research of Tibetan Buddhist meditations, along with the uncertain future of full-time Vajrayāna practice communities in the PRC due to economic and educational policies directing the lives of Tibetans<sup>6</sup>, have motivated my research. This thesis aims to provide an ethno-record that investigates the embodied context of knowledge in an intact tradition of lifelong tantric Buddhist practice. It investigates the production of Ge bcags' texts and their role in the nuns' tradition, the relationship of Ge bcags' oral and written forms of knowledge, and the nuns' overall way of life and learning. This is the first substantial research about this community of nuns and the sixteen volumes of scriptures composed by the nunnery's founder, Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho (1848-1909), that form much of the nunnery's corpus. The translations in this thesis are mine<sup>7</sup> and are among the first English translations from this collection of texts.

### Theoretical angle of the research

As I will demonstrate in this thesis, an abstract philosophical or objective reading of Ge bcags' written texts would be inappropriate, for it is only in the context of their lifeworld that they can be read as their composer and the nuns understand them. When it comes to the content of a tradition such as Ge bcags', it is as Liberman cogently comments in his discussion on research approaches in Tibetology, 'Yoga is a practice that leads to an experience; it cannot be reduced to its literary representation without inflicting some epistemic damage' (Liberman 2004: 6). Huntington points to how the same truth statements are usually read differently in the contexts of fiction and of Western philosophy (Huntington 1995: 283). The Western philosophical approach, in seeking an objective interpretation, tends towards a 'denaturalized discourse' that has freed such statements from the messy subjective biases of

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<sup>6</sup> Not to mention outside of the PRC for related reasons of educational and value systems.

<sup>7</sup> The translations were done under the guidance of some Ge bcags nuns, lamas and a rNying ma *mkhan po* from a neighbouring region of Nang chen.

the constructed lifeworld (Griffiths in Huntington 1995: 282). Ge bcags' texts are mostly tantric ritual manuals and guides for yogas and meditation, and not philosophical; however, their function is to guide the practitioner to an *experience* of the philosophical view ascertained in rNying ma and bKa' brgyud dialectics. Like the Tibetan philosophical learning praxis and texts of Huntington's analysis, Ge bcags' texts are meaningful for the nuns only and always in relation to their lifeworld and practical experience.

The questions of this thesis are therefore not strictly philosophical; in my research approach of the Ge bcags nuns and their practices I am not looking for any rational ground of knowledge in the Kantian sense, where knowledge is defined as 'the accurate representation of what is known' (Huntington 1995: 291). By 'knowledge' and 'meaning' I only intend that which is meaningful to the Ge bcags nuns. As this thesis will explore, the Ge bcags nuns do not really see their knowledge goals as an accumulation of certainties; a division between what they know and what they believe cannot necessarily be drawn (Huntington 1995: 291). My overall argument in this thesis is therefore for the importance of understanding the embodied, experiential context of texts and practices of a tradition such as Ge bcags, and as a researcher I endeavoured to take such an approach in my methodology (to be discussed further on in this Introduction).

### **A brief introduction to Ge bcags Nunnery**

Ge bcags Nunnery presently has approximately 250 nuns. It is located in an open valley in the high-altitude grasslands of Nang chen, in erstwhile upper Khams (Khams stod). Ge bcags is a single nunnery, as well as the origin of a lineage practised in roughly forty-six branch *dgon pa* (*dgon lag*) throughout Eastern Tibet that follow the Ratna gling pa *gter ma* teachings and practices as adapted by Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho. The term 'Ge bcags lugs' ('Ge bcags lineage'), or the shortened 'Ge lugs' (and also Ge bcags *chos brgyud*, 'Ge bcags tradition'), is used in written texts to refer to the assemblage of practice manuals and recorded instructions of Ratna gling pa, Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho and his gurus<sup>8</sup>, and to the practice of these in the nunnery community and its wider affiliates across Eastern Tibet. The

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<sup>8</sup> Most especially his root guru, Grub dbang tshogs gnyis.

nunnery and the people and influences that led to its founding are discussed in Chapters One and Two.



Figure 1: Scene from Ge bcags Nunnery in 2006. Photo: author.

Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho was an important disciple of Grub dbang tshogs gnyis (i.e. the first Tsoknyi Rinpoche, c. 1828-1904), under whose direction he mastered the tantric deity rituals, yogas and rDzogs chen meditations of Ratna gling pa *gter ma*, and on whose direction he established Ge bcags Nunnery in 1892. Ge bcags Nunnery was the first of nearly twenty-five *dgon pa* that Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho established in his sixty-one-year lifetime; the rest of the *dgon pa* counted as Ge bcags' branches were founded by his prominent male and female disciples in his lifetime or shortly after (Kun bzang<sup>9</sup> 2017: 58-94). Several of Ge bcags' forty-six branches, including the nunneries Chos 'khor gling, bDe chen gling and gSang chen dgon, grew into large communities of more than two hundred nuns that continue to thrive

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<sup>9</sup> 'Kun bzang' is Kun bzang nyi ma, a third reincarnation of the nunnery's founder, who along with several nunnery associates compiled and published this brief historical record of Ge bcags and its branches in 2017. He is one of two third-generation *sprul sku* of Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho; the second is dKon mchog rgyal mtshan, whose seat is at Ra ya dgon (also known as kLu grub dgon and dGa' tshal gling), Ge bcags' neighbouring male community. Kun bzang nyi ma is the nephew of the last Nang chen king and the *sprul sku* most associated with the nunnery.

today. Three of Ge bcags' forty-six *dgon lag* are for male monastics, including Ra ya monastery that today is an important centre with its own commentarial study program (*bshad grwa*), yogic training program and its own *sprul sku* ('emanation' reincarnate lamas), *mkhan po* (monk-scholars) and affiliate monasteries across Khams including dPal yul and bLa rung sgar. Other Ge bcags branches are mostly small hermitages scattered across Eastern Tibet, from the north in today's Yushu Prefecture down to Kong po and Padma bkod in the south. Ge bcags Nunnery is sometimes referred to as the 'mother nunnery' (*ma dgon*) to this large community of *dgon pa* and associated practitioners<sup>10</sup>.

It is important to make clear from the outset that this thesis is about Ge bcags<sup>11</sup> Nunnery specifically, and not about this wider Ge bcags community of nuns, monks and male yogins spread across Eastern Tibet. My use of the name 'Ge bcags' is mostly in reference to the nunnery alone, taking into account that its relationships with this wider community are part of its identity. There has always been significant, harmonious male participation in Ge bcags' tradition, and male lamas have always been regarded by the Ge bcags nuns as primary teachers in their lineage. Ge bcags is not, therefore, a strictly 'female lineage' (*mo brgyud*), although it is sometimes described as one by members of the community when discussing the primacy Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho gave to the female experience of yogic practices (personal communications, Karma dam chos and Ngag dbang chos sgron, May and September 2018). Ge bcags' wider tradition is an eclectic community of female and male, celibate and non-celibate practitioners, while Ge bcags Nunnery's current resident community is comprised of all female celibate practitioners. The nunnery has several supporting male *sprul sku* and many associated male practitioners who visit the nunnery and practice with the nuns during Ge bcags' annual prayer ceremony (*smon lam*) and on other special occasions.

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<sup>10</sup> This is unprecedented in the history of Tibetan and Himalayan Buddhism where nunneries have typically been annexes of monasteries, and nuns denied highest tantric practices and study.

<sup>11</sup> The spelling 'Ge bcags' is according to original copies of Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's collected works, and to a recently compiled Ge bcags' history (Kun bzang 2017). There are other spelling variants across sources – Gad chags, Ge lcags, Ge cag, Ge bcag, etc. It is common for spellings of vernacular place names to vary, but as the name of a monastic community, this variation hints at how much of the tradition takes place off the written page.

Unlike monastics in larger contemporary Tibetan *dgon pa*, the Ge bcags nuns do not study philosophical commentaries on Indian Mahāyāna treatises nor spend much time theoretically analysing their texts, most of which are written as practical manuals of ritual prayers, yoga and meditation. The nuns are proficient readers and spend on average five or six hours a day reading religious texts, yet most nuns cannot (or perhaps will not) articulate an in-depth explanation of a text's meaning<sup>12</sup>, nor can they write fluently. The written word is a reference for all that the Ge bcags nuns' practice, and all of their practice methods have corresponding written texts. Notwithstanding all of the scriptures that the nuns read each day, the highest form of knowledge in their rNying ma tantric/rDzogs chen tradition is nonverbal (*rig pa*, literally 'knowledge'). Its pith is experiential and transmitted orally through personalised instructions (*khrid ka; man ngag; gdams ngag*). The relationship of Ge bcags' texts to practice, and how the nuns derive meaning from their scriptures, is a core investigation of this thesis.

I have had a close association with Ge bcags Nunnery for about fifteen years, since my first visit there in 2006. After 2006 I spent two-to-four months each year in Nang chen, up until I began writing this thesis in 2019. For most of that time I was myself a Buddhist nun, and I visited the nunnery as a practising participant of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition with an avid interest in learning from the nuns' way of practising. I have never lived at Ge bcags Nunnery, and fully joining their practice system was never an option for me. To do so would have entailed years of intensive preliminary retreats, living in a meditation box in a room with a dozen other nuns sharing and spitting in my personal space. Neither visa restrictions nor my personal conditioning as a Canadian woman would have allowed for that possibility. The Ge bcags nuns may not have allowed it either. Nevertheless, I have formed a close relationship with some of the Ge bcags nuns and their lamas over the years, and had the fortunate experience of sustained participation in their lifeworld and practice tradition. A large part of this thesis is based on this, and aims to describe what life is like for the Ge bcags nuns and the cultural value system in which the nunnery originated and continues to evolve.

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<sup>12</sup> I suspect it is the older nuns' humility and lack of confidence, rather than lack of ability, that stops them from readily offering explanations of their texts. This is a question for further research about gender and knowledge in Tibet.



Figure 2: *Ge bcags nuns reading ritual texts with elderly nuns behind them. Photo: Jerome Raphalen, 2006.*

### Relevant sources and literature, and the significance of the research

The primary textual sources for my analysis are from Ge bcags Nunnery's scriptural corpus, which comprises sixteen edited volumes composed by the nunnery's founder, Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho (1848-1909), and twenty-five volumes of Ratna gling pa (1403-1478) *gter ma*. The Ge bcags nuns refer to these two collections as the 'Sixteen Volumes' (Pod sde bcu drug) and the 'Twenty-five Volumes' (Pod sde nyer lnga, also the 'Twenty-five Profound Treasures', Zab gter nyer lnga). The Sixteen Volumes are largely Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's adaptations of Ratna gling pa's *gter ma*, much of it for the sake of Ge bcags' communal ritual ceremonies of tantric deities, called *sgrub chen* ('great accomplishment'), which the nuns spend nearly half their year engaged in. From among all these volumes, I chose sections that I thought best reflected the Ge bcags nuns' daily reading and knowledge cultivation, such as a passage from a *sgrub chen* scripture, which is the type of liturgical text

the nuns read for hours each day, and rDzogs chen instructions expressing the hermeneutic that pervades all of Ge bcags' teaching and practice methods.

Much of the information about the background of the founding of Ge bcags Nunnery and Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's textual composition comes from his *rnam thar* ('complete liberation'; recorded spiritual life-story of a master), which was narrated by Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho and recorded by one of his male disciples in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Chapter Two in particular is based on this written work, and that chapter begins by addressing my way of reading this *rnam thar*. Supplementary demographic information about Ge bcags' branch *dgon pa* and wider community comes from a recently published Ge bcags' lineage record, compiled and edited in 2017 by Kun bzang nyi ma and his associates.

Much of Chapter One, which explains Ge bcags' social and cultural setting in the erstwhile kingdom of Nang chen is based on the invaluable work of Maria Turek (2012, 2013, 2019), the only non-Tibetan scholar surveying all extant local sources on the history of the Nang chen kingdom. Turek's research stands out in Tibetan Studies not only for her focus on Nang chen, but for revealing the importance of Eastern Tibetan yogins and hermitage networks in Tibetan cultural production, particularly during the Ris med ('Unbiased' or 'Non-sectarian') period and the post-Mao Tibetan Buddhist revival. Along with Gardner (2006), Oldmeadow (2012), Pearcey (2016, 2018), Smith (2001) and others, Turek has demonstrated the active socio-political roles of practice lineage lamas during the 19<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> century Ris med period, the height of which was when Ge bcags was founded in 1892.

This is a study about Tibetan nuns, however it is not a study about gender. Its main interest is Tibetan Buddhist tantric practice, more specifically that of a rNying ma practice lineage (*sgrub brgyud*) and how its participants read and learn. Since the founding of Ge bcags Nunnery in 1892, the nuns' practice system and ways of learning have not differed greatly from those of monks in neighbouring hermitages. There is a considerable body of research by Western scholars on Tibetan and Himalayan nuns, some of which I briefly discuss and refer to in the thesis (Gutschow 2004; Gyatso & Havnevik 2005; Härkönen 2017; Havnevik 1989, 1994; Makley 2005, 2007; Schneider 2011; Willis 1987, etc.). Generally, these are sociological studies focused on nuns' subordination in relation to monks, lamas and wider society, or on

nuns' improved educational opportunities and monastic status in post-Mao China and in exile. These studies show how different the regional and social contexts of various Tibetan Buddhist nunneries are. The Ge bcags nuns, by a general comparison, have been unusual as Tibetan monastic women for the social status they have enjoyed, and for their autonomy as meditation teachers, ritual masters and occasionally as teachers of neighbouring monks<sup>13</sup>.

In Eastern Tibet, Makley's 2005 study of dGe lugs pa nuns at Labrang in A mdo examines the social boundaries on nuns' female bodies, blurred and further constrained by CCP policies. Schneider (2011) looks at early 20<sup>th</sup> century dGe lugs pa nuns in central Khams who flourished around the same time that Ge bcags was established. Härkönen's 2017 study of contemporary nuns in Yushu Prefecture (Ge bcags' modern-day prefecture) investigates the social and individual reasons for an influx of nuns in the post-Mao period. None of these studies, however, nor studies of Tibetan monasteries, have focused on a particular community's whole learning system and ways of knowing. This is aside from Dreyfus' 2003 study of the traditional dGe lugs pa monastic curriculum. Along with Cabezón (1994), Kapstein (2000), Rich (2016) and others, the work of Dreyfus (2003, 2005) has been useful in Chapter Two and elsewhere in the thesis for ascertaining the meaning of scholasticism in the Tibetan context. This body of scholarly work on Tibetan scholasticism has helped in distinguishing how the Ge bcags nuns read and cultivate knowledge.

There is extensive scholarly literature on Tibetan Buddhist tantric practice, and a growing amount written specifically on rDzogs chen. Much of this literature focuses on the historical development of tantric practice and its underlying philosophical concepts (e.g. Cantwell & Mayer 2020; Cozort 2005; Dalton 2016; Davidson 2005; Germano 1994; Gyatso 1998; Kapstein 2000; Mayer 2015, etc.). The Vajrayāna path to Buddhahood has been described in detail and its underlying complex philosophical framework has been explicated, often with great sophistication. Studies by Beyer (1973) and Kohn (1988) have shown the centrality of liturgical rituals in Tibetan Buddhism, and offered detailed outlines of tantric ritual procedures and their underlying structure of ideas; however they are not studies of how the

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<sup>13</sup> Tibetan Buddhism has modernised to offer educational equality and will likely see more nun-teachers in the future, as I briefly discuss in the thesis' Conclusion.

practitioners engage with the texts and make meaning. Mahmood's 2001 study of devout Egyptian Muslim women has proven highly relevant to the Ge bcags nuns in that the everyday activities and emotions of both groups of women are fully integrated with their prescribed, formal ritual.

I have found much of value and interest in many of the writings on Tibetan Buddhist practice, but they have also left me somewhat unsatisfied. There seems to be something central about the spiritual life of the Ge bcags nuns, and of other communities and practitioners I have known, that is not captured by these writings. Tiyanich expresses a similar dissatisfaction in her *Forest Recollections*, an anthropological study of the lives of Thai forest monks since the forming of the modern state of Thailand. She premises her research on the argument that the generalising process of the scholastic approach (be it Western, Thai or otherwise) tends to screen out the diverse details of individual lives and local traditions that make them relevant and meaningful in their own contexts (Tiyavanich 1997: 2).

Most Tibetan Studies literature on tantric Buddhism has come from the work of Western scholars in consultation with Tibetan scholar-lamas, with reliance on texts and philosophical explanations as the main sources of information. As a consequence, they tend to privilege intellectual and philosophical understandings of Buddhism, which are generally the most easily assimilable to Western modes of scholarship. Such understandings certainly form a core part of the training of Tibetan scholar-monks, who played integral roles in disseminating all lineages of Tibetan Buddhism. The nuns at Ge bcags, however, while expert *experiencers* of Tibetan Buddhist practices, are not scholars, intellectuals or even writers. The Ge bcags nuns mostly come from simple yak-herding families, and they have had limited education outside of their training in ritual, yogic and meditation practices at the nunnery.

The Ge bcags nuns' full-time engagement in yogic practice makes many of them experts over time in subtle body practices like *gtum mo* and rDzogs chen meditation. The nunnery was and remains distinct in Eastern Tibet for the vitality and strength of its tantric practice tradition, which in itself makes Ge bcags an excellent case study for an ethnography of Tibetan Buddhist practice. More particularly, the Ge bcags nuns are ideal as a case study for the very reason that they are not sophisticated scholars. Because they are unable (or

reluctant) to intellectually explain their practices, the Ge bcags nuns express themselves most clearly as human examples of the knowledge they cultivate.

When it comes to theoretically framing the Ge bcags nuns' knowledge path, the work of the Japanese religious philosopher Yuasa (1987) resonates strongly with the concerns of this thesis, and helps to clarify challenges of discussing in English the nondual subtle body<sup>14</sup> and knowledge goal of Ge bcags' Vajrayāna tradition. Along with Samuel and Johnston's 2013 volume *Religion and the Subtle Body in Asia and the West*, Yuasa helps to explain how the subtle body in tantric Buddhism is not only a model of mind-body interdependence, but a whole paradigm of knowing the self and the world. Yuasa discusses Western philosophers like Merleau-Ponty who have expressed a similar ontological inseparability of mind and body, and further explicates the developmental goal of Asian Buddhism as mind-body integration to be achieved through habitual cultivation. At Ge bcags Nunnery, this habitual cultivation of mind-body integration is referred to as *sgrub pa'i nyams len* ('accomplishing practice'); this thesis mostly refers to it as 'practice'. Yuasa's theory of the body (or mind-body) in Asian Buddhism casts light on why traditional Buddhist scholarship was never a separate enterprise from contemplation. In Buddhism, knowledge of reality is to be known in one's human being:

... personal "cultivation" (*shugo* \*) is presupposed in the philosophical foundation of the Eastern theories. To put it simply, true knowledge cannot be obtained simply by means of theoretical thinking, but only through "bodily recognition or realization" (*tainin* or *taitoku*), that is, through the utilization of one's total mind and body. Simply stated, this is to "learn with the body," not the brain. Cultivation is a practice that attempts, so to speak, to achieve true knowledge by means of one's total mind and body (Yuasa 1987: 25-26).

Yuasa's theory helps to make sense of the tacit, experiential quality of the knowledge cultivated in Ge bcags' tradition, and the inextricability of Ge bcags' texts and oral instructions. A survey of orality and literacy studies in anthropology reveals its Western lens, and its movement over time towards more contextualised analyses of knowledge transmission and more equal appraisals of both knowledge forms (Abram 1996; Boyarin 1993; Havelock 1986; Long 1993; Ong & Hartley 2002, etc.). In contrast, Jabb (2015), Sujata

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<sup>14</sup> More will be explained about the subtle body in Ge bcags' tradition in Chapter Four.

(2015) and the example of Ge bcags' own textual production show that in the Tibetan context, orality and literacy were never at odds with each other; the two functioned in a world with no bold dividing line between formal and everyday speech in the transmission of knowledge.

Both Ge bcags Nunnery's practice and teaching methods are focused on how to arrive at the authentic experience of the practices in their tradition, not on reaching an intellectual understanding of what they are doing. There have been some moves towards a more scholastic approach at Ge bcags over the last fifteen years, under the influences of Buddhist modernisation in Eastern Tibet (McDougal 2016), but a scholastic approach is not easily reconcilable with the traditional training methods at Ge bcags<sup>15</sup>. Until recent times the Ge bcags nuns were not expected or encouraged to study Buddhist dialectical philosophy, however many of the mature nuns are able to express their knowledge in compellingly direct and perceptive ways. The thesis will demonstrate that the core of what the Ge bcags nuns know becomes embodied through their practice experience.

The nunnery has outer measures of the nuns' yogic accomplishments, including their annual *gtum mo* ceremony, their expertise in rituals and signs in the body and environment of a recently deceased nun. Yet the real point of the nuns' whole training program is inner transformation, which is not measurable and is harder to discuss. As yoginī the Ge bcags nuns develop an inner discipline that is not aimed at intellectual understanding but at the realisation of their spiritual ideal of Buddha nature<sup>16</sup> (*bde gshegs snying po*; Skt. *sugatagarbha*), which they regularly proclaim is the true nature of all beings. Their realisation of this ideal involves a deeply emotional, affective and indeed devotional core of their lives. This emotional dimension is something that academic Buddhist Studies has often been uncomfortable with, but it is at the very heart of Tibetan yogic practices and a great deal, if not most, of Ge bcags community life is centred on it. Whenever I have questioned a Ge bcags nun about the goals of her training, or about a realised nun's awakening, she has

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<sup>15</sup> An anecdote in the section 'Scholasticism in Tibetan Buddhism and the Ge bcags community' in Chapter Two is an example.

<sup>16</sup> Buddha nature is the main theme of the Ge bcags nuns' learning, and will be explained and discussed throughout the thesis.

expressed her *bodhicitta* aspiration (*byang chub sems*, ‘mind of enlightenment’, i.e. universal compassion) and the merging of one’s mind with the mind of the lama (guru). Shes rab bzang mo, an elderly Ge bcags yoginī famed for her rDzogs chen realisation, said in a conversation in 2006<sup>17</sup> (her remote regional dialect was interpreted for me by a Ge bcags male lama):

Sherab Zangmo declines to teach any Dharma. She says she has nothing to explain about what is or isn’t the true nature of mind. She says that when we understand the true nature without stopping whatever arises in the mind, praying wholeheartedly to the lama whose mind is inseparable from our own, while constantly developing love and compassion for all beings... this is the Dharma.

This study explores these dimensions of the Ge bcags nuns’ ways of life and practical learning, paying special attention to their engagement with the texts and the relationship of oral and written instructions in their tradition. Rather than offering an outside ‘analysis’ of the Ge bcags nuns, I aim, as a scholar who has come to know them, to place these nuns in such a way as to demonstrate their knowledge as human examples in an active lifeworld. In this sense, the thesis is not so much an argument as a demonstration that as long as we understand lineages of spiritual practices like tantra and rDzogs chen primarily in solely intellectual and textual terms, we will continue to miss much of the full-bodied experience that sustains these traditions and gives them meaning.

### **rNying ma, ‘practice lineages’ (*sgrub brgyud*), rDzogs chen and *gter ma***

First it makes sense to explain a little of the basic history and terminology of the tantric practices in which the Ge bcags nuns spend their lives engaged. The term ‘tantra’ (*rgyud*) in Tibet refers to both the texts and the practices associated with them, as well as to their modes of transmission from guru (lama, tantric teacher) to disciple, forming lineages of practice that have continued through many generations. Buddhist tantra (i.e. Vajrayāna) teaches the natural purity, or primordial perfection (*ye dag, ka dag*), of all existence, and the constant cultivation of ‘pure vision’ (*dag snang*, or ‘sacred outlook’) as the perceptual method for realising it. Tantric Buddhism’s main techniques involve visualisation of tantric

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<sup>17</sup> Shes rab bzang mo passed away in 2008.

deities (and their mandalas, or divine environments), cultivation of psychophysical energies through yogas, and familiarisation with the primordially pure nature of awareness (Kongtrul 2002: 5).

Tibetan tantric lineages can be grouped into the rNying ma ('Old' tantra) and gSar ma ('New' tantra) traditions. Tibetan Buddhist lineages that have prioritised the practice of tantric methods and meditation as a primary mode of engagement, be they rNying ma or gSar ma, can be referred to as 'practice lineages' (*sgrub brgyud*). The Ge bcags nuns are mainly practitioners of the rNying ma tradition<sup>18</sup>, with most of their practices deriving from Ratna gling pa and other *gter ston* ('treasure revealers') and their deep engagement in rDzogs chen ('Great Perfection' or 'Great Completion') meditation techniques. rDzogs chen meditation techniques, while in some respects technically different from tantra, are in practice closely linked with tantric practices in the rNying ma tradition in Tibet.

rNying ma lineages claim to go back to the earliest years of Buddhism in Tibet, to the time of the Tibetan Empire in the 7<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> centuries. They are believed to have been brought to Tibet from India by the tantric teacher and adept, Padmasambhava (in Tibetan, Guru Padma 'byung gnas or just Guru Rin po che, 'Precious Guru'), or by other early teachers. rNying ma lineages are contrasted with the gSar ma lineages, which were mostly transmitted to Tibet in the 11<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> centuries in an ensuing period of disorder and chaos following the collapse of the Tibetan Empire. Many texts associated with these 'New' tantras have surviving Sanskrit versions in India or Nepal, whereas nearly all of the 'Old' tantras exist only in Tibetan texts. This has led to disagreements among Tibetan practitioners as to whether rNying ma tantric texts represented a genuine transmission of Buddhism from India, and to a degree of historical tension between 'Old' and 'New' Tantra supporters. In the kingdom of Nang chen this tension was relatively subdued, especially during and after the 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> century Ris med period of practice lineage eclecticism. This is further discussed in later chapters.

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<sup>18</sup> Ge bcags has also historically been identified as 'Brug pa bka' brgyud due to its close links with the Nang chen royal family, and the 'Brug pa bka' brgyud monastery, Tshes bcu dgon, as the place where Ge bcags' founder received many of his transmissions from his root guru, Grub dbang tshogs gnyis.

Even though rNying ma tantras were developed in Tibet, it does appear likely that they originated from a legitimate Indian tantric transmission, one that differed somewhat from the Indian sources of gSar ma tantras. It also seems likely that there has been continuity of both texts and practices from the latter days of the Tibetan Empire, although only a small portion of rNying ma practices today (the so-called bKa' ma practices) trace their lineages directly back to this early period. Most rNying ma practice traditions (or lineages) date from later periods, and to teachings that Tibetans believe were given by Padmasambhava to a select group of disciples who were reborn in later centuries as *gter ston* ('treasure revealers') (Doctor 2005; Gyatso 1981; Mayer 2015a; Tulku Thondup 1986). Such rNying ma practices were gradually elaborated and developed over the centuries through the *gter ma* ('treasure') teachings revealed by these *gter ston*. One of these *gter ston*, Ratna gling pa (1403-1478), is especially significant for Ge bcags Nunnery as his *gter ma* are the primary source for their tantric practices.

The central aim of rNying ma tantras and their *gter ma* presentations is the achievement of Buddhahood (*sangs rgyas kyi go 'phang*), and each major *gter ma* cycle offers both a complete path of methods to achieve Buddhahood and a range of accessory rituals and explanatory texts. These include rituals for health, protection, prosperity and other issues concerned with the everyday life of practitioners, spiritual communities, and the lay communities with whom they interacted (e.g. Goodman 1983; Cantwell & Mayer 2020).

rDzogs chen meditation practices, which claim to have been transmitted by Padmasambhava and his close disciples and to have written sources in rNying ma tantras, are also mainly practised on the basis of *gter ma* teachings. In some of the earliest sources, rDzogs chen appears as a distinct but related set of practices to the tantras, using a different set of techniques and a somewhat different terminology (Karmay 2007; Germano 1994; Studstill 2005). Over centuries in Tibet, however, they came to be organized as the ninth and ultimate level (Atiyoga or 'supreme yoga') of a nine-fold structure of teachings, or 'nine *yāna*' (*theg pa rim pa dgu*). The first three of these represent non-tantric ('Sūtrayāna') teachings, and the fourth to eighth (Kriyā, Caryā, Yoga, Mahāyoga and Anuyoga) correspond to the various stages of rNying ma tantric practice. This nine-fold structure of the path and its associated terminology are well-known to the Ge bcags nuns, who understand their path according to

this framework. Furthermore, as I will discuss in Chapter Four, rDzogs chen and tantric *sādhana* are inextricably woven in Ge bcags' written works and practices.

The 'New' tantras in Tibet were also progressively codified through the activities of various scholar-yogins into four major categories (Kriyā, Caryā, Yoga and Anuttarayoga), with the fourth regarded as the principal source of methods for the attainment of Buddhahood. Historically, monastic centres of gSar ma traditions – particularly the dGe lugs pa associated with the Dalai Lamas and major monasteries around Lha sa and gZhis ka rtse – came to dominate much of Tibet from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards. rNying ma pa religious communities tended to be smaller, and were not necessarily composed of celibate monastics, although in later periods the rNying ma also developed their own monastic colleges populated by celibate monks. Over time there also came to be a progressive harmonisation of rNying ma pa with various non-dGe lugs pa gSar ma lineages, especially with bKa' brgyud lineages in Eastern Tibet. Particularly in Khams, where practice lineages were concentrated, communities such as Ge bcags that were bKa' brgyud in origin but had practices sourced from a mixture of gSar ma and rNying ma materials became very common. Ge bcags Nunnery originated from the connection of its founder, Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho, to the 'Brug pa bka' brgyud monastery, Tshes bcu dgon, through his guru Grub dbang tshogs gnyis. At Tshes bcu dgon Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho received a series of transmissions from bKa' brgyud and rNying ma lineages, but was directed by his guru to cultivate the rNying ma transmissions of Ratna gling pa in particular.

### **A brief introduction to the Tibetan tantric pathway: Generation Stage, Completion Stage and the *rtsa lung* subtle body**

My use of the term 'yogic' (the adjectival form of 'yoga') in this thesis implies 'tantric', as it refers to engagement of Vajrayāna (tantric Buddhist) methods. Vajrayāna methods, which can be generically termed 'yoga', comprise sophisticated methods for training the energetic mind-body complex of practitioners to expedite the realisation of nondual wisdom (*ye shes, rig pa*). These yogic methods are derived from Indian Buddhism, as are their corollary Mahāmudrā (Phyag rgya chen po, 'Great Symbol') and rDzogs chen meditation systems. Throughout many centuries in Tibet they have been transmitted and explicated on the basis

of deep and sophisticated scholarly texts. Yet the pith of these methods, and the pith of their transmission, has always been in the continuity of yogic practice among trained and skilled practitioners. The Ge bcags nuns are such a community of practitioners in full-time tantric training of mainly rNying ma practices. As the thesis explores, oral, experiential instructions (*khrid ka*, *man ngag*, *gdams ngag*) are inextricable from the textual bases of transmission in Ge bcags' tradition<sup>19</sup>.

The importance of yogic experience in Ge bcags' tradition hints at the nuns' mind-body relationship, and the importance of the 'subtle body' – the internal visualised structure of *rtsa*, *rlung* and *thig le* (Skt. *nāḍī*, 'channels'; Skt. *prāṇa*, 'winds' or energies; Skt. *bindu*, vital 'essences' or 'drops' – in their practice system. The role of the subtle body in Ge bcags' worldview and in the quality of knowledge that the nuns develop is crucial, and will be discussed in Chapter Four. In the Ge bcags context, 'mind' and 'body' are an indivisible complex and as terms they are better read as one, since realisation of their ultimate inseparability is a perceptual goal of their yogic practice. I therefore use 'mind-body' along with 'subtle body', throughout the thesis.

There is a general correspondence between the tantric practices of rNying ma and gSar ma traditions. They include 'Generation Stage' (*bskyed rim*) practices of 'deity yoga' (*lha'i rnal 'byor*), involving interaction and identification with *yi dam* (tantric meditational deities), as well as 'Completion Stage' (*rdzogs rim*) practices for developing control over the yogin's mind-body. In Generation Stage *yi dam* practices, one cultivates a relationship with a visualised *yi dam*, usually imagined at the centre of a mandala, a complex spatial arrangement of associated deities representing enlightened qualities. In more advanced stages, the practitioner fully identifies oneself as the deity. Tantric *yi dam* are assumed to be real, not just creations of the imagination, though they are also not thought of as simply external to the individual. There are varied, nuanced ways that this process may be understood and explained, and in Chapter Three I will examine how the Ge bcags nuns seem

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<sup>19</sup> There are three main modes of transmission in Ge bcags' tantric tradition: *dbang*, 'empowerment', *lung*, reading transmission and *khrid ka*, 'pointing out' meditation instructions. These three modes are also inextricable and take place in relation to each other.

to understand it. In general it can be said that the ability to realise oneself as a tantric *yi dam*, which is integral in Ge bcags' training paradigm, is linked to the idea of Buddha nature being intrinsic to everything in the universe. *Yi dam* are particular expressions of Buddha nature, and as such they are neither 'inside' nor 'outside' the practitioner, but both. The perception of oneself as a separate and autonomous individual is itself regarded as ultimately illusory in Vajrayāna Buddhism. It has a kind of relative and provisional truth at the level of ordinary awareness, but fixed perception of oneself as a separate entity is to be transcended through the practice.

Generation Stage *yi dam* practices are intended for transcending this ordinary perception of self, since they involve learning to perceive the universe as an awakened being does. By fully identifying as the *yi dam* deity, one is able to 'bring the result on the path' ('*bras bu lam du 'khyer ba*'), as commonly phrased in Tibetan tantra. By self-identifying as the *yi dam* deity, the yogic practitioner can gradually realise oneself as an awakened being in a real, embodied way. *Yi dam* deity practices involve visualisation, along with sound (in the use of chant and mantra), emotion, bodily gestures and movement. The array of subsidiary deities forming the mandala also expands the basis of self-perception into a mind-altering web that correlates with different spatial locations in the practitioner's body (where the mandala is visualised in many of Ge bcags' tantric practices).

Generation Stage *yi dam* practices are the sinews of Ge bcags' practice system. Ge bcags' founder, Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho, established thirteen 'retreat divisions'<sup>20</sup> (*sgrub khag*) and eighteen *sgrub chen* ('great accomplishment', extended group *sāadhanā* ceremonies) at Ge bcags dgon pa, which have always remained the framework of the nunnery's annual curriculum<sup>21</sup>. The nuns each have a meditation box in one of the retreat divisions, which serves as their home base where they sleep and practice their personal *yi dam sāadhanā* (for example, Hayagrīva, Tārā or Vajrasattva) along with the other ten or so nuns who share the *yi dam* of their retreat division. At eighteen scheduled times of the year, *sgrub chen* are carried

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<sup>20</sup> Today there are sixteen retreat divisions.

<sup>21</sup> Not an academic curriculum, but an annual schedule of practices which will be listed and further discussed in Chapter Three.

out by all the nuns communally in the main shrine hall. *sGrub chen* are elaborate ritual extrapolations of tantric *yi dam sādhanā*, each one lasting seven to ten days, during which the whole *sādhanā* is repeated two or three times each day and the main mantra is chanted continuously through the nights.

Completion Stage practices operate more directly within the mind-body. They entail a view of mind-body as the flow of *rlung* energy through channels (*rtsa*) and intersectional ‘wheels’ (*'khor lo*, Skt. *cakra*), and the concentration of energy flows in the channels as *thig le* essences. Yogic practitioners direct the flow of *rlung* in the subtle body through *rtsa rlung* yogas that involve both physical and mental processes. Similar subtle body practices are found in many Asian traditions of spiritual cultivation, including those of Hindu yoga, the Sufi tradition and traditions of China and Japan (Samuel & Johnston 2013). On the yogic pathway of Tibetan tantra, the principle that *rlung* and *sems* (‘mind’; mental consciousness) function indivisibly is essential. Ge bcags’ scriptures, and the nuns, regularly express the phrase *'rlung sems dbyer med'* (‘indivisible *prāṇa*-mind’) as both the approach and the aim of their *rtsa rlung* yoga and rDzogs chen meditation.

In the rNying ma nine *yāna* scheme of the path to awakening, the eighth *yāna* (‘vehicle’) is Anuyoga and largely comprises these subtle body yogas, while the ninth *yāna*, Atiyoga, is rDzogs chen. We will see that at Ge bcags, all stages of the nine *yāna* (especially the ‘three inner tantras’ [*nang rgyud gsum*], Mahāyoga, Anuyoga and Atiyoga) are not practised in a temporal sequence, but altogether in a composite approach with rDzogs chen as their overarching hermeneutic. In Ge bcags’ training path, the nonconceptual awareness (*rig pa*; literally ‘knowing’) of rDzogs chen meditation is cultivated in tandem with *rtsa rlung* yogas, so that mind-body and meditational awareness are profoundly interdependent and embodied.

### Philosophical and neuroscientific approaches

In Tibetan Buddhist thinking, all practices are understood as methods for the achievement of Buddhahood or awakening<sup>22</sup>. Therefore, a central concern in Tibetan Buddhist philosophy is

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<sup>22</sup> There are various Tibetan terms related to ‘awakening’, like *byang chub* (Skt. ‘bodhi’) *sangs rgyas* (‘buddha’), *sangs rgyas go 'phang* (‘buddhahood’), *thar pa* (‘liberation’), *dgra bcom* (‘foe destroyer’, Skt. ‘arhat’), etc.

to illuminate the relationship between ordinary consciousness (and states of being in the world) and awakened awareness of the true nature of reality (*gnas snang mthun pa'i snang ba*, 'experiencing the harmony of reality and appearance'<sup>23</sup>). Indian and Tibetan Buddhists, following on from the great Indian Mahāyāna Buddhist philosopher Nāgārjuna and his successors, devised a series of progressively more refined and advanced philosophical frameworks, or ways of viewing the world (*lta ba*, Skt. *darśana*). These frameworks have served to classify and position Buddhist views in relation to each other and to the teachings of various *sūtra*, the texts which claim to present the words of the historical Buddha. While not all Tibetan schools place equal importance on philosophical understanding, each major Tibetan Buddhist school has developed its own versions of these philosophical frameworks and of the ultimate view of reality to be cultivated<sup>24</sup>. All Tibetan Buddhist schools and lineages take for granted that in order to correctly view the true nature of reality, the conceptual structure of our ordinary thought (*rnam rtogs*) needs to be loosened and transcended by a kind of nondual, or nonconceptual, consciousness (termed *ye shes*, 'primordial knowing' or 'wisdom' in gSar ma traditions, or *rig pa* in rNying ma). On the practical level, this is the intent of rDzogs chen meditation techniques in the rNying ma tradition. The distinguished 20<sup>th</sup> century rNying ma and rDzogs chen teacher, Dudjom Rinpoche, described the 'view' (*lta ba*) of rDzogs chen in the following words:

As for this view, your mind's nature is the ultimate nature of reality. Once you have concluded this with certainty in awareness<sup>25</sup> free from all characteristics of intellectual mind's fabrications and contrivance, awareness nakedly manifests as self-manifest wisdom. Words cannot express it. Metaphors cannot illustrate it. It does not get worse in samsara nor better in enlightenment. It has not been born, nor will it come to an end. It has not been liberated nor deluded. It does not exist or not exist. Awareness is unlimited and impartial.

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Interestingly, for a tradition of lifelong Vajrayāna practice, the Ge bcags nuns and lamas do not commonly use any standardised term for it. Awakening, or enlightenment, is understood by them as that which is left after the removal of suffering (*sdug bsngal bral ba'i cha*).

<sup>23</sup> Pettit writes an important note on the Tibetan term *snang ba*, which does not refer exclusively to either object (as in 'appearance') or subject (as in 'perception' or 'experience') (Pettit 1999: 189). In practice lineages like Ge bcags, *snang ba* is very commonly used in rDzogs chen explanations and serves a nondual function, making it very difficult to translate it into a single English term.

<sup>24</sup> Notably, these philosophical frameworks have mostly developed in close collaboration with monastic institutions.

<sup>25</sup> 'awareness' here is likely a translation of *rig pa*.

In short, from the very beginning, awareness has never been established as being material and having characteristics that can be conceptualized, because its essence is primordially pure, sublime, all-pervasive emptiness. The ocean of realms of phenomena of existence and enlightenment naturally manifest as the display of unobstructed emptiness, like the sun and its rays. Therefore, awareness is neither partial nor a completely empty void because its nature is the supreme spontaneous presence of wisdom and noble qualities.

Thus, awareness, the indivisibility of appearance and emptiness, epitome of the three kayas, is the primordial nature of reality. Precise recognition of awareness, ultimate reality as it is (*yin lugs*), is what is called the Great Perfection's view beyond the intellect (Dudjom 2005: 48).

The founder of Ge bcags dgon pa, Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho, expressed the rDzogs chen view in the following, similar way:

Just as the sky has no beginning or end, the nature of mind is never more or less, and its projections [the way appearances appear] are beyond the conceptual mind. Like the sky, its empty cognisance is all-pervading. Like the sun and moon, its natural expanse is self-illuminating ... Since Dharmakāya is primordially empty, your own awareness is empty. Since its primordial nature is clear cognisance, your own awareness is clarity<sup>26</sup>. (Tshangs dbyangs vol. 11: 168-169)

These passages make clear rDzogs chen's central intent of indicating and contemplatively realising an essentially pure nature of awareness beyond ordinary thought. Mahāmudra meditation techniques of the gSar ma tradition share the same aim, if described in somewhat different terms. Over time, Tibetan yogins came to see Mahāmudrā and rDzogs chen as two different approaches to realising the same basic nature of awareness. Some yogin-scholars, including Karma chags med (1613-1678), have written on the 'union of Mahāmudrā and rDzogs chen' (*phyag rdzogs zung 'jug*) (see e.g. Chökyi Nyima 1989). The hybrid term *phyag-rdzogs* is commonly used in Nang chen today, where a cross-pollination of bKa' brgyud and

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<sup>26</sup> 'bri gang yod med snang cha blo las 'das/ dper na nam mkha' thog mtha' med dang mtshungs/ nam mkha' bzhin tu stong gsal kun la khyab/ nyi bla bzhin du gnas lugs rang gsal klong/ ... ye nas chos sku stong pas rang rig stong/ ye nas rang bzhin gsal bas rang rig gsal/

When describing Buddha nature of mind as it is in this passage, the term 'clarity' (*gsal ba*) refers to the knowing quality of mind's basic awareness. There is no single English term that communicates the same meaning as the Tibetan.

rNying ma tantric lineages has been common in most *dgon pa* since at least the Ris med period.

A group of non-sectarian (referred to as Ris med) Eastern Tibetan teachers of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (which included the founders of Ge bcags Nunnery) were especially committed to the view that the ultimate nature of Dharma encompassed all Buddhist teachings and pathways. As the contemporary lama, Ringu Tulku, expresses it:

The Ris med position is that although the various Tibetan lineages have evolved different emphases and practices, they have a single ultimate understanding, and their teachings all arrive at the same essential point (Ringu Tulku 2006: 11).

Mahāmudra and rDzogs chen meditational approaches have nevertheless remained as distinct training systems, even though Tibetan individuals often learn and teach both rNying ma and gSar ma practices. As mentioned, the nuns at Ge bcags mainly engage in practices from rNying ma *gter ma* and rDzogs chen, but several of their practice texts were composed by lamas such as Khams sprul *sprul sku* who were based in gSar ma monasteries and practised the Mahāmudra meditational approach. In other Nang chen hermitage communities it is common to have monks and nuns from different monastic backgrounds training individually and collectively in tantric *sāadhanā* and meditations from both rNying ma and gSar ma lineages.

At the time that rDzog chen was first becoming popular in the West, there was already a developing literature on the idea of pure consciousness in Asian and Western traditions, with particular reference to mystical experiences as described in various religious traditions. Examples include Forman's 1990 collection *The Problem of Pure Consciousness* (reprinted in 1997) and Katz's *Mysticism and Language* (1992). The subject of rDzog chen has slowly been drawn into this field of Western discourse. Studstill's *The Unity of Mystical Traditions* (2005) describes some of the controversies between 'essentialist' and 'constructivist' approaches to mystical experience, in alignment with the theses of Forman and others that mystical paths function to decondition ordinary consciousness. Studstill argues for a 'mystical pluralism' that recognises transformative processes across different religions may be expressed in different

doctrinal structures, and consequently may be expressed in phenomenologically different experiences (Studstill 2005: 1-10). He illustrates his thesis through a systematic comparison of rDzogs chen in Tibetan Buddhism and the Christian mystical theology associated with the German mystic Meister Eckhardt and his followers.

More recently, Josipovic has treated rDzogs chen as one of a number of traditions of 'nondual meditation':

The nondual view suggests that the goal of meditation, usually thought of as an idealized state reachable only in a very distant future, is already present and complete within oneself as one's authentic being. Meditation practice, in this view, is not about gradually perfecting oneself through improving one's capacities, but about recognizing or realizing a very subtle background nondual awareness that contextualizes all of one's experiences within this wholeness. The perspective presented here is based on the Tibetan Buddhist and Bonpo traditions of Dzogchen, Mahamudra, and the Hindu traditions of Advaita Vedanta and Kashmiri Shaivism (Josipovic 2016: 65; see also Josipovic 2010, 2013).

Approaches such as this tend to assume that philosophical descriptions of nondual<sup>27</sup> and mystical states can be taken at face value, as accounts of phenomenological states. In his PhD thesis, Josipovic took this further, attempting to identify the neural correlates of nondual awareness in the posterior parietal cortex and the prefrontal cortex of the brain (Josipovic 2005). There clearly are physiological processes associated with these processes (Tibetan tradition after all assumes them to have both body and consciousness aspects), but it is questionable whether this is the best way to approach an understanding of nondual consciousness. This raises various issues, such as that of translation between Tibetan (or Sanskrit and Pāli) and European languages, and the different epistemological histories that these languages communicate. When it comes to Buddha nature and rDzogs chen, for

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<sup>27</sup> In this thesis, 'nondual' and 'nonconceptual' are used interchangeably in discussing the highest knowledge (i.e. *rig pa*) of the Ge bcags nuns' meditative tradition. This is for convenience and simplicity, and not considering the four philosophical tenets (*grub mtha' bzhi*) of Indo-Tibetan Buddhism, nor the *rang stong/gzhan stong* ('self-empty'/'other-empty') distinction that Tibetan schools make in establishing the correct view of reality (Arya Maitreya 2000; Pettit 1999). There is however no general taxonomy encompassing different traditions and cognitive sciences of meditation in which these two terms can be used interchangeably (Josipovic 2010; 2013).

example, the Tibetan terms for mind (*sems*), consciousness (*rnam shes, shes pa*), awareness (*rig pa; shes bzhin; gsal bya*) have no ready equivalents in English. The subtle body – which is integral in every one of the Ge bcags nuns’ practices and their overall worldview – is another challenging subject to articulate in English.

On another note, it is also worth considering whether this whole structure of philosophical and neurophysiological ideas is actually meaningful or relevant to practitioners like the Ge bcags nuns. If they are not, what can such practitioners, who do not hold firmly to philosophical points of view, tell us about what their texts and practices mean?

## Methodology

This thesis joins the growth of methodologies diverging from the ‘classical paradigm’ in Buddhist Studies, which Cabezón, Gómez, Liberman and others have described as a pursuit of objective understanding through written works, accompanied by an aversion to engaging in Buddhist cultural practices and participation<sup>28</sup> (Cabezón 1995: 232-234; Gómez 1995; Liberman 2004). Philology, as the critical self-reflection of language, has evolved into a broader paradigm of approaches seeking, as Liberman articulates, holistic cultural understanding of indigenous ways of reading and knowing (Pollock 2015: 34; Liberman 2004: 12). This thesis takes such a holistic approach, to help fill the lacuna of cultural contextualisation of Vajrayāna texts and practices that I have discussed.

My active participant observation at Ge bcags Nunnery and the surrounding society has been my primary means of facilitating this understanding. As an ethnography, this research entailed conversation and interviews with practitioners, reading and translation of passages of Ge bcags texts central to their practice, and theoretical reflection with reference to relevant anthropological and Buddhist Studies literature.

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<sup>28</sup> The classical example would be Max Mueller, who forbade his students from going to India while studying (Liberman 2004: 6). Gómez names these classical approaches as classical philology and historical positivism (Gómez 1995: 185).

Fieldwork for this thesis spanned ten months from May to September 2017, and from May to October 2018. During that time I travelled to Ge bcags frequently, staying twice for one month periods and several other times for a few days, a week or two weeks. During the rest of those ten months I mostly lived at a lower altitude branch hermitage in Nang chen along with six senior Ge bcags nuns (who had moved there for health reasons), two Ge bcags lamas and about ten monks from other bKa' brgyud and Sa skya practice lineages<sup>29</sup>. By 2017 I knew the Ge bcags nuns and lamas fairly well and my interviews with them were casual conversations in our rooms, on the nunnery hillside, on drives to Ge bcags and in breaks during collective ritual prayers. The information that I sought in these exchanges was semi-structured in my mind, but I did not structure our conversations in an interview format as it might have confused my friends/informants and contrived the flow of our exchanges. I documented salient conversations shortly after they took place in field notes, from which I quote throughout the thesis.

This thesis is also informed by my observations and conversations with the nuns from 2006 to 2017, prior to my doctoral research. From 2006 to 2015 I did not have specific research questions in mind, however much of what I am able to share in this thesis about the nuns' characters and daily way of contemplative life comes from my participant observation over this time. From 2015 to 2016 I researched and wrote a fieldwork-based Masters thesis about cultural changes in Eastern Tibetan practice lineages *dgon pa* like Ge bcags since the 1980s, when rapid economic development of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau was initiated (see McDougal 2016). The interviews that informed that thesis are not used in the present doctoral thesis, however I learnt a lot about Ge bcags Nunnery during that research period.

Another important source of information for me, particularly about Ge bcags' language usage, is my translation work for dBang drag rdo rje rin po che from 2006 to the present. dBang drag rin po che is a Ge bcags *sprul sku* and scholar-monk (*mkhan po*<sup>30</sup>) active in

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<sup>29</sup> This newly-established branch hermitage (of Ge bcags) is a good example of Nang chen's eclectic practice lineage culture, which is discussed in Chapters One and Two.

<sup>30</sup> He was educated as a *mkhan po* at rDzong sar bshad college in sDe dge before being identified by the nuns as a Ge bcags *sprul sku* of dBang drag rdo rje in his thirties. Since then he has lived in Nang chen near the nunnery and works full-time for their community.

providing for the nuns' material needs, and in 2006 I began helping him to organise teaching and fundraising visits to Singapore and Australia<sup>31</sup>. This entailed translating texts of Ge bcags' *sādhanā* and rDzogs chen instructions that foreign students were interested in seriously practising, and the lama's oral teachings on preliminary contemplations, *yi dam* deity yoga and basic, intermediate and advanced meditations according to Ge bcags' system. As a Ge bcags *sprul sku*, dBang drag rin po che's teaching style is distinctly experiential, and though he was trained as a *mkhan po* I have never known him to adhere firmly to the gradual points of a text while giving a teaching.

Prior to reading Ge bcags' texts for my doctoral research I had been reading them and similar texts as a nun in bKa' bgyud and rNying ma nunneries in India; from about 2000 to 2010 this was while learning Tibetan language. I could not have read these Vajrayāna texts in the same way as a Tibetan or Himalayan nun born into a Buddhist family and worldview, although as a woman pursuing traditional Tibetan Buddhist life goals, I did aspire to. The reality is that I can only read these texts as a Canadian-born and raised woman with an ardent interest in understanding their meaning. This interest motivated me to pursue a traditional Tibetan monastic education<sup>32</sup>, and then a Masters in Indian philosophy at an Indian university (and later a Masters degree at the University of Sydney). I now find myself back in a Western academic arena, making sense of these texts from the varied viewpoints I have been educated in.

This all makes clear my position in relation to the research and my admiration for the women who are the subject of my study. It also hints at how the Ge bcags nuns and lamas have influenced me as the researcher (Haraway 1988: 592-593). As a foreign woman living in Tibetan Buddhist communities in India and Nang chen for eighteen years, I occupied the near-status of a 'halfie', as Kirin Narayan has termed the culturally immersed researcher who is both an insider and outsider to the people studied (attribution by Abu-Lughod 1993:

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<sup>31</sup> I had been living in a large Tibetan nunnery in South India at the time and was in need of inspiration relating to women's practice from within Tibetan society.

<sup>32</sup> I lived as a nun for eight years in 'Brug pa bka' bgyud and rNying ma nunneries, and outside of nunneries in Tibetan communities for another ten.

32n39<sup>33</sup>). This quasi-dual status has given me physical and cognitive access to the Ge bcags nuns' world. Through my friendship over time with the nuns and lamas in the sphere of their Buddhist culture and language, I was to some extent 'exposing oneself to the Other's powers to define reality'; that is, I learned from these people not as the objective 'other', but through our shared experience and relationship (Lieberman 2004: 12). I do not think the nuns would have shared their meditation and personal growth stories with me on the hillsides, nor would I have understood them, had I not been an 'insider' demonstrating my support and shared dedication to their Buddhist life goals over time.

Goulet, from his extensive research with the Dene Tha of northern Canada, argues for an experiential approach in fieldwork research of spiritual cultures, and points to shared interactions between ethnographer and informant as the key tool of ethnography (Goulet 1993: 175). This relational and cultural immersion in Ge bcags' lifeworld – using my whole self as an instrument of knowledge, as Abu-Lughod frames the peculiarity of ethnography among academic disciplines – was my primary method of gaining information for this thesis (Abu-Lughod 2016: 275). I am in accord with (the mainly female) ethnographers like Abu-Lughod, Narayan (1993) and Rao (2019) who argue, like Haraway (1988), for an awareness that 'objectivity' is always situated in embodied relations. Rao comments that in the absence of finding any external theoretical apparatus – from Bell to Bourdieu – to overcome the subject-object predicament, she found her experience-led research to be the most effective method for achieving self-aware subjectivity in her study of Vedic mantra practice (Rao 2019: 33-34). I have also found my immersion in Buddhist practice has been a supportive method for self-awareness of my subjectivity, as well as for understanding the practices that are the object of my research<sup>34</sup>.

On the other hand, my quasi-'halfie' status (weighted towards being an outsider) has put me in the uneasy position of speaking 'for' and 'from' the Ge bcags nuns in this thesis (Abu-Lughod 1991: 470). A researcher's methods and assumptions are of course imbued with their

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<sup>33</sup> The term 'halfie' was made shorthand in anthropology by Abu-Lughod. See Abu-Lughod 2016:277-278.

<sup>34</sup> Here I claim Buddhist practice as a part of my methodology, contrary to the 'classical paradigm' in academic Buddhist Studies.

own cultural history (Gómez 1995: 190). I will explore throughout the thesis how the ‘facts’ of Ge bcags’ learning tradition are not facts as I have learned them throughout my Canadian and Australian educations; indeed, the highest knowledge of Ge bcags’ training is not the knowledge of facts at all (as knowledge is sometimes defined in Western spheres). This made it challenging at times during fieldwork to reconcile my mental processes with the ways the nuns engage with their practices, and it challenged the process of expressing their ways of knowing in my language as a Western researcher. As an additional aid to understanding the nuns and my position in relation to them, I have included short unedited entries from my fieldnotes in the thesis’ Appendices.

I was initially challenged to find the appropriate *voice* with which to write the thesis. The Ge bcags nuns are not scholars; they were born in yak-hair tents, have grimy robes and warm personalities, and live in a devotional world of tantric *yi dam* deities embodying the nuns’ spiritual goal of love and compassion (*byams snying rje*). How could I give the reader access to their lifeworld – so crucial in the context of how they make meaning – using typically academic language? As an ethnography, this is a project that seeks to understand what is most central to their existence, that is, to understand ‘what concerns [the subject] most intimately, that is, the hold which life has on him’ (Malinowski in Narayan 2012: 14). It seeks to understand a people’s values – in my case, what makes the Ge bcags nuns happy and motivates them to practice their Vajrayāna tradition so rigorously day after day for their whole lives. The Ge bcags nuns usually speak in heartfelt, plainspoken language, and so I have generally tried to use plainspoken language while writing, as part of my attempt to relay the experiential tone of their knowledge. In this I was influenced by Narayan’s narrative writing form in ethnography as a method for bridging the narrative-analysis divide (Narayan 1993, 2012).

Another reason my Ge bcags research position is an uneasy one is that while much of my knowledge about the nuns is from our personal relationships, I am now disclosing this knowledge for purposes beyond those relationships – translating their local language into the politically ‘stronger’ language of academic discourse (Asad in Abu-Lughod 2016: 275). My motivation has been to write an ethno-record of their tradition for understanding and posterity in Tibetan Buddhist studies. However, if the nuns are not included in my audience,

nor have any experience of what a doctorate entails, how much good is there in writing about them (Abu-Lughod 2016: 298)? The only assurance is my care and respect for the nuns and lamas in my fieldwork, of which they are aware, and our continued reciprocity, without which this thesis would not be possible (Abu-Lughod 2016: 275).

## Further notes on terms and conventions

### Tense

Another recurring challenge while writing was choosing the tense. I am writing about a nuns' community that has been living amidst rapid and far-reaching economic and socio-cultural changes since the 1980s. My thesis, however, is concerned with Ge bcags Nunnery as an intact working tradition<sup>35</sup>, as it has been, until fairly recently, unaffected by these changes. Several older nuns commented to me on the reduced fervour over the last decade with which Ge bcags nuns now keep to the nunnery's rules and practice system. One said, "In the past we just drank our tea, whether it was boiled properly or not, and got on with our practices. These days, no way! We nuns now need our tea to be tasty and hot." Another example where current cultural changes in the nunnery made it difficult to choose tense when writing is this sentence from Chapter Five, which could equally have been written in past tense: 'Nuns from such [aristocratic] families stand out among the Ge bcags nuns for their literacy skills.' This applies to current nuns around age fifty who joined Ge bcags in the 1980s, but not to younger nuns who joined in the last ten years. There is no longer a Tibetan aristocracy in Nang chen conserving literacy in traditional Tibetan texts, and young literate women have been educated in Chinese state schooling and through digital mobile messaging.

### 'Modernity'

In this thesis I use the terms 'modern' and 'pre-modern', but modernity is a relative concept (if not a modern one), and where did I draw the line? Latour's (1993) characterisation of modernity as a cognitive distinction between nature and society is relevant in assessing modernisation of Ge bcags Nunnery, whose tantric tradition is so strongly characterised by a

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<sup>35</sup> I am also for the most part discussing 'practice lineages' (*sgrub brgyud*) generally as they were before recent cultural changes.

human-nature correspondence. Foucault (2001) is also relevant to Ge bcags' social context in marking modernity as the first separation of madness from reason and the quarantining of psychiatric patients with hospitals and medication in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The Nang chen region has been undergoing an industrial and technological revolution since the 1980s, and one way the shift in its inner world became apparent is in the opening of a psychiatric department of the Nang chen county hospital around 2015<sup>36</sup>. Local patients – including dispossessed street-wanderers and yogins who meditated too earnestly – are prescribed psychiatric medicine and guided by Tibetan nurses for daily *skor ba* circumambulatory walks around a stupa in the courtyard. To me, this situation reveals a crack between worldviews in Nang chen, and an irreversible turn in modernity's direction. With such effects in Nang chen's Buddhist culture in mind, I draw the line in this thesis between pre-modernity and modernity in the 1980s, after the death of Mao Zedong in 1976 and the initiation of the 'Reform and Open' period (Ch. Gaige kaifang) by Deng Xiaoping that set all of China on a trajectory of rapid economic development. I often describe a situation as 'pre-Mao' or 'post-Mao' to convey a similar reference point of change.

### Place names

My focus on Ge bcags Nunnery as an intact tradition, as it has been for most of its history, also informed my use of 'Eastern Tibet'<sup>37</sup> (mDo khams) and 'Khams' as place names for Tibetan cultural regions that span present-day Qinghai and Sichuan Provinces and smaller parts of Gansu and Yunnan Provinces<sup>38</sup>. I am aware that the status of minority ethnicities (Ch. *shaoshu minzu*) in the PRC today is extremely complex and consequential (Fitzgerald 2020: 4-20). I use these place names not as a statement of political views, but to avoid the lengthy 'Tibetan autonomous prefectures in Qinghai, Yunnan and Gansu Provinces', and because of my focus on Ge bcags Nunnery in its traditional context. Accordingly, I use the term 'Tibetan(s)' to refer to most local participants of Buddhism in Eastern Tibet, while aware of the four measures of ethnicity heeded by the Communist Party of China (CCP), and the

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<sup>36</sup> It may have been several years earlier than this.

<sup>37</sup> Since the 1960s Eastern Tibetan regions have had a markedly different socio-political atmosphere than the Beijing-administered Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), and are administered mainly at county and prefecture levels. Religious and cultural matters have therefore tended to reflect more of the local discretion permitted in Eastern Tibet (Kapstein 2004: 249).

<sup>38</sup> Some parts of western Khams are in the TAR, including Ri bo che and Chab mdo.

considerable transformation that has occurred to the status of Tibetans since the CCP officially designated fifty-four nationalities and a Han majority in the Chinese nation in 1962 (Fitzgerald 2020: 5, 11).

### ‘Sādhanā’

I often use the term ‘*sādhanā*’ (*sgrub thabs*, ‘means of accomplishment’) as a general term for *yi dam* practices at Ge bcags, even though the texts the nuns are chanting may not always be *sgrub thabs* but *las byang* (ritual manual), or more elaborate scriptures for collective recitation in *sgrub chen* called *sgrub khog* (*sādhanā* framework). The bulk of the nunnery’s scriptural corpus<sup>39</sup> comprises tantric *yi dam* liturgical texts, and *yi dam* visualisation is an element of every one of Ge bcags’ yoga, meditation and ritual practices. The Sanskrit ‘*sādhanā*’ is therefore a convenient term (and one widely used in English) to refer to many of Ge bcags’ practices in the absence of a single Tibetan or English equivalent.

### ‘Ritual’

The same goes for my frequent use of ‘ritual’ in this thesis, a term used for convenience rather than as an accurate signifier of a Tibetan concept. There is no direct translation of ‘ritual’ in the nuns’ Khams pa dialect. The Ge bcags nuns and texts use the related terms *cho ga* (ritual methods), *phyag len* (ritual gestures), ‘*don chog*’ (liturgical recitations) and occasionally *las* (‘action’ or ‘activity’). ‘*Don chog*’ (or ‘*don pa ’don ya*’ as the nuns say it), denoting enactment along with recitation of a scripture, is most apt here since what I refer to as ‘ritual’ at Ge bcags always entails recitation of texts. ‘*Don chog*’, however, is not used by the nuns as a singular referent as I do in this thesis with the term ‘ritual’.

I use the term ‘ritual’ to refer to *sgrub chen* as a whole, and to particular manoeuvres within collective and individual *sādhanā* practices like the consecration of a ritual boundary, the imprisoning of obstacle-making demons in a tantric subjugation activity and the placing of colourful arrows (*lha brtse*) on cairns at the top of Ge bcags’ tallest mountain to propitiate the deity residing there. My usage of ‘ritual’ goes somewhat against some of the literature on

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<sup>39</sup> Ge bcags’ Nunnery’s corpus is made up of Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho’s Sixteen Volumes (Pod sde bcu drug) and Ratna gling pa’s twenty-five volumes of *gter ma*.

the term. Ritual at Ge bcags is not prescribed formality as opposed to private emotion; it is not 'symbolic activity as opposed to the instrumental behaviour of everyday life' as Asad elucidates (Asad 1993: 55; Bell 1992). Like the Egyptian women in Mahmood's study (2001), there is an ineluctable relation between the Ge bcags nuns' everyday actions and their scripted actions of prayer. Ritual at Ge bcags is always based on scripture, but it is not always scripted. Indeed, Ge bcags' tantric ritual practices create a space for spontaneous, heartfelt emotions to arise. Ge bcags' rituals include elements of visualisation, emotion (like *mos gus*, 'devotion' and *byams brtse*, 'loving compassion'), yogic breathing and meditation, and function to synchronise the nuns' minds and bodies, in tune with recitation of their texts.

All Tibetan, Chinese and Sanskrit words in this thesis are transliterated, aside from certain terms that have been assimilated into English, like lama, mandala, tantra, yoga, yogin/yoginī, thangka, etc., and names of Tibetan lamas and places well-known in English. Tibetan words are transliterated according to the Wylie scheme, Sanskrit terms are transliterated with diacritics and preceded with 'Skt.' and Chinese transliterations are written in Pinyin without diacritics and preceded with 'Ch.'

### Outline of the thesis' chapters

The thesis is laid out in six chapters, followed by a conclusion. **Chapter One** looks at the political and cultural background of the kingdom of Nang chen where Ge bcags Nunnery is located, and specifically at the Ris med atmosphere at the time of Ge bcags' founding that has very much coloured the nunnery's character. I consider the culture of Nang chen's predominantly practice lineage (*sgrub brgyud*) population, key figures involved in Ge bcags' founding, including members of the Nang chen kingship whose endorsement became crucial to the nunnery, and the revival of Ge bcags Nunnery after the Cultural Revolution. The chapter seeks to ascertain the worldview and cultural value system out of which Ge bcags Nunnery arose as a community of mainly female practitioners valued by society for their embodied experience of tantric Buddhism.

**Chapter Two** looks at the autobiography (*rang nam*) of the nunnery's founder, Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho, to understand his education, influences and activities in composing

scriptures and establishing Ge bcags and branch *dgon pa* across Eastern Tibet. It then turns to the ‘Sixteen Volumes’ (Pod sde bcu drug) of scripture attributed to Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho, which along with Ratna gling pa’s *gter ma* form the textual foundation of Ge bcags’ ritual practices. I investigate the contents of these Sixteen Volumes, as well as their audiences and processes of textual production. The chapter points to the pragmatic nature of these texts, their oral dimension and how they are read by members of the community (topics that are further explored in subsequent chapters).

**Chapter Three** describes the lifeworld of the Ge bcags nuns, including their environment, activities, practices and characters. I look briefly at other academic studies of Tibetan and Himalayan nuns to place Ge bcags Nunnery within their context. I then explore the main elements of the nuns’ daily lives and their tantric practice tradition, looking at the nunnery’s annual schedule of collective ritual ceremonies, as well as the gradual stages of training that a new nun engages in upon entering the nunnery.

**Chapter Four** gives an analysis of the core elements of the Ge bcags nuns’ practice system, namely *yi dam* deity yoga (*lha’i rnal ’byor*) that is the framework of all their practices, rDzogs chen which is their hermeneutical context and the subtle body of *rtsa, rlung* and *thig le* that is the basis of the nuns’ learning and practice experience. The chapter takes insight from the Japanese Buddhist scholar Yuasa (1987) in discussing the integration of mind and body that is the goal of Ge bcags’ training pathway, as well as the mind-body paradigm in Asian Buddhist traditions that challenges the translation of Buddhism into English. The chapter considers the relationship of the Ge bcags nuns’ written texts to the highest form of knowledge (*rig pa*) in their tradition, and how the nuns express their understanding of this knowledge not through explanation, but as human examples with emotional dimensions.

**Chapter Five** returns to the question of ‘reading’, looking more closely at how the Ge bcags nuns read and learn. Ge bcags’ Buddhist tradition is predominantly practical and its highest knowledge is nonverbal, yet the nuns spend hours each day reading texts as part of their training. Written texts and literacy have been a large part of Tibetan culture, but that does not mean they have had the same role and significance as in traditional European or contemporary Western culture. How and why does a Ge bcags nun learn to read, write and

memorise? The chapter asks, fundamentally, what the role of written texts is at Ge bcags Nunnery and their relationship to personalised oral instructions in the nuns' tantric Buddhist tradition. Along with Chapter Six, Chapter Five demonstrates the way of reading at Ge bcags Nunnery, and how the nuns derive meaning from their texts through a living interdependence of experiential and scriptural practices.

**Chapter Six** takes a closer look at the nunnery's communal ritual life based on participatory observation of the nunnery's annual bKa' brgyad ('Eight Pronouncements', or Sādhanā of Eight Heruka) *sgrub chen*. *sGrub chen* ('great accomplishment'; extended group *sādhana* ceremonies) comprise nearly half of the nunnery's annual schedule. I look at different levels of the *sgrub chen* ceremony, from the outer atmosphere of the nuns' collective engagement to the words of the scripture. I consider a substantial passage from the *sgrub chen* scripture that the nuns recite by translating it in two ways: first, how it might be read by a younger Ge bcags nun, and second how it might be read by a senior nun or informed Western reader. While it is possible (though not straightforward) to give a coherent English translation and intellectual 'reading' of what this text is 'saying', this would not convey how this text is learned by the nuns through repeated recitation in its *sgrub chen* context, with its rhythmic chanting and melodies, physical gestures and other ritual elements that affect the reading. The chapter aims to give a sense of how the text might be read and engaged with by the Ge bcags nuns, whose daily lives are based around repeated recitation and embodied enactment of similar texts.

In the thesis' **Conclusion**, I give a summary discussion of my argument for our need to move away from exclusively textual and intellectual analyses in Buddhist Studies, to more holistic investigations of the embodied and contextual meaning of Buddhist texts and practices, listening carefully to what they mean to those who work with them at the heart of their lives. I discuss some of the conditions of modernisation in Tibetan Buddhism over the last few decades and their accompanying shift towards more degree-oriented scholastic approaches in practice lineage *dgon pa*. I give more examples of how this shift has reflected in the culture of Ge bcags Nunnery over recent years, and what the future might be like for such a full-time, practice-based community of spiritual transformation in Nang chen. I also point to questions for future research on topics such as gendered knowledge in Tibetan society, and the

expansion of our conceptual framework of 'meditation' and 'mindfulness' in scientific research.

## CHAPTER ONE:

### The political and cultural landscape of Ge bcags Nunnery

The thesis opens with an examination of the broader regional and cultural context of the Ge bcags nuns and their tantric Buddhist tradition. This chapter begins by giving a brief historical overview of the erstwhile kingdom of Nang chen, paying special attention to its earth-based economies, loosely centralised political structure and Buddhist worldview. I explore Nang chen's predominantly practice lineage (*sgrub brgyud*) population of *dgon pa* and their active participation in the social networks and textual production that defined the 19<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> century Ris med period in Eastern Tibet. I then turn attention to the contemplative values and practices that informed the eclectic and open-minded attitudes of the Ris med period, and Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's personal and communal participation in these. The chapter ends by considering how Nang chen's contemplative culture at the time of Ge bcags' founding was conducive to the emergence of a community of nuns who became respected for their embodied experience of Buddhist texts.

#### A brief overview of the kingdom of Nang chen (1300-1951)

Prior to 1951, Nang chen was an Eastern Tibetan kingdom that, unlike sDe dge, has received relatively little attention in Tibetan Studies. Previous academic writings on Nang chen, as Turek points out, are largely based on colonial narratives of neighbouring states, namely Yuan and Qing empires and the Lha sa government, the dGa' ldan pho brang<sup>40</sup>, whose points of view depict Nang chen as an ambiguous and shifting polity that was at various times bolstered, legitimised and/or assimilated by surrounding powers (Turek 2013; 2019). Nang chen's political relation to neighbouring states is clear in local written and oral sources citing Chinese titles of Nang chen leaders, like *chan hu* (Ch. *qianhu*), *be chang* (Ch. *baizong*) and *be hu* (Ch. *baihu*) – administrative titles used in Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties to legitimise and integrate peripheral polities (Lho bstan 'dzin 2012: 89-90; Turek 2019: 466). As this chapter is concerned with the cultural landscape in which Ge bcags was founded, it looks directly at

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<sup>40</sup> Nang chen was one of numerous Khams pa kingdoms, including Lha thog, Mi nyag, gLing tshang and others whose self-referential status as autonomous polities is overlooked in the most often cited sources.

local sources and to Turek's work on Nang chen as its own place, from the points of view of its kingship and Buddhist society<sup>41</sup>.

An example of Nang chen's integral identity yet shifting status dates from the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when the kingdom petitioned the Fifth Dalai Lama and Gushri Khan for defensive support against a Bon invasion. This marked the beginning of Nang chen's inclusion among the greater territories ruled by Lha sa's dGa' ldan pho brang, which legitimised the Nang chen king's authority over local monastic and lay estates. Tribute was thereafter paid to Lha sa and enforced by means of a census, and some Nang chen monasteries were subsequently converted to dGe lugs pa (Turek 2019: 465-466). These developments were of significance for Nang chen's later participation in the Ris med ('Unbiased' or 'Non-sectarian') response, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

Prior to its absorption into the PRC in 1951, Nang chen comprised a significantly larger region than it does today, with three royal palaces<sup>42</sup> spread across its territory over its royal lifetime, and traversed by the headwaters of three of Asia's great rivers – the rDza chu (Lancang/Mekong River), rMa chu (Yellow River) and 'Bri chu (Yangtse River)<sup>43</sup>. Nang chen was long vitalised by the town of sKye dgu mdo (also sKye dgu; Ch. Yushu), an important trading hub for Tibetans and Chinese merchants with roads leading out across the Tibetan Plateau and to lower-land China (Rockhill 1894: 206). Today sKye dgu is the urbanised administrative centre of Yushu Prefecture which, following a complete renovation after a devastating earthquake in 2010, has become an attractive destination in Chinese domestic tourism. Since the early 2000s, many of the Ge bcags nuns have families based in sKye dgu,

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<sup>41</sup> Turek's local sources are mostly contemporary productions by lamas and their monastic associates, written in part as a revival strategy since the 1980s. As far as they are religious constructions of memory, written on behalf of particular lineages, their purpose is largely inspirational and legitimising rather than historical accuracy. However, this does not mean these religious sources lack real historical information. Through a measured reading of these sources and oral accounts, Turek has managed to piece together a coherent picture of the Nang chen kingship, with its moral and economic power relations to its *dgon pa* and pastoral population (Turek 2012; 2013; 2019).

<sup>42</sup> Nang so chen mo (at sKu 'bum dgon), gSang rdzong nor bu lha rtse, and finally, Nang chen sgar. In between the second and third was a mere tent encampment, dPal gzhung g.yer chen sgar (mKhan po bsod nams n.d.: 153-157).

<sup>43</sup> Another major river in Nang chen is the lCi chu, which flows near Ge bcags Nunnery and figures often in Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's *rnam thar*.

where adult men participate in cordyceps trade or other business with wider Chinese society. This follows in the wake of the Develop the West campaign (Ch. Xibu dakaifa) initiated in the 1990s, which has motivated most Nang chen families to partially or fully relinquish their earlier yak-herding livelihoods and to now rely on the profits of cordyceps trade and other business. Whatever their livelihoods, nearly all Nang chen families nowadays maintain a household in a town where children attend nine mandatory years of state school. The Nang chen that the current Ge bcags nuns live within, as one of five counties in Yushu Prefecture, Qinghai Province, PRC, is a considerably shrunken territory and different regional identity to its pre-1950 realm. Throughout its lifespan the Nang chen kingship saw itself as powered by a dynastic life-force (*bla*) connected to a mountain deity (Lho bstan 'dzin 2012: 15). Today the Nang chen government is powered by a materialist ideology. Superstition (Ch. *mixin*) – defined as beliefs and practices that contradict science – is illegal in the PRC (Poon 2011: 31; Yang 2012).

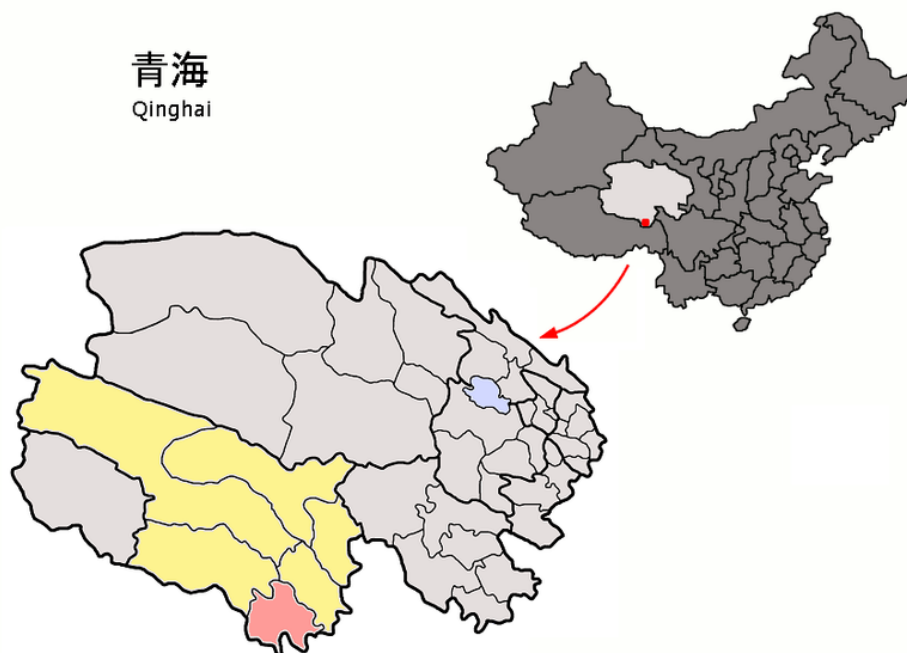


Figure 3: Location of present-day Nang chen County in the PRC. Map: Croquant, Wikimedia Commons. Nang chen County (red) is within Yushu Prefecture (yellow), in Qinghai Province (grey).

In the autumn of 1950, while moving through Nang chen on its campaign march towards Chab mdo and Central Tibet, the Communist People's Liberation Army (PLA) absorbed the power of local leaders and assimilated them into a new political apparatus. The Nang chen king (bKra shis tshe dbang stobs rgyal, 1910-1961) was placed as the nominal head of the

prefecture (Turek 2019: 478-480). Without the possibility of sons continuing his hereditary line and having no effective political role, bKra shis tshe dbang stobs rgyal was to be the final Nang chen king. Two of his sons continued through the post-Mao reform period to participate in the re-establishment of Ge bcags' tradition, one as a lama and one as a royal endorser. Their photos remain on the walls of the lamas' residence at the top of the nunnery.

### **Nang chen's kingship, ways of life and Buddhist worldview**

The first king of Nang chen was the Dru clansman and 'Ba' rom bka' brgyud monastery abbot, Chos kyi rgyal mtshan, who was officially installed by the Mongol-Sakya diarchy in 1300 as sovereign over twenty-five pastoral clans and eighteen monastic districts. A written 'Ba' rom bka' brgyud 'Dharma history' (*chos byung*) states that Sa skya khon decreed the Nang chen throne holder should be a reliable leader of Buddhist moral authority with the title *chos rgyal* ('Dharma king') (Turek 2019: 462-463). All eighteen monastic districts are said to have followed the 'Ba' rom bka' brgyud tradition (Turek 2019: 462). Chos kyi rgyal mtshan's predecessor, who established the seat that became the royal residence, was a yogin-disciple of Ti shri ras pa shes rab seng ge (1164-1236), who was in turn a disciple of the founder of the 'Ba' rom bka' brgyud lineage, Dar ma dbang phugs (1127-1199)<sup>44</sup>. The Nang chen kingdom thus had its origins in the bKa' brgyud tradition as it existed at the time, with several of its key figures being 'cotton-clad' yogins (*ras pa*) marked as *gtum mo*<sup>45</sup> experts following Mi la ras pa's example (Turek 2013: 115-120). Nang chen evolved to become a bKa' brgyud stronghold with dynamic *sgrub brgyud* (practice lineage; literally 'accomplishment lineage') links that extended across Tibet and the Himalayas, and eventually sparked the relationships that gave rise to Ge bcags Nunnery (Holmes-Tagchungdarpa 2014: 172-180; Karma don grub 1999: 486-495).

The socio-religious structure of the kingdom was patterned on Indic cosmology, with the physical layout of the capital and the function of its ministers (*be hu*) loosely modelled on a

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<sup>44</sup> Who was a direct disciple of sGam po pa (1079-1153).

<sup>45</sup> *gtum mo* is an advanced tantric Buddhist yoga by which a practitioner's psychic energy-winds are dissolved in the central channel of the energetic mind-body complex, in order to expedite an experience of nonconceptual awareness (*rig pa; ye shes*). The increased body temperature that arises with advanced *gtum mo* practice is a byproduct of the yoga and not its purpose.

mandala. At the last royal capital of Nang chen sgar, settled in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, the king lived in a central palace surrounded by residences of four main ministers (*be hu*) in four directions. A further thirty-three official districts extended throughout the territory, mimicking Indra's realm of Thirty-three gods (Sum cu rtsa gsum; Skt. Trāyastriṃśa) from Indic cosmology. This imitated the Tibetan divine kingship narrative, and an Indic mythological blueprint adopted by many ancient Hindu and Buddhist polities across Asia that empowered the king as a mediator of the divine (Turek 2019: 469-470). The worldview behind Nang chen's ruling structure assumed a correspondence between microcosm and macrocosm with religious and secular power operating in tandem. The Nang chen sgar palace was located on the same plot of land as the 'Brug pa bka' brgyud monastery Tshes bcu dgon<sup>46</sup>, and districts were defined by the large monasteries within them. This correspondence of outer and inner worlds is implicit in the tantric worldview of the Ge bcags nuns and the society it evolved within, as we will explore in further chapters. It is also crucial in considering the changes in culture and monastic education accompanying Tibetan modernisation since the 1980s.

Nang chen's natural landscape was the vessel in which all events occurred, and people's characters and life experiences were defined by their intimate relationship with nature. Nang chen's traditional worldview is reflected in the title of a recently published, well-regarded Nang chen history, in which history is 'the two-way [spiritual and temporal] happenings of the environment [or 'vessel'] and its inhabitants'<sup>47</sup>. The opening pages of this history are dedicated in equal parts to the human and natural worlds: eight pages of photos of important officials and lamas are followed by eight pages of landscapes named after resident deities (Lho bstan 'dzin 2012: 7-22).

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<sup>46</sup> Today Tshes bcu monastery is also called Nang chen sgar.

<sup>47</sup> The full title is 'The heavy droplets from the mountain lCi and zLa waters: the annals expressing the two-way happenings of the environment and its inhabitants in the dGe 'brong region of Nang chen, Eastern Tibet', *Pod mdo khams nang chen dge 'brong yul gyi snod bcud lugs gnyis kyi byung ba brjod pa'i deb ther gangs chab lci zla'i zegs ma zhes bya ba bzhugs so*.

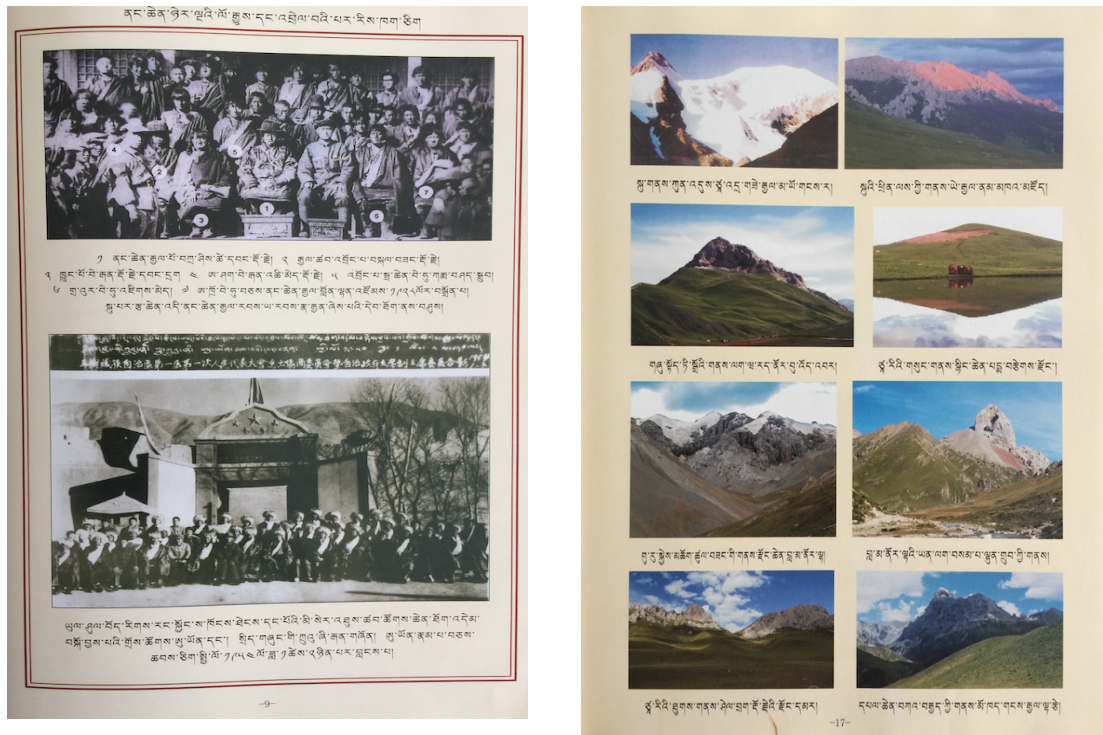


Figure 4: Two opening pages from *Lho bstan 'dzin* 2012: 9, 17.

Nang chen is set at an average altitude of 3,645 metres (11,968 feet). Its predominant pre-1950s economy was pastoral, with wealthy families tending herds of over a thousand yak and sheep across vast grasslands. Horses figured prominently in Nang chen culture as a main form of transportation; today, motorcycles are called ‘motor horses’ (*‘khrul rta*). Gruschke (2008) noted that less than one fifth of Nang chen’s pre-2008 population was involved in field cultivation (mostly of barley and root vegetables), although most agricultural families also maintained small herds, so that herds of yaks were everywhere to be seen. Nang chen’s *dgon pa* also maintained yak herds, as Ge bcags dgon pa exemplifies: the nunery resides in a highland valley at 4,500 metres (14,700 feet), where the nuns tend hundreds of yaks which they rely on for their dairy and yak dung for cooking and heating fuel. Only over the last ten years has the nunery augmented yak dung with unreliable solar-powered electricity (installed by the government) and coal as fuel. Nearly all of Ge bcags’ approximately 250 nuns are from yak-herding families; the rest are from families who have resettled in urban households over the last twenty years. When one drives with Ge bcags nuns for five hours over barren highlands towards the nunery, they look out the windows expressing affection for the landscape, commenting on how conducive to herding certain areas are.

The Nang chen dialect of Tibetan language is vital and rugged, much like the landscape itself, and people rarely use honorific forms that are normal in Central Tibetan dialects. The Nang chen character is generally direct and heartfelt, with a buoyant vitality generic to people of the Tibetan Plateau who have survived the harsh elements of high-altitude pastoral and agricultural livelihoods. While unrefined, the Nang chen dialect reveals an affectionate cultural character and social relationships. People rarely take offense from an imperative tone and conversation has the regular insertion of *tshe ring* ('long life', like modern English's 'take care') and *dga' shog* ('be happy'). *Tshe ring* and *dga' shog* are expressed easily and often: adults say it to children, children say it to neighbours, women say it to men (related and unrelated), customers say it to shopkeepers.

### **The Nang chen kingdom's decentralised ruling structure and monastic alliances**

It is clear from historical sources that while Nang chen has had a deeply rooted cultural self-identity over its history, it was never a tightly structured kingdom exercising complete authority from its royal centre. Nang chen society lived in reference to its *chos rgyal*, yet royal authority was distributed among highland districts of pastoral families and *dgon pa*. In the early stages of the kingdom some monasteries were placed in high official rank, receiving privileges and authorisation over their own territories. Some monasteries of different denominations were appointed to perform empowering and longevity rituals (*sku rim*) for the king, and in return were granted governing status (Turek 2013: 118; 219: 475-476). Ge bcags Nunnery, whose founder was reborn as the son of the Nang chen king, was one of the large *dgon pa* that performed *sku rim* for the king – tantric rituals like Tshes sgrub (Lifeforce Accomplishment), Tārā and repulsion rituals of the wrathful deities Mahākāla and Vajrakīlaya (rDo rje 1998; personal communication, Kun bzang nyi ma<sup>48</sup>, June 2018). This illustrates the unique status of Ge bcags as an anomaly among Tibetan nunneries, given that nuns rarely had complete access to highest tantric training, let alone were they called upon to perform advanced rituals officially. The question of how Ge bcags became a community of female tantric experts valued for their meditative experience is central to this chapter.

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<sup>48</sup> As noted in the Introduction, Kun bzang nyi ma (b. 1973) is a third reincarnation of Ge bcags' founder, Tshangs dbyangs rgya mthso, and the nephew of the last Nang chen king.

Due to its lack of centralised political force and an economic superstructure, Turek argues that Nang chen was more a federation of clans united under a royal Buddhist banner than a hierarchical polity like its neighbouring sDe dge. In Nang chen kings retained power to a large extent as moral and social institutions (Turek 2013: 118). Social capital was afforded to the Nang chen kingship by society's belief in tantric Buddhism, and some kings are recalled for having engaged in prolonged periods of yogic practice. Nang chen's earth-based economy and decentralised political authority allowed for a culture in which dedication to tantric practice was encouraged and highly valued<sup>49</sup> (Gruschke 2004: 107; Tulku Urgyen 2005; Turek 2013: 118).

### **Nang chen's practice-based tantric Buddhist culture**

Prior to the 1950s, and following the Tibetan religious revival in the 1980s, Nang chen had the highest relative population of monks and nuns of any ethnic Tibetan region of China. In 1958 Gruschke reported nearly a quarter of Nang chen's population being monastic (Gruschke in Turek 2013: 114). In 2012 Lobsang estimated a population of 15,000 ordained sangha out of a total estimated Tibetan population of 70,000 in Nang chen<sup>50</sup> (Lobsang 2012). A 1999 Nang chen County publication counted eighty-three per cent of Nang chen's *dgon pa* as sub-lineages of bKa' brgyud and rNying ma schools<sup>51</sup> (Karma don grub 1999). This figure, and the overall number of Nang chen *dgon pa*, is greater if the numerous small hermitages in present-day Nang chen are taken into account. rMog phur dgo and sKya zhig ri khrod are examples of small hermitages not accounted for in this publication, among several others of which I am aware.

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<sup>49</sup> It can be argued, based on the historical pattern of pre-modern Buddhist societies across Asia, that a widespread culture based on prolonged meditative experience, like tantric or forest meditation traditions, can only exist where there is decentralised political administration (Samuel 1993: 10, 33; Tiyanich 1997).

<sup>50</sup> Such a ratio will have declined significantly since 2012 as all school-age children are now assimilated in mandatory primary schooling, and monastic ordination is not legal in the PRC until age 18.

<sup>51</sup> Lineages – for example the 'Brug pa bKa' brgyud, dPal yul rNying ma and 'Khon lineages – are subsumed under one or more schools. Oldmeadow points out that Tibetan Buddhist 'schools' are a matter of monastic and institutional organisation, whereas 'lineage' is a line of practice transmission from guru to disciples, like the Na ro Chos drug or Lam 'bras (Oldmeadow 2012: 18-19). Dalton demonstrates that rNying ma and bKa' brgyud are less definable as schools, and more umbrellas for numerous tantric transmission lineages (Dalton 2016).

The Buddhist culture in Nang chen was not the pan-Tibetan Buddhist culture observable in exile, but a visceral, earth-based culture where herders and farmers supported *dgon pa* with material provisions, while depending on them for spiritual, psychological and ritual support to negotiate social and natural forces. The hearty and down-to-earth Nang chen way of life entailed a mental simplicity and experiential approach to understanding that allowed for easy access to attitudes of faith (*dad pa*) and pure vision (*dag snang*) that are essential in traditional Vajrayāna practice. Most of Nang chen's *dgon pa* are located at 4,000 metres (13,000 feet) or higher, and as followers of *sgrub brgyud* lineages they were traditionally constituted more as hermitages than as monasteries, with curricula of contemplative and ritual training and the oral, experiential instructions of practised gurus as the highest learning principle (personal communications, rDo rdzong rin po che and Karma o rgyan, May 2014 and September 2018; Turek 2013: 118). We can infer from the proliferation of *sgrub brgyud* lineages in Nang chen's monastic histories, and from the fact that several of them have undergone Ris med and post-Mao revivals, that Nang chen has long been a region where contemplative training was afforded social prestige and capital (Karma phrin las 1965; Lho bstan 'dzin 2012; Turek 2013).

Prior to the 1980s, only one systematised study centre (*bshad grwa*; monastic college) existed in Nang chen at Zur mang rnam rgyal brtse monastery. Textual study did naturally take place in Nang chen's *dgon pa*, and this increased with the Ris med influence, but in general it was not systematised or degree-oriented. The emphasis of philosophical study that took place was on moral conduct and understanding emptiness (*stong pa nyid*; Skt. *śūnyatā*) as the nature of the knowing mind (sGam po pa 1956; Pettit 1999). Core philosophical texts studied in Nang chen's pre-1950s bKa' brgyud and rNying ma *dgon pa* included the *Bodhisattvacaryāvatāra* (sPyod 'jug), *Ascertaining the Three Vows* (sDom gsum rnam nges) and *The Sublime Continuum* (rGyud bla ma). Study of these was combined with regular experiential instructions (*khrid ka*) imparted personally. Since the post-Mao Tibetan Buddhist revival, however, almost every large *dgon pa* in Nang chen has added a systematised

intellectual study program, and some monasteries have reestablished themselves at lower altitudes leaving nuns to take over their earlier locations<sup>52</sup>.

With its concentration of *sgrub brgyud* practice lineages Nang chen has long been eulogised as a realm of contemplative tantric practice, and its many hermitages have been a fertile source of Tibetan cultural production over the centuries, giving rise to famous yogins, *gter ston*, pilgrimage sites and incarnation lineages (*sprul sku*) (Turek 2013: 3). An epithet traced to the 13<sup>th</sup> century reign of 'Ba' rom bka' brgyud masters calls Nang chen a 'Realm of Meditators' (*sGom sde*), or more fully the 'Family of Cotton-clad Ones, Realm of Meditators' (*Ras tshang sgom sde*) (Turek 2013: 114-115). The title 'sGom sde' is still in usage today within Tibet and abroad where Nang chen lamas have laid down roots, and Nang chen folk preserve a reputation of their homeland as a place where the most advanced tantric practices were imparted equally to everyone. I raised this subject over dinner soup with some monks in Nang chen in 2018, and they recalled in unison the adage that sGom sde Nang chen was a place where 'all the women meditate while spinning wool, all the men meditate on horses'<sup>53</sup> (personal communication, Karma don Idan and Karma dam chos, May 2018).

Whether the cultural reality throughout Nang chen's history in fact matched this reputation is beyond the scope of this thesis, but of substantial note is the ancient human-made remains distributed throughout the region as evidence of a contemplative culture dating far back over centuries<sup>54</sup>. Temple murals of the eight bodhisattvas (*nye ba'i sras brgyad*; 'eight close sons' of Śākyamuni) were recently uncovered on the meditation site of Ti shri ras pa (1164-1236) on the rDza chu riverbanks across from the present-day Nang chen County capital. These have been dated by a Beijing archaeologist as predating the Nang chen kingdom and originating from links with Dunhuang (Wang Yamei 2019). In other cases, local monks have

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<sup>52</sup> Ra ya dgon and rTogs Idan dgon are two examples near Ge bcags.

<sup>53</sup> *Mo thams cad bal phang 'khel zhing sgoms; pho thams cad rta yi thog nas sgoms.*

<sup>54</sup> The caves, paintings, stupas and skeletons of yogins at rDzong mgo gling, rTa rna dgon, gDong tshang ri khrod and rDza mo dgon are a handful of many examples. See also the photo catalogue of relics in Karma don grub 1999: xxii-xl.

identified ancient stupas as memorials of yogins recorded in their lineage histories (personal communication, Karma don Idan, June 2018).

Most pertinent to the thesis is the fact that Ge bcags Nunnery is itself evidence of a 'sGom sde' culture in Nang chen from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the present. Ge bcags was founded specifically to provide an opportunity for women to cultivate lifelong rDzogs chen and advanced tantric practices. A spectrum of ordained and lay men and women from various backgrounds are mentioned in Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's *rnam thar* as receiving tantric transmissions and practising them in the nunnery's vicinity (rDo rje 1998). The two-way (*lugs gnyis*) worldview of pre-modern Nang chen, in which spirituality and temporal affairs overlapped, is again clear in the fact that eight Nang chen princes (*rgyal sras*) of the 'Brug pa bka' brgyud dynasty participated in Ge bcags' affairs from the 1890s to the present as lamas and agents of royal patronage (Karma don grub 1999: 486-495; Kun bzang 2017: 41-45). Numerous clergy of other bKa' brgyud lineages can be counted among Nang chen royalty as is evident in their monastic histories ('Brong pa rgyal po 2003; Karma don grub 1999).

### **The nexus of practice lineages (*sgrub brgyud*) in Eastern Tibet**

Practice lineages which prevailed in Eastern Tibet throughout Ge bcags' lifetime were just that: lineages based primarily on practical knowledge of Vajrayāna teachings, with oral, experiential instructions as their highest learning principle. More accurately, the term *sgrub brgyud* is derived from the *sgrub brgyud shing rta chen po brgyad* ('eight great conveyance lineages of accomplishment'<sup>55</sup>), a classification generally attributed to 'Phreng bo gter ston shes rab 'od zer (1517-1584) and widely referenced by 'Jam mgon kong sprul and other Tibetan authors, especially during the Ris med period from the 19<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (Deroche 2009: 320-321; Kapstein 1996: 277). These eight *sgrub brgyud* practice lineages are regarded as the authentic traditions that conveyed Buddhism to Tibet, notably because they transmitted Buddhism's core teachings on consciousness and its functions through personalised, experiential instructions (*gdams ngag*; Skt. *upadeśa*) from master to disciple

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<sup>55</sup> The eight lineages are: rNying ma, bKa' gdams pa, Lam 'bras, Mar pa bka' brgyud, Shangs pa bka' brgyud, sByor drug, Zhi byed/gCod, rDo rje gsum gyi bsnyen sgrub.

(Kapstein 1996: 276-277; Ringu Tulku 2006: 97-192). The connotation of *sgrub* (*sgrub pa*, ‘accomplishment’) as the term for the embodied realisation of self as a tantric deity will be discussed further in Chapter Four.

More than eighty per cent of Nang chen’s *dgon pa* prior to 1951 were *sgrub brgyud* sub-lineages of bKa’ brgyud and rNying ma schools. *sGrub brgyud* were the fabric of the cross weave of rNying ma and gSar ma lineages that still characterises the Buddhist culture of Eastern Tibet, having flourished especially during the Ris med era, with their nexus being the open-minded nature of cognisance as experienced in rDzogs chen and Mahāmudrā meditation systems. Such cross-pollination of practice lineages is evident from at least the 13<sup>th</sup> century, as seen in the works of the second and third Karma pa. Rang byung rdo rje’s 14<sup>th</sup> century ‘Mahāmudrā Prayer of Definitive Meaning’ (Nges don phyag rgya chen po’i smon lam) expressed a non-sectarian attitude that centuries later characterised the ethos from which Ge bcags arose:

Free from mental fabrication it is Mahāmudrā,  
 Free from extremes it is Great Madhyamaka (‘Middle Way’),  
 And everything included here, it is also called Dzogchen (‘Great Completion’ or ‘Great Perfection’).  
 May I attain the confidence that, in understanding one, I realise the meaning of all.<sup>56</sup>

Nearly six hundred years later, Ge bcags’ founder, Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho, wrote a slight variation on the theme:

There is no partiality in the three views of Madhyamaka, Mahāmudrā and rDzogs chen. It only matters what suits your mind. They are classified as three, but your mind is the only basis for their difference. Seen with space-like *rig pa* awareness, the three do not exist<sup>57</sup>.

The transmission of rNying ma and gSar ma practices continues in a multidirectional flow in Tibet (PRC) and in exile today, with rNying ma practitioners receiving Mahāmudrā

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<sup>56</sup> *yid byed bral ba ‘di ni phyag rgya che/ mtha’ dang bral ba dbu ma chen po yin/ ‘di ni kun ‘dus rdzogs chen zhes kyang bya/ gcig ches kun don rtogs pa’i gdeng thob shog/* (translation and Wylie transliteration in Oldmeadow 2012: 135).

<sup>57</sup> *dbu ma phyag rdzogs gsum gyi lta ba de/ phyogs ris ma yin blo la gang ‘thad yin/ gsum du dbye yang dbye gzhi rang gi sems/ rig par bltas nag sum med nam mkha’ ‘dra/* (Tshangs dbyangs vol. 11: 167).

instructions and tantric cycles from gSar ma collections, and vice versa. More often, rDzogs chen has been adopted by practitioners of gSar ma schools, although in line with the nondual nature of Mahāmudrā and rDzogs chen awareness, a clear distinction between the two systems of training is practically impossible to locate. A good example of this blending of traditions is rDzong sar Monastery in sDe dge in both the Ris med and post-Mao revival periods, where renowned *mkhan po* like 'Jam dbyangs mkhyen brtse dbang po (1820-1892) and mKhan po pad ma dam chos (1933-2016) are identified as Sa skya by monastic and philosophical affiliation, while being regarded as rDzogs chen masters who gave widespread transmissions of rDzogs chen treatises like *Ye shes bla ma* ('Unsurpassed Wisdom') and *bKha' lding gshog rlabs* ('Flight of the Garuda'). Another among many other Eastern Tibetan examples is the Zur mang bka' brgyud (a gSar ma lineage) nunnery in Nang chen, Rig gsum dgon pa, whose three-year retreat centre currently follows the kLong chen snying thig system of the rNying ma school with its rDzogs chen orientation. The lives of Ge bcags' founder, Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho, and his guru, Grub dbang tshogs gnyis (c. 1828-1904), also demonstrate this mingling of rNying ma and gSar ma practice lineages with an overarching Ati (rDzogs chen) hermeneutic<sup>58</sup> (rDo rje 1998; Karma don grub 1999: 486-503).



Figure 5: A photo collage of lamas on the wall of a Ge bcags nun's room. Photo: author, 2018.

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<sup>58</sup> Grub dbang tshogs gnyis' other disciple, Shākya shrī, is famous for his meditation encampment (*sgar*) where he taught Mahāmudrā to practitioners on one hillside, and rDzogs chen to practitioners on another hillside around the power place of Kyi phug at Tsā ri in Southern Tibet (Holmes-Tagchungdarpa 2014: 170-171).

### The Ris med approach and its political impetus

The period prior to Ge bcags Nunnery's founding in 1892 saw a proliferation of non-sectarian thought and practice that invigorated the cultural world of Khams. This development, now referred to as the Ris med period, continued to evolve until the 1950s and still influences modern developments in Tibetan Buddhism today. The most vulnerable lineages at the start of the Ris med period, the ones strengthened by its outcomes, were those whose meditative knowledge and pithy oral instructions gave them a quieter textual and political voice than the scholastic dGe lugs pa school of Central Tibet. Ris med activities were largely a response to the dGe lugs pa political and scholastic hegemony of the time, which had generally become static and at times overtly sectarian (Dreyfus 2003: 123-126; Smith 2001: 245; van Schaik 2011: 201-202).

Central figures of the Ris med era, 'Jam mgon kong sprul (1813-1899), 'Jam dbyangs mkhyen brtse dbyang po (1820-1892), the *gter ston* mChog gyur gling pa (1829-1870) and their associates, initiated a synthesis of practices, doctrines, scriptural collections and hermitages that revived and strengthened minority non-dGe lugs pa lineages in Khams (Gardner 2006; Oldmeadow 2012; Turek 2012). Several researchers have been reluctant to recognise a Ris med 'movement' since it was not recognised as such at the time. (Gardner 2006; Pearcey 2016; Oldmeadow 2012; Turek 2012). However it can certainly be said that by the height of the Ris med era in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century – when Ge bcags Nunnery was founded – salient trends and a non-sectarian attitude merited the era's description by Gene Smith as 'one of the most fascinating periods in Tibet's cultural history' (Smith 2001: 249).

Ris med's roots are present in the historical syntheses between shamanic and clerical patterns of Tibetan Buddhism, as they are in the tensions that foiled such syntheses (Samuel 1993; Smith 2001: 237-239). The ethos of Ris med is reminiscent of Karma pakshi's harmonising of rNying ma and gSar ma practices in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, and later in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, in the works of rTse le sna tshogs rang grol and Karma chags med. Karma pakshi's place of study was the rNying ma pa monastery Ka thog dgon pa in Khams, which already had a fully-fledged scholastic program in the 12<sup>th</sup> century with a tantric orientation and

encyclopaedic approach that would later be echoed in Kong sprul's writings (Bya bral n.d.: 18-47; Kapstein 2000: 99). Perhaps the most kindred Ris med predecessor was 'Jigs med gling pa (1730-1798), who prioritised tantric practice experience over the monastic career and fortified rNying ma's rDzogs chen teachings through scriptural organisation of bKa' ma, gTer ma (traditional scriptures and rediscovered 'Treasure' texts) and kLong chen snying thig compilations. His use of imagery and analogy rather than logical defence to communicate a spacious meditational outlook that could encompass any Dharmic viewpoint heralded the attitude that later defined the Ris med period (Oldmeadow 2012: 40-43; Samuel 1993: 535). These would also be later reflected in the tenor of Ge bcags Nunnery's scriptures.

The sDe dge kingdom, Nang chen's South-easterly neighbour in Khams, was the first major cradle for the Ris med period. The sDe dge royal family's establishment of the sDe dge printing press and its edition of the Tibetan Buddhist canon in the 18<sup>th</sup> century were a major impetus for the eastward power shift of Tibetan religious culture that unfolded in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (Oldmeadow 2012: 49). sDe dge's royal patronage of 'Jigs med gling pa and his woodblocks of rNying ma tantras and kLong chen snying thig scriptures were also key prompters for activities that would follow (Gyatso 1998: XX). Nang chen, intimately linked to sDe dge through many cultural lines, became an equally important setting for Ris med developments through *sgrub brgyud* hermitage networks and reincarnation lineages, particularly of mChog gyur gling pa. Today, the focus of Tibetan Buddhist culture in China remains in Eastern Tibet (mainly Qinghai and Sichuan Provinces) where populations are more loosely administered than the Beijing-administered TAR, and where a vital religious revival has taken place alongside modernisation since the 1980s<sup>59</sup>.

### **Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho as an epitome of Ris med learning and values**

This chapter is chiefly concerned with the quality of knowledge and values that defined the Ris med period and were the context for Ge bcags' founding. Ge bcags Nunnery was and

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<sup>59</sup> The rNying ma centres of bLa rung sgar and Ya chen sgar in Sichuan Province are two major focal points of the Tibetan Buddhist revival over the last three decades, and for the Sino-Tibetan relations that are now Tibetan Buddhism's larger social context in the PRC. These centres have had a far-reaching influence on Tibetan religious culture, from diet and livelihoods to the curricula of *sgrub brgyud dgon pa* (Gaerrang 2012; Gayley 2013; McDougal 2016: 48-58).

continues to be an outcome of these, and Ge bcags' founder, Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho, was an archetypal Ris med participant. Like Ris med's three principal figures – 'Jam dbyangs mkhyen brtse dbang po, 'Jam mgon kong sprul and mChog gyur gling pa – Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho came from an eclectic lineage background in Khams. He was also identified as the reincarnation of a close disciple of Padmasambhava, rGyal ba mchog dbyangs. Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's *gter ma*-style compositions and establishment of over a dozen branch hermitages across Eastern Tibet were consonant with the Ris med mission of revivifying practice lineages and identifying sacred territory with links to Padmasambhava and the early Yarlung dynasty (Turek 2012: 440-442). Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho was also quite closely associated with Kong sprul and mKhyen brtse – he was among the first recipients of the *Rin chen gter mdzod* – and more distantly with rDza dpal sprul and 'Ju mi pham (rDo rje 1998; Kun bzang 2017). Importantly, he was identified by Grub dbang tshogs gnyis as the 'Dharma holder' (*chos bdag*) of Ratna gling pa's *gter ma* (rDo rje 1998: 335). Ratna gling pa (1403-1478; abbreviated Rat gling) was the great Vajrakīlaya devotee who compiled the first version of the rNying ma rgyud 'bum, thereby laying a foundation stone for developments in the Ris med period and for Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's own life-story.

### Ris med's Ati hermeneutic

rDzogs chen and Mahāmudrā systems of practice-based philosophy, with their emphases on the unconstrained, all-pervading nature of mind, were prominent influences in the non-sectarian Ris med ethos. They accompanied the openness to a variety of doctrinal positions that characterised the period (Oldmeadow 2012: 16; Turek 2012: 433). In examining the life-stories of the Ris med forerunner Zhabs dkar tshogs drug rang grol (1781-1851), Pang summarises Ris med as an attitude inspired by the basic nature of reality as experienced in meditation (Pang 2015: 455, 462-464). Ris med's attitude and trends were enabled by contemplative engagement with the spacious nature of reality as understood in rDzogs chen and Mahāmudrā meditation. Even amidst the increase of *sgrub brgyud* scholasticism in this period, rDzogs chen and Mahāmudrā remained the most sophisticated methods of knowing for practice lineages. The nonverbal nature of their highest knowledge (*rig pa*, literally 'knowledge', in rDzogs chen; *ye shes*, 'primordial knowing', in Mahāmudrā) lent itself to an open-minded attitude, and to the secondary role given to dialectical reasoning and

conceptual determinations in the work of Ris med lamas (Smith 2001: 264). The ability to illustrate a subject from various perspectives without identifying with one philosophical standpoint was a salient feature of their thinking.

### **Ris med scholar-yogins (*mkhas sgrub*) and their scholastic bolstering of *sgrub brgyud* lineages**

The harmony of study and practice was highly valued in the Ris med approach: great Ris med lamas were referred to as masters ‘possessed of both learning and tantric accomplishment’ (*mkhas sgrub gnyis ldan*). The *mkhas sgrub*<sup>60</sup> ideal harked back to that of the Indian Buddhist *siddha*-scholar, and appealing to it provided a strategy to bypass the gamut of Tibetan dialectical controversies (Smith 2001: 246). Smith and others have explored the growth of scholasticism in East Tibet at this time which saw the proliferation of texts and the establishment of *bshad grwa* (‘commentarial schools’ or monastic colleges). They have noted that the increased number of *sgrub drwa* ‘retreat centres’ at large *sgrub brgyud* monasteries like rDzogs chen, dPal spungs, rDzong sar and dPal yul provided a counterbalance to these intellectual developments (Pearcey 2016; Ringu Tulku 2006; Samuel 1993: 499-552; Smith 2001). Under the initial, primary influences of mKhan po gzhan dga’ chos kyi snang ba (1871-1927) and ‘Ju mi pham rgya mtsho (1846-1912), these *bshad drwa* were oriented towards direct comprehension of Indian treatises (emphasised by mKhan po gzhan dga’), and a rDzogs chen interpretation of Madhyamaka with Buddha nature as the solvent of all polemics<sup>61</sup> (Bayer 2019; Duckworth 2008; Mi pham 1998). mKhan po gzhan dga’s *bshad drwa* curriculum of thirteen great Indian treatises (*gzhung chen bcu gsum*) omitted *pramāṇa* texts of logic and epistemology, which were the very foundation of the dGe lugs pa scholastic method (Bayer 2019; Pearcey 2015). Thus, in contrast to the dGe lugs pa scholasticism of the day which entailed extensive debate and exhaustive analysis of a limited set of texts, this approach entailed the use of a greater number of texts and less analysis. Ultimately, the gradual

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<sup>60</sup> *mkhas grub* was used to describe most Ris med leading lamas – masters of *sgrub brgyud* practices as well as Tibetan Buddhist philosophy – and remains a respectful title for a qualified lama in Khams today. Before the Ris med lamas (and after the ancient Indian *siddha*-scholar forefathers), the Third Karma pa (Rang ‘byung rdo rje, 1284-1339) and kLong chen rab ‘byams (1308-1363) were also crucial role models for the scholar-yogin ideal. For a significant study of the life of the Third Karma pa, see Gamble 2018.

<sup>61</sup> ‘Ju mi pham was the boldest dialectician of the Ris med luminaries. Mi pham’s commentaries slowly came to be widely studied in rNying ma *bshad drwa* as their ‘own tradition’ (*rang gzhung*). Thus, the non-partisan beginnings of Ris med *bshad drwa* curricula soon returned to Tibetan auto-commentaries.

curricula of practice lineage *bshad drwa* pointed to experiential understanding of emptiness as the nature of cognisance, and to the culmination of all knowledge in Ati (i.e. rDzogs chen) or Mahāmudrā. Just as it has been in the post-Mao revival period in Eastern Tibet, practice lineage *bshad grwa* of the Ris med period operated in tandem with oral meditation instructions and prolonged retreat sessions for almost all students.

### Ris med's contemplative view and values seen in salient Ris med texts

'Jam mgon kong sprul's first of his *Five Great Treasuries* (mDzod chen lnga), the *Treasury of Knowledge* (Shes bya mdzod or Shes bya kun khyab, 'Encompassment of All Knowledge'), was first intended as a treatise on the 16<sup>th</sup> century root text, *Ascertaining the Three Vows*<sup>62</sup> (sDom gsum rnam nges), by mNga' ris pan chen pad ma dbang rgyal (1487-1542). In the end Kong sprul's *Treasury of Knowledge* turned out to be a more far-reaching commentary demonstrating a harmonious progression of all Buddhist traditions (*theg pa*, 'vehicle'; Skt. *yāna*) and practical methods and how they ultimately reach their fruition in the Atiyoga view of the rDzogs chen system (Smith 2001: 236-237). Kong sprul completed his *Treasury of Knowledge* in 1864, twenty years before Ge bcags began flourishing with its own scriptural corpus in which rDzogs chen is the quintessence of all teachings and practices, and sDom gsum rnam nges figures as an important philosophical reference. Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho eventually compiled sixteen volumes of scriptures, many of them adaptations of Ratna gling pa *gter ma* along with his own *mgur* (spiritual songs and verses) and pith instructions oriented to a variety of audiences. The following verses from Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's eleventh volume clearly express his alignment with Kong sprul's *Treasury*:

The enlightened intent of all [*yāna*] is the Buddha nature of beings. Like leavening yeast, [various *yāna*] are the condition that awakens beings to enlightenment in the primordial, timeless space of the single Buddhakāya, that is without beginning or end<sup>63</sup>.

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<sup>62</sup> *Prātimokṣa*, bodhisattva and tantric vows.

<sup>63</sup> 'gro rams bde gshegs snying po'i dgongs pa la/ phab kyi rtsi ltar rkyen gyis sad gyur te/ sangs rgyas thog mtha' med pa'i nyag gcig sku/ ye thog gdod ma'i klong du byang chub bo/ (Tshangs dbyangs vol. 11: 162-163).

Although each of the three levels of vows has separate requirements, they are like the naturally evolving conduct of a child, youth and adult. Each of the nine *yāna* has its own distinct approach – they are like steps on the single stairway of Ati<sup>64</sup>.

As Smith remarks, Kong sprul's *Treasury of Spiritual Instructions* (*gDams ngag mdzod*) also illustrates the Ris med approach (Smith 2001: 264). *gDams ngag* (spiritual, or esoteric, instruction) is pithy experiential advice communicated directly from a master to a student, most often through metaphor, parable and paradox (Smith 2001: 264). Here again Kong sprul, drawing on a vast range of spiritual instructions from diverse lineages, returns to practical engagement, not through the language of ratiocination and logic, but through personalised language that aims to shift the dualistic perception of the student to an all-encompassing knowing of reality. Words here are for the most part pointing back to experience (Kapstein 1996; Smith 2001: 263-264).

### The importance of hermitage networks in Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's lifetime

On one hand, Ris med was a philosophical (and institutional) response realised through textual production and the establishment of *bshad drwa* programs – aspects that have been widely discussed by Smith and others. Another important aspect of Ris med activities was how they functioned as a cultural value response actualised through widespread hermitage and pilgrimage activity, that accompanied the organisation of scriptures and their transmissions. This eremitic aspect of the Ris med period, which predominantly unfolded outside of monasteries, has been far less discussed in Western academic literature. Its importance in the Nang chen context has been cogently highlighted by Turek (2012; 2013: 36-77) and is further demonstrated by the case of Ge bcags dgon pa presented in this study.

Turek identifies hermitages as the power centres of the Ris med period, that acted as sources for the dissemination of *sgrub brgyud* scriptures and as nodes in the network that spread their influence and enactment in new retreat systems (Turek 2012; 2013: 442). The fact that 'hermitage' correlates to so many Tibetan terms in usage across schools (*sgrub khang, ri*

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<sup>64</sup> *sdom pa gsum gyis dgag dgos so so yang/ mi gcig rgan gzhon byis pa'i spod dang mtshungs/ theg pa dgu yi 'jug sgo so so yin/ a ti'i stegs te shing gcig skas lhu 'dra/ (Tshangs dbyangs vol. 11: 165-166).*

*khrod, sgrub sde, sgrub drwa, dbyen gnas, sgrub phug, mtshams khang, sgom grwa*) testifies to their actual presence across territories and traditions. In the late Ris med period some hermitages were built at the twenty-five power places of Eastern Tibet (mDo Khams) that had been mapped in a *gter ma* revealed by mChog gyur gling pa. All of this hermitage activity gave spatial referents to Ris med developments and helped to set Khams apart as a territory (Gardner 2006; Turek 2012). As to the quality of Ris med learning and knowledge, it is very significant that the greatest Ris med scholars, like rDza dpal sprul, 'Ju mi pham and Kong sprul, spent more time in hermitages than in institutional study. The learning that took place in these contemplative settings must have contributed to these authors' prodigious literary output.

Ge bcags Nunnery's founder, Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho never formally studied in a *bshad grwa*. He was educated in practical tantric knowledge in various hermitages in Tsa' ri, Tshes bcu and mountain settings near Ge bcags. He nevertheless produced his Sixteen Volumes (Pod sde bcu drug) of commentary that formed the scriptural basis of a lineage that eventually comprised over forty large and small hermitages across Eastern Tibet. Although Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's Sixteen Volumes contain sophisticated philosophical and poetic content, he was not considered a scholar in the sense that the three 'Jam mgon<sup>65</sup> (mKhyen brtse, Kong sprul and Mi pham) were. Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho was rather a great beneficiary of their literary output. Nearly fifty pages of his autobiography (*rang rnam*) are continuous lists of scriptural transmissions (*gsan yig*) that he received, with companions or in assemblies, from these three 'Jam mgon and other Ris med luminaries like rDza dpal sprul and the 15<sup>th</sup> Karma pa, mKha khyab rdo rje, (rDo rje 1998). He states there was not a single transmission he received that he did not exert himself in practically applying; by this he meant that he transmitted them further to others and/or ritually enacted their tantric *sādhana* (rDo rje 1998: 208). These lists tell us whom he regarded as his main associates, the content of the scriptures he learned and how he engaged with them. These topics are further discussed in Chapter Two of this dissertation.

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<sup>65</sup> The three were regarded as embodiments of Mañjuśrī, referred to in Tibetan as the Ris med triad *mKhyen kong mchog gsum*.

## The social life of Nang chen contemplatives

In her study of Shākya shrī (1853-1919) (who was a yogin-peer of Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho), Holmes-Tagchungdarpa (2014) argues that a *rnam thar* acts more as a record of a spiritual master's social networks than as an account of a master's solitary contemplation. This is certainly true of Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's self-narrated 'outer' liberation story<sup>66</sup> (*phyi'i rnam thar*). For all the prolonged retreat periods Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho is known to have undertaken, the life he narrates in his 236-page *rnam thar* is primarily one of social connections and multi-directional influences between peers and patriarchs in numerous sacred places (rDo rje 1998). In actuality, the life of the average Tibetan hermit is much more social than one might expect. In the retreats I joined in Nang chen nunnery and hermitage communities<sup>67</sup> there was plenty of human interaction, and even during scheduled meditation sessions (*thun*) members did not hesitate to walk into others' rooms to pick up or drop something off. We will see in the case of the Ge bcags nuns that their lifeworld is collective with no strict silence separating their social life and contemplation, as there tends to be in Western mindfulness retreats. Silence is naturally observed at Ge bcags as part of its lifestyle, and there are at times rules of silence (*ngag bcad pa*); Tulku Urgyen recalls Ge bcags' profound atmosphere of silence when he visited around the 1940s (Tulku Urgyen 2005: 160). At Ge bcags, however, silence is more of a collective disposition than an individual one.

## The society and main alliances from which Ge bcags emerged

The social networks and currents of scriptural transmissions that Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho recounts in his *rnam thar* give a portrait of the society in which Ge bcags was founded. Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's initial and most important institutional alliance was with Tshes bcu dgon, the 'Brug pa bka' brgyud monastery adjacent to the king's seat at Nang chen sgar palace. Tshes bcu dgon was established in 1750 by the first A lde'u rin po che (a.k.a. the fifth

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<sup>66</sup> His 'inner' (*nang*) and 'secret' (*gsang*) *rnam thar* narrate more of his visions and meditation experiences.

<sup>67</sup> In Nang chen I joined for two months in a three-year group retreat at Rig gsum Nunnery, and did five solitary retreats of one-to-three months each at Ge bcags Nunnery and the community hermitages, rDza mo dgon and gDong tshang ri khrod.

'Khrul zhig *sprul sku*), who was a son of the Nang chen king<sup>68</sup>, and closely linked with the Eastern Tibetan base of the 'Brug pa bka' brgyud lineage at the time, Khams pa sgar. This was the start of a 'Brug pa bka' brgyud dynasty of Nang chen kings with high 'Brug pa lamas recognised in the royal family. Indeed, Nang chen's pattern of royal reincarnate lamas would play a recurrent role in Ge bcags' flourishing over time. The second Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho, Chos grags rgya mtsho (1911-1978?), was born as a Nang chen prince (*rgyal sras*); this secured royal patronage and status for the Ge bcags nuns' community, which, following the historical precedent of other Tibetan nunneries, may otherwise have faded into neglect or been absorbed as an annex of a monastery. A third and present Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho *sprul sku*<sup>69</sup> was born in 1973 as the nephew of the last Nang chen king and continues to closely oversee the nunnery. To the present, a total of eight Nang chen *rgyal sras* have participated closely in the Ge bcags community as lamas or laymen in liaison with the royal administration (Kun bzang 2017: 41-45).

Tshes bcu dgon was also near the birthplace of mChog gyur gling pa – the third in the triad of prominent Ris med *gter ston* – and the monastery where he started his religious career<sup>70</sup>. At that time Tshes bcu dgon had become the seat of Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's root guru, Grub dbang tshogs gnyis (c. 1828-1904, i.e. the first Tshogs gnyis rin po che). It was here that Tshangs dbyangs received the bKa' brgyud and Ratna gling pa transmissions of *yi dam* ritual cycles, *nāḍī* and *prāṇa* yogas and Completion Stage meditations that would shape his training and provide the framework for the Ge bcags tradition he established. Grub dbang tshogs gnyis specified Tshangs dbyangs rgya tsho as the destined holder (*chos bdag*) of Ratna gling pa *gter ma*. Based on these, Tshangs dbyangs' practice and written works became the foundation of Ge bcags' eclectic *sāadhanā* curriculum and marked the nunnery as rNying ma in practice (rDo rje 1998: 335; Kun bzang 2017: 111-142). Yet concurrently, the nunnery is

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<sup>68</sup> The second A lde'u rin po che (i.e. the sixth 'Khrul zhig) was also born as a prince, and in the absence of a second royal son he managed both religious and temporal affairs (Karma don grub 1999: 486-487).

<sup>69</sup> As typical in rNying ma lineages over the last two centuries, Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho was known to emanate in numerous *sprul sku*. There are currently two well-regarded third generation *sprul sku*: Kun bzang nyi ma, the royal nephew referenced here who looks after the nunnery, and dKon mchog rgyal mtshan, a well-educated scholar-lama who looks after Ge bcags' large branch monastery, Ra ya dgon.

<sup>70</sup> Though conventionally speaking this part did not go very well, and mChog gling was expelled from the monastery for his unruly behaviour. This propelled him towards sDe dge where mKhyen brtse and Kong sprul endorsed him as a *gter ston*.

identified as 'Brug pa bka' brgyud on account of Ge bcags' family links to the kingship, and to Tshes bcu dgon as the source of Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's training. Today Tshes bcu dgon is thriving as the active Eastern Tibetan seat for the worldwide 'Brug pa bka' brgyud lineage and A lde'u *sprul sku*. As the monastery of the erstwhile Nang chen king, Tshes bcu dgon maintains a close alliance with Ge bcags Nunnery, particularly when it comes to administrative issues that span beyond the nuns' daily lives<sup>71</sup>.

Another important destination in Tshangs dbyangs' life-story was rTsa' 'dra (rin chen brag), the hermitage-base of 'Jam mgon kong sprul in sDe dge. According to his *rnam thar*, Tshangs dbyangs walked there at least twice from Nang chen to meet Kong sprul, and mKhyen brtse along the way, accompanied by the 'nun' mTsho rgyal sgröl ma who was his female companion, and several male yogin disciples. At rTsa' 'dra Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho was among the first groups to receive oral transmission of Kong sprul's 'Treasury of Precious gTer ma' (Rin chen gter mdzod), and was later the very first person to receive an edited printed version. Tulku Urgyen recalled it was Tshangs dbyangs' tenacious character that earned him the copy (Tulku Urgyen 2005: 158). On Kong sprul's encouragement, Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho subsequently passed on the Rin chen gter mdzod several times to assemblies in Nang chen, using ritual substances in the empowerment (*dbang*) ceremonies provided to him by mKhyen brtse and Kong sprul (rDo rje 1998: 119, 167-168).

Tshangs dbyangs widely transmitted and expounded Ratna gling pa *gter ma*, with their major Vajrakīlaya rituals<sup>72</sup>, thereby adding to the Ris med trend of accentuating Vajrakīlaya in newly revealed treasures and compilations (Doctor 2005: 105-106; Smith 2001: 264). He further contributed to Ris med trends in establishing new hermitages and retreat systems based on his adaptations of Ratna gling pa *gter ma*. *gTer ma*, as a scriptural form that most often arises in connection to a place, took on special significance in the Ris med period for their role in expanding sacred geography. While there are various taxonomies of *gter ma*, a general

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<sup>71</sup> For example, every three years a committee formed of a 'royal representative' (*rgyal tshab*) from Tshes bcu dgon and sixteen Ge bcags nuns, representing Ge bcags' 'retreat divisions' (*sgrub khag*), appoints new disciplinarians (*chos khrims*) and managers (*gnyer pa*) for the nunnery.

<sup>72</sup> Ratna gling pa compiled the rNying ma rgyud 'bum partly to include Vajrakīlaya tantras that had been excluded from Bu ston's Tibetan Buddhist canon.

division headed by the Ge bcags community is between material *gter ma* revealed from the earth (as *sa* or *chu gter*, ‘earth’ or ‘water treasures’), and those revealed from the mind of the treasure revealer (as *dgongs gter*, ‘mind treasure’), often during a period of meditation at a hermitage or sacred site (Doctor 2005: 17-30; personal communication, Karma o rgyan, May 2017). Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho did not reveal earth *gter ma*, and is therefore not considered by the Ge bcags community to be a *gter ston* in the conventional sense. However, many of his writings were produced in a visionary *gter ma* style as spontaneous revelations of insight from prolonged tantric practice, and are titled *dgongs gter* (‘mind treasures’) throughout his Sixteen Volumes. Through his visionary creation of scriptures through *dgongs gter* revelations, and the practice of these scriptures in his own retreats and in the many tantric hermitages he established across Khams, he laid the ground for the expansion of *sgrub brgyud* culture.

In these ways Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho wove vibrant strands in the Ris med crossweave of practice lineages across Eastern Tibetan. To list more of the significant members of Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho’s society, there were: his close lama friends among the Karma and sTag lung bka’ brgyud communities in Ri bo che; the great Padma bkod *gter ston*, Drag sngags gling pa (c. 1871-1929), whom he instructed on sexual yoga; ’Ju mi pham, who paid homage to Tshangs dbyangs in verse<sup>73</sup>; rDza spal sprul with whom he interacted in visions; and, of course, the Ge bcags *dge ma* (‘virtuous females’, the Nang chen vernacular for ‘nun’) who gathered around him by the hundreds and whose names figure prominently throughout his Sixteen Volumes.

Written and oral recollections relate that most of the male members of the early Ge bcags community – from its gurus like Grub dbang tshogs gnyis and Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho himself to the hundreds of their male disciples – had the appearance of *rtogs ldan* (‘having realisation’, the Nang chen vernacular for yogin). These *rtogs ldan* had dreadlocked hair and white and red robes that were usually unwashed and covered with the dirt from their mountain settings. Across Eastern Tibetan *sgrub brgyud* communities at this time there was a

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<sup>73</sup> One of these verses is included in Chapter Two.

revival of attention on the famed yogin Mi la ras pa as a folk hero embodying the spirit of genuine practice. Kong sprul authored the *Mi la bla sgrub*, a guru *sādhana* in which Mi la ras pa is at the centre of a mandala of deities and protectors, and lamas like rDza dpal sprul and Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho emulated Mi la ras pa in their folk-oriented compositions and minimalist lifestyles (Turek 2013: 30-31). Ge bcags' long-haired male *rtogs ldan* held the three levels of Tibetan Buddhist vows, though they were not always celibate, as sexual yoga (part of the 'path of skilful means', *thabs lam*) was sometimes practised as a test of their control of *prāṇa* (*rlung*) energy (rDo rje 1998: 78-80). This was likely practised more often by the men than the women, as the nuns' cropped hair and fully maroon robes held them to a different code of conduct. Along with all of these trends was a willingness to openly impart rDzogs chen instructions to people from all walks of life, including women, whom we see in the story of Ge bcags Nunnery were brought in from the margins (rDo rje 1998: 41, 106, 110).



Figure 6: Two of Ge bcags' male yogin-lamas. Photos: Ge bcags dgon pa; author 2018. These yogins, Padma rdo rje (L) and Padma dri med (R), both practised in the Ge bcags lineage before and after the Cultural Revolution, and were highly regarded by the nuns. (Both have now passed away.)

### Ge bcags' founding: feminine knowledge?

It was amidst this cultural and religious blossoming in late 19<sup>th</sup> century Eastern Tibet that Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho, on the direction of Grub dbang tshogs gnyis, established Ge

bags dgon pa in 1892. The nunnery was to grow to have nearly seven hundred<sup>74</sup> nuns practising a full-time program of *gter ma*-based *sāadhanā* and yogas within a rDzogs chen hermeneutic. It is not explicitly written in Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's *rnam thar*, but often orally recalled that Grub dbang tshogs gnyis directed him to establish Ge bcags in order to provide equal opportunities for women to practise Dharma, as there had been a scarcity of nunneries before in the region. Schneider's study of Khams pa nuns in the Brag dkar lineage near dKar mdzes in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century points to a lack of support for religious women being the reason for so few nunneries in Khams at the time. She cites mKhan po 'Jigs med phun tshogs (1933-2004) who said later in his life, in reference to the nuns of her study, 'About one hundred years ago, Lama Brag dkar of Drango once accepted up to one hundred nuns, which is still considered a historical miracle' (Schneider 2011: 57).

Ge bcags Nunnery continues to flourish today with around 250 nuns, after a vibrant revival in the 1980s and 90s, along with dozens of branch *dgon pa* that look to Ge bcags as the *ma dgon* ('mother nunnery') of their continuing tradition. Such a large community of tantric-expert nuns who have remained autonomous in their religious life until today is highly unusual, if not unprecedented, in pre-modern Tibetan Buddhism. There have been a few other Tibetan lineages originating from female practitioners, like the Shangs pa bka' brgyud who traces itself to the Indian yoginī Niguma (10<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup> century), or that of Ma gcig lab sgron (1055-1149) whose teachings are traditionally claimed to have become popular in India<sup>75</sup>. Shug gseb Nunnery near Lha sa is another community of female tantric practice that flourished under the guidance of Lo chen chos nyid bzang mo (rJe btsun shug gseb, c. 1865-1951) during the Ris med period (Havnevik 1999). These lineages, however, were not originally monastic and soon became subsumed into other male-dominated traditions.

This raises questions about how the values and learning culture of Nang chen society in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century were conducive to the growth of female tantric knowledge, and even more profoundly to questions about gendered psychology and ways of knowing in Tibetan contexts. These questions, however, merit the attention of an entire research project. To

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<sup>74</sup> Karma phrin las stated that Ge cag (sp.) had 1,000 nuns in the 1960s (Karma phrin las 1965: 69).

<sup>75</sup> Though this is not presently established by historical evidence. See Sorensen 2006.

simply talk about ‘Tibetan nuns’ connotes a homogenous Tibetan society where there was not one. This study of Ge bcags Nunnery shows how different its context was to that of the Tibetan Buddhist nuns in studies by Gutschow (2004), Härkönen (2017), Makley (2005), Mann (2009), Schneider (2011) and others.

Some preliminary observations can be made here. It may be significant that many of the writings of renowned Ris med authors were inspired by visions of tantric deities and revealed from a non-intellectual sphere, very often mediated by a *ḍākinī* – a female human or divine embodiment of wisdom. Despite all the renewed attention given to intellectual study and writing in Eastern Tibet during this period, the highest knowledge enshrined in the *sgrub brgyud* ethos remained that of embodied, nondual awareness (*rig pa; ye shes*). In the highest levels of Tibetan Buddhist tantra, nondual knowledge is identified as feminine – not feminine by gender, but in being embodied and non-rational – and personified by the *ḍākinī* principle and female deities like Ekajaṭī and Vajravārāhī (both important deities at Ge bcags). Highest *sgrub brgyud* knowledge was also experiential. rDzogs chen lamas and treatises are unequivocal that *rig pa* can only be known through one’s own experience (Khang sar 2013; Shabkar 2012). This is the paramount reason why oral instructions of an experienced guru have been essential in *sgrub brgyud* lineages. Whatever the matrix of conditions for the emerging of Ge bcags Nunnery, it is clear that in a society where women – even the Ge bcags nuns – were mostly denied a written voice, the *sgrub brgyud* quality of learning that predominated in Nang chen in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century did not preclude women from embodying the highest practices and knowledge of their tradition.

### **Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho’s reincarnation(s) and the revival of Ge bcags after the Cultural Revolution**

The second incarnation of Ge bcags’ founder (Chos grags rgya mtsho, b. 1911)<sup>76</sup> was born as the son of the Nang chen king, which sealed the nunnery’s link with the Nang chen royal family. The second Grub dbang tshogs gnyis (c.1905-1958) had also been born as a Nang

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<sup>76</sup> There were various second-generation *sprul sku* of Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho. The two primary ones were Chos grags rgya mtsho, mostly aligned with the nunnery, and Lama Mi nub rgya mtsho, who focused his time at Ra ya dgon (monastery).

chen prince, and later seven more Nang chen princes would participate closely as lamas and endorsers for the Ge bcags lineage, until the Nang chen royal line ended in 2009 with the death of the last male descendent (rGyal sras a chung). Royal endorsement of Ge bcags as a practice centre bolstered the flourishing of Ge bcags, and by the 1950s it had over seven hundred nuns, as recalled by present nuns and written sources (Karma phrin las 1965: 69; Tulku Urgyen 2005: 162). By that time Ge bcags had also become the ‘mother nunnery’ (*ma dgon*) to dozens of branch *dgon pa* following its practice system, four of them monasteries. Having branch monasteries was unprecedented for a nunnery in Tibet, where nunneries have most often been annexes of a monastery and nuns denied advanced studies and practices.

This height of Ge bcags’ flourishing collided with the start of Mao Zedong’s Great Leap Forward (1958-1961) and the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976; Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution). This was a period referred to by the nuns as ‘when time turned upside down’ (*dus log sgang*). The nunnery was ransacked and demolished and the nuns and lamas were dispersed. Those that survived the deprivations of the era, including a severe famine in Qinghai from 1960-1962, were assembled in local communes or fled to other places.

After the passing of Mao Zedong in 1976, with the CCP granting freedom of religious belief under the ‘Open and Reform’ policies of Deng Xiaoping, *dgon pa* across the Tibetan Plateau quickly began a period of vibrant revival. Nearly seventy elder Ge bcags nuns returned to the original location of the nunnery at the end of the 1970s and resumed their prayers and practices together in a large woven yak-hair tent. They were led by surviving Ge bcags male *rtogs ldan* who took on the role of lamas<sup>77</sup>, and whose memorial stupas can be seen today on the hillside and in one of the shrine halls. These male lamas mostly lived at Ge bcags and directed the community in rebuilding shrine halls and retreat houses using local rocks and mud. There was no machinery in those days and reconstruction was all performed manually by the nuns, *rtogs ldan* and neighbouring nomads, with the help of pack animals. A fifty-five-year-old nun, who would have been about fifteen years-old at the time, remembers the

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<sup>77</sup> Two Nang chen princes are counted among the revival-period male leaders at Ge bcags: the older, rGyal sras a chen, was an ordained lama, and the younger, rGyal sras a chung, was a layman who helped to liaise with county administration.

prayer they chanted as they lay the foundation stone for the shrine hall that now houses their scriptures:

bLo gros dbang phyug [the male lama] told me and a few other new nuns to lay the stone and chant whatever came to mind. But we couldn't think of anything, let alone chant. We didn't really know how to pray at that age. Then an old nun stood up and spontaneously chanted

*May the mind become Dharma  
May the Dharma become the path  
May the accomplishment of Padmasambhava's teaching be fulfilled!*

and laid down the stone. We chanted the same after her. That flat stone is still at the entrance, near the timber beam at the doorstep.

A few days later a black crow flew over and shat on that foundation stone, which we thought was an excellent sign. As the saying goes, "The black bird has a white voice" (*bya nag po gsung dkar po*). The crow's droppings symbolised the purity of Dharma.

The same nun recalls an earthquake shaking the half-reconstructed main shrine hall as she stood inside stacking stones on a wall. Nobody was injured. At another time, before reconstruction began, their temporary yak-wool tent was blown halfway up the valley by a violent gust of wind. They read this as a sign that sorrowful spirits<sup>78</sup> still inhabited the valley from the 'upside down time' (*dus log skabs*) and were creating obstacles to the re-establishment of Ge bcags. Ge bcags' ritual practices function in large part to overcome such obstacles to accomplishing their deeper practice, and they did not let this inauspicious event discourage them. The nuns understand that many of their practices, particularly their collective *sgrub chen*, are for pacifying and appeasing negative forces and bringing the energies of their environment – natural, spiritual and social energies – into supportive harmony with Ge bcags' intention.

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<sup>78</sup> The word used was *yul lha* which can be translated as 'local deity/god/spirit'. The old Tibetan world and its language has numerous species of spirits that are hard to translate in English, a bit like trying to translate Australian native animals into European equivalents.

Ge bcags buildings between 1977 and 1998 were rudimentary structures hand-built with local mud and stones, and most have been rebuilt a second time with concrete and steel over the last twenty years. The current shrine hall at Ge bcags, where the nuns collectively perform their nineteen annual *sgrub chen* (and thus spend most of their time) is its third construction. It is a three-storey structure rebuilt between 2011-2016 with steel, concrete and local stones, under the direction of a Chinese contractor and his team of labourers. The nuns helped with mixing cement, painting and decorating the interior. Construction has always been one of the nuns' mundane tasks. Two other buildings at Ge bcags today are central in the architecture of the nuns' religious lives: the three-year retreat centre, and the sixteen retreat divisions' (*sgrub khag bcu drug*) building where every nun who has finished the three-year retreat has a meditation box (*sgom khri*) in one of sixteen rooms dedicated to particular *yi dam*. More will be said about these later. Besides these are dozens of smaller retreat and private houses scattered across the hillside where Ge bcags is based, mostly built from stone and mud, with flat roofs and earthen or wooden floors.



Figure 7: Ge bcags' second shrine hall. Photo: author, 2006.

As Ge bcags' memories and practice spaces reassembled in the late 1970s, all the major components of its practice tradition were found to have been preserved. Their entire scriptural collection was intact, along with nuns with embodied experience capable of transmitting instructions to new nuns on subtle body yogas, rDzogs chen, *sādhanā*, retreat styles and administrative protocols. One elderly nun had hidden Ge bcags' two core sets of scriptures underground – the Sixteen Volumes and Ratna gling pa's Twenty-five gTer ma Volumes – and then recovered them in the 1970s. Another senior nun (Shes rabs bzang mo<sup>79</sup>) with profound rDzogs chen insight had feigned disability for nearly ten years while she silently meditated instead of performing communal labour. The senior nuns' fortitude aside, complete preservation was made possible because Ge bcags had a relatively small corpus of scriptures. In the short history since Ge bcags had been established there were only a few hand-written copies of its major texts, and one of each was recovered at the end of the Cultural Revolution.

### Upsurge of new nuns in the revival and the death of elderly nuns

Today there are roughly 250 nuns at Ge bcags Nunnery. Most of them are in their forties or fifties and joined Ge bcags in the 1980s and 90s. The Ge bcags nuns rely, as they always have, on male lamas of the lineage for transmitting *dbang* empowerments and textual *lung*. Yet to a large extent, these new nuns learned Ge bcags' elements of training and religious life from the surviving elderly nuns, and on a day-to-day basis the nuns function autonomously from male leadership. Nuns and male lamas told me that one of the main stimulations for the influx of new nuns since the 1980s has been the inspiring manner in which these elderly nuns pass away. After spending decades cultivating Buddhist practice, many died consciously and in a cheerful state of mind<sup>80</sup>. The last of the elderly nuns who survived the Cultural

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<sup>79</sup> Shes rab bzang mo was written about in Lion's Roar magazine in 2009. See <https://www.lionsroar.com/remembering-sherab-zangmo-great-yogini-of-tibet/>

<sup>80</sup> Many stayed in *thugs dam* (post-death *samādhi*) after physical death, seated upright with warmth at their hearts and no bodily decay for seven days in some cases. Over my fifteen-year association with Ge bcags, I have heard of six Ge bcags nuns staying in *thugs dam* after death, ranging in ages from twenty-three to ninety-four. For a video interview with a Ge bcags nun talking about her practice at the nunnery and the death of an elder nun in her retreat division, see <https://vimeo.com/gebchak> (my translation).

Revolution passed away at age 91 in January 2020. In September 2013 a nun in her forties described the demeanour of the elderly nuns who raised her:

When the old nuns were ready to pass away, there wasn't a single one who didn't die a special death. When I first came I was too young to appreciate their qualities. Now looking back, I really feel faith. Just by uttering "Phet!" the old nun Sangdron could scare all the kids hovering at the temple doors – they would fall over and run away! Looking back now I see they had that kind of force about them. They would always tell us we have to spend our whole lives at Ge bcags, we have to fan the flames of practice here and not get scattered. When those old nuns died, they didn't complain of any suffering. They'd say, "Look, today I'm dying. No point in fussing about it. I have no regrets! My body has disease, but I am fine. I'm not suffering." Most of them talked like that when they were nearing death. There wasn't a single one who didn't die an impressive death.

## Conclusion

This chapter has examined the quality of education and values that informed the writings and activities of Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho, and the broader network of practice lineages in Eastern Tibet during the Ris med period when Ge bcags was founded. The writings and activities of the Ris med period took place in widespread hermitages as much as they did in emerging large non-dGe lugs pa *bshad grwa*, with yogic practice and scholarship happening in tandem, as evident in the *mkhas sgrub* title of Ris med luminaries. Visionary knowledge born from tantric deity yoga and Mahāmudrā/rDzogs chen meditation was crucial in informing the attitudes and eclectic *gter ma* textual compilations that defined the period, however it did not arise entirely from isolation. Yogic practice and textual production were taking place in vibrant social networks, in which Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho and early Ge bcags members were actively embedded. Overall, the tantric, experiential quality of knowledge that informed and was bolstered in Ris med writings and activities was conducive to the development of female practitioners, as evident in the fact of Ge bcags Nunnery's founding at the height of the period. The next chapter will take a closer look at the quality of practical learning and knowledge in the life and writings of Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho, a remarkable Ris med lama.

## CHAPTER TWO:

### The education of Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho (1848-1909) and production of Ge bcags' texts

Chapter Two focuses on the life of Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho (1848-1909), his founding of Ge bcags Nunnery and composition of its main scriptures. The chapter's main concern, within the thesis' overall query of the quality and context of Ge bcags' knowledge, is the orientation of Ge bcags' texts and the ways that they have been produced. I start by investigating Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's upbringing, character and social relations, and his establishment of a community of women and their place in a wider gathering of male and female yogic practitioners. I consider Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's education and ways of knowing as a Ris med-era yogin and composer of *gter ma*-style texts, while examining the meaning of scholasticism within Tibetan Buddhism and in relation to Ge bcags' learning tradition. The chapter then analyses a summary outline of Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's Sixteen Volumes, taking into consideration the communal processes of textual production, the audiences and orientation of the volumes, as well as Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's voice and compositional style. Finally, I consider what the nuns regularly read from among Ge bcags' scriptural corpus and how they choose it, while pointing to changes in the community's printing processes over time.

#### A note on *rnam thar* as a source for the chapter

There are several *rnam thar* and consistent oral accounts of Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's life. The most celebrated of his *rnam thar*, and the most accessible, as nuns would explain it to me, is his autobiographical 'outer *rnam thar*' (*phyi'i rnam thar*; *rang rnam*) narrated by Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho to a close disciple who then committed it to writing. The 'inner *rnam thar*' (*nang gi rnam thar*), in the fifteenth volume of Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's Sixteen Volumes (which are outlined later in the chapter), contains his conversations with earthly and divine non-human beings. His secret *rnam thar* (*gsang ba'i rnam thar*), which includes his teachings on sexual yoga and communication with spiritual wisdom beings (mostly female *ḍākinī*), is separate from the Sixteen Volumes and limited copies are kept at Ge bcags. In accordance with Tibetan traditions of secrecy, the nuns and male lamas at the nunnery were reluctant to comment openly on Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's secret *rnam*

*thar*, and I did not therefore read it on my own as a source for this research. Information in this thesis (this chapter in particular) about Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's life largely comes from his outer autobiography, and throughout the thesis the word '*rnam thar*' refers to it, unless otherwise specified.

The term *rnam thar* is the standard term for biographical writings about lamas and other religious figures in Tibetan Buddhism. The literal meaning of the term (an abbreviation for *rnam par thar pa*), 'complete liberation', indicates that the central issue of the story is the spiritual progress and enlightenment of the protagonist. In this sense, the *rnam thar* genre harks back to a long heritage of Buddhist narratives of the lives of the Buddha and of other Indian and Tibetan *siddha*. This raises the question to what extent a *rnam thar* can be relied upon as an historical source, when, like some Western hagiographies, the life-story has been rewritten and mythologised for spiritual and soteriological purposes. A reading of the *Zangs gling ma* and *Padma bka' thang* life stories of Padmasambhava, or the famous *rnam thar* of Mi la ras pa by gTsang smyon he ru ka, as Roberts has discussed, makes plain the challenge of distinguishing fact from mythology and 'fiction'<sup>81</sup> (Roberts 2007: 55-81). In these and other cases where centuries have passed since the actual life was lived, one can see the progressive elaboration of the story over long periods of time. In practice, however, *rnam thar* are quite varied across the genre, ranging from those whose content is mythological and legendary, to others that are relatively straightforward and down-to-earth<sup>82</sup>.

Autobiographical accounts (*rang rnam*) such as that by Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho, often completed after the author's death by a close disciple, are a particularly complex genre. The author of an autobiographical *rnam thar* usually aims to inspire followers with an edifying account of his spiritual progress, while striking a modest tone in speaking about himself and his achievements. Janet Gyatso has reflected on the complexities of self-presentation in Tibetan autobiography in an article in 1992, and again in her 1998 book on the

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<sup>81</sup> It is worth bearing in mind that in the tantric *rnam thar* genre, mythologisation of a master is not an unconscious process but an intentional and effective one, as it is both conscious and core in the practice of Tibetan guru yoga (*bla ma'i rnal 'byor*).

<sup>82</sup> In the modern era of Tibetan Buddhism, we see a down-to-earth telling of history more often in Tibetan life-story writing. See the difference between Orgyen Tobgyal Rinpoche's telling of Jamyang Khyentse Chökyi Lodrö's life story, and Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche's telling of the same (Dilgo Khyentse et al. 2017).

autobiographical writings of 'Jigs med gling pa. Willis (1985) has discussed the focus in many such texts on inner spiritual practice, dreams and revelations, matters often relayed in 'inner' or 'secret' *rnam thar* categories – content which differentiates the narrative from a straightforward historical mode. But the 'outer' *rnam thar* of everyday events are also significant, and many recount places visited, ceremonies performed on specific occasions, teachings and empowerments received (*gsan yig, dbang tho*) and the gurus who gave them. They also relate the construction of monasteries and the acquisition of disciples, all often told in a relatively factual and straightforward manner. This is true of Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's 'outer' *rnam thar*.

This study is not an analysis of Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's *rang rnam*, although his *rnam thar* would offer plenty of fertile material for such a study, as its first iteration is not more than 120 years old and is still perpetuated (and corroborated) by an intact community in which are embedded many of the practices and social networks of the master. I have read the *rnam thar* for details about the origins of Ge bcags Nunnery, paying particular attention to the nature of Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's character, education and the tradition of learning that he established. I have tried to be alert to the agendas inherent in any *rnam thar* narrative, and to Tshangs dbyangs' emphasis on certain aspects of his life, including his intense devotion and alignment with the mind of his guru, and thereby with a continuing lineage (rDo rje 1998: 48, 130, 214). The fact that Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's *rnam thar* is still embedded in a living community with links to the author, along with Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's plain manner of narration and down-to-earth Nang chen tone, made the discernment of facts relatively straightforward. There is every reason to assume that the main events of the story, such as the guru presenting Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho with a yogin's robes on first meeting, and the records of empowerments and oral transmissions that occurred in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, are factual, and I have generally treated them as such.

Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's character and the atmosphere in Khams during his lifetime permeate his teachings and the Ge bcags tradition that he established. His *rnam thar* and his Sixteen Volumes, as we will see, reflect many living voices, and display the multivocality of Tibetan autobiographical writing that has been widely discussed (Diemberger 2008: 83; Gyatso 1998: 103). The first page of Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's autobiography

acknowledges the *rnam thar* of past lineage masters that inspired his own life-story (rDo rje 1998: 2). His *rnam thar* expresses a continuum of values, meaning and identity, and serves to guide the life-direction of the Ge bcags nuns.

### Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's upbringing and character

Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho (1848-1909) was born on the 'Turning the Wheel of Dharma Festival' day (Chos 'khor dus chen), as one of nine siblings, into a large herding family in a Nang chen highland valley that would later become home to the nunnery named after his family's Ge bcags clan. The valley is high above the treeline at 4,500 metres (14,700 feet) and flanked on all sides by grassy mountain tops, with the table-topped Kes rgyal mountain dominating the skyline to the East. Throughout Khams, especially in regions populated by herding communities who know themselves in relation to the land, every mountain has a name and these names define the people's landscape.



Figure 8: Winter view of Kes rgyal mountain ridge from the nunnery. Photo: Olivier Adam, 2017.

As the most capable son in the family, Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho grew up shouldering responsibility for his family's large yak and sheep herds. He had a strong yearning to learn to read and practise Dharma, sounding out Tibetan consonants by butter lamp late at night, but

he was largely denied opportunities for these until his twenties. He recalls the time he had to tend the herds while others in his family went to see the renowned *gter ston*, mChog gyur gling pa (1829-1870), who was visiting a few kilometres away. As a teenager he lived out his Dharma fantasies in other ways, like fashioning a mini *dgon pa* and retreat house (*sgrub khang*) on a nearby hilltop and conferring empowerments (*dbang*) there to the animals of his herds. He carried photos of buddhas and lamas that his siblings bartered with him in exchange for food. He tells in his autobiography of overhearing meditation instructions from his grandfather while a teenager and trying to practise them on hillsides (rDo rje 1998: 3-12).

It is said that Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho was not handsome and did not have a nice voice, but certain anecdotes from his life-story suggest he was charming and charismatic. Written and oral sources say that groups of people gathered around him wherever he went, even before he became an accomplished yogin, and he established nearly twenty-five *dgon pa* across Khams in a thirty-year period (Kun bzang 2017: 58-94). He tells us in his *rnam thar* that he cried often out of devotion for his gurus, and he is famous for having swiftly mastered advanced tantric practices (rDo rje 1998: 48, 130, 214).

As an individual, Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho seems to have personified the Ris med character, as seen in various ways: his Mi la ras pa-like lifestyle as a *rtogs ldan* yogin; his close association with mKhyen brtse and Kong sprul; his accessible manner of teaching all kinds of beings; the poetic, yet at the same time vernacular, tone of his Sixteen Volumes; his eclectic interaction with teachers from various lineages; his authorship of practice oriented texts; and his activity in establishing numerous *dgon pa* (Oldmeadow 2012; Samuel 1993: 533-543; Turek 2012: 20-53). *mGur* (spiritual songs and verses, usually uttered spontaneously) are his favoured voice of transmission in his Sixteen Volumes. His words are spontaneous and poetic, empathetic and accessible, and his listeners were from all walks of human and non-human life. Perhaps his grandest Ris med gesture was his bringing to the centre a group of females and establishing them on the platform of tantric practice.

We see reflections in Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's character in earlier 'crazy *siddha*' types (*sgrub smyon*; *smyon pa*) like Tshangs dbyangs he ru ka (1452-1507), Tāranātha (1575-1634) and Mi la ras pa (c. 1052-c. 1135). These figures embodied the 'trickster' aspect of the

shamanic character, as Samuel describes it. Their supernatural feats, embrace of women and their irreverence in the face of rigid orthodoxy and abstract debate echoed Indian *siddha* and foreshadowed Ris med responses to clerical hegemony (Samuel 1993: 518-524; Templeman 2009; Turek 2012: 29).

### Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's first major pilgrimage and his Dharma initiation

In his twenties, after a heavy autumn harvest, Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho finally set out on pilgrimage to the holy shrines of Central Tibet, and to meet the 'Brug chen rin po che, who was a highly regarded lama in Nang chen society at the time. There he received empowerments and teachings belonging to rNying ma and gSar ma traditions<sup>83</sup> from the 'Brug chen. He stayed for eight months in retreat with a community of 'Brug pa bka' brgyud yogins at the gCig char hermitage at Tsa' ri mountain. Tsa' ri was a cherished tantric hermitage site for the 'Brug pa bka' brgyud lineage in Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's lifetime. Huber's *The Cult of Pure Crystal Mountain* discusses the concentration of young male yogins from Tshang and Kong po 'Brug pa bka' brgyud monasteries who lived at Tsa' ri's gCig char hermitage while training in *rtsa rlung* yogas (Huber 1999: 81-175). Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho joined such a community at gCig char; he recalls his training was ascetic and rigorous. He accumulated 'preliminaries' (*sngon 'gro*) and mantras of 'Generation Stage' (*bskyed rim*) *yi dam* deity *sādhana*, and by the end of his retreat he was tied up in straps and belts positioning his body for the advanced subtle body yogas of the bKa' brgyud tradition (i.e. Nāropa's Six Yogas). It was not long before he was able to demonstrate his internalisation of the teachings he had received through a practical exam (*rgyugs 'bul*, *rgyugs sprod*, 'give an exam'; *rgyugs len*, 'take an exam')<sup>84</sup>, whereby he performed his yogic practices and described his meditation experiences to a qualified teacher (rDo rje 1998: 19-21).

The 'Brug chen directed Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho to focus on rNying ma practices, and to seek out Grub dbang tshogs gnyis in Nang chen for his root guru. This advice, as related in Ge bcags' oral narratives, turned out to be prophetic. Back in Nang chen, at Tshes bcu dgon

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<sup>83</sup> dKon mchog spyi 'dus ('Embodiment of the Precious Ones'), bDe mchog (Cakrasaṃvara), Phag mo (Vajravārāhī) and Chos drug (Nāropa's Six Yogas), for examples.

<sup>84</sup> Also *rtogs 'bul*, 'offering one's insight'.

monastery, Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho met Grub dbang tshogs gnyis who initiated him into the tantric practices of Ratna gling pa's *gter ma* cycles and guided his progression towards becoming a master yogin and the developer of the Ge bcags community.

### Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's guru, Grub dbang tshogs gnyis, and their yogin style

At this point, it is worth looking in some detail at Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's guru, and the general background of *sgrub brgyud* yogic practices in Nang chen out of which Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's future training and activities would evolve. His guru, Grub dbang tshogs gnyis padma dri med 'od zer (c. 1828-1904, i.e. the first Tsoknyi Rinpoche), was a stellar yogin of the mid-Ris med period, believed to be a rebirth of Mi la ras pa's disciple, Ras chung pa, and of the 15<sup>th</sup> century *gter ston*, Ratna gling pa (hereafter Rat gling). We know from Tshogs gnyis' *rnam thar* and those of his disciples that a culture of tantric practice was flourishing during his lifetime, with widespread practice of *rtsa rlung* subtle body yogas (*nāḍī* and *prāṇa* yogas, the general practice category that includes *gtum mo*) and oral transmissions of rDzogs chen and Mahāmudrā meditation among male and female practitioners throughout Khams (Karma don grub 1999: 489-495; rDo rje 1998; Rigzin n.d.). Many of these practitioners were ordained monks or nuns, or at least wore monastic robes, although not all took celibacy vows, particularly the men. The yogic attitude and tantric interpretation of ethics overrode strict adherence to the *vinaya* ('*dul ba*). Accomplished male yogins of *sgrub brgyud* lineages were called *rtogs ldan* ('having realisation') and were marked by their dreadlocks and white and red striped robes. Such was the guise of Tshogs gnyis, Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho and the many male yogins who came to surround them. On one of their first meetings, Tshogs gnyis gave Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho distinctive clothing to mark him as a non-celibate yogin, telling him to maintain the appearance of a *tāntrika* and to transform the essence of the celibate monk's vows to the 'path of method'<sup>85</sup> (*thabs lam*) of the Vajrayāna (rDo rje 1998: 35, 38).

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<sup>85</sup> Tibetan tantra and rDzogs chen see an inseparable relation between mind and the movement of subtle body energies, and therefore offer two approaches to realising the true nature of existence: working directly with the mind through nondiscursive meditation (*grol lam*, 'path of liberation'), and manipulating subtle body energies through yogas (*thabs lam*, 'path of method') after which mind follows (Kongtrul 2002: 19). The Ge bcags nuns take a composite approach and engage with both.



Plate 73. Monks of the Nyingmapa monastery Pelchung Anye

Figure 9: rNying ma pa 'monks' from a dgon pa near present-day Yushu. Photo: Gruschke 2004: 86. This photo, taken by Gruschke during his fieldwork around 2000, shows the yogin style common in pre-modern Nang chen.

A senior dreadlocked yogin and high lama of the Ge bcag community, who passed away in 2018, recalled that all great male lamas of Ge bcags' early days had dreadlocked hair, while mTso rgyal sgrol ma, a renowned female Ge bcags lama, looked like 'an ordinary nun' (*phal cher dge ma*) (personal communication, Padma Dri med, May 2018). This difference in appearance between male and female yogic adepts should not obscure the fact that many Ge bcag nuns have been regarded by their wider society as equal in meditation to their greatest *rtogs ldan* contemporaries. Even today, in the quiet sphere of practice where lineage techniques are transmitted, Ge bcags nuns are occasionally called upon as experts to teach *rtsa rlung* yoga and ritual to monks from branch *dgon pa* and other monasteries in Eastern Tibet<sup>86</sup>. A full discussion of the difference in social status and written self-assertion of Ge bcags' male and female members merits a whole study of its own.

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<sup>86</sup> Though sometimes their monk counterparts take the credit, as when several *mkhan po* from bLa rung sgar visited Ge bcags' branch monastery, Ra ya dgon, around 2017. On their invitation, Ge bcags nuns travelled to Ra ya and instructed the *mkhan po* in *rtsa rlung* yoga. Afterwards the *mkhan po* and the monks have said they received *rtsa rlung* transmission from Ra ya dgon.

Like Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho, the first Tshogs gnyis is remembered for his unshakeable dedication to yogic practice and asceticism. He stayed for thirteen years in strict retreat, gaining mastery in subtle body practices of the Six Yogas of Nāropa, and vowed to break his retreat only in the case of death by starvation (Karma don grub 1999: 490). His *rnam thar* recalls that he wore a single tattered robe around his body and feet, and survived for long periods on daily bites of his ritual offering cakes (*gtor ma*). His fervent devotion to his gurus was a strong feature of his personality (Karma don grub 1999: 489-495; rDo rje 1998: 48, 130, 214). As a recognised emanation of Ras chung pa, Tshogs gnyis accomplished and transmitted 'Brug pa bka' brgyud practices; as an emanation of Ratna gling pa he did the same with the rNying ma *gter ma* of Ratna gling pa, which became the basis of Ge bcags' tradition.

### Links to Tshes bcu dgon and the Nang chen kingship

Tshogs gnyis' seat was the royal monastery, Tshes bcu sgon (also now known as Nang chen sgar). He was a contemporary of the famous *gter ston* mChog gyur gling pa<sup>87</sup>, and guru to many prominent figures of his day. An adage memorialises Tshogs gnyis' three principal disciples as the sun, moon and star: Ngag dbang dge legs, Ngag dbang chos 'byor and Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho respectively. Of these, Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho was celebrated for his extensive activities in establishing nearly twenty-five branch *dgon pa* – an unusually large number for a lama in a single lifetime (rDo rje 1998; Kun bzang 2017; Rigzin n.d.1: 15). After Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's passing, the number of Ge bcags' branch *dgon pa* increased to approximately forty-six across Eastern Tibet through the activities of Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's disciples (Kun bzang 2017: 54-94).

Tshes bcu dgon was, and continues to be, an important associate monastery of Ge bcags. It was established in 1750 by the first A lde'u rin po che (the fifth 'Khrul zhig rin po che), a practitioner of transmissions from the important 'Brug pa bka' brgyud master, the fifth mDo

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<sup>87</sup> mChog gling also started at Tshes bcu dgon. Grub dbang tshogs gnyis' third and present reincarnation is mChog gling's great-great-grandson.

khams pa sprul sku (from Khams pa sgar monastery near Chab mdo). This was a high period of the 'Brug pa bka' brgyud in Khams with its many accomplished lamas transmitting preliminary and advanced instructions of Mahāmudrā, the Six Yogas of Nāropa and a mixture of gSar ma and rNying ma ritual *yi dam* cycles throughout Tibet. The first A lde'u rin po che became the principal lama of the Nang chen king, and this initiated a 'Brug pa bka' brgyud dynasty of Nang chen kings based at Tshes bcu dgon that continued until the final ruling king, bKra shis tshe dbang stobs rgyal, passed away in 1961<sup>88</sup>. As noted in Chapter One, the second reincarnation of Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho, Chos grags rgya mtsho<sup>89</sup> (c. 1911-1978), was born as a son of the Nang chen king, and the third reincarnation is the last king's nephew. These lineage and familial links to Tshes bcu dgon have been central to Ge bcags' identity and a crucial socio-political condition that allowed the flourishing of Ge bcags Nunnery after the first Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's death.

### **Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's further training in Ratna gling pa *gter ma* and *sgrub chen***

Having considered the yogic culture of Nang chen into which Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho was being initiated, we can now return to Tshangs dbangs rgya mtsho's training under Grub dbang tshogs gnyis. Seeing a propensity in Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho for rNying ma practices, Tshogs gnyis transmitted the entire body of Ratna gling pa's *gter ma*, including subtle body yogas (gSang khrid rigs Inga<sup>90</sup>, 'Five Secret Instructions'), Mahāyoga *yi dam sādhanā* and rDzogs chen meditation to him. Tshogs gnyis specified Hayagrīva (rTa mgrin), the largest cycle among Rat gling's *gter ma*, as Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's main *yi dam* practice. He further encouraged him to arrange the ritual methods of fierce *yi dam* deities

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<sup>88</sup> With no male descendants to his sons, and no legitimacy under the CCP, this was the end of the line for the Nang chen kingship. Tshe bcu sgar remains an important centre for the 'Brug pa bka' brgyud, and is remembered as the Nang chen royal seat by Nang chen society. 'Ba' rom bka' brgyud, the lineage of the original Nang chen kings, is also strongly asserting itself today in a Nang chen cultural revival (see Turek 2013).

<sup>89</sup> As had become common from the 19<sup>th</sup> century across Tibet, the Ge bcags community recognised several emanations of the deceased Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho (of 'body, speech, mind, qualities, activities', *sku, gsung, thugs, yon tan, phrin las*). Along with Chos grags rgya mtsho, Lama Mi nub was heralded as an important second reincarnation and he took on a leadership role at the male Ra ya dgon.

<sup>90</sup> gSang khrid rigs Inga are five sets of yogic instructions, each correlating with a Buddha family: *rmi lam 'od gsal* ('clear light dreaming' yoga, Buddha family, transmuted delusion), *sgyus lus* ('illusory body' yoga, Vajra family, transmuted anger), *phyag chen* ('Mahāmudrā' yoga, Ratna family, transmuted pride), *gtum mo* (psychic heat yoga, Padma family, transmuted desire) *bogs 'don gcod* ('enhancing cutting' yoga, Karma family, transmuted jealousy) (Rigzin n.d.1: 13).

from the Rat gling collection in ways that could effectively subjugate wild and adverse forces and serve the aims of yogic practitioners and their surrounding communities (rDo rje 1998: 59, 211, 335). To this end Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho established eighteen annual *sgrub chen* (extensive group ritual ceremonies) that constitute nearly half of the Ge bcags' practice schedule. These *sgrub chen* were, and continue to be, dedicated by the nuns for 'the teachings and beings in general, and the stable lives of the lamas, and for the supreme awakening of sentient beings pervading space'<sup>91</sup> (rDo rje 1998: 171). Tshogs gnyis explained to Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho the extraordinary ritual power of *sgrub chen* and the timeliness of establishing many of them at Ge bcags<sup>92</sup>:

It is now the time of the five degenerations, with overall disease, famine and warfare, and the hostility of uncivilised border populations towards the Teachings. We may now be nearing the time when border savages will enter Tibet, which other rituals will not be able to avert. So keep in mind that these many *sgrub chen* will be beneficial<sup>93</sup> (rDo rje 1998: 211).

### The establishment of Ge bcags Nunnery

Oral narratives recall that Grub dbang tshogs gnyis directed Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho to organise a nunnery in the 1890s, and the *rnam thar* mentions a lack of nunneries in the region for women to train in Vajrayāna (rDo rje 1998: 41-43; personal communication, bZod pa, October 2016). Since the 1980s there has been a burgeoning of Tibetan nunnery populations in Khams and throughout China under modernised conditions of education and equality (Härkönen 2017: 103, 176). However, unlike most communities of nuns in Ge bcags' surrounding Yushu Prefecture (a large area spanning parts of A mdo and Khams), Ge bcags' pre-1950s population was larger than it is now. Ge bcags was thus unusual in the region in its early days in being a large centre of female monastics.

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<sup>91</sup> *bstan 'gro spyi dang bla mai'i zhab brtan dang mkha' khyab kyi sems can la byang chub mchog tu bsngo ba*

<sup>92</sup> Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche and other lamas are known to have revived and encouraged the practice of *sgrub chen*, for their transformative power at this time in Tibetan and world history, which is perceived as a dark, or degenerate, age (*snyig ma'i dus*) (Tenzin Gyatso 2007: 262).

<sup>93</sup> *da snyigs ma lnga bdo/ nad mug mtshon gsum spyi dang/ kla klos bstan pa la 'tsho ba'i dus 'dir da bod la kla klo thon 'ong i mi ran/ de'i rim gro la gzhan sus kyang mi zlog/ sgrub chen mang du thon na phan yong yid la zhog/*

While there is no feminist tone in Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's autobiography (at least not a strident one), he unassumingly features his endeavours for and with nuns, which are many. The nuns are regular characters in his *rnam thar*, almost every one of them remembered by name; they accompany him to visit high lamas and he often credits them with titles like *mkha 'gro* (Skt. *dākinī*), lama and *btsun ma* (honorific for nun) (rDo rje 1998; Kun bzang 2017: 9, 119). The same highlighting of Ge bcags' numerous female characters is absent in writings by other Ge bcags male yogins, and they are muted in a recently published Ge bcags history (Kun bzang 2017; personal communication, Karma dam chos, September 2018). This accords with the muting of female characters throughout much of Tibetan literature (Gyatso & Havnevik 2005; Ofner 2016; Schneider 2011). Most nuns and monks in the early Ge bcags community were not fluent writers, and only a handful were involved in transcribing Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's teachings and/or writing commentaries of their own. Most Nang chen writers were men, most came from aristocratic clans where they learned some reading and writing at home. Chapter Four will discuss how reading and writing is learned at Ge bcags Nunnery.

Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's *rnam thar* relates that groups of females were gathering around him for teachings. Males of all ages were gathering as well, but females are given precedence in his recollections<sup>94</sup>. In accord with Tshogs gnyis' foresight, Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho seems to have had a natural affinity for teaching women, as many from various backgrounds came on their own volition to join his emerging community. The first group of girls came to Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho for ordination at the time his mother was passing away; he recalls this and that he spent months training his mother in death meditations and monitoring her passing. He ordained this first group of girls by 'cutting their hair' (*skra bcad*), taught them preliminary contemplations and practices, which they completed, and then guided them in Generation and Completion Stages (*bsKyed rim*, *rDzogs rim*) of meditation. Each nun was successfully tested in performing the practices (*rgyugs sprod*) for her teachers.

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<sup>94</sup> Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's contemporary, gTer ston drag sngags gling pa (1871-1929), recalls that Ge bcags was the only large gathering of both male and female yogin/yoginī receiving transmissions of Ratna gling pa's practice cycles (Rigzin n.d.1:12-13). It must have been soon after his observations that Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho divided them and established a separate male centre.

A monk, also ordained by Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho at this time, taught the nuns reading (rDo rje 1998: 39).

Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho established the nunnery in the valley of his upbringing, settling the nuns' first residences in the buildings of his old family home. After he emerged as a celebrated yogin, his family members followed him as their guru. His older sister established Ge bcags' first branch *dgon pa*, Chos 'khor gling, which still flourishes today as a nunnery college of over 200 nuns.



Figure 10: Ge bcags Nunnery, 2006, in the valley of Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's pastoral home.  
Photo: Jerome Raphalen.

### Ordination practices at Ge bcags

Ordination ceremonies of Ge bcags' founding lamas and nuns are scarcely recounted in Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's *rnam thar*, and *dge tshul* ordination (novice monastic; Skt. *Śramāṇerikā*), usually the highest ordination for nuns in Tibet, is not mentioned. New nuns are remembered to have simply 'offered the best of her hair' (*skra phud phul ba*), put on

maroon robes and taken the five *dge bsnyen* precepts ('attendant of virtue'; Skt. *upāsikā*), including celibacy (personal communication, Kun bzang nyi ma, October 2018)<sup>95</sup>. Regardless of the level of *prātimokṣa* vows taken, a female who cuts her hair and wears robes at Ge bcags is called a '*dge ma*' ('virtuous female') or an '*ani*', both meaning 'nun' in local vernacular and understood as such by those around her. In the case of Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho, his preceptor the 9<sup>th</sup> rGyal dbang 'brug pa gave him his name and withheld full celibacy precepts, instead bestowing on him *dge bsnyen* vows of pure conduct (*tshangs spyod*)<sup>96</sup> (rDo rje 1998: 21).

### Ge bcags' flourishing

Through Tshogs gnyis and A Ide'u, who was a Nang chen prince and high lama, Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho obtained official permission to establish Ge bcags as a nunnery in the kingdom in 1892. The king wrote the nunnery's guidelines for conduct (*bca' yig*), and with Tshogs gnyis' agreement the yak-herding valley where Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho grew up with his family was chosen for the nunnery. The valley was seen as an ideal location at the centre of many great inner, outer and secret holy sites, which Ge bcags' history describes as being:

... like 'Ja' mar in the East, gZe rgyal in the South, rTa rna in the West, R'a dza rdzong mgo in the North. The nunnery lies in a divinely virtuous realm at the base of Lha kis rgya<sup>97</sup> [the mountain named after its deity], with the sacred Padma Lha ri mountain of sPyan ras gzig behind. In front of Kes dgon [the nunnery] is the holy lake of Green Tara. [The nunnery] itself is a sacred site of Vajravārāhī, the Twenty-One Taras and the

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<sup>95</sup> At the 'Brug pa bka' bryud monastery, bKra shis ljong in Himachal Pradesh, a transplantation of sKhams pa sgar monastery, many monks including the head lama, Khams sprul rin po che, had *dge bsnyen* vows and not full *dge slong* ordination when I lived there from 2000-2004.

<sup>96</sup> This suggests he was encouraged to practice sexual yoga (*thabs lam*, 'path of method' in the *rnam thar*) as part of his tantric training, which seems to have been a common test of control of vital energies for *rtsa rlung* practitioners around Ge bcags at the time. Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho became an expert in *thabs lam* and was encouraged by Tshogs gnyis to teach his followers (rDo rje 1998: 79). The topic of sexual yoga at Ge bcags is a fascinating one, relating to important questions of consciousness and gender, but Ge bcags nuns and lamas were reluctant that I delve into the topic which is kept secret by tradition. Respecting this and their propriety, I will leave it to them to discuss further if they choose. In my fifteen-year association with the nunnery I have not seen or heard any evidence that *thabs lam* is practised by the nuns nowadays, although I obviously cannot say whether individual nuns practise it in secret. Ethical reform and monastic education of Tibetan nuns and monks since the 1980s, in Tibet and in exile, has heightened the importance of celibacy as a value marker.

<sup>97</sup> Alternatively, Lha kes rgyal.

Mantra Protectress, and has countless sacred forms emanating from its landscape, like Tara, a conch shell and others<sup>98</sup> (Kun bzang 2017: 8-9).

In a valley lying at 4,500m (14,700ft) Ge bcags' landscape is defined by mountain peaks in all directions. Many sites are envisioned as abodes of deities and named after an identifiable shape or story in the landscape – like rTa rna ('Horse Ears') Monastery on a tall, jagged mountain protruding upwards in the shape of a horse's ears, and R'a dza rdzong mgo ('Raja's Fortress Peak') on a majestic mountain peak that resembles its name. These sites are mentioned throughout Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's *rnam thar* as places where he went on pilgrimage, stayed in retreat and transmitted teachings to disciples. Among several locations considered for the nunnery, the valley of Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's childhood home was chosen partly for the sacred feminine forms in the landscape. While the *lingam* phallic symbol is ubiquitous across sacred sites of India and Bhutan, Ge bcag is presided over by a clearly defined vulva in a hilltop facing the nunnery. Curiously, this is the one hill in the valley that does not seem to have a name<sup>99</sup>.

Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's initial community of nuns quickly grew to eighty, with fifty-three among them proficient enough in *rtsa rlung* to pass their demonstrative exams<sup>100</sup> (*rgyugs sprod; rgyugs len*) in yogic practices. The number of adepts soon grew to several hundred, and two hundred nuns led by mTsho rgyal sgrol ma committed to lifelong retreat (*tshe mtshams*). "While two hundred have committed to lifelong retreat, there are countless more nuns gathered in practice at Ge bcags", reported Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho in his missive to 'Jam mgon kong sprul in the mid-1890s (rDo rje 1998: 37). Oral accounts tell that with the onset of the Chinese Communist occupation in the mid-1950s, there were nearly seven hundred nuns at Ge bcags. Today's oldest nuns report that at times in Ge bcags' earlier days the whole base of a hill behind the nunnery would become covered in the black hair of

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<sup>98</sup> ... shar 'ja' mar/ lho gze rgyal/ nub rta rna/ byang r'a dza rdzong mgo sogs gnas chen mang po'i lte bar gyur pa lha yi dge bsnyen yul lha lha kis rgyal gyi mar gsham rgyab ri dil 'bur ser sdis sam padma lha ri zhes pa spyar ras gzigs kyi gnas dang/ kes dgon mdun stod du yod pa'i mtsho kha sgrol ma'i bla mtsho zhes phyi nang gsang las/ rdo rje phag mo dang/ sgrol ma nyer gcig sngags srung ma bcas kyi gnas yin par sungz zhing/ sgrol ma'i sku brnyan rang byon dang/ dung dkar rang byon bcas ngo mtshar mang du bzhugs/

<sup>99</sup> I could not find out the reason for this. Was it 'she who shall not be named'? Or 'she who shall not be given credit'?

<sup>100</sup> Whereby a practitioner performs her yogic practices, or describes her meditation insight, in person to a teacher who guides her experientially.

girls who had ordained. Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche says that Ge bcags' nearly forty branch nunneries had up to four or five hundred nuns each, and at minimum about seventy nuns each. He described Ge bcags Nunnery as he saw it when he visited, likely in the 1940s:

Looking down through the valley, you could see at least twenty large stupas. The entire valley was unique, but you only realized how unique when a great master was passing through. Then, as far as the eye could see, the landscape became a sea of red robes (Tulku Urgyen 2005: 160).



Figure 11: Nuns looking out in ceremony to a sacred feminine form in the landscape. Photo: author, 2018. (See also the photo of Kes rgyal mountain above in this chapter.)

When nuns first arrived at Ge bcag, their initial requirement was to participate in a Vajrakīlaya *sgrub chen* (*Phur ba yang gsang bla med sgrub chen*). This soon evolved as part of Ge bcags' gradual system of retreats, with a seven-month Vajrakīlaya retreat following completion of *sngon 'gro* preliminaries, both of these preceding an intensive three-year retreat. The practice of Vajrakīlaya, a wrathful deity and protector that is central in Rat gling

*gter ma*, is understood to clear obstacles to the deeper yogic practices that follow in lifelong Ge bcags training. It is interesting to note that for the male and female practitioners in Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's world – at Tsā ri, Tshes bcu dgon and Ge bcags – the preliminary *sngon 'gro* accumulations, while required, were completed quickly and alongside advanced deity and subtle body yogas (rDo rje 1998: 20).

### **Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's activities and celebrated disciples**

Despite long periods spent in ascetic retreat, Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho was highly active and productive in his community. Between the year of Ge bcag's founding in 1892 and Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's passing in 1909, the number of his disciples burgeoned as did the branch *dgon pa* established by him or his disciples – totalling forty-six branches by the 1950s spread across Eastern Tibet as far as Kong po (Kun bzang 2017: 54-94). By the end of his life Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's teachings had been edited into his Sixteen Volumes (Pod sde bcu drug) by his disciple Dung dgar bkra shis rgya mtsho, a highly literate yogin from the aristocratic Rakshi clan (Kun bzang 2017: 26).

Within Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's lifetime, a number of his male and female disciples rose to prominence and were honoured with special titles like: 'The Nine Ge bcag Lamas' (Ge bcag bla dgu ma), 'The Thirteen Holders of the Teaching' (Chos bdag bcu gsum), 'The Four Heart Sons' (sNying gi bu bzhi), 'The Twenty-One Vase Holders' (Bum 'dzin nyer gcig), etc. Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho was naturally poetic and it is likely he coined these titles himself. 'The Nine Lamas of Ge bcag' title is still used by Ge bcag nuns and lamas today, their names being: mTsho rgyal sgröl ma (the only female of the nine), Dung dga' bkra shis rgya mtsho, Ngag bsam, Lhun grub padma rdo rje, dBang drag rdo rje, O rgyan nyi ma, Gru pa a rbo, Karma tshe ring, Me nyag mgon tshe.

The lives of these Nine Lamas of Ge bcag share common features: each is said to have mastered Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's tantric instructions and expanded his linkages of teachings and support for the Ge bcags lineage. Interestingly, several wrote commentaries on the same tantras and treatises on which Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho had written, within the same generation and presumably with some overlap in audiences. Like Tshangs dbyangs rgya

mtsho, Dung dga' and dBang drag also wrote commentaries on the Guhyagarbha tantra, *sDom gsum rnam nges* (*Ascertaining the Three Vows*, by mNga ris pan chen; hereafter *sDom gsum*) and Śāntideva's *sPyod 'jug* (Skt. *Bodhisattvacaryāvatāra*). *sDom gsum* – a tantric interpretation of the three levels of Tibetan Buddhist vows within the framework of the nine *yāna* of the rNying ma school – was a central text for the Ge bcags community, and served what can be seen as Ris med ends: ethical emphasis towards social acceptance of rNying ma communities, a rDzogs chen/Mahāmdudrā interpretation of Buddhist tenets, a focus on Indic roots, textual proliferation and pluralism (Rich 2016; Smith 2001; Turek 2012).

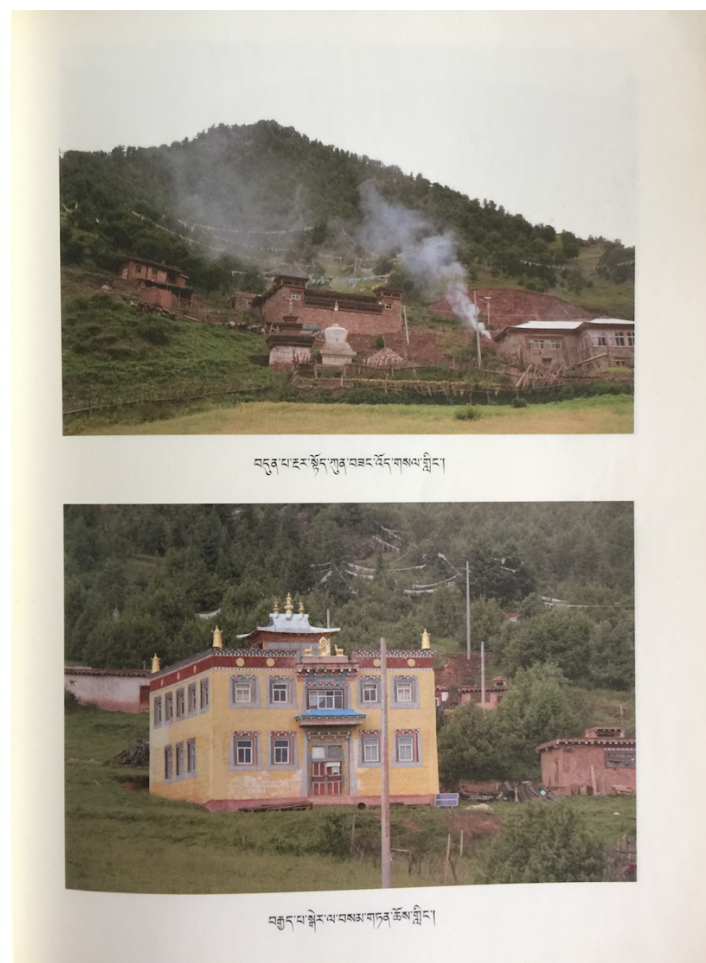


Figure 12: Two of Ge bcags' branch nunneries, in Ri bo che and southern Nang chen (present-day TAR).  
Photo: Kun bzang 2017: xi.

### The practice of sexual yoga in the early community

Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho is candid in his *rnam thar* about his practice and teaching of sexual yoga (referred to as *thabs lam*, 'path of method', in the *rnam thar*) to his male and

female students. Several times he mentions the use of sexual techniques to test practitioners' control of vital energies, and tells us that in the early Ge bcags community he paired off his male and female disciples to practice *thabs lam*. When the wider community found out about this a scandal ensued, causing a break-up of the early community and the establishment of a separate *dgon pa* for the male practitioners – rTogs ldan dgon (a.k.a. Ra ya dgon, formally gSang sngags bstan rgyas mthong grol gling) (rDo rje 1998: 78-80).

Sexual practices are of course not new in Tibetan tantric lineages, and the ambivalent status of sexuality within Buddhist monastic life, particularly in the rNying ma school, has meant that sexuality has long been cloaked in traditions of secrecy. Jacoby surveys the transformation of sexual practices from being literal rites in the earliest iterations of tantric empowerments, to becoming sexual components within a Buddhist yogic model, to becoming metaphoric or visualisation descriptions in Tibetan celibate contexts (Jacoby 2007: 215-221). Sexual practices likely continued to be employed in secret by members of the wider Ge bcags community as components of their yogic model, although the nuns' monastic attire and cropped hair suggests it was an exception to their rule, while the males with their long hair and white robes were free from social expectations of celibacy. Male yogins were encouraged by Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho to keep long hair and wear white coloured robes, while the nuns kept a monastic appearance and long hair was not advised for them (Kun bzang 2017: 54-55).

The formal names first given to Ge bcags Nunnery and its first branch monastery also suggest sūtra celibacy for females and tantric sexuality for males: the nunnery was formally named Theg chen byang chub gling ('Place of Mahāyāna Enlightenment'), and the men's monastery was named gSang chen dga' ba'i gling ('Place of Great Secret Bliss')<sup>101</sup> (Kun bzang 2017: 9). In theory, *sDom gsum* commentaries – two from Ge bcags lamas of the same generation – would have served to resolve sexual practices within the philosophical interpretation of the rNying ma school, and ethically rationalised them with all three levels of Buddhist vows.

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<sup>101</sup> These formal names of the two *dgon pa* are written on texts and logos, but in spoken conversation they are usually referred to as Ge bcags dgon and Ra ya dgon.

In the modern period, influences of a centralised, primarily dGe lugs pa government on the Tibetan diaspora in India, the rationalising influence of bLa rung sgar on monastic communities in Tibet, and of Chinese Mahāyāna participation (as sponsors and students of Tibetan masters) have raised the importance of celibacy to a cardinal principle in Tibetan monastic morality. mKhan po 'jigs med phun tshogs (1933-2004)<sup>102</sup> took a leading role in this value shift as a *gter ston* with no female consort, who advocated monastic discipline as the best path to fortify Tibetan Buddhist culture in the post-1980s revival (Germano 1998: 68, 71). mKhan po 'jigs med phun tshogs and his bLa rung sgar associates have been crucial reference points for the Ge bcags community over the last twenty years, and this influence is reflected in the nuns' stricter adherence to monastic appearance and conventions. The same is apparent in monastic communities throughout Eastern Tibet over the last two decades.

### Padmasambhava mimesis in the Ge bcags community

At Ge bcags there has been, and continues to be, a strong re-enactment of the life-story of Guru Padmasambhava. Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho, for example, is represented in close relation with Padmasambhava in his appearance in thangkas, in his identification as a reincarnation of one of Padmasambhava's close disciples, rGyal ba mchog dbyangs, and in his relationship to mTsho rgyal sgrol ma, who was herself named after Ye shes mtsho rgyal, the Tibetan consort of Padmasambhava. mTsho rgyal sgrol ma was a key figure in the nunnery's early flourishing and, mirroring the role of Ye shes mtsho rgyal, is memorialised as Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's consort, as the *dākinī* who midwifed Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's mind treasures (*gdongs gter*) and as the one who recorded them as one of the two main scribes of his teachings<sup>103</sup>.

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<sup>102</sup> bLa rung sgar (Five Sciences Buddhist Academy, bLa rung sgar lnga rig nang bstan slob gling) is in dKar mdzes Prefecture, Sichuan Province, at the site of a famed 19<sup>th</sup> century mountain hermitage. It was formally established by mKhan po 'jigs med phun tshogs in 1987 and soon became the first major centre of Tibetan Buddhist learning in the post-Mao revival, with a thirteen-year scholastic program and tens of thousands of monks and nuns. mKhan po 'jig med phun tshogs envisioned bLa rung sgar as part of his combined efforts with the Tenth Pan chen lama to rehabilitate Tibetan Buddhism after the cultural and moral corruptions of the Cultural Revolution, with the vision that Tibetan Buddhism should spread to Han society (Germano 1998). bLa rung sgar has had an extensive influence on the post-Mao revival, and on contemporary Tibetan Buddhism across the world.

<sup>103</sup> Young Ge bcags nuns today say as an expletive 'Guru mTsho rgyal sprul sku!', referring to mTsho rgyal sgrol ma, like North Americans say 'Oh my God!'

Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's recognition of mTsho rgyal sgrol ma as an emanation of Ye shes mtsho rgyal was confirmed by Tshogs gnyis and other lamas who saw her as the greatest among several *dākinī* (female embodiments of wisdom) divined to be living in the nunnery (mKhan po bsod nams 2008: 9). The lamas drew on prophecies from 17<sup>th</sup> century *gter ma* of sTag sham nus ldan rdo rje, who had strong links to Ye shes mtsho rgyal, to seal her identity, just as they had done for Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho (mKhan po bsod nams 2008: 1-6).



Figure 13: Thangka of Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho (R) next to an image of Padmasambhava. Photo: Ge bcags dgon pa.

Tshogs gnyis and others read passages from Rat gling *gter ma* and mDo ting 'dzin rgyal po (Skt. Samādhirāja Sūtra) to identify Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho as a reincarnation of Padmasambhava's disciple rGyal ba mchog dbyangs, and the 'Dharma holder' (*chos bdag*) destined to disseminate Rat gling's treasures<sup>104</sup> (Kun bzang 2017: 98; rDo rje 1998: 334-335; mKhan po bsod nams 2008: 1-6). In Tibetan mytho-history rGyal ba mchog dbyangs is said to have received the bKa' brgyad (Sādhana of Eight Herukas) transmission from

<sup>104</sup> Ge bcags is today the only Tibetan *dgon pa* annually practising all major Rat ling ritual cycles. Many rNying ma *dgon pa* practise one or two of Rat gling's *yi dam* rituals such as Tshe sgrub, Thugs sgrub or Phur ba.

Padmasambhava and accomplished the *yi dam* Hayagrīva. Hayagrīva became the personal *yi dam* of Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho and, along with bKa' brgyad, is a key *sādhana* ceremony in Ge bcags' yearly *sgrub chen* schedule. Just as Tibetans validated their lineages by linking them to Indic sources, this mimicking of the Padmasambhava legend and prophetic interpretation of scriptures are common legitimising strategies in *gter ma* lineages. Mayer notes the continuity of identity through reincarnation serves to authorise the redaction of *gter ma* material and legitimise a new community's identity within the rNying ma tradition (Mayer 2015a).



Figure 14: Ge bcags' lineage thangka. Photo: Ge bcags dgon pa.

The thangka shows the *Ris med* character of Ge bcags' early days, with Tibet's four main Buddhist schools surrounding Ge bcags' lineage in the centre. mTsho rgyal sgrol ma is third down in the third column to the right. She is the only woman depicted in the Ge bcags lineage, and curiously as a laywoman (like Ye shes mtsho rgyal), though she is remembered by Ge bcags' eldest members as looking like a nun.

### The education of Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho

Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's outer *rnam thar* of 236 pages includes nearly fifty pages of textual transmissions and empowerments from various lineages he received (*gsan yig; dbang*

*tho*) from 'Jam dbyangs mkhyen brtse, 'Jam mgon kong srpul, the sixth Khams sprul, mChog gyur gling pa, rDza dpal sprul, Karma pa mkha' khyab rdo rje and other masters of his day (rDo rje 1998: 97-102; 133-166; 174-182). These transmissions included, among many others, the bKa' 'gyur (Tibetan canon of sūtra teachings), rNying ma rgyud 'bum (rNying ma collection of Old Tantras), mDzod bdun (kLong chen pa's 'Seven Treasuries'), mDzod lnga (Kong sprul's 'Five Treasuries') and numerous *rnam thar*. These pages reveal the fertile cross-pollination of bKa' brgyud, rNying ma and Sa skya *sgrub brgyud* lineages taking place at the time. Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho records that he immediately put into practice the transmissions he received, completing large numbers of mantra accumulations, and then shared them as practical instructions with the nuns and male yogins gathered around him. 'Whatever he heard he expounded at least once to others,' says a Ge bcags' history (Kun bzang 2017: 103). As mentioned, following the guidance of his guru Tshogs gnyis, Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho spent most of his time practising Rat gling *gter ma* transmissions, and it was on their basis that he composed his Sixteen Volumes. As already mentioned, he had a close affiliation with 'the two 'Jam mgon', mKhyen brtse and Kong sprul<sup>105</sup>, as well as rDza dpal sprul and other luminaries of the time (Kun bzang 2017: 10). Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho was well known to 'Ju mi pham rgya mtsho who complimented his writings on *sPyod 'jug* and *sDom gsum*<sup>106</sup> and memorialised Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho in this verse:

Supreme regent of the second Buddha, Padma,  
Mighty Siddha, Tsangyang Gyamtso,  
May all be auspicious so that your activities blaze with splendor,  
And the sun of your teachings forever pervades the three worlds' realms<sup>107</sup> (Kun bzang 2017: back cover).

For a yak-herding yogin who only fully learned to read in his twenties, it is interesting how quickly Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho rose as a luminary in his own right, composing commentaries on Indic tantras and treatises, establishing numerous *dgong pa* and closely

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<sup>105</sup> Called the 'the two 'Jam mgon' for being regarded as emanations of Manjuśrī (Oldmeadow 2012: 95).

<sup>106</sup> The nuns recount that the Ge bcags yogin, Dun dga', showed Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's commentaries of these texts to Mi pham, who said, "There are some spelling mistakes, but not a single mistake in the meaning" (personal communication, Ngag dbang mtsho sgron, May 2018).

<sup>107</sup> *sangs rgyas gnyis pa padma'i rgyal tshab mchog/ grub pa'i dbang phyug tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho yi/ bstan pa'i nyi ma 'jig rten gsum gyi khams/ rtag khyab phrin las dpal 'bar bkra shis shog/ ('Ju mi pham 'jam dbyangs rnam rgyal rgya mtsho'i gsung)*

associating with leading lamas of the day. As noted earlier, he was among the first to receive a printed version of the Rin chen gter mdzod from Kong sprul, who gave it at Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's insistence, and he went on to transmit it several times to audiences in Nang chen (rDo rje 1998: 126-127; Tulku Urgyen 2005: 158). There is, however, no written or oral recollection of Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho systematically studying Buddhist theory in a *bshad grwa*. This raises the question of how he gained all the knowledge that he went on to teach.

Oral accounts and monastic histories tell us that Nang chen *dgon pa* predominantly followed practice lineage models until the post-Mao revival, and there was only one *bshad brwa* in Nang chen at Zur mang rnam rgyal rtse monastery<sup>108</sup> (Karma don grub 1999; personal communication, A'phel, July 2015). This is in line with the decline of non-dGe lugs pa scholastic centres in prior centuries discussed by Dreyfus and others. In competition with burgeoning dGe lugs pa monasteries, non-dGe lugs pa centres from the 17<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries lost the political and material support required to maintain large monastic colleges (Dreyfus 2005: 287; Smith 2001). In the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries large rNying ma *bshad grwa* in sDe dge like rDzong gsar and Śri Singha were developing as part of the Ris med response to this state of affairs, but in Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's day they were by no means the standard monastic model of Nang chen *dgon pa*. Most monks studied in small groups around a teacher who specialised in a particular subject, sometimes for years. They would then proceed to another teacher or retreat area to deepen their knowledge (rDo rdzong rin po che, personal communication, 2014). Dreyfus cites Dezhung Rinpoche's life-story as an example of this kind of decentralised educational career (Dreyfus 2005: 287n31).

We can infer from Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's transmission lists and life events that he studied in a similar manner and that the main tenor of his textual learning was not dialectical, but instructional. There is no mention of debating (*rtsod pa*) or memorising Indian philosophical root texts on dBu ma (Skt. Madhyamaka) and Tshad ma (Skt. Pramāṇa, Buddhist logic) in his writings, nor indication of ratiocination as his reflective style. The overriding

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<sup>108</sup> I also heard in conversation with Nang chen monks that the last Nang chen king prohibited extensive dialectical study at Tshes bcu dgon monastery in order to encourage yogic realisations in his monks.

emphasis is on his receiving transmissions of rDzogs chen theory, yogas and tantric rituals, his engagement with them in periods of contemplative retreat and further transmitting them to followers. His understanding was tested through demonstrative exams (*rgyugs sprod*), in which he described his meditation experience and performed *rtsa rlung* yoga practices for his lamas. *rGyugs sprod* remains a central means of testing the nuns' learning at Ge bcags.

On the topic of oral transmission (*lung*), the Buddhist Digital Resource Center (2014) notes a discernible effort by Tibetan authors to establish *lung* lines through teaching and empowerment records (*gsan yig*), like those in Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's *rnam thar*, from the 11<sup>th</sup> century onwards, tracing lineages to Indian origins and thereby legitimising Tibetan hermeneutical writings. As van Schaik further underlines, the centrality of *lung* oral transmission holds a vital element of living knowledge, and functions to keep that experiential knowledge alive (van Schaik 2011: 165). This element of communicating lived experience as an intent of oral transmission is clearly crucial in a community such as Ge bcags.

### Scholasticism in Tibetan Buddhism and the Ge bcags community

Ge bcags' recently published history describes Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's education as 'having heard profound oral teachings that ripen and liberate from many scholar-practitioners' (Kun bzang 2017: 10). The same page lists rDza dpal sprul, 'Jam mgon kong sprul and Karma pa mkha' khyab rdo rje as some of the *mkhas sgrub* scholar-practitioners Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho relied on.

It is worth clarifying what the words 'scholar' and 'scholarship' mean in the context of Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's life and learning. In what sense could Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho be called a 'scholar' himself? Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's disciple, Dung dga', is in fact recalled to have been accomplished in 'practice' and 'study' (*sgrub pa, mkhas pa*), with more 'qualities of Mañjuśrī' ('Jam dpal *yon tan*), while in comparison Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's brilliance was his 'spontaneous outpouring from his wisdom mind' (*dgongs pa'i klong nas brdol*) (personal communication, Karma dam chos, May 2020). Whatever the mode of his

knowledge, Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's mastery of poetic expression and profound philosophical subjects is evident in the content of his Sixteen Volumes.

Kapstein notes that the use of the term 'scholasticism' in Western Tibetan Buddhist studies needs more nuanced understanding. He highlights that unlike early Western scholasticism which aimed to elaborate theology along purely rational lines, there was no impermeable distinction for Tibetan scholars between scholastic and visionary knowledge (Kapstein 2000: 85-86). Indeed, divine visionary experiences (*dag pa'i snang ba*) were seen as an authorising criterion for composing Tibetan tantric scriptures, and they are essential in the process of producing *gter ma* (Gyatso 1993; Kapstein 2000: 100; Cantwell & Mayer 2020). The lives of prominent scholars across Tibetan Buddhist schools like Tsong kha pa, Karma Pakshi, kLong chen pa and Ris med era scholars like mKhan po ngag chung and 'Ju mi pham are replete with visions of deities that passed knowledge to them (Dudjom 1991; Kapstein 2000: 100; Ngawang Palzang 2013). Visions at times even went so far as to authorise support for doctrinal arguments and apologetics (Kapstein 2000: 87). We see a salience of visions across various types of Tibetan knowledge production, from the intellectual annotations on Madhyamaka by Tsong kha pa and 'Ju mi pham, to the *gter ma* adaptations on yogic practices by Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho.

Kapstein highlights prominent characteristics of early Western scholasticism – a 13<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> century development in Latin Catholic universities, paralleling the rise in science – as being the rationalising of Catholic theology according to Aristotelian logic, scriptural commentaries and the promotion of the written medium for the expression of ideas. Using similar criteria, much of Tibetan Buddhist monastic endeavour can be called scholastic, although according to Dharmakīrti's logic and with very different social impetuses (Kapstein 2000: 86).

Cabezón discusses the broadening of the term scholasticism to apply to a variety of philosophical movements in medieval Europe, and a distinction made by scholars of the day between intellectual content and analytical methods. Europe's continental history of scholasticism is far removed from the Indo-Tibetan context, as Cabezón asserts; Tibetan Buddhism has not (yet) undergone the secular distancing from religious, experiential dimensions into primarily secondary sources of critique as in Western academia (Cabezón

1994: 11-26). Even so, admitting a distinction between scholastic *content* and *method* within scholasticism is relevant at the current modernising juncture of Tibetan Buddhism, and helpful when considering Ge bcags learning. The major enquiry of this thesis concerns the intellectual, or knowledge, content of the Ge bcags tradition and how the nuns arrive at that knowledge. If the nuns do not engage in much ratiocination about their scriptures, although they practice their directives, hear oral commentary and reflect in less analytical ways, does that mean the nuns are not rational, or intellectual? Many Ge bcags nuns become masters of a certain kind of knowledge, but their way of processing reason on the path to that mastery is different to that of intellectual scholars.

Through Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho the Ge bcags nuns connected with prominent Ris med scholars and were part of an emerging *sgrub brgyud* culture that, as discussed by Rich, valued the role of reason as a prerequisite for spiritual realisation (Rich 2016: 16-22). Elevating intellectual study in *sgrub brgyud* curricula through systematised *bshad grwa* programs was, again, a feature of the Ris med period. However, the *bshad grwa* learning model was not yet pronounced in Nang chen's *dgon pa* during the time of Ge bcags' founding figures. Unlike Shrī Singha and other rNying ma *bshad grwa* in sDe dge, Ge bcags and its branches did not include systematic philosophical study in their corpus or training at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Study that did occur was primarily of treatises with a moral emphasis, such as gradual path (*lam rim*) texts like rDza dpal sprul's *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung* and *sPyod 'jug*, or contemplation of major tantric transmissions like *sNying thig ya bzhi* (kLong chen pa's collection of rDzogs chen *gter ma*). *sDom gsum* was, as mentioned, an important Vajrayāna text for Ge bcags, as was the Guhyagarbha tantra (*rGyud gsang ba snying po*) on which two male yogins wrote commentaries.

The nuns do not currently read these philosophical texts as a scheduled part of their daily training, nor do they have formal study of Buddhist logic and epistemology (*tshad ma rigs pa*). As a late 19<sup>th</sup> century rNying ma community interwoven with bKa' brgyud traditions in Nang chen, the scholarship that informed Ge bcags' early lamas was based mainly on instructive commentaries and the exchange of meditation experience, and very rarely on dialectical debate. As a community of women practising the tantric/rDzogs chen instructions of Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho, the nuns' commentaries were orally transmitted or from

scriptures written on the basis of yogic experience. While the nuns may not have extensive theoretical knowledge, it is hard to imagine the Ge bcags tradition – one of lifelong, rigorous training towards the development of nondual awareness whereby mind comes to know its own nature – being sustained without the nuns’ understanding of what they are doing in their many hours of daily practice.

If, as Rich discusses with reference to Cabezón’s work, scholasticism is a systematic, rational organisation of religious learning, focused on the application of logic to religious questions, then the Ge bcags nuns are not typical scholars (Rich 2016: 19-24). The rNying ma canon and practices were certainly an organised system by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, but as Chapter Four will explore, Ge bcags seems to have a *deliberately* unsystematic aspect to its lived tradition that allows for spontaneous experience as the highest principle of learning. If, as Yamamoto posits, scholasticism requires an agreed upon canon and discourse, then Ge bcags nuns can be called scholastic in a limited sense (Yamamoto in Rich 2016: 9). The nuns accept Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho’s Sixteen Volumes and Rat gling’s twenty-five *gter ma* volumes as their core scriptural corpus, and have an agreed upon discourse about the content of their teachings. Scriptures from different lineages do supplement the Ge bcags’ scriptural canon at times depending on their practical relevance. Texts are crucial to the Ge bcags tradition and are omnipresent in the nunnery, and the nuns spend more time chanting scriptures than on any other activity. The way that they read their scriptures and what is happening in their minds as they read will be explored more in Chapters Four and Five. Most of their scriptures are liturgical, with specific tantric imagery that is internally visualised as the verses are chanted. In a process highlighted by Cantwell, their meditative experience comes to incorporate the associated words (and vice versa) and the scriptures are in this way internalised by the practitioner (Cantwell 2015: 245).

A recent anecdote casts light on how the nuns view knowledge. For six weeks over the summer of 2018, Ge bcags Nunnery hosted roughly two hundred nuns and several dozen monks and male yogins from about thirty branch *dgon pa* for training in and preservation of Ge bcags’ traditions of practice, particularly *sgrub chen* (extended group *sādhana* ceremonies). Each day, Ge bcags nuns instructed roomfuls of participants in *sgrub chen* chanting, hand mudras, *’cham* ritual dances and musical instruments. The participants broke

off into small groups to repeatedly mime and memorise the instructor's movements and recitation tunes, and to enact the complicated timing of scriptural recitations with ritual performance. Towards the end of the two-month-long gathering, I overheard a conversation between a few senior Ge bcags nuns and male lamas about testing the participants' learning. A *mkhan po* and nuns from a branch nunnery with a newly expanded program of philosophical study had wanted to test their memorisation and analytical understanding of the *sgrub chen* scriptures. Their idea was that the participants compare Ge bcags' scriptures with other renditions of related *gter ma*, in line with the approach and the types of critical reasoning pursued in a *bshad grwa* education. The senior Ge bcags nuns and lamas in conversation disagreed with this type of scholastic examination. They felt that Ge bcags' specialty, as a tradition of Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's teachings, was embodied knowledge gained through experience, and that their way of testing should continue to be demonstrative (*rgyugs sprod*).

This demonstrates that there has been a spectrum of modes of learning (and influences) in the Ge bcags community, and more widely in the Eastern Tibetan society from which Ge bcags emerged. By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, these learning modes all had some scholastic elements, while participating to some extent with approaches favouring yogic (or visionary) experiential knowledge. Tension between yogic and scholastic orientations is nothing new in Buddhism; it was present in early Indian Buddhism and has continued between and *within* Tibetan Buddhist schools for centuries. The scholarship of the Ris med period was often motivated by attempts to reconcile such tension (Dreyfus 2003: 22; Oldmeadow 2012: 47-54; Ray 1994; Samuel 1993: 525-543). However, the divide in Tibetan Buddhism between the intellectual and yogic is perhaps not so real if the meaning of scholarship and study is allowed more nuance, with more consideration given to the content of knowledge and methods of thinking, as distinguished by Cabezón (Cabezón 1994: 20). Dreyfus remarks that, 'Interesting differences are often less the marks of obvious sectarian divisions than the signs of the less obvious dialogue that takes place within living traditions' (Dreyfus 2005: 297). The establishment of Ge bcags Nunnery occurred at the beginning of a great shift in learning values, one which has accelerated further in the post-Mao era and brought Tibetan tantric learning modes into starker relief against international modernising curricula.

## Non-analytical/non-verbal highest knowledge

In between the lines of Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's lists of transmissions we can infer he was influenced by a philosophical value system that led him (and his male disciples) to write scholarly commentaries on the Guhyagarbha tantra, *sDom gsum* and *sPyod 'jug*. We may therefore consider Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho a scholar as long as we keep in mind that dialectical studies were of little concern to him. Generally speaking, dGe lugs and Sa skya scholarly approaches emphasise analytical study in order to exhaust intellectual doubts about ultimate reality prior to meditation, while bKa' brgyud and rNying ma emphasise meditation experience to understand ultimate reality as the nature of mind<sup>109</sup>. Rich summarises the central philosophical principle underlying rNying ma and rDzogs chen meditation lineages:

while first explicitly associated with Mahāyoga and its scriptures – especially the eighth century *Guhyagarbha* – and later the defining characteristic of the emergent “vehicle” of Dzogchen, with its proliferating Tibetan-language literature, the central Premise – the foundational idea – running like a continuous thread through the fabric of the Nyingma spiritual universe is that the mind, by its very nature, is already awakened, and any and all conceptual, dualistic thought is a deviation from that pristine, non-conceptual, and non-dual nature. ... As already expressed by the eighth century Indian Mahāyoga exegete Buddhaguhya, “Each and every sentient being without exception is essentially, primordially awakened. Therefore, there is no [need] to engage in analysis” (Rich 2016: 221).

This passage speaks to the fundamental principle underlying the nuns' doctrinal and practical learning, taught in most practice lineages as the 'foundation' or 'ground' (*gzhi*) that underlies their pathway of practice (*lam*) and its results (*'bras*) (Rig 'dzin 2004). The foundation is that the ultimate nature of existence is immanent in the nature of mind, as a co-emerging continuum (tantra, *rgyud*), gnosis (*rig pa*, *ye shes*) and the appearances of form (*snang ba*, *gzugs*). In other words, as Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho explains it, the nature of mind is intrinsically pure and endowed with the potential of enlightened qualities (*lhun grub*), and nothing whatsoever needs to be done to improve or 'achieve' it. Buddha is nowhere to be found other than as the very nature of one's own awareness, and the path of practice is simply to undo the habits of cognitive and emotional obscurations which arise incidentally in

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<sup>109</sup> As Samuel discusses throughout his *Civilized Shamans*, however, both approaches are found in all four schools. Indeed, the synthesis of both has been a characterising feature of Tibetan Buddhism overall.

the mind, but are not intrinsic to its conceptually unconditioned nature (Tshangs dbyangs vol. 11: 168-169).

Tibetan exoteric scriptures term this principle of immanence as ‘Buddha nature’ (*bde gshegs snying po*; Skt. *sugatagarbha*, *tathāgatagarbha*), while Tibetan tantric texts describe it as ‘the pervasive, unfabricated presence of divine form, divine sound, and gnosis-awareness’ (Pettit 1999: 3). Buddha nature is the most crucial principle in the cognitive orientation of Tibetan tantric practices, and makes sense of all the elements of Ge bcags’ tradition with its pervasive deity visualisations and mantras, its subtle body yogas and the rDzogs chen hermeneutic that informs them all. Also crucial to making sense of Ge bcags’ teaching methods and practice is that the ultimate nature of reality (*chos nyid*, Skt. *dharmatā*) is said to be inconceivable and verbally inexpressible, and one and the same as direct awareness of it<sup>110</sup> (Pettit 1999: 4).

Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho alluded to this in his rDzogs chen meditation advice to the first Ge bcags nuns:

Now, let all mental labeling, projections and dualistic concepts fall away. The unborn, inconceivable Dharmatā is without centre or limit. Buddha nature is without partiality or bias<sup>111</sup> (Tshangs dbyangs vol. 11: 170-171).

At Ge bcags the *bde gshegs snying po* principle of Buddha nature is taught from the beginning of the nuns’ contemplative careers and constantly reiterated as a reminder in Ge bcags’ scriptures and oral teachings. If, as many Tibetan lamas assert, a criterion of Indo-Tibetan Buddhist learning is that reasoned understanding must precede realisation, this primordially awakened nature (*bde gshegs snying po*) is the reason to be fully understood from the outset and throughout a Ge bcag nun’s training. At Ge bcags *bde gshegs snying po* is not, however, taught as a philosophical topic, but as an experience to be cultivated in non-discursive meditation. Within the rDzogs chen hermeneutic that imbues Ge bcags’ tradition with meaning, all Buddhist terms for ultimate reality (*bde gshegs snying po*, *sangs rgyas*, *chos sku*, *chos nyid*, etc.) are identified with one’s own mind and meditative experience. The

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<sup>110</sup> In other words, reality and existence are one and the same (ultimately nondual).

<sup>111</sup> *da ni thams cad ming btags sgro btags dang/ kun brtags kun la ’dzin pa’i rnam rtog dor/ skye med bsam ’das chos nyid mtha’ dbus bral/ rgya chad phyogs lhung med pa’i bde gshegs snying/*

orientation of all elements of Ge bcags' learning, in accord with the rDzogs chen approach, is thus to redirect attention, non-discursively, back to the here and now (Studstill 2005: 168).

Passages from Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's rDzogs chen instructions intimate the non-analytical way the nuns are taught to train in this knowledge:

Rest your mind in the view beyond conceptual thoughts.

...

Emptiness will not be found in words and concepts of 'empty'.

...

[Buddha] will not be found in the thinking mind and objectified objects.

...

Those meditating mentally only become obscured.

...

Holding to intellectual concepts about the view and meditation, and falsely intellectualising about *dharmatā* as a concept; to merely utter 'the unobstructed display of unseen *dharmakāya*' and 'everything is mind, and mind's true nature is empty' is to overlook the real meaning of the guru's instructions and the Buddha's words. It undermines the truth of cause and effect.

...

You must see your own face, the very essence of Samantabhadra. You will not see it by meditating with your thinking mind<sup>112</sup> (Tshangs dbyangs vol. 11: 161-182).

The following account relates how these written instructions on Buddha nature filter down and are communicated in day-to-day Ge bcags life. When I was visiting Ge bcags during a quiet period in the nunnery in 2018<sup>113</sup>, a middle-aged nun-friend walked into my room while I was meditating. (This is not unusual at Ge bcags; the nuns are very relaxed in their meditation approach.) She sat down next to me and leaned on my shoulders, picked up my phone and started scrolling through its photos<sup>114</sup>. Candidly, she asked me how well I can meditate, while showing me photos on her own phone of her and another nun working in the

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<sup>112</sup> *blo 'das lta ba'i thog tu 'jog pa la ... stong zhes tshig dang blo yi yul la med ... blo dang dmigs pa'i yul nas rnyed rgyu med ... blo yis byas rnams sgrub par 'gyur ba yin ... blos byas lta sgom blo yi rnam rtog ste/ blos byas chos nyid 'dra zhes rdzun skad de/ bla ma'i bka' dang rgyal ba'i lung gi don/ ma mthong chos sku'i yo langs yin zhes smra/ thams cad sems yin sems nyid ng obo stong/ las dang rgyu 'bras mi bden khyad du gsod/ ... kun bzang thig le'i rang zhal mjal bar gces/ de nyid ma mjal bsgom blos rnam rtog des/*

<sup>113</sup> This was in early June during a nunnery holiday when most nuns return home to look after children while adults harvest cordyceps on the mountains. In the past, Ge bcags' main holiday was during the autumn agricultural harvest, when nuns returned home to collect food supplies from their families.

<sup>114</sup> Another space the Ge bcags nuns do not feel is 'private'. A clear distinction between private and public space does not exist at Ge bcags as it does in the West.

nunnery's barley field<sup>115</sup>. I told her about my meditation, and how I had found a Ge bcags lama's teachings helpful, as he taught directly from experience and not from texts. She seemed to understand exactly what I meant. I finished by saying, "He points out Buddha nature", to which she leaned in with an allied, "Buddha nature pervades all sentient beings<sup>116</sup>." She then expressed further meditation instructions, telling me to let all thoughts and distractions go, and to take the blessings of Buddha inseparably into my mind. She said in Tibetan *khriṃs lhod, khriṃs lhod... res mo byas nas* ('alternate focusing your awareness, relax, focusing your awareness, relax'). "Don't think 'I'm no good at meditation'", she said, "Just allow the mind to be as it is, no matter what arises."

This anecdote reveals how *bde gshegs snying po* – an important philosophical principle in *sgrub brgyud* texts – is meaningful for Ge bcags nuns as their nonjudgmental technique of meditative awareness. They come to understand Buddha nature through their repeated meditation practice over years, and it is relevant and communicable over barley fields and other daily tasks. The nun's question to me of 'How well can you meditate?' did not come across as imposing or competitive in any way. It felt like a relevant and very normalised topic for conversation with a Ge bcags nun. After spending time at Ge bcags, one senses that 'how well one can meditate' is the whole plenum of their world, not as a hierarchical goal but as the purpose pervading their lifelong practice. I was impressed by nuns my own age who explained, in one-on-one quiet conversations, the stable mental ease they had achieved through their years of meditation training at Ge bcags. One told me how Ge bcags had become like a pure land (*zhing khams*) for her: "This place of Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's blessings, where mind is opened and spacious, not lost in distractions [she pointed to the sky], is the very best place to repay the kindness of one's parents and all sentient beings." I found that the nuns' descriptions of their view (*lta ba*), their easeful attitude towards mind's complicated mental activity, reflected in a human way the writings on realising emptiness I had read in Tibetan Buddhist texts. When I asked the same nun if it took about ten to fifteen years for an average Ge bcags nun to reach such a spacious mental disposition, she

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<sup>115</sup> This nun was responsible for the nunnery's food supplies at the time, and her phone was given to her by a male lama with whom she communicated regularly about trips to town. Cellular phone reception was installed at Ge bcags in September 2017, and since then many nuns keep mobile phones.

<sup>116</sup> *bde gshegs snying po kun la kyab*

straightforwardly admitted, “Forget fifteen years – I came here when I was fifteen and now I’m forty-eight!”

The above account further relates how knowledge at Ge bcags is participatory, rather than individually accumulated and then shared from textbook to student, or from authority to follower. It also shows the heartfelt quality that is integral in the nuns’ understanding of Buddha nature.

### **Visionary and embodied tantric knowledge**

Yogic practice as a method of learning is strongly emphasised in Tibetan practice lineages, and we will see more in subsequent chapters of how the nuns’ primary pedagogy is practical and embodied. The body as divine and as the locus of awakening is one of the most defining features of all tantric traditions (Chang 1963; Tulku Urgyen 1999: 166; Urban 2009). In the Vajrayāna context, knowledge attainment occurs through the subtle body wherein all elements of *rtsa*, *rlung* and *thig le* are understood to be conscious (Rangjung Dorje 2014). This is a salient point in considering how Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho learned and taught (often speaking spontaneously in *mgur* verses), as knowledge was premised not only on mental consciousness, but on sensory, mental and intuitive consciousnesses of the whole mind-body complex.

Of all the gurus Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho relied on, those spoken of in his *rnam thar* are known to have experienced visions that informed their teachings (Tshogs gnyis, Mi pham, Kong sprul, mKhyen brtse, mChog gling, etc.) and much of Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho’s Sixteen Volumes was informed by visionary experiences. The nature of such visions is culturally and experientially inaccessible to me, but it is safe to say they are not ratiocinative, and their prevalence highlights that Tibetan Buddhism was not apologetic about its non-logical forms of knowledge. Dreyfus notes that the need to transcend rationality for spiritual realisation is accepted by almost all schools of Tibetan Buddhism (Dreyfus 2005: 296).

Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho is an example of the recurrent case of the Tibetan yogin who purified psychic knots and *rlung* energies in the *nāḍī* of his subtle body, thereby freeing

innate knowledge. Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's embodied, energetic 'knowing' born from *rtsa rlung* yoga, in tandem with the refined awareness of rDzogs chen meditation, is said to have arisen from his yogic, embodied experience. A prayer recalling the life of a Ge bcags *rtogs ldan* from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century relays this view of the arising of yogic knowledge<sup>117</sup>:

All subjects of *piṭaka*, tantras, transmissions and meditation instructions that you heard  
You took to heart and fully realized,  
While those that you didn't hear spontaneously arose in your mind.

...

You unfettered the knots and purified the karmic winds in the central channel  
And ripened as the deity's form by refining the bindu-essence of great bliss  
You realised the exhaustion of phenomena and perfected the signs of the four  
appearances<sup>118</sup> (Padma n.d.: 1-7).

Communication with supernatural spirits is common in Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's writings as well. His entire fifteenth volume features his teachings to non-human beings, including *nāga*, goddesses and land spirits. These written perspectives are windows into a worldview in which humans lived intimately with the energies of nature, and within an inextricably connected mind-body experience.

### Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's compositions and knowledge revelation

The first complete texts Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho learned to read were bSam pa lhun 'grub (Spontaneous Fulfilment of Wishes, a mChog gling *gter ma*<sup>119</sup>), an aspirational prayer to Guru Padmasambhava, and Tshe sgrub gsang 'dus (Secret Gathering of Life Accomplishment, a Rat gling *gter ma*). Both of these texts are full of rNying ma terminology and complex tantric themes (rDo rje 1998: 12). Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho was very soon immersed in the *lung* transmissions discussed in the Introduction, especially of the twenty-five *gter ma* volumes of Rat gling transmitted to him by Tshogs gnyis. He spent fifteen years in retreat

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<sup>117</sup> Incidentally, this prayer's colophon reveals a communal process of textual production like that of Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's writings: at the request of two Ge bcags nuns in lifetime retreat, both named by the 'author', it was composed by Padma phrin las snying po and written by Padma rdo rje (Padma n.d.: 7).

<sup>118</sup> *rig gnas sde snod rgyud lung man ngag rnam/ gang gsan thams cad yongs rdzogs thugs su chud/ ma gsan pa rnam dgongs pa'i klong nas rdol/ ... rtsa yi mdud grol las rlung dbu mar dag/ bde chen thig le'i dwangs ma lha skur smin/ chos zad don rtogs snang bzhi'i rtags tshad rdzogs/*

<sup>119</sup> This shows how quickly a *gter ma* revealed within Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's generation had come to acceptance. mChog gling's life spanned from 1829-1870, and Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's from 1848-1909.

engaging with these Rat gling transmissions – largely manuals of *sādhanā* ritual and instruction as well as rDzogs chen, subtle body yogas (‘Five Secret Instructions’, gSang khrid rigs lnga) and rNying ma deities from the Mahāyoga cycles including rTa mgrin (Hayagrīva), rDo rje phur pa (Vajrakīlaya) and bKa’ brgyad (Sādhanā of Eight Heruka). He recited immense numbers of mantra with visualised meditations of these *yi dam*, and then expressed his experiences in his writings. In the colophon of Volume Thirteen, Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho’s ritual manual (*las byang*) on the bKa’ brgyad *sādhanā*, he explains how he came to compile it:

At age thirty-nine, I directly saw the *ḍākinī* language of the main ritual of the three roots’ bKa’ brgyad [‘Eight Pronouncements’, Sādhanā of Eight Heruka]. At age forty-six the mandala vividly displayed itself to me and I wrote a brief clear meaning of the deities’ mantra, though I was not convinced of the accuracy of the vision and kept it secret. At fifty-three I felt the need to set out the text, but remained lazy, despite directions from the lama, deity and *ḍākinī*. Again at fifty-six I was directly told I must write it out, which I did, seeing that it was the same and in one stream with writings of bsTan gnyis gling pa, rGod ldem can and Ratna gling pa, and believed in the truth of the vision. Thus at fifty-six [I] committed it to words and the master of scriptures and realisation bKra shis rgya mtsho wrote it out<sup>120</sup> (Tshangs dbyangs vol. 13: 215-216).

This clearly reveals the compositional process of Volume Thirteen – a scripture regularly recited by the nuns in their bKa’ brgyad retreat division and once a year in an intensive nine-day *sgrub chen*. We see Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho’s knowledge for the volume came to him over years, and with reticence on his part that was relieved by reading that similar information was shared in previous *gter ma*. His knowledge came to him in visions, obviously in a highly intuitive process; his other writings likewise probably came to him during periods of yogic practice. All the words of the text are attributed to Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho, but another person wrote them out, a fact clearly stated by the ‘author’ Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho. The

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<sup>120</sup> *rtsa gsum bla ma bka’ brgyad kyi las gzhung ’di rang lo so dgu’i dus mkha’ ’gro’i brda yig kha byang mngon sum mthong/ zhe drug dus dkyil ’khor gyi bkod pa gsal snang brtan por lam lam du shar bas lha sngags kyi mngon rtogs bsdus pa zhig bris kyang/ ji mi snyam par ’khrul snang bden med du gsang rgyas btab/ rang lo nga gsum dus gi ger ’god dgos pa’i lhas dang/ bla ma lha dang dha’ ki’i gnang ba thob kyang bag med du lus/ slar yang rang lo nga drug thog nges par ’bri dgos pa’i gnang ba thob pa dang/ bstan gnyis gling pa’i rig ’dzin mchog sgrub dang don gcig par ’dug pas nges par yid ches te chu bog cig ’dres su gyur/ der ma zad rgod ldem can gyi spros bral bde chen ma dang/ ratna gling pa’i rig ’dzin byin bebs rnams nges par don gcig par ’dug pas/ ’khrul snang bden par bzung ste rang lo nga drug thog brahma s’a ras gtan la phab pas/ lung rtogs kyi dbang phyug mchog gib la ma dam pa bkra shis rgya mtshos yi ger bkod pa dge legs ’phel/*

communal creation of Tibetan religious compositions, often a complex collaboration of narration, scribes and editors, has been discussed before (Diemberger 2008: 83; Mayer 2015a; Rheingans 2015). This suggests that it is knowledge as distinguishable from its written form that is most valued in attribution of such religious texts.

### **Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's *gter ma* style of composition**

Cantwell (2015) and Mayer (2015, 2015a) (and Cantwell & Mayer 2010, 2020) have shed light on the modular nature of *gter ma* writing, how it preserves traditional material while adapting, expanding and refreshing it. In rNying ma eyes, *gter ma* is both the oldest and newest source material in Tibetan Buddhism. It harks back proudly to an ancient source in Padmasambhava and his twenty-five disciples, while celebrating new revelations for their vitality and relevance (Mayer 2015a). The Ge bcags nuns often praise their young lineage (founded in the 1890s) as a *nye brgyud* ('close lineage') that is close in time to its living source of enlightenment in its founders. Much of *gter ma* content is reproduction, and the tradition intends this: some passages are reproduced verbatim, other content is re-worked and augmented with new material in the creation of new wholes (Cantwell 2015: 245). Terrone discusses how the appropriation of portions of texts without explicit attribution to their original authors is an intended means of promoting a lineage that sees itself sourced in ancient truths (Terrone 2016). Analysing bDud 'joms rin po che's (1904-1987) Vajrakīlaya *gter ma*, Cantwell discerns the author's intention to clearly present practice texts by editing ancient passages and adding relevant Vajrakīlaya materials from other lineages, in this way universalising the revelations and revitalising the tradition's earliest intents (Cantwell 2015: 268).

Some of Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's teachings are titled and termed by the Ge bcags community as *dgongs gter* ('mind treasure'), but I also heard it discussed by male Ge bcags lamas that Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho was not exactly a *gter ston* since he never revealed any 'earth treasures' (*sa gter*). Nevertheless, the content of Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's Sixteen Volumes reveals a *gter ma* style of composition, being a reproduction and adaptation of Rat gling *gter ma* material that is injected with rituals, notes on ritual cake (*gtor ma*) motifs and instructions from numerous related communities like sMin grol gling, rTa rna dgon and

Khams pa sgar<sup>121</sup>. His colophons often state the section as his ‘edited arrangement’ (*bsgrigs chog tu bkod pa*) of material from Rat gling’s *gter ma*, sometimes borrowing Rat gling material already reworked by ‘Jam mgon kong sprul (Tshangs dbyangs vol. 7: 821, vol. 9: 240, vol. 10: 684). Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho’s writings are also inspired by visions and yogic insight. The colophon of his forty-eight-page ritual practice of Khyung (Garuḍa), one of nine deities in his arrangement of Rat gling’s Hayagrīva Guhyasamāja *gter ma*, clearly reveals this compositional style:

This arrangement from the lower portion of Activity Garuḍa, from Ratna’s Hayagrīva Guhyasamāja *gter ma*, is based on Garuḍa’s own scripture, supplemented with additional [material] from Wrathful Guru (Gur drag) and Kīlaya wherever there were crucial missing parts. Following the command of the Three Roots, it was spoken by the mantra-holder bDud ’dul rdo rje [Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho] and written down by Grub dbang chos dar. May virtue increase<sup>122</sup> (Tshangs dbyangs vol. 7: 821).

Another example of such ‘open-sourcing’ of original material is the most recent publication of Ge bcags’ core scriptures in 2018: a twenty-five-volume re-arrangement of Rat gling’s *yi dam* ritual cycles and Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho’s reworking of them, for recitation in Ge bcags’ retreat divisions (*sgrub khag*) and collective *sgrub chen*<sup>123</sup>. Here again, with loyalty to Rat gling’s *gter ma* as the touchstone, a group of monks and nuns from the Ge bcags community freely rearranged and edited Ge bcags source materials for efficiency in collective *yi dam* practices.

The majority of colophons in Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho’s Sixteen Volumes state intuitive impetuses for his compositions, including pure visions (*dag snang*) and ‘following the command of the mother-father guru’ (*gu ru yab yum gyis bka’ gnang la rjes bzung*) or commands of the three roots (*rtsa gsum*, i.e. lama, *yi dam* and *mkha’ ’gro*, or *ḍākīnī*)<sup>124</sup>. Less often, Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho states that he composed ‘whatever came to mind’ (*gang*

<sup>121</sup> rNying ma, Yel pa bka’ brgyud and ‘Brug pa bka’ brgyud respectively.

<sup>122</sup> *ratna’i gter byon rta mgrin gsang ba ’us pa las phrin las khyung gi smad las bsgrigs chog tu bkod pa ’di ni/ khyung gi rang gzhung sor bzhag la/ gur drag dang phur pa nas zur brgyan/ ma tshang rigs dgos gal che ba rnams kyis kha bkang ste/ rtsa gsum rjes bzung bka’ gnang la brten te/ sngags ’chang bdud ’dul rdo rjes smras pa grub dbang chos dar pas yi ger bris pa dge legs ’phel/*

<sup>123</sup> This publication was sponsored and initiated by Tshogs gnyis rin po che III and prepared at dPal yul Monastery in gDe dge.

<sup>124</sup> See for examples Tshangs dbyangs vol. 6: 140; vol. 7: 821; vol. 9: 58, 240; vol. 10: 18; vol. 15: 520b.

*dran*), or simply when there was a need for augmentation of original material to facilitate *sgrub chen* recitations (Tshangs dbyangs vol. 12: 771; vol. 8: 287). The identification of *dgongs gter* among Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's writings (not all of which are specified) seems to correlate with such an intuitive and visionary quality of knowledge. Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's adaptation of Rat gling's rTa mgrin gsang 'dus (Hayagrīva Guhyasamāja) *gter ma* is his most famous *dgongs gter*, and the colophons of this volume have the most references to pure visions of gurus and deities<sup>125</sup>.

The following are from a *rnam thar* of the treasure-revealing yogin Drag sngags gling pa (ca. 1871-1929) who trained with Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho under Grub dbang tshogs gnyis and was Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's student in sexual yogas (Rigzin n.d.1: 12-17):

the tertön himself will practise a non-conceptual meditation on the primordial expanse of Dharmadhātu, an inexpressible wisdom utterly free of all fixations, extremes and contrived activity (McDougal 2016a: 31).

By the power of previous prayers, [he] will not reveal earth, mountain or water treasures, but the great fortune at the heart of Guru Rinpoche ... like piercing the sky with a spear ... the ocean of existence subsumed in a single word, the utmost profound treasure of *dharmatā* space ... inexpressible knowledge through the single accomplishment of HUNG<sup>126</sup> (Rigzin n.d.1: 121-122).

These could just as well be describing Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's style of revelation, and the provenance of much knowledge recorded in his volumes. They allude to the rDzogs chen view of the nature of consciousness (*rig pa*) as pure knowing (pure in being conceptually unconditioned) and as the source and storage place of *gter ma* knowledge. HUNG in rDzogs chen is a deity's seed syllable, a symbolic form of embodied knowledge, or an energetic expression repeatedly uttered, along with physical postures, as a method of realising *dharmatā* (or emptiness of self, *bdag med*). These are methods common to rDzogs chen

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<sup>125</sup> See for examples Tshangs dbyangs vol. 6: 140, 144, 158, 179, 183.

<sup>126</sup> *de nas sngon gyi smon lam mthu sad pas/ sa gter brag gter chu gter ma yin par/ gu rus las can snying la sba ba yi/ ... nam mkha'i dkyil du mdung bskor byed pa 'dra/ ... zab pa'i yang zab chos nyid klong mdzod la/ tshig gcig gis ni srid mtsho gting skem pa'i/ ... h'ung sgrub gcig gi yon tan brjod mi thub/*

practice lineages and would have been widely practised by Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho and his associates.

There seems to be a parallel between the quality of knowledge arising from Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's yogic rDzogs chen training, and the arising of his *dgongs gter* – *dgongs gter* being understood by the tradition as a revelation of seeds planted in the mind by Padmasambhava, and rDzogs chen as 'the utmost profound treasure of *dharmatā*' and source of knowledge. 'Knowing one thing, all [knowledge] is liberated'<sup>127</sup> is a cherished adage at Ge bcags. It refers to nondual self-awareness (*rang rig; rig pa*) or 'recognising the nature of mind' (*sems ngo 'phrod pa*) that, as discussed, is understood in Ge bcags' tradition to be Buddha nature.

### Outline of Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's Sixteen Volumes

An outline of Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's Sixteen Volumes follows here. Along with the content of Ge bcags' scriptural corpus, it shows the scattering of genres within single volumes (eg. *nam thar*, *mgur* and *las byang* ritual outlines all in one) and names some of Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's audiences. Most of the content was first spoken by Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho, and immediately or later written by his consort mTsho rgyal sgröl ma, Dung dga' bkra shis rgya mtsho<sup>128</sup> or other disciples (personal communication, Kun bzang nyi ma, September 2018). Dung dga' bkra shis rgya mtsho is credited as the editor and publisher of Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's Sixteen Volumes and supplementary texts; he would have likely done this in the last decade of Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's life at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Kun bzang 2017: 26). The catalogue of contents (*dkar chags*) of the Sixteen Volumes was written by lTo phud dbang drag rdo rje in 1916, and he states in the catalogue's colophon that he arranged the volumes according to the chronological order in which Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho spoke their contents (Kun bzang 2017: 135-136). The titles of each volume would have

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<sup>127</sup> *gCig shes kun sgröl* (Tshangs dbyangs vol. 9: 62).

<sup>128</sup> Both were from the aristocratic Rakshi clan, and likely educated in reading and writing by their families before joining Ge bcags. Writing was a cultural capital of aristocratic households. Despite high intellectual achievements and the importance of literature and verbal skills in Tibet, writing fluency was rare in pre-modern *dgon pa*. Dreyfus discusses the discouragement of writing in pre-modern dGe lugs pa monasteries (Dreyfus 2003: 120).

been written by Dung dga' bkra shis rgya mtsho, and are translated according to the *dkar chags* reprinted in book form in 2017 (Kun bzang 2017: 111-135).

#### Volume One (Ka)

**The precious key to the profound points of the glorious lama's oral instructions: a treasury of instructive spiritual songs for the benefit of advising fortunate ones desiring liberation**  
*(Thar 'dod skal ldan rnams la zhal gdams su spel ba dpal ldan bla ma'i zhal lung man ngag mgur ma'i bang mdzod zab gnad kyi lde'u mig rin po che'i skor/)*

Spontaneous, personalised advices on guru devotion and preliminary reflections, including supplication verses (*gsol 'debs*) to Tshogs gnyis. These were mostly uttered by Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho in person as *mgur* to encourage particular disciples in response to their questions. The catalogue names each person who requested the advice, most of whom are nuns and the rest male yogins (*rtogs ldan*)<sup>129</sup>. A *nam thar* of Tshogs gnyis is recorded in this volume, and a 'calling from afar' supplication prayer (*rgyang 'bod*) composed by mTsho rgyal sgrol ma.

#### Volume Two (Kha)

**Clear mirror of tantric scriptures, spontaneous vajra songs of expansive liberation: supplications praising the realisation of the extraordinary object, the vidyādhara lamas**  
*(Yul khyad par 'phags pa'i rig 'dzin bla ma rnams kyi rtogs brjod gsol 'debs rgyud lung gsal ba'i me long klong grol rdo rje'i thol glu'i skor/)*

Melodic supplication prayers (*gsol 'debs*, *dbyangs*) recalling the lives of individual lamas and lineages, including Indian *vidyādhara* (*rig 'dzin*) who are seen by the tradition as the sources of tantric *yi dam* cycles practised at Ge bcags. The content in this volume was also given to nuns and male *rtogs ldan*, each named as in Volume One; mKha' 'gro mTsho rgyal sgrol ma is the first of thirty-five recipients listed.

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<sup>129</sup> Some names are: sPros bral sgrol ma, Tshe dpag lha mo, Don 'grub sgrol ma, Kun bzang sgrol ma, rTogs ldan mkhyen rab rgya mtsho. mTsho rgyal sgrol ma is referred to as a *mkha' 'gro* (Skt. *dākinī*) and her name is present in the catalogue outline of all volumes.

Volume Three [Ga]**Stainless clear light: vajra songs of oral advice praising realisation***(rTogs mrjod zhal gdams dri med 'od gsal rjo rje'i mgur ma'i skor/)*

More devotional verses (*mgur*) recalling the lives of famous lineage masters like Rig 'dzin 'ja' tshon snying po [1585-1656] and Phag mo grub pa [1110-1170], along with yogic instructions. Many of these *mgur* were first sung by Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho to certain disciples, again mostly nuns and male *rtogs ldan*, and each one of them named. One passage encourages women as embodying the wisdom to see all phenomena as illusory; one distinguishes mental consciousness and pure awareness (*sems rig shan 'byed kyi gdams pa*). One teaching was written as *mgur* verses in a letter 'on the great primordial upholding of samaya, while carried away in folk dancing at Jo dgon retreat hermitage, for the sake of mTsho rgyal sgrol ma's joyful fulfillment' (Kun bzang 2017: 121). Some content was given to nuns in lifelong retreat (*tsho mtshams*). This volume includes Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's charts of metrical arrangement for poetic praise of the Buddha.

Volume Four [Nga]

**The precious preliminary stairway, the jewel treasure of the two purposes, for various fortunate guests in saṃsāra travelling to the divine abode of the vajra heart, the place of enjoyment in the liberating freedom bringing rest from the three worlds in the dharmakāya nature of great bliss**

*(Don gnyis nor bu'i gter la rang dbang spyod pa'i thar gling rdo rje snying po'i khang bzangs su bgrod pa'i skal bzang gi mgron po sna tshogs 'khor ba'i spros pas dub pa gang zhig gnas lugs chos sku bde ba chen po'i khams gsum ngal gso bar byed pa'i lam sngon 'gro rin chen them skas)*

*Sādhanā* of Ge bcags' rDzogs chen ordinary and extraordinary preliminary practices (*thun mong dang thun min gyi sngon 'gro*) and meditation instructions on *zhi gnas* (Skt. *śamatha*) and *lhag mthong* (Skt. *vipaśyanā*<sup>130</sup>). This volume also includes Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's commentary on Ascertaining the Three Vows (*sDom gsum rnam nges*). The extraordinary

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<sup>130</sup> *Lhag mthong* at Ge bcags is practised following rDzogs chen presentations, where it aims at nondual *rig pa* awareness that sees a nonconceptual essence (emptiness) of thoughts (Khang sar 2013).

preliminary *sādhanā* in this volume was composed by the sixth mDo khams pa, bsTan pa'i nyi ma, a 'Brug pa bka' brgyud lama from sKhams pa sgar monastery.

Volume Five [Ca]

**Ritual for generating the mind on the path of great enlightenment, from the lineage of the profound view**

*(Zab mo lta brgyud lugs kyi sems bskyed pa'i cho ga byang chub chen po'i gzhung lam/)*

Sūtra passages recalling the life of Śākyamuni Buddha and virtues of the Three Jewels. This volume includes Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's commentary on Śāntideva's Bodhisattvacaryāvatāra.

Volume Six [Cha]

**Arrangement of Generation Stage rituals of the rediscovered treasure of ultimate profundity, Hayagrīva Guhyasamāja**

*(Yang gter zab pa'i mthar thug rta mgrin gsang ba 'dus pa'i bskyed rim chog bsgrigs kyi skor/)*

Arrangement of Generation Stage rituals from the upper portion of Rat gling's Hayagrīva Guhyasmāja *gter ma*. Most colophons in this volume state that the teaching was given by Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho on the command of the mother-father guru or three roots, suggesting a visionary impetus for their composition. For example:

Based on the blessing and command of the mother-father guru (*gu ru yab yum*), this mantra recitation of The Gathering of Sugata (bDe gshegs spyi 'dus pa) was composed by the mantra-holder bDud 'dul rdo rje [i.e. Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho], at gSang sngags bstan rgyas mthong grol gling [the nunnery's branch *dgon pa* for men]. It was written down by Grub dbang chos dar. By its merit, may there be inseparability with the mandala deities in this lifetime<sup>131</sup> (Tshangs dbyangs vol. 6: 158).

Volume Seven [Ja]

**Lower activities of liberating enemies and obstructers**

*(sMad las dgra bgegs sgrol ba'i skor/)*

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<sup>131</sup> *bde gshegs spyi 'dus kyi 'dzab bsnyen 'di nyid gu ru yab yum gyi bka' gnang byin rlabs la brten nas gsang sngags bstan rgyas mthong grol gling du/ sngags 'chang bdud 'dul rdo rje smras pa/ grub dbang chos dar pas bris pa'i dge bas dkyis 'khor lha dang tshe 'dir dbyer med shog/*

Rituals for ‘liberating’ (*sgrol ba*) enemies and obstacle-makers from the lower portion of Rat gling’s Red Hayagrīva Guhyasamāja treasure revelation, including wrathful protecting deities like Yamāntaka, Bhairava, Vajrapāṇi, Siṃhamukhā, Krodhakālī, etc.

Volume Eight [Nya]

**Collection of ḍākinī practices**

*(mKha’ ’gro’i skor/)*

Ritual manual and supplication prayers of *ḍākinī* mTsho rgyal and related female deities like Sarasvatī, Tārā and others. This volume includes offerings and mantra recitation.

Volume Nine [Ta]

**Collection of supplementary ritual activities**

*(Las phran gyi skor/)*

Arranged manual of rituals for accomplishing outer life force, inner inseparability with the guru and secret Hayagrīva Guhyasamāja, from Rat gling’s Hayagrīva Guhyasamāja treasure revelation. Specifically, this includes daily practices on important Rat gling *sādhanā* like Thugs sgrub yang snying ’dus pa (Accomplishing the Innermost Heart Assembly of the Guru) and Vajrakīlaya, and rDzogs chen instructions from the Luminous Expanse (kLong gsal) tantra.

Volume Ten [Tha]

**Collection of ripening empowerments**

*(sMin byed dbang gi skor/)*

Arrangement of preliminary empowerment procedures and explanations, from Rat gling’s Hayagrīva Guhyasamāja treasure revelation, including those on Vajrapāṇi, Garuḍa, Siṃhamukhā and other subsidiary deities of the Hayagrīva mandala.

Volume Eleven [Da]

**The extraordinary quick path of liberating advice on profound Completion Stage path with Signs, the main Hayagrīva Guhyasamāja *gter ma*; and supportive teachings on Completion Stage without Signs**

*(Grol byed kyi gdams pa myur lam khyad par can rta mgrin gsang ba 'dus pa'i mtshan bcas kyi rdzogs rim zab lam gsang 'dus gter gzhung dang de'i rgyab chos mtshan med kyi rdzogs rim skor/)*

The profound path of Completion Stage with Signs from the main treasure of Hayagrīva Guhyasamāja, and its supportive teaching on Completion Stage without Signs. This includes Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's practical instructions (*dmar khrid; man ngag*) and spontaneous songs (*thol glu*) on *rtsa rlung* yogas like *gtum mo* and illusory body (*sgyu lus*), and on rDzogs chen *khregs chod* ('cutting through') and *thod rgal* ('direct crossing') meditation techniques. It further includes instructions on *bcud len* ('taking the essence' fasting practice), *rkang mgyogs* ('swift-footedness') and sexual yoga practices.

Volume Twelve [Na]

**Collection of liberation stories**

*(rNam thar gyi skor/)*

Brief liberation stories of Guru Padmasambhava and the first Grub dbang tshogs gnyis; Ge bcags preliminary practices from Accomplishing the Heart Essence of Lama Samantabhadra (*bLa sgrub kun bzang thugs thig*); *rtsa rlung* instructions; propitiation to rNying ma protector deities; Guru Yoga lineage prayers; *gtor ma* offerings to gLing ge sar; pilgrimage guide (*gnas yig*) to a local sacred mountain; etc.

Volume Thirteen [Pa]

**Pure vision mind treasure of the Dharma section on Generation and Completion stages of the three roots' Sādhanā of Eight Heruka, according to the three levels of yoga**

*(dGongs gter dag snang gi chos sde rtsa gsum bla ma bka' brgyad yo ga gsum 'brel gyi bskyed rdzogs skor/)*

This is the ritual text used in Ge bcags' annual bKa' brgyad (Sādhanā of Eight Heruka) *sgrub chen*, following three sections of Mahāyoga, Anuyoga and Atiyoga.

This volume is remarked on by the editor, Dung dga', as not appropriate for the public.

Volume Fourteen [Pha]

**An explanation of Generation and Completion from the Three Roots' Sādhanā of Eight Heruka: the wish granting sun mandala that illuminates all**

*(rTsa gsum bla ma bka' brgyad kyi bskyed rdzogs don 'grel rnam bshad yid bzhin nor bu kun gsal nyi ma'i dkyil 'khor/)*

Ritual and explanation on Generation and Completion Stage sections of the Sādhanā of Eight Heruka (bKa' brgyad).

Volume Fifteen [Ba]

**About the inner liberation story**

*(Nang gi rnam thar gyi skor/)*

Record of questions and answers in Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's visionary exchanges with non-human wisdom and worldly beings (*ye shes dang 'jig rten gyi mi ma yin*), including with eight great *nāga* serpent spirits, Vajra Turquoise Lamp (sMan btsun rdo rje g.yu sgron ma), the Five Sisters of Long Life (Tshe ring mched Inga), spirits connected to A mye rma chen mountain, a Tārā emanation, a Yamatāka emanation, the spirit of Rat gling's treasure-consort, Rin che mtsho, etc. It also includes exchanges from pure visions (*dag snang*) of Hayagrīva, Vajrakīlaya and other *yi dam*. Many of the discussions are about profound points of rDzogs chen, the death dissolution process, *yi dam sādhanā*, etc. These sections are also remarked on by the editor, Dung dga', as the heart lifeforce of *ḍāka* and *ḍākinī* that is protected by oath-bound Dharmapāla, and not for the public.

Volume Sixteen [A]

**His [Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's] spoken, extended outer liberation story (*rnam thar*), compiled in one volume with lists of received transmissions**

*(Phyi yi rnam thar rgyas pa gsan yig phyogs gcig tu bzhugs pa nyid kyi zhal gsum ma/)*

The 'outer' liberation story of Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho that he narrated, mainly to Dung dga' bkra shis rgya mtsho, who wrote it down. Dung dga' also composed a condensed outer *rnam thar* of Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho and this follows the extended one in the text of this volume. Volume Sixteen also includes the catalogue of contents (*dkar chags*) of all Sixteen Volumes.

### Pragmatic orientation of the texts

Attempting to categorise Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's writings into distinct genres would be misguided. His writings flow across genre boundaries in three ways outlined by Jackson: 1. They borrow from earlier texts (being based on Ratna gling pa *gter ma*); 2. Different genre styles are found within the same composition (like *mgur*, *las byang* and *man ngag*); and 3. As tantric practice texts they have a strong performative dimension that goes beyond the written word (Jackson 2015: 90). This dynamism of genre highlights the pragmatic orientation of tantric offering and *sāadhanā* texts, which, as Jackson further notes, are not always performed as they are written (Jackson 2015: 103). The recitation order of Ge bcags' *sgrub chen* texts varies with sessions, for example, and expands with numerous enacted elements. A pragmatic orientation is of course characteristic of practice lineages, especially sub-lineages of the rNying ma school (Kapstein 1996: 277-280; Smith 2001: 240).

As mentioned, Ge bcags' basic scriptures are Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's Sixteen Volumes and Rat gling's twenty-five *gter ma* volumes. These are adapted, however, to include ritual procedures, prayers, meditation instructions, philosophical and moral exegeses influenced or directly composed by masters from various lineages. As evident in the fourth volume's outline, some sections of Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's Sixteen Volumes were not actually authored by him. This eclecticism of Ge bcags' textual bases and lack of lineage orthodoxy demonstrates that Ge bcags' logic of compilation is more practical than doctrinal. While doctrinal tenets can remain unchanged for centuries in Tibetan Buddhist schools, practical instructions adapt to people's lived experiences, as Ge bcags' texts exemplify.

### Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's audiences

We know that much of the Sixteen Volumes' content, as outlined above, was first spoken, or sung, by Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho to disciples – human and non-human – and later committed to writing by Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho or another person. The mental process of speaking aloud to others is very different to and often less analytical than directly writing thoughts onto a page. Spoken voice communication from and to living people with embodied

senses is dynamic, felt and immediate, and differs from the communication of thoughts directly through writing.

At the inauguration of Ge bcags, Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho recalls there was a burgeoning community of *'rtogs ldan'* and *'dge ma'* ('realised ones' and 'nuns', i.e. male and female yogic practitioners) who gathered for a *sgrub chen* and empowerment ceremony. Additionally, lay men and women, including local officials, offered a tuft of their hair in taking Buddhist precepts, and each committed to reciting ten million Padmasambhava mantras (rDo rje 1998: 41). It is evident throughout Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's *rnam thar* that non-ordained people were engaging in Vajrayāna practices, including *sngon'gro* and mantra accumulations, and rDzogs chen instructions<sup>132</sup> (rDo rje 1998: 41, 106, 110). All of these people would have been orbiting the cultural heroes of the day, the great lamas of Tshes bcu dgon like Grub dbang tshogs gnyis and A lde'u, those at the celebrated centre to the south in bDe dge where the two 'Jam mgon were based, and many other unnamed<sup>133</sup>. These monastic and lay people are those with whom Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho was communicating.

### Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's voice

Sujata, in her discussion of Tibetan poetic techniques, discusses simple, ordinary speech as a characterising feature of *mgur* in Tibetan writing, and its purpose of appealing to the general public (Sujata 2015: 197-210). She notes a contrast in the *mgur* genre between its metric sophistication and the informal circumstances in which they are often sung (Sujata 2015: 200). Sophistication of poetic composition and a down-to-earth communication style epitomise Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's voice throughout his Sixteen Volumes. *mGur* is his favoured medium through which he communicated much of the content in person to younger and older women, men and non-human spirits of all social classes and kinds. As Sujata observes, in the *mgur* of any saint, personal background, character, education, travels, regional locale and exposure to other saints contribute to the unique style of their *mgur*

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<sup>132</sup> Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho says of those gathered at an empowerment ceremony, 'Even among male and female laypersons there was practically no one who did not know the nature of mind' (rDo rje 1998: 110). This means they received rDzogs chen *man ngag* instructions and practised them.

<sup>133</sup> Many must have been lost to the record in the interruption of the Cultural Revolution.

(Sujata 2015: 198). These influences are clear in Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's *mgur* compositions and, along with the overall cultural values of his day, were crucial ingredients in the content of his Sixteen Volumes.

Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's synthesis of informal expression and his naturally sophisticated poetic voice are reflected in Ge bcags' overall practice tradition. As I will discuss in Chapter Four, informality is a meaningful method in Ge bcags' tradition of learning as a nexus between meditative insight and its verbal instructions, allowing for the spontaneity of rDzogs chen oral transmission. Peasants participated in Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's narrative, asking questions and engaging in conversations. Jabb echoes Aris in observing the mutual borrowing of language between peasants and tantric yogins, whose spiritual songs 'Often proclaimed the highest mystical insights in the metre of humble folk-songs' (Aris in Jabb 2015: 236). Like many aspects of Tibetan culture, this undermines assumptions of a clear-cut division between sacred and mundane, and shows the inextricable interplay between orality and written word in Tibetan tantric compositions. Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's voice throughout his Sixteen Volumes certainly demonstrates this. His oral *mgur* style alongside their written forms, his down-to-earth vernacular language alongside his poetic expertise, fill in the boundary between religious elite and illiterate followers with a visceral rapport. A lively example of Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's voice is heard in the following parable he shares in a teaching on the nature of consciousness:

Before, there was an elderly couple. The old woman offered to lead the way to the bazaar, but the old man was afraid of getting lost and wouldn't go. So the woman said, 'We'll tie a string to your foot so you won't get lost,' and they left to the bazaar in this way. But the old man strayed in the bazaar and when the string loosened from his ankle, he cried out, 'I'm lost!' And the old woman gave him a beating<sup>134</sup> (Tshangs dbyangs vol. 12: 612-613).

The old man's wife – the person most capable of leading him home – is at his side all the while, yet he overlooks her for a fabricated method of assurance (the string tied to his foot).

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<sup>134</sup> *sngon rgan rgan gnyis yod pa/ rgan mo'i khyod khrom du gtad mo blta bar phyin na byas kyang/ rgan po'i nga 'bor yong zer te 'gror ma nyan pas/ rgan mo'i khyod kyi rkang pa la thag pa thog ste song dang/ khyod mi 'bor ba'i thabs yin zer bas/ de ltar byas te phyin pas/ rgan po khrom la yengs te/ the gu grol te gtor bas/ rgan po nga bor gda' zer te 'o dod dang bcas/ rgan mo brdung ba ltar.../*

Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho likens this to relying on mentally fabricated pathways in meditation, when the true, nonconceptual nature of awareness is ever-present. The passage is actually a profound point on rDzogs chen meditation, which Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho communicated in a relatable style that makes the meaning accessible to anyone listening.

There has always been a complex, mutually influential relationship between spoken and written word in Tibet. Contrary to Abram, Ong and others who highlight the process of writing as one that abstracts events and places from their embeddedness in the corporeal world, the written word at Ge bcags is meaningful in close connection with oral culture (Abram 1996: 111-112; Ong 1986: 36-37). Ge bcags texts connect to and synch the corporeal world, both that of the practitioner's body and the natural environment.

At Ge bcags, where highest knowledge is nonverbal (*rig pa* or *ye shes*) and its pithiest transmission is oral (sometimes moments of silence), the nexus between written word and oral instructions is especially revealing. Most of Ge bcags' scriptures serve as verbal pointers to practical experience, and most of the texts cannot stand alone without being fleshed out by the oral instructions of an experienced practitioner. Oral instructions are essential to guide the techniques and visualisations that take place in the psychophysical space of *rtsa rlung* yogas, and they are essential in the live mind-to-mind transmission of rDzogs chen insight. The nuns regularly stressed to me the importance of oral instructions accompanying their scriptures. The texts also make this clear, as will be seen in Chapter Five.

### **Publication of Ge bcags texts – from earthy to digital over time**

The first copies of Ge bcags' scriptures were handwritten by scribes, likely male Ge bcags followers expert in handwriting (personal communication, Kun bzang nyi ma, July 2017). When Red Guards destroyed the nunnery in the 1950s, one nun, risking her life, carried a set of the two scriptural collections (the Sixteen Volumes and Rat gling *gter ma*) to Central Tibet and entrusted them to a poor farmer who buried them underground<sup>135</sup>. When 'time began to turn upright again' (*dus tshod tshur bde yong dus*) in the late 1970s, she recovered them both

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<sup>135</sup> Such stories were common during the Cultural Revolution. See Germano 1998: 177.

and returned them to Ge bcags. This, and the survival of nuns with practical experience who could teach the yogas, rituals and meditations, ensured the revival of Ge bcags' practice lineage. I have not yet seen these oldest copies of Ge bcags' two collections; they are carefully enshrined in a treasure chest (*gter sgam*) at the nunnery.



Figure 15: Copy of a *sgrub chen* text handwritten by Lama Thar pa in the 1980s. Photo: author, 2018. Pages are worn from decades of flipping. Newer texts in the stack behind were digitally produced.

During the 1980s an important male lama in Ge bcags' revival, Lama Thar pa (a *sprul sku* of Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's disciple, O rgyan nyi ma), collected plants from Ra tsa kha in Ri bo che and made paper on which he handwrote Ge bcags' major *sgrub chen* texts. Fifty copies of each were made using waxed paper and ink, with the nuns helping to cut the folio pages (personal communication, O rgyan chos sgron, September 2018). These originals are no longer at the nunnery, but hundreds of photocopies were made of them, and until recently these were used in daily *yi dam sādhanā* and *sgrub chen* recitations.

The next publication of the Sixteen Volumes was around 2006, undertaken by the monks of Ra ya dgon, entered digitally in dBu can and electronically printed by the hundreds in Xining. This marks a significant step away from the community's direct physical engagement with copying and producing the texts, which until then had always been an earthy and sensuous process, and towards broader dissemination of the texts locally and globally. The

psychological shift that accompanies this modernisation of textual reading and production deserves extensive further research. The most recent publication of Ge bcags' core scriptures is the 2018 re-arrangement mentioned above of Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho and Rat gling materials for *sgrub chen* recitation.



Figure 16: A handwritten lag deb ritual 'handbook'. Photo: author, 2017.

This was written by A lde'u rin po che (likely in the 1980s) for Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho III's use in conducting *sgrub chen*.

### What the nuns regularly read from among these texts

This brings us to the questions of who collates what is read by Ge bcags nuns, and what are the processes by which these texts are chosen and printed. Like reading, collation and publication at Ge bcags are collective processes with individual elements. Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho as an individual articulated instructions and meanings directly to the Ge bcags community and directed many of the practices that comprise the nunnery's curriculum, but he was not alone in doing this: mTsho rgyal sgrol ma, Dung dga' and others assisted in transcribing and editing his teachings, and numerous beings (most of all Rat gling) participated in the exchanges that comprise much of the content of his volumes. As time went by, groups of nuns in retreat divisions made practical decisions about how often they recited certain prayers, usually based on guidelines from senior practitioners on what is

meaningful for their experience, but sometimes limited by the number of copies they procured. In the early days most copies of recitations had to be hand-written by scribes or the nuns themselves.



*Figure 17: A Ge bcags nun's daily reading. Photo: author, 2016.  
(Some sections are only read in special ceremonies.)*

Along with the core scriptures, Ge bcags' texts are interwoven with lamas' meditation instructions (rDzogs chen and Mahāmudrā) from different lineages, interspersed throughout the stack of daily recitations the nuns carry out. For example, in the 1990s some of the older nuns had hand-written copies of a rDzogs chen instruction by rDza dpal sprul rin po che which they read alone in their meditation boxes, or on the hillside as a reminder for meditation. Today many of the nuns have a photocopy of this small, yellowed twelve-page text which they read from time to time, though this kind of meditation instruction is not part of the nuns' daily prescribed reading.

It is evident from the outline of Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's Sixteen Volumes and the gradual publications of core scriptures that the primary texts read by the nuns and reorganised for publications are *yi dam sādhanā*. These are what the nuns spend most of their time reading as their primary daily practice in their retreat divisions (*sgrub khag*) and in collective *sgrub chen*. Chapter Three will outline Ge bcags' retreat divisions and *sgrub chen*. The *yi dam* practised in Ge bcags' retreat divisions each have a basic *sādhanā* text that has been expanded for collective *sgrub chen* and special ceremonies.

Each nun has a large stack of texts that she recites every day as a matter of sacred commitment (*dam tshig*; Skt. *samaya*). *Yi dam sādhanā* is the primary practice at Ge bcags and frames the other elements of their training like *rtsa rlung* yoga and rDzogs chen. Early on in her career, each nun takes on a particular *yi dam*<sup>136</sup>, such as Vajrasattva or Guhyasamāja, that she commits to practising every day, without exception, until she dies. On average a nun's daily recitations take her five or six hours, which may be broken up by collective practices or her mundane responsibilities and taken up again later in the day.

Below is an outline of the daily recitations of a sixty-one-year-old nun, who previously lived in the Hayagrīva retreat division and now lives as the caretaker in the male lamas' apartment at the top of the nunnery grounds. She collated her own collection of daily recitations based on what she has deemed meaningful for her practice, including her daily *yi dam sādhanā*. The inclusion of some of the contents was directed to her in a dream, which is not uncommon at Ge bcags. Dreams and visions are of course a respected medium of information in indigenous communities, and especially so within a Vajrayāna tradition that trains in lucid dreaming as part of human development (Goulet 1993; Ngawang Palzang 2013). In the Ge bcags community, as in many pre-modern societies as Goulet observes, 'the distinctions familiar to the Western mind between the world of everyday life and the world of dreams are simply not drawn' (Goulet 1993: 173).

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<sup>136</sup> How she chooses a *yi dam* will be discussed in Chapter Three.

***sngon 'gro* (preliminaries<sup>137</sup>):**

Her heart practice of condensed daily recitations of wrathful deities (an original copy she handwrote herself), particularly rDo rje gro lod and Yamāntaka

Abbreviated 'Recitation of the Names of Mañjuśrī' ('Jam dpal mtshan brjod)

Bar chad lam sel (Clearing Obstacles on the Path)

dBang sdud gsol 'debs (Magnetising Aspiration)

Prayer composed by Lama A chen (a Nang chen prince)

Prayer for 'khrul 'khor

Abbreviated dKon mchog spyi 'dus (Embodiment of the Precious Ones)

Daily recitation of Hayagrīva Guhyasamāja (by Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho)

Short White Dzambhala, by Khams sprul don brgyud nyi ma

Medicine Buddha recitation, from the gNam chos tradition

bZang spyod smon lam (Prayer of Noble Conduct)

sPyod 'jug smon lam (Bodhicaryāvatāra prayer)

rNam mkhyen grong 'jug (All-knowing Resurrection)

**Followed by the main practice of:**

bLa sgrub kun bzang thugs tig, including its 313 pages<sup>138</sup> of *gsol kha* (propitiation of protector deities). [This is the basic *gsol kha* that all nuns recite each day, along with *gsol kha* of their own daily *yi dam* recitation, and the *yi dam* of the current *sgrub chen*.]

bDe smon (Sukhāvātī Prayer)

**Dedication prayers**, including Twenty-one mandala offerings to Tārā.

This sixty-year-old nun wakes up at 3a.m. each day to recite these all, and is hungry by the time she finishes around 7a.m. She is a good model for Ge bcags' quality of knowledge, having lived at the nunnery longer than most other nuns. "Everything we read is a meditation," she said. "You must recite from the depths of the heart with faith, otherwise the words are wasted." After explaining her recitations to me, which she did in the lamas' apartment – a smallish room with a cast-iron stove at the centre, in a mudbrick building with wooden beams the nuns painted themselves – she said, "Ge bcags is wonderful. We don't have to learn all kinds of subjects, we just have to have faith (*dad pa*) and pure vision (*dag snang*) and everything in existence makes sense." When she finished speaking, a Ge bcags rin po che added, "The whole path is rDzogs chen."

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<sup>137</sup> These are not technically *sngon 'gro*, only categorised this way as they precede what the nun considers her main practice.

<sup>138</sup> This is recited every day.

## Conclusion

This chapter has focused on the practical orientation of Ge bcags' texts, which can be considered a major Ris med era collection, and the social, contemplative processes of their production. Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho was educated within, and gathered around him, an eclectic community of male and female, celibate and non-celibate practitioners from various lineages. Some of these people (and non-human beings) asked the questions that he answers in many of his volumes; some of them assisted him as scribes and editors. Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's knowledge was passed to him through transmissions from various lineages, that he received and put into practice in natural settings in hermitage *dgon pa*. His knowledge was also born from his own intensive yogic practice, 'revealed' to him through a visionary knowing that was not entirely rational, yet has been celebrated, trusted and reproduced through centuries of *gter ma*-based lineages.

All of these elements, along with the flexible and spontaneous *mgur* language of many of Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's compositions, point to an experiential quality of knowledge that he made accessible and was applicable to all walks of life. Later chapters will further explore this quality of knowledge and how the Ge bcags nuns cultivate it through their daily reading and yogic practices. The next chapter will first introduce us to the nuns and their lifeworld.

## CHAPTER THREE:

### The Ge bcags nuns' lifeworld and their practice system

Chapter Three introduces the Ge bcags nuns, their lifeworld and the practices they spend their lives engaging with. I begin by considering the post-Mao influx of Ge bcags nuns and their motivations for living their lives at Ge bcags Nunnery, looking briefly at other studies of Tibetan Buddhist nuns to place them in their context. I then look at the nuns' backgrounds and the atmosphere of their daily lives at Ge bcags, as well as their mundane responsibilities and how these are integrated in the nunnery's contemplative pathway. The chapter then explains the main practices and stages of training that comprise the nuns' lifelong practice system, while further alluding to the foundational principle of the Ge bcags nuns' learning, Buddha nature, and its correlating nondual *rig pa* awareness that is the consummate goal of all their practices.

#### The nuns' motivations for joining and staying in the nunnery

Ge bcags Nunnery today, following its revival from the late 1970s, maintains its pre-Cultural Revolution identity as a royally-endorsed nunnery known for its accomplished female tantric practitioners. Today there are roughly 250 nuns at Ge bcags, most of them middle-aged women who joined the nunnery in the 1980s and were trained by surviving elderly nuns who had returned after the Cultural Revolution. This brings us to the motivation of the present nuns at Ge bcags for joining the nunnery as young girls. The dozens of Ge bcags nuns I asked<sup>139</sup> over my years of visiting the nunnery offered a variety of reasons for their ordination. In common with the findings of other studies on Tibetan nuns, most said that they had seen difficult marriages and household work and did not want the 'pains of *saṃsāra*' (*'khor ba'i sdug bsngal*). Along with this, several had seen Ge bcags *sgrub chen* as children and thought the nunnery's group ritual practices looked fun; some had older relatives at Ge bcags whom they wanted to emulate; some were sent to Ge bcags by their parents, who valued having a daughter in the reputable nunnery. One said she had wished to be a Ge bcags nun as a girl, but had not wanted to cut off her long hair. Most of the nuns I

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<sup>139</sup> I asked this of mostly middle-aged nuns, and a few nuns about twenty years-old.

asked also reported feeling a strong motivation for Dharma practice, and inspiration from what they knew about Ge bcags Nunnery as a community offering advanced training to women.

After becoming nuns their motivation was sustained, they reported, by the example of the elderly nuns who raised them and the inspiring manner in which these nuns passed away. As I noted in Chapter One, many of the elderly nuns, having spent decades in dedicated Buddhist practice, stay in *thugs dam* (post-death *samādhi*) after their vital signs have stopped, with warmth at the heart and no signs of bodily decay for up to ten days. One middle-aged nun in September 2013 described the death of an elderly nun in her retreat division:

Last year one of the last elderly nuns, Thabs mkhas, passed away. ... Being summer, we thought that after two days her body would smell. I expected to smell a corpse, but inside her retreat division it smelled like perfume – ‘the fragrance of morality’ [*tshul khrims kyi dri ma*]. Stepping closer to her body, the fragrance became stronger. Then my eyes filled with tears. We were really amazed. The next morning when they brought her body to the hilltop they said her complexion hadn’t faded, it was light and radiant.

Despite Ge bcags’ harsh environment and the famed rigour of its discipline, not to mention more comfortable educational opportunities for Nang chen girls since the 1990s, several young nuns have continued to join Ge bcags each year until the present<sup>140</sup>. Along with their mundane reasons for being nuns, their inspiration from the life examples of accomplished community members (including in written *rnam thar*) is core in their lives and motivates them, individually and collectively, in the many long ceremonies and practices they undertake. The nunnery also seems to have carried a sense of prestige from its pre-Cultural Revolution past that motivated the families of nuns to send their daughters to Ge bcags in

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<sup>140</sup> In the 1980s, dozens must have joined each year, as evidenced by the population of over 200 middle-aged nuns today. Since 2006, only a few very young nuns have joined each year, and most of them have had to return to towns for education in state primary schools which they enter around age seven. There is a federal regulation prohibiting monks and nuns from ordaining before age 18, now enforced in Tibetan areas, as is nine years of mandatory state primary and secondary schooling for all PRC citizens.

the post-Mao revival period<sup>141</sup>. In 2018 a forty-seven-year-old nun who had been at Ge bcags since the early 1980s shared her background of first joining the nunnery:

I first ordained with [a local lama]. My parents told me to become a nun. I was too young to think about it, only eleven or twelve. That winter I spent at Ge bcags dgon pa doing prostrations. Then I did Guru Yoga, Vajrasattva and mandala offerings. Come spring, there were many new nuns arriving. There was a lottery to work as a nunnery yak-herder and I spent a good year looking after the yaks.

After my turn yak-herding I returned home. We discussed how there are many new nunneries around, but Ge bcags was the best of them with a long history and practice tradition. My parents stressed that I had to put down roots at Ge bcags for my whole life. When I finished as yak-herder in the spring, I did one hundred sets of *smjung gnas*<sup>142</sup>.

My parents counselled me, *'Stay in the nunnery and don't wander. You have brothers who will always give you food, so you won't need to leave the nunnery. Keep to the nunnery rules without breaking them.'* Since then I never broke the nunnery rules [meaning she never left the nunnery for longer than the annual recesses]. After that I spent two years serving tea to all nuns during pujas. Then I did [*Vajra*]*Kilaya* retreat for 6 months, followed by another one hundred *smjung gnas*. Then I did the 3-year retreat. You see, I did several long retreats in my first years here.

Ge bcags designates a six-week recess period during the cordyceps harvest in May and June each year when nuns return home to look after children while the adults of their families harvest the caterpillar fungus on the mountains<sup>143</sup>. There is another two-week recess in autumn that corresponds with a harvest season, during which nuns used to collect food supplies like barley, turnips and dairy products from their pastoral families that were then shared with other nuns according to Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's directive (rDo rje 1998: 89). Other than during these designated periods, Ge bcags nuns are bound to the nunnery's annual training schedule, and overstaying the holidays results in a fine or penance. In the past these recess rules were much more strictly adhered to, and nuns who overstayed them for very long were not allowed back into the nunnery's training system. That included a niece

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<sup>141</sup> Values have changed with rapid economic and educational modernisation in Nang chen since then, and this prestige seems to have faded over the last ten or so years (see McDougal 2016).

<sup>142</sup> A two-day fasting practice of Avalokiteśvara. One hundred sets will take two-thirds of a year to complete.

<sup>143</sup> Cordyceps trade has become the bulk of Nang chen families' cash income only since the 1980s. See Gaerrang (2012: 283-288) for a general discussion on the significance of cordyceps trade for contemporary Eastern Tibetan herding families.

of the Nang chen king in one instance. Over the last fifteen years, enforcing and adhering to these recess rules has become lax and nuns come and go more often, sometimes to join extended transmission ceremonies at large centres like bLa rung sgar or Ya chen sgar, sometimes due to sickness<sup>144</sup> and sometimes to live at other lower altitude *dgon pa*.

The Ge bcags nuns have been exempt from the two-way labour obligations to both family and nunnery, and additionally to monasteries as cooks, seen in several other studies of Tibetan and Himalayan Buddhist nuns<sup>145</sup>. This may be partly due to Ge bcags Nunnery's isolated location, which is far from a village and other *dgon pa*. As I argue in Chapter One, it is likely also an aspect of having evolved within a politically decentralised contemplative culture that valued tantric accomplishments, and gave opportunities for their cultivation by women. The same value system is reflected in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century dKar mdzes nuns of Schneider's 2011 study, whose Brag dkar Nunnery is located southwards of Ge bcags in sDe dge and was founded at roughly the same time. Those nuns were also given opportunities by their male lamas for tantric cultivation and earned a good reputation as practitioners. Turek's doctoral dissertation on the contemporary La phyi hermitage in Nang chen details another community of Khams pa nuns supported in full-time tantric practice who are exempt from frequent calls to household and monastery labour (Turek 2013: 102-189).

A considerable body of Western fieldwork-led research over the last few decades has observed a cross section of Tibetan and Himalayan Buddhist nuns: Gutschow with nuns in Zangskar (2004), Härkönen in northern Kham (2017), Makley at Labrang in Amdo (2005), Mann at Dolma Ling (2009), Shneiderman in Mustang (2006) and others. Many of these studies are sobering reads, with their analyses focused on the nuns' female gender in relation to the margins of power they live within<sup>146</sup>. Härkönen (2017), for example, extends her

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<sup>144</sup> For reasons which are not clear, altitude sickness is affecting Nang chen Tibetans nowadays, especially those that frequently travel back and forth to lower altitude towns for food supplies, trade and medical services.

<sup>145</sup> See, for examples, the Zangskari and Amdo nuns researched by Gutschow (2004) and Makley (2005, 2007), and the post-Mao Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture nuns (and women) of Fitzgerald's 2020 dissertation and of Härkönen's 2017 dissertation.

<sup>146</sup> Turek, for whom the La phyi nuns were a case study for broader research questions, explains she did not analyse the gender factor because her data did not 'depict the position of females as particularly underprivileged' (Turek 2013: 232). Is nuns' lower status the only reason to focus investigations on them? My

investigations on the basis of Havnevik's findings of a three-fold subordination of Tibetan nuns: under the Chinese state, in Tibetan society and in the Buddhist monastic hierarchy (Havnevik 1994: 266 in Härkönen 2017: 2-3). The freedom nuns do experience in these studies seems primarily that of having renounced gendered expectations of them in domestic and family workloads, or in their agency as feeling, nationalist voices (Barnett 2005; Härkönen 2017; Havnevik 1994; Makley 2007). Studies by Mann, Tsomo and others on nuns in exile over the last twenty years seem partly intended to offer a more positive perspective, highlighting the massive improvements in nuns' status and education (Mann 2009: 119; Tsomo 2003, 2006).

It is worth considering here that while the Ge bcags nuns may stand out among these studies for their sustained political support and religious autonomy, in other ways they may not be so unusual in comparison with other communities of Buddhist nuns. It seems important in such studies to consider Buddhism's unique context in having a non-material, contemplative orientation towards nondual consciousness and the cultivation of mental ease. Indeed, in my observations of the Ge bcags nuns over the years, the most salient form of their personal empowerment is their happiness, which is expressed in their cheerful characters, warm-heartedness and in others ways that will be furthered discussed in this chapter and Chapter Four. Most Tibetan Buddhist nunneries offer at least some opportunities for Dharma practice, service and study, and an inner joy and fulfilment can be seen in many Tibetan and Himalayan nuns, despite the subordination they may experience in relation to other structures of power. In her fieldwork research with the nuns of Dolma Ling near Dharamsala, India, Mann found the nuns were happy in their monastic lives as a result of their contemplation:

That gender is either immaterial, or simply irrelevant, for nuns like Champa Dechen, is a testament to their monastic practice in that they are committed to nonattachment to components of their selfhood such as gender. ... they are united in their dedication to female monasticism, which was for every nun I spoke with the cause for their daily humility and happiness (Mann 2009: 117-118).

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argument here is that important dimensions of Buddhist nuns' inner freedom might be overlooked in analyses that are primarily focused on outer structures of gender and socio-political power.

This ‘inner’ dimension of the Ge bcags nuns’ Buddhist life, perhaps less measurable but no less real than their outer circumstances, is present in their motivations for remaining ordained as nuns over decades at Ge bcags Nunnery. It is also reflected, as discussed in Chapter One, in Nang chen’s pre-modern contemplative culture with its Vajrayāna orientation.



Figure 18: Ge bcags’ oldest nun in 2018. Photo: Ge bcags dgon pa.

### The nuns’ backgrounds

The approximately 250 nuns at Ge bcags today have all come from yak-herding families (*'brog pa*). The large majority of them are now roughly forty-five to sixty years-old, and grew up with their pastoral families on the land in black yak-hair tents (*sbra*). The Ge bcags nuns are generally down to earth, often cheeky, and walk in a slow, stable way that makes it hard to imagine them ever losing their balance. Younger nuns under the age of thirty come from herding families, but some have grown up in resettled family homes in Nang chen town – most of them square, concrete bungalows painted and furnished in Tibetan style, set along

ad hoc, dusty streets in the quickly ‘developing’<sup>147</sup> county capital. Some of their families still maintain highland yak-herding camps, usually managed by a brother and his wife whose school-age children live in town with other adults of the extended family.

This urban-focused family structure has emerged over the last twenty years, motivated by the CCP’s nomad resettlement policies which began in the 1960s, and have intensified since 2000 with China’s ‘Develop the West’ campaign (Ch. *xibu da kaifa*). An element of the CCP’s economic development of its western regions is implementing nine-year state education, mandated for all school-age children across the nation since 1986. By 2018 all Nang chen children, with only rare exceptions, were attending impressive primary and secondary school facilities in Nang chen town or other villages across the county. All subjects in state school curricula are secular and a core educational goal is to consolidate ethnic minorities within a national unity of China, with an emphasis on scientific, socialist values and economic development (Kolas & Thowsen 2005: 93).

As young girls prior to ordaining, Ge bcags nuns from pastoral families helped with child-minding, herding, cooking and processing animal products for their families’ food and fabrics. Theirs was an earth-based livelihood within large families, in a landscape that they related to intimately through ritual, prayers, memory and visions. As young girls they had no modern conveniences like hot baths or electricity, nor did they have institutional discipline. They learned through hard work, harsh weather and a Buddhist moral worldview taught to them through family dynamics, lived examples and story-telling. These nomad girls were thus easily able to adapt to Ge bcags’ tough physical conditions and rigorous practice schedule, which draws on endurance and the hearty disposition of a Buddhist herder’s background. Like that of their childhood homes, Ge bcags’ cold, rarefied atmosphere at 4,500m (14,750ft) dissipates the pungent smells of animals and people living in close quarters. The constant smell of smoke from yak dung fires, herbs and incense adds to Ge bcags’ ambience.

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<sup>147</sup> ‘Developing’ according to the CCP’s high-modernist vision of material economic development. In 2017 the country government posted urban development plans around Nang chen town. The plans, drafted in Beijing, showed the town’s future development of residential neighbourhoods, high-rise apartments, a railway station and airport.

A characterising feature of the Ge bcags world is the weather, which is inclement and changeable with frequent snow, rain and hail. The temperature in early summer at Ge bcags hovers around fifteen to twenty degrees Celsius (with a few unprecedented highs of thirty degrees over the last few years), but rainstorms are common and can last for days. Winter temperatures average around minus ten to minus twenty degrees Celsius. Bad weather does not affect the nuns' disposition very much – they get on with their activities and pay it little attention, since there is always more to come. Sunny summer days bring a lightheartedness, and nuns are seen resting in small groups on the hillside or enjoying that favourite Tibetan pastime – picnics – in larger groups.

### **'We eat our food with a twig': more on Ge bcags' atmosphere and character**

Ge bcags Nunnery is not a physically luxurious place to live; in fact, it is barely comfortable. The weather is harsh, food is plain, most buildings are rudimentary mud-brick and the practice schedule is rigorous. The nuns practise and sleep in *sgom khri* lining the walls of a small room which they share with a dozen other nuns, and perhaps their greatest material comfort is *tsam pa* (roasted barely flour). Yet a warm and fulfilling inner world takes precedence over the outer material world of the nunnery – which is not surprising given that most of the nuns' waking lives is spent in spiritual practice. One can infer that for nuns who have lived at Ge bcags for nearly forty years, the physical discomfort is compensated for by a psychological wellbeing, and I have often heard them claim this. The nuns focus more of their lives in an inner realm of contemplative practice than they do in the outer world.

The nuns sometimes use twigs as utensils to eat their food, and when I asked a nun why, she answered with a facial expression suggesting, *Why would we need anything else when we have twigs?* Several nuns told me, almost as an adage, that "The physical world at Ge bcags is difficult, but inside my mind is happy." This is certainly true for the forty-to-sixty-year-olds who form the majority of Ge bcags' nuns today, and were raised by elderly nuns who had survived the Cultural Revolution. There is a level of joy and warm-heartedness in these nuns that is quite remarkable, and not dependent on physical comfort. Some of the nuns have vowed to live their whole lives and die at the nunnery, and to be reborn at Ge bcags in their next lives.

A forty-year-old nun told me that in her first few years at Ge bcags she found life difficult with the demanding practice schedule and shared living quarters, but as she gradually developed in her meditation, she found freedom in her mind. Most senior nuns have become skilled in meditative insight so that habitual mental patterns are relaxed, and they are at ease in their daily interactions with the many other nuns with whom they live in close quarters. The nuns laugh together easily and seem to have endless enthusiasm for their long days of practice and group ritual ceremonies. While the social life of the nunnery is not perfect, the nuns are proud of their overall harmony with each other as a reflection of their success in meditation. “At Ge bcags, whatever your mind wants to do it can do. You can become whoever you want to be,” said the same nun. Her comment recalls the earlier discussion of Buddha nature and tantra at Ge bcags. This nun would have regularly reflected on Buddha nature as the nature of her being, and cultivated a growing familiarity with open-minded awareness through her *yi dam sādhanā*, subtle body yoga and meditation practices.

Most nuns cannot articulate much of a word-for-word explanation of their ritual and meditation texts, but they can casually explain profound principles of Vajrayāna, and when you spend time with them over tea or walking on the nunnery hillside they can read your state of mind like a book. I found it startling at times when nuns asked me, quite directly, if I was lonely or homesick, as I am used to masking these vulnerable states of mind as people tend to do in urbanised society. The Ge bcags nuns spend their days in contemplation, however, so it is not surprising that they should have intimate familiarity with states of mind and the ability to sense them in others. It did not seem judgemental when the nuns addressed me this way, but like plain observations of something they had recognised in themselves and empathised with.

The Ge bcags nuns generally stand out among Tibetan and Himalayan nuns I have lived with in their self-confidence<sup>148</sup>. They are cheerful but not giggly, and I have rarely seen them lower their voices or draw back when talking with male lamas. An older Ge bcags nun is generally

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<sup>148</sup> I lived in three Tibetan Buddhist nunneries between 2000-2018, Don brgyud dga’ tshal gling, mTsho rgyal bshad sgrub gling and Druk Amitabha Nunnery.

comfortable walking down the main street of town by herself, with an air of gravitas. The dozen or so Ge bcags nuns I asked are also unusual in not praying to be reborn as monks, which most Tibetan and Himalayan nuns that I talked with between 2000 and 2010 in India reported doing<sup>149</sup>.



Figure 19: Handcrafted figures of supportive yakṣa (*gnod sbyin*) spirits on the nunnery grounds. Photo: author, 2014.

Until the development of roads and motor vehicles over the last two decades, the nunnery community in the Kes rgyal valley was a world unto itself. The nuns have their own large herd of yak<sup>150</sup> and horses with the dung these provide as fuel for heat and cooking, their own barley and turnip fields, constant food supplies from their families, and their own charnel ground where they offer the bodies of deceased nuns to vultures (*bya sbyin*). Senior nuns perform these sky burials, chopping up the bodies and performing the elaborate offering rituals<sup>151</sup>. Like any human society, the nuns have a distinct way of seeing themselves and the

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<sup>149</sup> Those nuns in India, however, explained that they prayed this way because monks had easier circumstances, not because they were inherently spiritually advanced. This attitude is changing significantly with improvements in Tibetan nuns' education and independent status over the last twenty years (Härkönen 2017; Mann 2009; Tsomo 2003).

<sup>150</sup> This used to be a larger herd of over two hundred yak (including female '*bri*') in the 1980s and 90s. Today the nunnery's herd has less than one hundred.

<sup>151</sup> See <https://vimeo.com/258350770> for a video of a Ge bcags nun talking about her role in performing sky burials.

world that they live within. The following passage translates a hand-painted sign that the nuns erected at Ge bcags' entrance, warning the surrounding lay community not to leave stray dogs at the nunnery:

All faithful neighbours in the area, please do not leave stray dogs at the nunnery. If you leave them here, the wrathful protector deities will have to fulfil their duty, and if that happens, it will not be pleasant for you or others. So, please keep this in mind.

This provides a glimpse into the world of the Ge bcags nuns, in line with the tantric worldview where deities are real and supernatural signs are heeded in normal processes of social interaction and decision-making.

Another striking feature of the nunnery that gives a glimpse of their lifeworld are the life-sized clay images of people and monster-like creatures standing on the sides of the roads leading upwards to the nunnery. Some are seven-foot tall clay statues of lamas wearing yellow plumed hats and red robes, followed by life-sized lay men and women wearing traditional Tibetan garb and jewellery. These are explained as ransom figures to fool and appease malignant spirits that would otherwise inflict trouble on actual people. Beyond these figures is a strange-looking three-animal-headed creature on a large clay body with sharp wooden hands and feet, each head crowned with human skulls and thread crosses, and surrounded at the base with small thread crosses and flags. I asked numerous Ge bcag nuns and lamas over several years who this three-animal-headed creature is and the story behind it.

They have a name for the statue – mGo gsum ('Three Headed') – and an annual ritual of restoring and consecrating it that they still maintain, but none of the people I asked could tell me precisely who the statue represents and where the tradition came from<sup>152</sup>. This demonstrates that the nuns *perform* such practices more than they feel the need to explain them, and that they continue to do so because the rituals function in the community's

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<sup>152</sup> This did not seem to have anything to do with secrecy.

experience. The absence of a full explanation of a ritual does not undermine its efficacy for the Ge bcags community.



Figure 20: The mGo gsum statue at Ge bcags' entrance. Photo: author, 2013.

## Main components of the nuns' daily lives and practice

### Work

The first task for a newly arrived nun is to look after the nunnery's yak herd for one year. As mentioned, most nuns will have done herding work as young girls. It requires walking with large numbers of yak (and female yak, 'bri) from morning to evening while the herd grazes over local valleys. Herding must happen every day, regardless of the cold weather and blizzards that are typical from October to May in Nang chen's highlands. A yak-herder has plenty of time alone while the yaks graze, and new nun-herders can be spotted on hillsides reading their prayer books, and engaging in that perpetual Ge bcags movement – thumbing mantra recitations on their *mala* prayer beads.



Figure 21: Nuns with horses near the nunnery's main kitchen. Photo: Olivier Adam, 2017.

Along with yak-herding there are numerous mundane responsibilities to attend to at Ge bcags. There is a large barley field to farm, three greenhouses to maintain year-round, a dozen horses to tend, cooking in the central kitchen, managing nunnery supplies, guests and events and supervising nunnery discipline. There are four managers (two within the nunnery and two who travel to town for shopping) and two disciplinarians, and these are the weightiest responsibilities which mature nuns take on for a three-year period each. Four nuns from each of the sixteen retreat divisions (*sgrub khag bcu drug*; see below) take one-month turns cooking lunch and evening soup for the whole nunnery. They do this over a yak-dung fire, more recently with the addition of kerosene stoves, and cook the same five or six ingredients each day: flour, rice, leaf vegetables (from the greenhouses), meat, oil and salt.

The diet at Ge bcags is one of few flavours. The non-cooked staple of the nuns' diet is *tsam pa* which the nuns obtain from their families, along with dried cheese, milk, yogurt and meat. The nuns store their own bowls and sacks of *tsam pa* at their meditation boxes (*sgom khri*)<sup>153</sup>, where they sleep and do most of their practices when *sgrub chen* are not underway.

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<sup>153</sup> Generally, from the time of formally entering the nunnery's practice system, Ge bcags nuns practice and

A *tsam pa* meal is convenient and can be had at any time, often on a break during a relaxed period of prayer and *yi dam* recitations. One nun from each retreat division retrieves boiled water from the central kitchen several times a day for the nuns' tea and *tsam pa* meals. There is also a resident Tibetan herbal doctor-nun (*em rje*) in the nunnery clinic and several nuns who assist her in collecting and preparing locally sourced medicinal herbs.



Figure 22: Nuns harvesting their barley field. Photo: Caterina DeRe, 2013.

### Preliminaries (*sngon 'gro*)

The many jobs at Ge bcags are regarded by the nuns as service to the nunnery. The older nuns take pride in their responsibilities and refer to their work as a form of 'outer preliminary' (*phyi yi sngon 'gro*) practice<sup>154</sup>. Formally, *sngon 'gro* at Ge bcags Nunnery are four contemplative exercises repeated one hundred thousand times each as a way of purifying negative mental habits and accumulating positive spiritual energy, or merit (*bsod nams*; sometimes also meaning 'harvest' in Nang chen vernacular; Skt. *punya*), and wisdom

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sleep in meditation boxes (*sgom khri*) about one square metre in size. This is to support a straight spine and central *nāḍī* channel, and therefore a clear and open flow of *prāṇa*-consciousness, even during sleep.

<sup>154</sup> Technically it is the 'inner preliminaries' (*thun min nang gi sngon 'gro*) of purification and accumulating merit which the nuns compare their work to, but they call them 'outer' here as they are outside of their formal practice system.

(*ye shes*; Skt. *jñāna*). The nuns' mundane work, performed with an attitude of devoted service to the nunnery and its guru(s), is seen as a means of accumulating merit and preparing their minds for more advanced practices. This is another instance showing the interplay of all aspects of Ge bcags' life world, and the lack of firm boundary between the sacred and mundane in traditional Tibetan culture (Aris in Jabb 2015: 236).

We heard from the nun above about the practices she undertook during her first years at Ge bcags. As a general framework, after a nun's one-year obligation as a yak-herder, she officially enters the nunnery system and begins her four hundred thousand inner preliminary practices of prostrations, visualisation, mantra recitation and meditation which take roughly four months. These are followed by one hundred sets of *smyung gnas*, a two-day fasting practice of Avalokiteśvara, which may take up to a year to complete. Next is a mantra accumulation retreat of the guardian deity Vajrakīlaya (*phur sgrub*), which lasts about seven months. Along with completing these preliminary retreats, a new nun trains in ritual instruments, shrine preparation and liturgical chanting. Upon completing all of these, a Ge bcags nun then begins her three-year retreat.

### **Three-year retreat (*sku gsum sgrub khang*)**

The three-year retreat building is called the *sku gsum sgrub khang* ('retreat house accomplishing the three *kāya*', or 'three buddha bodies'), a common name for rNying ma retreat centres. The name alludes to the tradition's view of a literally embodied nature of enlightenment, encompassing all form and formless dimensions of existence. The retreat building sits above the main nunnery grounds, and inside of it all nuns practise and sleep in *sgom khri* meditation boxes lining the walls of its main room. The nuns leave their boxes for meal times, breaks and yoga sessions and do not exit the retreat house for the entire duration of the retreat. Other than their lamas, appointed doctors and a 'retreat attendant' (*sgrub g.yog*) who brings in supplies and helps with cooking, no one from outside is permitted to enter the retreat building for the entire three-year duration<sup>155</sup>. Approximately fifteen to twenty nuns participate together in each three-year retreat, most of them usually

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<sup>155</sup> In fact it is a three-year, three-month and three-day retreat.

in their late teens or early twenties. There is always a waiting list to stay in the *sku gsum sgrub khang* and some nuns are delayed for reasons of sickness or nunnery work obligations. Every nun I spoke with about their time in three-year retreat said it was highly enjoyable and they had wished it to continue at the end.

The three-year retreat is an initiation into Ge bcags' practice system, and a blueprint of all the practices involved in Ge bcags' lifelong training system. It is where the nuns become skilled in *yi dam* visualisations and recitations, through practising the main *sādhanā* of the retreat, Thugs sgrub yang snying 'dus pa ('Condensed Accomplishment of the Innermost Heart', an important *sādhanā* cycle from Rat-gling's *gter ma*) each day<sup>156</sup>. It is also where the nuns become proficient in subtle body yogas, which at Ge bcags are integrated in the ritual enactment of *yi dam sādhanā* as well as the rDzogs chen insight that informs them. I will discuss later how fundamental and consequential the subtle body is in the Ge bcags nuns' worldview and their overall practice tradition. Ge bcags' subtle body yogas include *rtsa rlung*, the general practice category of breath control and visualisation that includes *gtum mo*, and *rtsa rlung's* corollary 'khrul 'khor (literally 'magical wheel', similar to *haṭha* yoga) of rigorous breathing and dynamic physical postures. These are practised daily for the whole duration of the three-year retreat, so that by the end of three years *rtsa rlung* yogas come naturally to the nuns and they are capable of continuing them as part of their daily practice.

Generally, as in 'Jam mgon kong sprul's retreat system followed by most *sgrub brgyud dgon pa* in Tibet, *rtsa rlung* yogas are practised in the final year of a three-year retreat, following two years of preliminaries (*sngon 'gro*) and mantra accumulations of *yi dam sādhanā* in their Generation and Completion Stages (Kongtrul 1994: 74-113). At Ge bcags, *rtsa rlung* is practised each day of the retreat from its beginning, and after the retreat on a regular basis until old age. This makes the nuns specialists in *rtsa rlung* yoga<sup>157</sup>, and their expertise is demonstrated in their annual *chu ras* ('wet sheet') ceremony, in which they dry off wet

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<sup>156</sup> It is the extended *las byang* outline of the Thugs sgrub *sādhanā* that the nuns mostly recite in the three-year retreat.

<sup>157</sup> *rTsa rlung* is the general practice category that includes *gtum mo* (Skt. *caṇḍālī*; yoga of inner heat) and other yogas such as 'khrul 'khor, 'pho ba (consciousness transference) and *thabs lam* sexual yogas. Nāropa's Six Yogas (Na ro'i chos drug) of the bKa' brgyud school are considered *rtsa rlung* practices. Further explanation of Ge bcags' *rtsa rlung* yogas follows in Chapter Four.

sheets draped over their shoulders with their psychophysical *gtum mo* heat (Skt. *caṇḍālī*; inner heat) generated as a by-product of the practice<sup>158</sup>. The *chu ras* ceremony takes place on the full-moon day of the twelfth lunar month (January or February), with temperatures around -25C (-13F). It is celebrated by the wider lay community, many of whom come to view the demonstration from a nearby hillside.



Figure 23: Nuns in the three-year retreat. Photo: Ge bcags dgon pa.

The nuns do not cut their hair during the long retreat, in order to preserve psychic energies cultivated in intensive *rtsa rlung* yogas. This was taken in 2007; the building has since been reconstructed with steel, concrete and more windows.

Only nuns accomplished at raising inner heat through *gtum mo* can participate in the *chu ras* demonstration without danger to their health; in 2010 this was eighty-five out of 250 nuns. No other large *dgon pa* in present-day Tibet upholds such a regular, lifelong training in *rtsa rlung*, nor an annual *chu ras* ceremony (personal communication, mKhan po don ldan, September 2019). Several Nang chen *dgon pa*, like the large and historic sKyo brag monastery of the 'Ba' rom bka' brgyud, hold a *chu ras* ceremony on completion of three-year retreats, and the ceremony as a tradition dates back to the earliest bKa' brgyud communities following

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<sup>158</sup> The aim of the practice is nondual awareness.

Mi la ras pa's *gtum mo* lineage<sup>159</sup>.

A middle-aged nun commented on her experience of Ge bcags' three-year retreat:

I didn't want to come out when the retreat ended. ... Ge bcags dgon pa's practice specialty is *rtsa rlung*, and it is practised here according to the unique teachings of the first Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho. Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho wasn't a scholar (*mkhas pa*), but wrote these practice commentaries from his pure vision and meditative realisation.

As outlined in the three-year retreat's main *sāadhanā*, each year of the retreat is dedicated to accomplishing the three *kāya* and their associated qualities in the following ways:

first year: to accomplishing the *nirmāṇakāya* (*sprul sku*, 'emanation body') of Padmasambhava through Mahāyoga; this correlates to the all-pervading compassionate (*thugs rje'i kun khyab*) aspect of Buddha nature  
second year: to accomplishing the *saṃbhogakāya* (*longs sku*, 'enjoyment body') of Amitāyus through Anuyoga; this correlates to the naturally cognisant (*rang bzhin gsal ba*) aspect of Buddha nature  
third year: to accomplishing the *dharmakāya* (*chos sku*, 'truth body') of Vajradhara through Atiyoga; this correlates to the essentially empty (*ngo bo stong pa*) aspect of Buddha nature

A different mantra, each associated with the particular *kāya*, is accumulated each year.

The correlating aspects of Buddha nature listed are the personal qualities that the nuns aspire to develop through their practice, i.e. wisdom and active compassion. Each aspect leads to the others, however realisation of the most refined and formless aspect – emptiness – is the ultimate cognitive goal of all Ge bcags' practices, on the basis of which the other two are said to be spontaneous expressions. Realisation of formless emptiness (*ngo bo stong pa*) is not understood as a nothingness. It is an experience of the primordial nature of mind<sup>160</sup> that is known once conceptual and emotional obscurations have fallen away. This is described as 'clarity' or 'luminous' (*gsal ba*) as well as 'compassion' (*thugs rje*), and accords with the rDzogs chen explanation that the ultimate nature of being is invested with

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<sup>159</sup> Huber (1999: 87-90) discusses the *chus ras* (or '*rephu*') ceremony performed by 'Brug pa bKa' brgyud yogins in the 1950s at Tsa' ri Mountain in southeastern Tibet. Huber also notes an account of the ceremony in contemporary Ladakh in Crook's *The Yogins of Ladakh* (Huber 1999: 246, n.19).

<sup>160</sup> *sems kyi ngo bo*; more accurately in English, the nature of mind-body.

compassion (Kongtrul 2002: 8). This is compassion not as goodness over evil, but as the natural, empathetic responsiveness of one who has fully awakened to the interdependence of oneself with all existence (Sumegi 2013: 79).

Mahāyoga, Anuyoga and Atiyoga are the ‘three inner tantras’ (*nang rgyud gsum*) according to the rNying ma categorisation of the nine *yāna* (*theg pa rim pa dgu*; literally ‘nine vehicles’). Generally speaking, Mahāyoga includes Generation and Completion Stages of *yi dam* practice, Anuyoga includes the subtle body yogas of *rtsa* and *rlung* and Atiyoga is the consummate formless meditation of ‘self-knowing awareness’ (*rang rig*, or *rig pa*) of the ultimate nature of reality (Dudjom 1991). Mayer explains these three inner tantras as progressively subtler and more inward experiences according to the rDzogs chen path, which accords with the trajectory of contemplative development at Ge bcags (Mayer 2015: 390).

The paramount intent of Ge bcags’ entire knowledge tradition is familiarity with *rig pa* (literally ‘knowledge’/‘knowing’ or ‘gnosis’<sup>161</sup>) awareness of the authentic nature of mind that is unconditioned by cognitive and emotional habits of conceptualisation. The rDzogs chen ‘view’ (*lta ba*) of such a primordially pure nature of mind (*ka dag*) is alluded to throughout all of the nuns’ texts, practices and the oral *khrid ka* instructions that guide their tradition. A nun’s first cognitive step towards this knowledge is learning the principle of Buddha nature, developing the habit of recalling it with firm confidence and orienting her mind towards such awareness in meditation. Once nondual *rig pa* awareness is introduced and recognised (*rig pa ngo sprod pa*), meditation practice for a nun is a matter of familiarising herself with this awareness, so that eventually it is present in daily life. Nuns with a honed understanding of Buddha nature may experience *rig pa* in the three-year retreat, while other nuns may recognise it over a longer period of cultivation at the nunnery. Regardless, the three-year retreat is a concentrated period in which the nuns learn about Buddha nature and gain intimate familiarity with the workings of their minds and the orientation of their practice tradition.

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<sup>161</sup> In the context of rDzogs chen meditation *rig pa* is neither a noun or a verb; it is beyond agent, action and object (Tshangs dbyangs vol. 11: 178-179).

One of the nunnery's middle-aged nuns, who teaches in many of Ge bcags' branch nunneries, said of her three year retreat some thirty years ago:

There were twenty nuns in the three-year retreat house together. The first year of the retreat was a little difficult because we had to learn all of the chanting and meditation practices. The second year was more enjoyable because I'd become familiar with the meditation practices and my own mind. By the third year I enjoyed the retreat so much. We practised six sessions every day and night, with almost no breaks except fifteen minutes or so to eat our meals. My mind transformed while I was in retreat. To tell you the truth, I enjoyed being in retreat more than coming out!

In the three-year retreat, as in all of Ge bcags' practices, the three *kāya*, the three inner tantras and their correlating enlightened qualities are all part of a composite approach and vision of full awakening, and they are intertwined in all stages of practice. In Chapter Six we will see how Ge bcags' entire vision of Buddhahood is imagined within the practitioner's body in a mind-expanding visualisation of deities, mandalas and subtle body elements, with an inextricable correspondence of inner and outer space. Just as the nine *yāna* pathway sees all approaches and stages of Buddhist practice subsumed within a single path to 'Great Completion' (rDzogs chen) (Ngari Panchen & Gyalpo 1996: 9-10), likewise all prayer, visualisation, mantra and subtle body elements of Ge bcags' practice tradition are subsumed within its overall rDzogs chen intent.

#### **'Sixteen retreat divisions' (*sgrub khag bcu drug*)**

After the three-year retreat, a nun settles in for the rest of her life into one of sixteen retreat divisions (*sgrub khag bcu drug*, 'sixteen accomplishment divisions'), each division devoted to the *sādhana* of a particular *yi dam* meditational deity (*yi dam*, literally 'mind-binding'; like Skt. *iṣṭadevatā*<sup>162</sup>). Here she continues cultivating the Generation and Completion Stages (bsKyed rim, rDzogs rim)<sup>163</sup> of her *yi dam* every day until she dies. The sixteen *sgrub khag* retreat divisions are as follows:

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<sup>162</sup> Though not an externally-existing god as with the Hindu connotation of *iṣṭadevatā*.

<sup>163</sup> Classification of practices in these two Stages varies between schools, and how they are practised does not always adhere to a school's textual presentation, since they are classifications of practical realities.

**rTa mgrin:** Hayagrīva (Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho *dgongs gter*)  
**gSang 'dus:** Guhyasamāja (Rat-gling *gter ma*)  
**bKa' brgyad:** Sādhanā of Eight Heruka (Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho)  
**dGongs 'dus:** 'Embodiment of Realization' (Sangs rgyas gling pa *gter ma*)  
**Tsa gsum:** 'Three Roots' (*bla ma, yi dam, mkha' 'gro* [*chos skyong*]; Skt. *guru, deva, ḍākinī* [and *dharmapāla*]) (Rat-gling *gter ma*)  
**'Jigs byed:** Bhairava (Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho adaptation)  
**rDo rje gro lod:** Wild Wrathful Vajra (Yongs dge mi 'gyur rdo rje tradition)  
**Thugs sgrub:** 'Heart Sādhanā' (Rat-gling *gter ma*)  
**mKha' 'gro:** Wrathful Black Ḍākinī (Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho)  
**Gu ru drag po:** Wrathful Guru Padmasambhava (Rat-gling *gter ma*)  
**Phur pa:** Vajrakīlaya (Rat-gling *gter ma*)  
**Tshe sgrub:** Ayuh Sādhanā (Amitāyus) (Rat-gling *gter ma*)  
**sGrol ma:** Green Tārā (Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho)  
**rDor sems:** Vajrasattva (sMin grol gling tradition)  
**kLong gsal:** Brilliant Expanse (Rat-gling *gter ma*)  
**sNgags gso:** Tantric Mending (mChog'gyur gling pa *gter gsar*)



Figure 24: Nuns in their meditation boxes in a *sgrub khag* 'retreat division'. Photo: *Ge bcags dgon pa*.

How does a nun choose her retreat division? In earlier days, a high associate lama of Ge bcags such as A lde'u rin po che or a resident male lama performed a divination to choose a nun's *yi dam*. In these cases, a prayer was said to the guru and *yi dam* deities, then the nun chose one of several *tsam pa* doughballs with *yi dam* names written on papers inside. The choice is seen as karmically destined by the nun's connection to that *yi dam* and its Buddha

Family (rGyal ba rigs Inga) (Kun bzang 2017: 40). Sometimes a male lama guides the nun to intuit her predilection for a particular *yi dam*. More recently, in the absence of resident male lamas, a new nun's division is more often a matter of which one has space in it, and perhaps joining an older relative in hers.

The *yi dam* deities of the sixteen retreat divisions are derived from Mahāyoga tantras of rNying ma compilations, most of them from Rat-gling's *gter ma* with Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's adaptations. In Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's lifetime only thirteen *sgrub khag* were established; three others were added in the 1980s revival period. The nuns explained that when Ge bcags was re-established A lde'u rin po che added sNgags gso ('Tantric Mending') from mChog 'gyur gling pa's *gter gsar* ('new treasures', revealed in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century). Along with rDor sems, sNgags gso is a tantric purificatory ritual that was intended to cleanse the moral corruptions and degenerated tantric commitments (*dam tshig*; Skt. *samaya*) that had occurred during the Cultural Revolution. The list of the sixteen retreat divisions again demonstrates the patchwork of traditions, personal influences and lineage connections from which Ge bcags' practices are derived.

### ***sGrub chen* – extended group *sādhanā* ceremonies**

Along with daily sessions of *yi dam* practice and subtle body yogas are eighteen extended group *sādhanā* ceremonies called *sgrub chen* ('great accomplishment'), lasting seven to ten days each. These are performed by all the nuns together in the main shrine hall and are scheduled according to the seasons of the agricultural year. *sGrub chen* are in effect extended *yi dam* practices of the *sādhanā* texts followed in the retreat divisions. With two to three hundred nuns in concentrated practice of a tantric *sādhanā* together, the *sgrub chen* indeed 'greatly accomplishes' a highly charged ritual atmosphere, both within the individual's body-mind and in the collective nunnery atmosphere. A tantric empowerment is bestowed on the final day of the *sgrub chen*, sharing substances that are imbued with *siddhi*<sup>164</sup> (*dngos grub*; tantric attainments) and heightened meditative awareness that have been

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<sup>164</sup> Tibetan Vajrayāna understands 'mundane *siddhi*' (*thun mong dngos grub*) to be psychophysical powers like clairvoyance, clairaudience, perpetual youth, etc. The goal of Ge bcags' tradition and Tibetan Buddhism overall is 'supreme *siddhi*' (*mchog gi dngos grub*), equated with complete awakening.

accomplished (*sgrub pa*) by the ceremony.

*sGrub chen* are a core element of Ge bcags' practice tradition, embodying all dimensions of the nuns' religious life – ritual, energetic, collective and meditative. They have in fact been a defining element of the practice culture throughout rNying ma and bKa' brgyud *dgon pa* in Eastern Tibet. A description of *sgrub chen* is as follows:

... a form of intensive group practice that epitomizes the depth, power, and precision of the Vajrayana, drawing together the entire range of its skillful methods— mystical, ritual, and artistic—and including: the creation of the mandala house; the complete sadhana practice with visualization, mudra, chant, and music; continuous day and night practice of mantra; the creation of tormas and offerings, with sacred substances and precious relics; the tsok feast; the sacred dance of cham; as well as the construction of the sand mandala. All blend to create the transcendent environment of the pure realm of the deity and awaken, for all those taking part, the pure perception of this world as a sacred realm. So it is said that several days participating in a drupchen can yield the same results as years of solitary retreat, and great contemporary masters such as Kyabjé Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche have made a point of encouraging and reviving the practice of drupchen, because of its power of transformation in this degenerate age (Tenzin Gyatso 2007: 262).

For the seven to ten days, a *sgrub chen*'s participants engage in twenty-four-hour continuous *sādhanā* practice of a particular *yi dam* and its surrounding mandala, employing visualisation, mantra, prayers and meditation – all styled with ritual music, symbolic gestures and costumed dance.

A closer look at a Ge bcags *sgrub chen* is the subject of Chapter Six. For now, here is an outline of Ge bcags' annual *sgrub chen* schedule. The yearly cycle begins on the seventh day of the tenth month in winter and is divided into four seasons: winter, early spring, spring and summer. Autumn is mainly occupied by the annual prayer festival (*smon lam*), and in the past with harvesting, and is therefore not a designated *sgrub chen* season.

Eight winter *sgrub chen* (*dgun sgrub*):

**Thugs sgrub yang snying 'dus pa** (Condensed Accomplishment of the Innermost Heart)  
**Gu ru drag po** (wrathful Padmasambhava)  
**mGon sgrub** (Mahākala)  
**sNgags gso** (Tantric Mending and Purification)  
**Thugs rje gsang 'dus** (Secret Gathering of Compassion)  
**Zhi khro tshor chen** (Peaceful and Wrathful Deities of the Intermediate State)  
**Phur sgrub** (Vajrakīlaya)  
**Tshe sgrub gsang 'dus** (Secret Gathering of Life Accomplishment)

Horse month (early spring) *sgrub chen* (*rta sgrub*<sup>165</sup>):

**Thugs sgrub bar chad kun sel** (Heart Accomplishment Removing All Obstacles)  
**Zhi khro tshor chung** (Peaceful and Wrathful Deities of the Bar do)

Seven spring *sgrub chen* (*dpaid sgrub*):

**sGrol ma** (Green Tārā)  
**rTa mgrin** (Hayagrīva)  
**rTa nag** (Black Hayagrīva)  
**Seng ge gdong ma** (Lion-faced Ḍākinī)  
**Khro nag** (Wrathful Black Ḍākinī [*gcod*, 'cutting' practice])  
**rDor sems** (Vajrasattva)  
**gShin rje** (Yamāntaka)

One summer *sgrub chen* (*dbyar sgrub*):

**bKa' brgyad** (Sādhanā of Eight Heruka)

Besides these eighteen *sgrub chen* are several other annual ceremonies performed collectively by the nuns and male lamas:

**dGu chen** ('Great Ninth') – obstacle-clearing ceremony performed for the last seven days until the 29<sup>th</sup> of the twelfth and last month every year

**mGo gsum** ('The Three-Headed') – renovation and re-consecration of protective figures, including two principal three-headed figures, built of clay at the two entry points into the valley of the nunnery. This process lasts four days. These figures act as ransom effigies to absorb any obstacles that would otherwise attach themselves to members of the community.

**Dung sgrub** ('Accomplishing One Hundred Million') – one hundred million recitations of Padmasambhava or Mani mantra, lasting about one month

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<sup>165</sup> *rTa* ('horse') being the fifth Tibetan month following the animals of the Chinese zodiac.

**Eight sets of *myung gnas*** fasting practice conducted every year by at least eight nuns, according to an unbroken tradition set by A chen rin po che (a Nang chen prince and important Ge bcags lama in the 1980s revival)

**'Ja' dmar smon lam** – Community prayer festival every ninth lunar month at the historic sacred site of 'Ja' dmar ('Red Rainbow') in southern Nang chen. The Ge bcags nuns organise this and several local *sgrub brgyud dgon pa* participate, along with hundreds of laypeople.

**Chu ras** ('Wet Sheet') – testing demonstration of the inner heat of the nuns' *rtsa rlung* yoga by drying off wet sheets on their semi-naked bodies in the open air of the coldest (twelfth) month in winter

### Unscheduled practices carried out each year by the nuns: dark retreats and fasting retreats

Other cherished retreat practices at Ge bcags are 'dark retreat' (*mun mtshams*) and 'taking the essence' (*bcud len*), which smaller groups of nuns practice together during the autumn recess or periods in between *sgrub chen*. These retreats are not scheduled or mandated, but the nuns organise themselves to practice them each year in groups of about ten or fifteen nuns.

Dark retreat is a rDzogs chen training method whose purpose is similar to that of *thod rgal* ('leap over') in the rDzogs chen system, which is to recognise the nondual source of the mind's projections of visual consciousness. The boundary of a dark retreat is the sealing off of all outside light, so that the setting of the practice is complete darkness. The nuns sit cross-legged along the walls of a room whose windows and door are completely covered, and they stay there for the whole duration of the retreat. A retreat helper (*sgrub g.yog*) brings them water and supplies.

*bcud len*, 'taking the essence', is a purificatory fasting practice, also carried out in unscheduled seven-day retreats by groups of ten or more nuns. During a *bcud len* retreat the nuns do not eat anything other than consecrated medicines made from herbs and grains. I have seen nuns emerge from these retreats appearing replenished and inspired by their experience. When I asked them questions about their retreat time they spoke with a sincere air of secrecy, as though what had happened inside was too profound to be spoken about in public.

As we have seen so far, much of the Ge bcags nuns' contemplative life is practised collectively in group residences and *yi dam* ritual ceremonies. Nonetheless, deeper meditation is practised individually with the nuns sitting alone in their *sgom khri* or outdoors on the hillside, and in solitary retreats that older nuns occasionally undertake in private huts below the collective practice area. While the nuns are communal by nature, and are most often seen in pairs or groups, they are also comfortable being alone as they walk around the nunnery, or in town on shopping trips or hospital visits.

## Conclusion

The outline in this chapter of the Ge bcags nuns' lifeworld and practice system has highlighted the down-to-earth character of the nuns and their contemplative way of life. The nuns' backgrounds in highland pastoral families are inseparable from the culture of the nunnery. The chapter has also demonstrated the rigorous nature of Ge bcags' practice system, and that the nuns are sustained in their lifelong engagement largely by their inspiration for achieving Dharma goals of inner freedom, which they have seen modelled in elder nuns. Individual and collective *yi dam* deity practice, in retreat divisions and *sgrub chen*, has been introduced as a characterising feature of Ge bcags' tradition, along with the principle of Buddha nature and the meditational insight of nondual *rig pa* awareness.

This chapter has continued to give a sense of the considerably different quality of knowledge and learning at Ge bcags Nunnery than that of most Western education systems. The following chapter will carry out a deeper analysis of the underlying elements of Ge bcags' practices and ways of knowing.

## CHAPTER FOUR:

### An analysis of Ge bcags' mind-body paradigm and core principles of learning

Chapter Four offers a key analysis of the mind-body paradigm of Ge bcags' Vajrayāna tradition, which is crucial to understanding the nuns' ways of knowing, the methods by which they cultivate knowledge and their cultural worldview. The chapter begins by introducing the tantric Buddhist subtle body, the basis of the nuns' yogic practices, taking insight from Yuasa (1987) in explaining the integrative view of self and knowledge that it implies. I then examine *yi dam* deity yoga as the method of creative visualisation crucial in the psychological development and cultivation of nondual awareness that all of Ge bcags' practices intend. I consider how the nuns learn the sophisticated function of *yi dam* practice, as well as the essential role of heartfelt faith and devotion in the nuns' cognitive expansion. The chapter then examines the inextricable relation of rDzogs chen and tantric *sādhanā* in Ge bcags' texts, and the inter-relation of oral and written knowledge transmission in the community. Finally, I consider the lived human examples of the Ge bcags nuns as their most salient statement of the knowledge they gain.

#### Subtle body and mind-body knowing

Between worldviews, many far-reaching subtleties of human experience can be lost in translation. For this reason, perhaps the most important aspect of Ge bcags' lifeworld to discuss for this reason is the subtle body. The subtle body of Ge bcags' tradition is not at all easily translatable into Western terms. The 20<sup>th</sup> century Japanese philosopher, Yuasa, posited that in order to understand the body as it is understood within Japanese Zen Buddhist and other Asian traditions, a complete reorientation of Western conceptual understandings of the body would be required (Yuasa 1987: 1).

Subtle body as a label could be applied to various concepts and practices across Asian (and ancient) religions and cultures. Samuel and Johnston's edited volume *Religion and the Subtle Body in Asia and the West* (2013) explores how subtle body systems in various religious and healing traditions are really whole ways of knowing the world. In the volume, Sumegi compares accounts of altered states of consciousness in Mongolian shamanism and Tibetan Buddhism, pointing to subtle body understandings on the rDzogs chen path and their

resolution of the physical and spiritual in a human being (Sumegi 2013). Samuel discusses the Indo-Tibetan context of the subtle body where it refers to an interfacing system of ‘mind’ and ‘body’ comprising channels (*rtsa*; Skt. *nāḍī*), junction points (*rtsa 'khor*; Skt. *cakra*), energetic essences (*thig le*; Skt. *bindu*) and a flow of energy (*rlung*; Skt. *prāṇa or vāyu*) comparable to Chinese *qi* and related to breath, consciousness and sexual energy. Such a subtle body system, as in Tibetan tantric traditions, is not simply a presentation of the workings of the human, but is a model allowing for cultivation of awareness and mastery of experiences and behaviours that are normally hidden (Samuel 2013: 249-251).

In this thesis, the closest Tibetan equivalent term for subtle body is *rtsa rlung* (or *rtsa rlung thig le*), often used at Ge bcags in reference to yogas based on this subtle body system, as well as to the principle of inseparable *rlung* and consciousness (*rlung sems dbyer med*) that underlies Ge bcags’ knowledge path. The *rlung sems dbyer med* principle and instruction to abide in inseparable *prāṇa*-consciousness is ubiquitous in Ge bcags’ scriptures and conversations. “Abiding in inseparable *prāṇa*-mind (*rlung sems dbyer med du zhogs*) is the very significant teaching of Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho,” said one of the nunnery’s two rDo rje slob dpon ((‘Vajra Master’; Skt. *Vajrācārya*; hereafter rDor slob<sup>166</sup>). In Chapter Six, a translation of a section of a *sgrub chen* scripture reveals the subtly complicated web of *rtsa rlung* elements interwoven with visualised deities and buddha realms within the practitioner’s body. These mind-expanding visualisations and their subtle body elements pervade all of the Ge bcags nuns’ practices, and set the overall orientation of their lifelong path of training.

In discussing Asian systems of the subtle body, Samuel draws attention to the subtle, often unconscious, assumptions about the nature of human life that underlie a society’s structures and the ways people are directed to make meaning (Samuel 2013: 251). The subtle body is such a fundament of the Ge bcags nuns’ lived experience and their ways of knowing. It is the experienced body on the basis of which the nuns practice their yogic pathway, as well as relate to each other and their natural environment. The subtle body of *rtsa rlung* elements is

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<sup>166</sup> Spelled not correctly but as pronounced.

also integral in the nuns' Vajrayāna worldview in which body and mind, practitioner and nature, are profoundly connected. This connectedness extends to the animate natural environment that the nuns relate to intimately through countless rituals. There is no Cartesian mind-body dualism in the epistemological history of the nuns' ways of knowing; the view (*lta ba*) that their yogic tradition orients them towards is one of union or inseparability. This is expressed in numerous terms describing the pinnacle of Vajrayāna knowledge, such as *thabs shes zung 'jug* (union of method and wisdom), *snang stong zung 'jug* (union of appearance and emptiness), *bde stong zung 'jug* (union of bliss and emptiness), *gsal stong zung 'jug* (union of cognisance and emptiness), *rig stong zung 'jug* (union of *rig pa* and emptiness), etc.

Yuasa, who was steeped in Western philosophical dialogue while centred in a modern Japanese perspective with a deep knowledge of Asian religions, elucidates a theory of body that speaks cogently and comprehensively to Ge bcags' tradition. Yuasa examines the interdependence of mind and body acknowledged with varying emphases by different cultures, and brings to light a fundamental incongruity between most Western theories of the body and those of Eastern traditions. Eastern traditions – particularly Buddhist – differ greatly from Western traditions in that not only do they view mind and body as ontologically indistinguishable, many view the unification of mind and body as the goal of contemplative cultivation (Yuasa 1987: 1). Yuasa's theory of the body makes sense of why philosophy and meditation have often been a shared pursuit in Eastern traditions. Much of Eastern philosophical thought, says Yuasa, presupposes knowledge to be a matter of personal cultivation. Such an achievement of mind-body union is the intent of Ge bcags' Vajrayāna tradition of texts and practices, as evident in the tantric formula that *prāṇa* and consciousness share the same ultimate nature, which is often articulated in the nuns' goal of realising the inseparability of the two (*rlung sems dbyer med*). Reality is not to be known merely theoretically, but through one's whole mind and body as a human way of being (Yuasa 1987: 25-26)<sup>167</sup>. Such mind-body integration has no exact correlate in Western

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<sup>167</sup> From the perspective of depth-psychology – here understood to be psychology which takes account of the spiritual or archetypal dimension of human experience – the role of sexuality seems unavoidable in such holistic mind-body cultivation, and leads to important questions about male and female cognition. Yuasa discusses this in the context of the Five Buddha Families' archetypes and kundalini in esoteric Buddhism (Yuasa 1987: 136-

theoretical terms, which makes it particularly difficult to discuss the kind of knowledge cultivated in a yogic tradition like Ge bcags' (Yuasa 1987: 3).

As Yuasa explains, freedom in Buddhist thought is not a question of a universal truth, nor of free will over determinism, but something that can be psychophysically achieved through disciplined cultivation of the human being. In ordinary people, mind-body integration is partial, but it can be fully developed through prolonged, habitual cultivation (Yuasa 1987: 9-10, 93-98). This is not mere physical cultivation as in sports, where the mind develops the ability to spontaneously command certain physical actions – although physicality is an element of subtle body cultivation, as in Ge bcags' visualisation and *rtsa rlung* yoga practices. Another key difference between Western (or Aristotelian) and Eastern thought that Yuasa highlights is regarding the role of cultivation of habit. In Buddhism, repeated cultivation of psychophysical habits is the pathway not only for outward physical and moral behaviour, but also for cognitive wisdom. Just as the mere study of morality does not produce a moral person, likewise mere study cannot produce a truly wise person according to a Buddhist pathway such as Ge bcags' (Yuasa 1987: 6).

In the knowledge cultivated by a tradition like that of the Ge bcags nuns, 'all instances of knowing are both practical and theoretical' (Kasulis in Yuasa 1987: 6). In the full fruition of a mind-body cultivation, 'knowing' and 'being' are one and the same (Pettit 1999: 4). This view is echoed in Ge bcags' terminology for meditation (*sgom*, Skt. *bhāvanā*; 'cultivation'), which is often explained by its lamas and nuns as relating to the term *goms* ('familiarisation', 'habit') and as a process of cultivating familiarity. Conceptual and emotional confusion are explained as incidental obscurations that are not intrinsic to the nature of mind. *Rig pa* is recognised when these obscurations are removed through cognitive and moral cultivation, with the help of an experienced lama's pith instructions (*man ngag*). Meditation is simply a matter of recognising and familiarising with this intrinsic, conceptually unconditioned nature of mind.

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153). Sexuality functions explicitly in higher tantric Buddhist practices of *thabs lam* ('method path'), whether in intercourse practices of *las kyi phyag rgya* (Skt. *karmamudrā*) or transmuting sexual energy in *gtum mo*, as contemporary celibate Ge bcags nuns practice. I would argue that sexual energy is also partially transmuted in the devotion involved in Tibetan Buddhist guru yoga. As mentioned in Chapter Two, however, these questions are beyond the scope of the present thesis.

By the age of twenty-five, after the three-year retreat and prolonged immersion in the nunnery's practice system, most nuns have become proficient in the *rtsa rlung* yogas that they practice regularly as a support for meditative awareness. At Ge bcags, as in all Tibetan Buddhist hermitages, *rtsa rlung* and *'khrul 'khor* are practised in tandem to condition the mind-body complex beyond its ordinary habitual constraints, and thereby prepare the practitioner for the nondual consciousness of rDzogs chen or Mahāmudrā realisation. *rTsa rlung* yogas manipulate the flow of *prāṇa* in the channels (*rtsa*) using breathing, visualisation and devotion, based on the *rlung sems dbyer med* principle that *prāṇa* and mental consciousness operate inextricably. By successfully directing *prāṇa* in the central channel (*rtsa dbu ma*; Skt. *avadhūti*), *rtsa rlung* yoga functions to psychophysically expedite access to the nonconceptual consciousness of *rig pa*.

All elements of the Vajrayāna subtle body are seen as conscious, and indeed to experience this is the high point of Vajrayāna training (Rangjung Dorje 2014). The embodied, existential knowing born from *rtsa rlung* yoga, in tandem with the honed awareness of rDzogs chen meditation, thus arises from within the subtle mind-body of the yogin/yoginī. At Ge bcags this knowledge is alluded to and talked about in written and spoken language, but in itself it is not abstracted as a cognitive, or intellectual, object. This is significant in considering that Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's prolonged and intensive practice of *rtsa rlung* yogas must have conditioned his knowledge and his compositions – both his spontaneous utterings of *mgur*, and his written poetry and philosophical commentaries.

Such a subtle body paradigm points to major problems of translating into English the language of a practical Asian tradition such as Ge bcags'. Ilundáin-Agurruza (2014), in his research on the holistic functions of the body in Japanese *dō* martial arts, highlights the inability of the English language to articulate the Japanese cultural and conceptual mind-body paradigm. Regarding the English title and language of Yuasa's book, *The Body* (1987), which was translated from Japanese to English, Ilundáin-Agurruza says: 'The richness and subtlety of [Yuasa's] analysis and taxonomy are a translator's nightmare; they are also the readers'

loss every time they encounter the word ‘body’<sup>168</sup> (2014: 458). He recalls that Varela complained of the English language’s inability to distinguish, as German does, between the body as lived and vital, *leib*, and the body as material physicality, *körper* (Ilundáin-Agurruza 2014: 456-457). Japanese language is equipped to make this distinction and far more, with a remarkably nuanced taxonomy articulating a continuity of integrated body-mind functions. For example, the syllables of the Japanese *shinshin* (integrative ‘mind-body’) are homophonous, and can be reversed to emphasise the physical aspect over its conscious function; however, the two concepts are never split as separate entities and always function in an interdependent continuum (Ilundáin-Agurruza 2014: 458).

At Ge bcags, the subtle body and all its constituents are understood as inextricably linked with all pure and impure life forms in the universe. In the earliest written sources of Buddhist tantra, the practitioner’s body is seen as a microcosm of the macrocosmic universe, with the inner psychophysical elements of the subtle mind-body corresponding to the outer landscape of the natural world (and vice versa) (Mallinson & Singleton 2017: 174). This tantric view of inner and outer correspondences has been continually expressed in Tibetan treatises on tantra, as in the third Karmapa Rang ’byung rdo rje’s 14<sup>th</sup> century treatise, *Zab mo nang don* (*The Profound Inner Principles*), which explains the principles of yogic practice that accompany Mahāmudra in the training course of a bKa’ brgyud yogin<sup>169</sup>. In this treatise Rang ’byung rdo rje writes:

In accordance with the Kalachakra’s teachings on the unity of the external, internal, and “other,” [this chapter] will explain how the worldly realms are complete within the body, thereby [demonstrating] the one-to-one correspondences between the external and internal (2014: 374).

Such mirroring of inner and outer worlds is implicit in the Ge bcags nuns’ worldview, and speaks deeply to the porous boundary between sacred and mundane. It conveys the acceptance of the ‘supernatural’ in Ge bcags’ lifeworld, and the community’s reading of signs (*rtags mtshan; ya mtshan*) in daily and ritual happenings. Ge bcags texts and conversations

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<sup>168</sup> ‘the body’ would have referred to the Japanese *shintai* (Ilundáin-Agurruza 2014: 458).

<sup>169</sup> These principles underly the yogic practices of all Tibetan Buddhist schools, and in Nang chen *Zab mo nang don* is read closely by followers of various lineages.

are replete with mentions of wondrous signs – from rainbow light over butter lamps, to vase water boiling on its own, to an unexplained fragrance pervading the shrine hall during *sgrub chen* (mKhan po bsod nams 2008: 12-16; rDo rje 1998: 241). The nuns and monks recognise such occurrences as signs of tantric accomplishment (*'grub rtags*), which motivate and verify their meditation experiences. When signs are negative, they can indicate the need for a ritual or behavioural response.

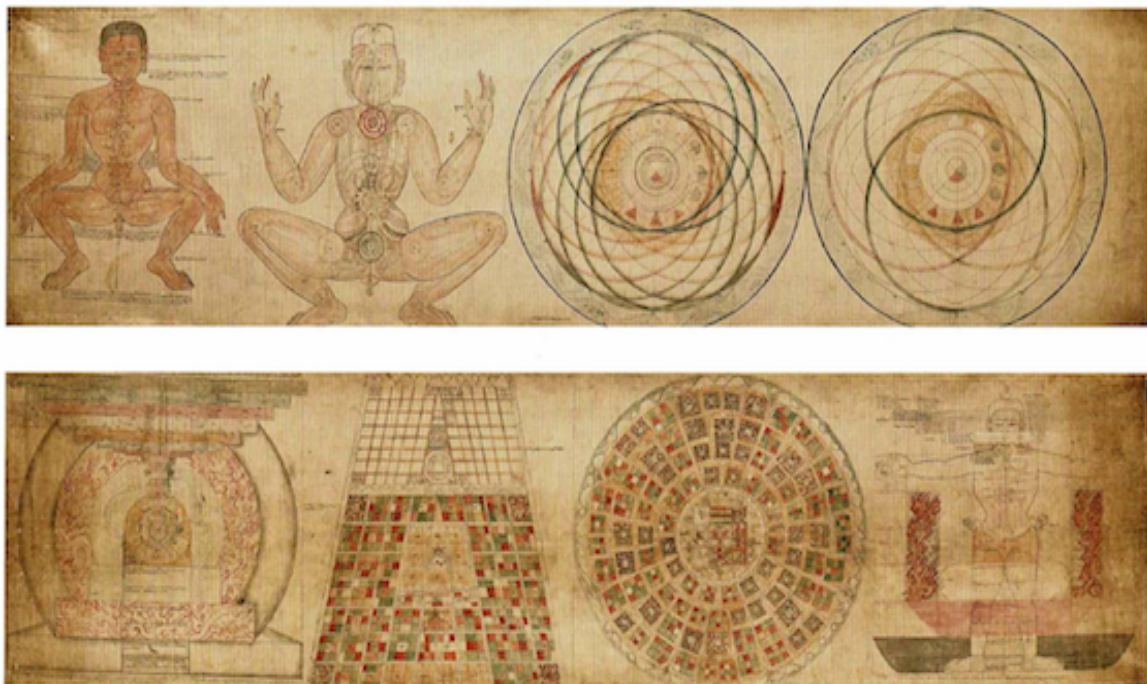


Figure 25: Tantric Buddhist cosmological scroll of the human subtle body, illustrating its *rtsa (nāḍī)* and *rtsa 'khor (cakra)* and its correspondence with the universe. Photo: Rubin Museum of Art. C2009.9 (HAR61200).

In considering the reality and value of these signs for the Ge bcags nuns and the lifeworld that they collectively experience, the words of Goulet are germane: ‘Experiences of dreams or visions and accounts of them clearly inform social interactions in non-western societies in which the world of spirits is as real as that of work, though real in different qualitative ways’ (Goulet 1993: 171). This dissertation has by now made clear that the distinctions familiar to the Western, or modern urbanised, mind between everyday life and visions are not drawn in the Ge bcags nuns’ worldview. As Goulet compellingly highlights, in pre-modern knowledge traditions visions and the dreamworld are not only integrated as real (as opposed to fantasy), they may be intentionally induced and utilised for human and social development (Goulet

1993: 173). This is the case at Ge bcags Nunnery, where dreams and the supernatural are navigated with pathways like lucid dreaming (*rmi lam*; ‘dream yoga’) and visionary *yi dam* practices for human development in the nuns’ Vajrayāna tradition. We thus see that mind, body and the world of everyday life are an integrated whole in the Ge bcags nuns’ worldview and their pathway of learning.

The role of the subtle body and the worldview it entails are thus inextricable from all of the nuns’ practices, and it is within this holistic perspective that the world and all components of their contemplative path are interwoven. Moreover, all stages and elements of Ge bcags’ tradition are practised in an integrated approach, and not separately as I am laying them out in these chapters. When practising Generation Stage *yi dam* visualisations, or Completion Stage *rtsa lung* yogas or rDzogs chen meditation, the subtle body is integral in cultivating the nonconceptual awareness (*rig pa*) that is the ultimate context of their training pathway.

### Yi dam

A primary mental technology of Tibetan tantra could be summarised as visualisation – either of oneself residing within a *yi dam*’s (tantric deity’s) pure realm, or oneself as the *yi dam* in his/her pure realm in advanced tantra – imbued with the emotional energy of aspiration (*smon ’dun*), confidence and pure vision (*dad pa, dag snang*) that is core in Vajrayāna (Bokar 1991; Lingpa 2007). In outlining tantra with the following passage, Studstill outlines the intent of Ge bcags’ tradition:

(1) embracing one’s embodied situation (particularly all associated feelings and passions) as the vehicle of awakening, (2) de-conditioning dualistic evaluative associations by imaginatively superimposing the *maṇḍala* over ordinary appearances, and (3) gaining awareness and control of the subtle energy (*rlung; prāṇa*) of the body through *nāḍī-prāṇa* yoga. More generally, tantra seems to serve the additional function of beginning (through symbols) to acquaint the practitioner with the experience of immediate presence (Studstill 2005: 165).

The human propensity to project (or see) deities in the world is an ancient one, and the *yi dam* technique harnesses this as a method of Buddhist nondual psychology. The tendency to deify qualities of nature and human experience is particularly strong in the Tibetan disposition, and is apparent throughout Ge bcags’ texts and conversations, such as this example from a *sgrub chen* scripture:

The ten feet of the utterly complete ten *bhūmi*  
 Squashing the directional guardians, embodiments of the ten impurities  
 ...  
 The nine feet of the utterly complete nine *yāna*  
 Squashing nine *dam sri* brothers of wrong views about the Dharma<sup>170</sup>  
 (Tshangs dbyangs vol. 13: 138)

*Yi dam* practice, also called *lha'i rnal 'byor* ('deity yoga') in Tibetan tantra, is an element of all of Ge bcags' practices. The nuns' ultimate aim is to realise Buddha nature, or awakened consciousness (*rig pa* in rNying ma terms, more often *ye shes* in bKa' brgyud; also Buddha nature), which is conceptually transcendent by definition<sup>171</sup> (Shabkar 2012). A *yi dam* deity is a symbol<sup>172</sup> of this transcendent consciousness in a relatable, human form. The practice functions as a creative method for the practitioner to experience and become familiar with the embodied presence of Buddha nature. By mentally re-constructing herself as a deified buddha (*bdag bskyed*), her image of her world as its divine expression (mandala) along with mantra and visualised radiating light, a Ge bcags nun undercuts the mistaken mental projection of an independent ego (self) on a collection of mind-body aggregates (Kongtrul 2002). With this function, *yi dam* practice is categorised as Generation Stage, and the consummating, transcendent meditation where false mental projections fall away is Completion Stage (loosely equatable at Ge bcags with rDzog chen and Atiyoga).

*Yi dam* may be bodhisattvas, tantric deities, Dharma protectors or human figures (at Ge bcags, for example, Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho is sometimes deified). The main *yi dam* practised at Ge bcags were listed in the outline of retreat divisions and *sgrub chen* in Chapter Three; these are mostly of rNying ma's Mahāyoga category of inner tantras (*nang rgyud*). The ideal of enlightenment is always projected onto the guru in Tibetan Buddhism, with *yi dam* being the medium. At Ge bcags and in practice lineages in general, all *yi dam* are taught as

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<sup>170</sup> *sa bcu yongs su rdzogs pa'i zhabs bcu yis/ ma dag bcu yi rang gzugs phyogs skyong mnan/ ... theg pa rim dgu rdzogs pa'i zhabs dgu yis/ bstan la log rtog dam sri spun dgu mnan/*

<sup>171</sup> And, crucially, said to be only knowable through one's own meditation experience (Shabkar 2012).

<sup>172</sup> When discussing *yi dam* and other Ge bcags practices, the word 'symbol' does not intend, in the modern sense of the term, an object or artefact that is narrowly representational, nor a device to indicate deeper meaning as in its literary sense. Instead, it is understood as Coomaraswamy intends it in his philosophy on traditional artworks, where he explains symbolism as 'the representation of a reality on a certain level of reference by a corresponding reality on another' (Coomaraswamy 2007: 100). For example in the Vajrayāna context, *sprul sku* (Skt. *nirmāṇakāya*) is a symbol of the formless reality of *chos sku* (Skt. *dharmakāya*). The two *kāya* appear substantially different, but they are equally real.

being one with the nature of the guru, that together are ultimately to be experienced as the Buddha nature of the practitioner's own mind (mDo khams n.d.: 109-110<sup>173</sup>). Harding notes that in the Tibetan tantric approach, the relationship between guru (both the human and the Buddha he or she represents) and disciple *itself* forms the basis for contemplative transformation (Harding in Kongtrul 2002: 11-12). This is often reflected in the Ge bcags nuns' conversations and descriptions of their practice: they understand the guru and *yi dam* as one and the same, but their greatest love and attention is for the guru (as the embodiment and example of Buddha), whom they understand and trust as compassionate and wise. Seeing complete purity in a human being and trusting the experienced wisdom and compassion of the guru to guide one has a profoundly transformative psychological effect, which Tibetan Buddhism has enshrined in guru yoga at the core of its traditions.



Figure 26: An image of three longevity *yi dam* (Amitāyus, White Tārā and Uṣṇīṣavijaya ) on the shrine of Ge bcags' Tshe sgrub retreat division. Photo: author, 2013.

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<sup>173</sup> Reference from Ge bcags' *sngon 'gro* text, from which the nuns recite 'To the lama, who is the embodiment of all buddhas, the nature of the Three Jewels, I, and all sentient beings of the six realms, go for refuge until enlightenment' 100,000 times.

*Yi dam* are one of the ‘three roots’ (*rtsa gsum*: lama, *yi dam*, *mkha’ ’gro*; Skt. *guru*, *deva*, *dākinī*), that, augmented by Dharma protectors, are Vajrayāna’s three focuses of faith, or ‘refuge’ (*skyabs gnas*), and the source of spiritual powers, or *dngos grub* (Skt. *siddhi*). The aspect of spiritual power is salient in Ge bcags’ practice tradition, and is present in the name of the ritual (*dbang*, ‘power’) that initiates any Generation Stage *yi dam* practice. It points to the embodied, energetic nature of Vajrayāna enlightenment, and to the creative visualisation and positive psychological qualities that *yi dam* involve. *Yi dam* practice aims to awaken in the meditator an experience of whatever ‘energy’ of reality, or enlightened quality of one’s true consciousness, the deity symbolises. *Yi dam* deities and their *sādhanā* frameworks involve heightened emotional states of faith and devotion (*dad pa*, *mos gus*), while constantly engendering a universal, altruistic attitude and aspiring towards one’s highest potential (in Tibetan Buddhist terms, union of one’s consciousness with the *yi dam* as guru). These elements are constitutive of the Generation Stage and indeed ‘generate’ psychophysical energy that, according to Vajrayāna tradition, facilitates rDzogs chen nondual awareness of the Completion Stage (Kozhevnikov & McDougal 2018<sup>174</sup>).

Completion Stage of the *yi dam* practice at Ge bcags generally appears as the silent meditation that follows dissolution of the visualisation at the end of the *sādhanā* and mantra recitations. In practice lineage terms there are two levels of Completion Stage: ‘Completion Stage with Signs’ (mTshan bcas rdzogs rim) employing subtle body yogas like Ge bcags’ *rtsa rlung* and ‘*khrol ’khor*, and ‘Completion Stage without Signs’ (mTshan med rdzogs rim) of nonconceptual rDzogs chen or Mahāmudrā meditation. Both Completion Stage levels, though apparently different, are once again intimately related within the subtle body view in which mind and the movement of *rtsa rlung* energies function inseparably (Kongtrul 2002: 18-19). Both share the same intent of cultivating the ability to rest in unconditioned, nondual

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<sup>174</sup> Preliminary neuroscientific data supports the generation of psychophysical energy through *yi dam* deity yoga. Much of Kozhevnikov’s cognitive neuroscientific work over the last fifteen years has drawn attention to the arousal of psychophysical energy entailed in Tibetan Vajrayāna methods (see Amihai & Kozhevnikov 2014, 2015). The visualised, emotional and creative elements of tantric deity yoga, and how they condition the mind-body of long-term practitioners, is a fascinating subject that is central to Tibetan Buddhism’s traditional lay-out of Generation to Completion Stages. Despite modernity’s aversion to faith and theism, these elements of *yi dam* deity yoga merit significant attention in neurophysiological studies of Tibetan Buddhist meditation.

awareness, and both are integral and interwoven in Ge bcags' methods of training. The two Completion Stage levels also always follow or are framed by Generation Stage visualisations, so in practice at Ge bcags it is difficult to precisely demarcate between Generation and Completion Stages.

There are other practices, including silent rDzogs chen meditation techniques (notably *khregs chod*, 'cutting through' and *thod rgal*, 'leap over'), that the nuns may practise independently of a *yi dam sādhanā*, but even these are usually preceded by a brief 'guru yoga' (*bla ma'i rnal 'byor*) visualisation in which the guru is imagined merging with oneself. Thus, identification with a visualised *yi dam* can be considered the framework for every one of Ge bcags' yoga, meditation and ritual practices. In this way, *yi dam* and their retreat divisions are like the bones of Ge bcags' practice system. A morning *yi dam* practice session in a retreat division lasts two or three hours, perhaps from 4:30a.m. to 7a.m., with silent meditation at the end lasting about forty minutes. This timing can vary from day to day depending on what collective *sgrub chen* or other activities are happening. Individual nuns in any division also do *yi dam* sessions on their own. Following the morning session the nuns eat breakfast, often *tsam pa* with tea, and then usually proceed to practise 'khrul 'khor and *rtsa lung* yogas in the basement of the retreat divisions building for about one hour.

During collective *sgrub chen* ceremonies, the nuns maintain one *yi dam* session a day in their retreat division, usually in the evening as the *sgrub chen* starts very early at 4:30 or 5a.m.. (They begin even earlier in the winter, which is the intensive retreat season in Ge bcags' annual schedule.) When there is no *sgrub chen*, they may do two or three personal *yi dam* sessions a day. One nun from each division is responsible for maintaining daily recitations of the extended *yi dam sādhanā* and associated Dharma protector (*chos skyong*, *srung ma*) prayers<sup>175</sup>, which can take six hours each day. This nun is called the 'practice leader' (*sgrub dpon*) and she is exempt from group practices for six months while she fulfils these recitations for her division.

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<sup>175</sup> Tibetan Dharma protectors are generally distinguished from *yi dam* deities. Many are understood as land spirits/deities harnessed by Padmasambhava and continually propitiated for the purpose of protecting communities of Dharma practice. Much could be said about the profound psychological role that Dharma protector rituals serve in a community like Ge bcags, but it goes beyond the scope of the present research.

### Mantra sound and *yi dam* ‘accomplishment’ (*sgrub pa*)

The main Tibetan term used in reference to tantra is ‘mantra’ (*sngags*) or ‘secret mantra’ (*gsang sngags*; in full, ‘vajra vehicle of secret mantra’, *gsang sngags rdo rje’i theg pa*). Along with being the embodiment of awakened consciousness, *yi dam* are also considered its vibrational expression through mantra utterance. In Tibetan Buddhist tradition, *yi dam* practice is often quantified by how many mantra recitations one has accumulated (*bsnyen tshad*). Many retreats require a certain number of mantra to be completed, for example Ge bcags’ Vajrakīlaya retreat which requires recitation of one hundred thousand of each syllable of the mantra (*’bru ’bum*). A typical vignette of a Ge bcags nun sees her holding her *mala* (*’phreng ba*; rosary) and humming mantras under her breath while she chats with friends, or walks around the nunnery in between work or practice sessions. The mantras at Ge bcags are of rNying ma *yi dam* from Mahāyoga tantras, such as rTa mgrin or bKa’ brgyad (see the retreat divisions above), and a typical mantra averages twenty syllables or more. The nuns are rarely seen without their malas and they seem to be constantly humming mantra, sometimes still thumbing their beads while expressing an opinion or laughing in conversation. They recite mantra while working in the greenhouse, collecting yak dung, cooking for *sgrub chen* and falling asleep. Mantra, quietly uttered on the breath throughout the day, are like the soundtrack of the nuns’ waking lives.

The liturgical framework for any *yi dam* practice is called ‘means of accomplishment’ (*sgrub thabs*, Skt. *sādhana*<sup>176</sup>) and spans Generation and Completion Stages. *sGrub chen* are ‘great accomplishment’ ceremonies of collective *sādhana* practice. In Tibetan practice lineage *dgon pa*, tantric (or yogic) practice is referred to as *sgrub pa’i nyams len* (‘accomplishment practice’). It can be said that the *yi dam* is the most conspicuous symbol of what the Ge bcags nuns aim to ‘accomplish’. The Ge bcags’ community sees the fruition of their tantric training pathway as quite literally ‘accomplishing’ (*sgrub pa*) the deity, or realising oneself as the

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<sup>176</sup> As noted in the Introduction, there are different variety of *sādhana* texts in usage at Ge bcags. Extensive *sādhana* manuals for use in collective *sgrub chen* are called *sgrub khog*. Along with *sgrub thabs* and *sgrub khog* are *las byang* (‘activity manuals’) which are extended versions (or outlines, though the nuns chant all of it) of ritual *yi dam* practices.

human embodiment of Buddha. *rNam thar* and oral narratives refer to the relics and other physical signs that result from accomplishing the *yi dam*, like the deity's mantra syllable appearing on a practitioner's forehead, or black hair appearing in the ashes of a cremated Vajrayoginī practitioner<sup>177</sup>. What is accomplished by *yi dam* practice is both what is symbolised by the tantric deity, and the embodiment of this divinity in human form.

Looking more closely on the stages of the *yi dam sādhanā* the nuns practice, most have within them three main stages: *bsnyen pa* ('approach' or familiarisation), *sgrub pa* ('accomplishment') and *las sbyor* (application of activities). (Each stage has a correlating mantra recitation.) *bsnyen pa* is the initial stage when the *yi dam* deity is visualised upon one's head, supplicated and worshipped with many verses of recitation. *sgrub pa* is the merging of the *yi dam* deity inseparably with oneself, so that one realises the already 'divine' or awakened nature of consciousness; this is understood literally as 'accomplishing' the deity. After realising oneself as the *yi dam* deity, during *las sbyor* one ritually enacts and imagines the deity's four enlightened activities (*las bzhi*) of pacifying, increasing, magnetising and subjugating (*zhi, rgyas, dbang, drag*).

With these three stages in mind, we may return here to Yuasa's theory of the body and cultivation of knowledge as a whole human being. Yuasa's theory implies that many of our effective actions are not mentally thought out at the time that they are performed. An expert baseball player, for example, is not *thinking* about his swing at the moment he is carrying it out, yet he is only capable of the expert swing because he has consciously cultivated the ability over a long period of time (Yuasa 1987: 11). In parallel with this consideration is Kozhevnikov's preliminary neuroscientific study of *yi dam* visualisation and its effects on the ability to rest in nondiscursive Completion Stage awareness (*rig pa*) (Kozhevnikov & McDougal 2018). Kozhevnikov hypothesised, based on centroparietal brain wave patterns of Bhutanese monks and nuns, that a 'rebound' effect may be taking place in the brain and body of the practitioner. The rebound effect is observable in athletes who visualise a difficult activity in order to hone and heighten their subsequent physical performance. In doing so,

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<sup>177</sup> These recent examples of A khyug rin po che and dGe shes bla ma dkon mchog respectively are well-known among Tibetans. There are countless similar examples found within Tibetan Buddhist society.

the mind is training in the context of multimodal imagery, and thereby has an intended ‘rebound’ effect on the sensorimotor body schema. Kozhevnikov suggested that *yi dam* practice, with its multimodal visual and other psychophysical elements, may be similarly effective in enhancing attentional abilities to successfully realise the heightened nondual awareness of Completion Stage (Kozhevnikov & McDougal 2018: 308-310). Yuasa’s theory of mind-body integration as the goal of Buddhist cultivation aligns with such a hypothesis, and with Ge bcags’ *sāadhanā* which are oriented in stages towards *las sbyor* as a cultivated mind-body ability for enactment.

### How a nun learns *yi dam*

The Vajrayāna understanding of the existence of *yi dam* is not easy to capture in conventional terms, as it is meant to serve a nondual psychological function. *Yi dam* are not external gods or spirits in the theistic sense of a deity, but they are nevertheless *real* expressions of one’s own Buddha nature<sup>178</sup> (Bokar 1991; Dilgo 2016; Lingpa 2007). They are not abstract images of deities that represent something other than themselves; rather, they are real in themselves as part of intrinsic awareness. The Vajrayāna explanation of *yi dam* deity yoga acknowledges that one mentally creates the deity, but one does so on the basis of understanding that one’s ordinary self and reality are also mentally created, while fundamentally empty (Kongtrul 2002: 8-10). The practitioner is to become the *yi dam* to the same degree they had previously become an ordinary person, with that transformation resting on naked awareness of the substantial emptiness of any version of self. This awareness of self-emptiness is itself the ultimate nature of the *yi dam*, that ‘merges’ with the mind of the meditator through familiarisation (personal communication, dBang drag rin po che, May 2020).

All of this a mature Ge bcags nun comes to understand over her years at the nunnery. Yet the understanding is philosophically and psychologically sophisticated, involving Buddhism’s most

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<sup>178</sup> The *yi dam*’s symbolism is distilled in Vajrayāna Buddhism into the elemental Five Buddha Families (Sangs rgyas rigs Inga), from which all *yi dam* are said to derive (Thrangu 2013). The creative visualisation of *yi dam* and mandala draws on the Mahāyāna philosophical paradox that physical form and emptiness share the same ultimate nature<sup>178</sup> (Namdroling 2002: 50).

rarefied idea, emptiness of self-existence (*bdag med* or *stong pa nyid*; Skt. *śūnyatā*). I wondered how young girls first understand the *yi dam* when they become Ge bcags nuns. Do they relate to it as an external deity as a young Vaishnava devotee might, or a Christian? And how do Ge bcags nuns come to fully understand the *yi dam's* nature in a nunnery that does not teach them theory or interpretation in scheduled classes? A middle-aged nun told me:

As a young nun, I didn't really understand the *yi dam*. I hadn't had instructions on the nature of mind (*khrid ka*) at that point. But my faith and devotion were strong, and I received blessings. Slowly, as I heard the lamas' instructions, I understood the indivisibility of the *yi dam* and my own mind.

As she grows up in the Ge bcags world, a nun learns through a partly unspoken process of repeatedly reciting and enacting the words in the texts over time, while absorbing the examples and references made by older nuns and occasional teachings from male lamas. As for all Ge bcags' practices, as I further discuss in Chapter Five, instructions are often imparted informally, which almost seems to be by the tradition's design. Instructions are given regularly and deliberately enough to comprise a tradition, but often in unsystematic ways that allow for spontaneity. Some of the most profound teachings at Ge bcags are exchanged at unplanned gatherings, like when sitting in the sun with a senior nun at the shrine hall entrance, or over dinner soup in a visiting lama's room.

The same is true for the insights in Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's Sixteen Volumes and revelatory knowledge in the *gter ma* tradition in general: the time and place are often unplanned<sup>179</sup>, while occurring within a broader tradition of tantric practice and instructions that cultivate conditions for spontaneous revelation. Another consideration is that the Ge bcags nuns sometimes package and refer to highest Buddhist knowledge as 'the lama', so that when the nun above said 'the lamas' instructions' I might have understood her to mean the way she had learned Dharma overall, including from senior nuns who are also sometimes called lamas.

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<sup>179</sup> E.g. when falling asleep, or in an inspired stream of consciousness like when Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche put a *dgongs gter* to paper while flying from France to Bhutan. The Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche anecdote was told by Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche at a public talk in Sydney on 6 February 2020.

As to the content of Ge bcags' instructions, as we have seen so far, the pith is repeated articulation of the principle of Buddha nature, which is conceptually simple: Buddha is to be found in the nun's own awareness, which is always empty, yet cognisant, by nature. In practice, however, psychophysical experiences are complex and consequential, and most of Ge bcags' instructions are about how to manage the mind-body as it reorientates towards conceptually unconditioned awareness, and how to correctly place one's attention in meditation. Over years, a nun recalls the Buddha nature principle over and over again in her thoughts and through direct engagement in meditation. Her embeddedness in the nunnery with its Buddhist language and the lived and historical examples of other nuns and male yogins reflect and guide her understanding.

### **Faith, devotion and compassion**

Devotion (*mos gus*, interacts with *dad pa*, 'faith', and *dag snang*) ought not be overlooked as an integral cognitive and emotional force directing mind-body in Vajrayāna technologies of consciousness<sup>180</sup>. Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho recalls in his *rnam thar* a conversation with 'Jam mgon kong sprul, who shared the proverb, "All past bKa' brgyud realised beings came solely from devotion. Great meditators can be led astray in meditation, but in devotion meditation cannot be led astray" (rDo rje 1998: 130). She rab bzang mo, one of Ge bcags rDzogs chen masters who lived at the nunnery before and after the Cultural Revolution, gave as her only meditation teaching to a group of foreign visitors: "Do not try to stop conceptual thoughts but let them arise. Know their nature by praying to the lama, understanding that the lama's mind and one's own mind are inseparable." These anecdotes draw attention to the centrality of devotion in Ge bcags' Vajrayāna value system and orientation. Devotion (along with *dad pa* and *dag snang*) is indeed visceral in the *rnam thar* of most Tibetan saints, and heavily emphasised in scriptures and practices across all Tibetan Buddhist lineages.

Another anecdote shows how trust and devotion orientate Ge bcags nuns on their training path. I once shared a room with a Ge bcags rDor slob who was the niece of Shes rab bzang

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<sup>180</sup> See minute 4:17 to 5:27 of <https://vimeo.com/110416922> for a video glimpse of Ge bcags' culture of devotion. This shows an elderly Ge bcags nun recalling Shes rab bzang mo ('Shes bzang'), another elderly Ge bcags nun renowned for her rDzogs chen realisation. The former nun's own words of devotion, the last ones on her lips when she died in January 2020, are heard from 5:15-5:27.

mo. This rDor slob was raised by Shes rab bzang mo and nursed her in her final years, all the while soaking up the exemplary presence and pith instructions of her aunt whose meditative insight was renowned in practice lineage circles. (In her final months Shes rab bzang mo was bedridden with her body crippled from disease, yet she regularly described her surroundings as a 'pure realm' [*zhing khams*] and said she experienced no physical sickness. She stayed in *thugs dam* [post-death *samādhi*] for days after her death and remains an inspiring mentor in the hearts of the Ge bcags nuns.) This rDor slob, who teaches Ge bcags practices at numerous branch nunneries, is herself an exemplary presence whose stable meditative gaze I have never seen falter, even with blood running down her face from an injury after a fairly major car accident. (She fully recovered.) She praised her aunt as being truly awakened, while she was like an insect in a puddle in comparison. After talking more about her experiences learning from her aunt and other Ge bcags lamas, and counselling me on how to meditate (for shorter sessions, more often), she made three prostrations on her bed and went to sleep murmuring "Guru, your kindness is great. Precious Guru, you are tremendously kind<sup>181</sup>."

Studstill (2005) offers a cogent discussion on the role of faith in the process of cognitive development. In the context of rDzogs chen training, an outlook is cultivated in direct opposition to the dualistic frame of reference of ordinary cognitive function. The rDzogs chen view, in tandem with the yogas and creative visualisations of tantric rituals, disrupts the habitual structures of self and the world, effectively opening the mind to a profound state of cognitive dissonance. 'The break-down of the cognitive structures that maintain the hermeneutical circle of ordinary experience is simultaneously an encounter with the unknown' (Studstill 2005: 238). Studstill draws on a description of systems theory, where disruption of a system can lead to a contracting of a system's boundaries (to disassociation or psychopathy/spiritual crisis) or to a greater opening of the system's boundaries (expansion of one's self-knowledge). Faith – as a deep trust that one will be held in the leap toward an experience previously unknown to the conceptual mind – can render the experience an expansive one (Studstill 2005: 238-240). Faith based on a correct, prior understanding of the process (*rgyu mtshan shes pa'i dad pa*, 'reasoned faith' in Tibetan terms) thus supports

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<sup>181</sup> *bla ma bka' drin che bla dkon mchog bka' drin che*

engagement in meditative techniques that lead to nondual consciousness, and is considered a crucial gnostic bridge to rDzogs chen knowledge (*rig pa*) (Dilgo 2010; Patrul 1998: 149-175).

Male yogins of the Ge bcags community told me that such collapse of one's frame of reference of self and the world is not unusual in yogins while undergoing intensive, prolonged training in tantric yogas and meditation. Frightening visions and uncomfortable psychological experiences occur when subtle body consciousnesses become increasingly refined; descriptions include dream and daytime visits from evil spirits intending to harm or mislead the meditator. Ultimately, as the yogins and Ge bcags nuns explained, such experiences and spirits are understood as meaningful 'tests' (*tshod len*) projecting from one's own consciousness. They explained that practitioners with strong, heartfelt attitudes of faith and devotion are able to pass through such experiences and gain greater insight, while those in whom these attitudes are weak are more prone to distress and psychological breakdown<sup>182</sup>.

Devotion is a close relative of altruistic compassion (Skt. *bodhicitta*, *byang chug sems*<sup>183</sup>) in the range of the Ge bcags nuns' heartfelt religious attitudes. Compassion is of course an integral motivational disposition cultivated in Tibetan Buddhism, and all of the nuns' practices begin and end with verses of aspiration that the practice be beneficial for all sentient beings in the universe. In conversations with Ge bcags nuns and lamas, one regularly hears that a person's correct view of emptiness (which cannot be directly observed or verbally expressed) can be inferred by the strength of their compassion. This is based on the core philosophical tenet in Mahāyāna that compassion and wisdom are two aspects of the same nondual nature of reality (Chandrakirti 2002: 59-61), which is depicted in Tibetan tantra by *yab yum* ('father-mother') deities in sexual union.

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<sup>182</sup> Such psychological breakdown does happen among Tibetan meditators. I witnessed one dreadlocked meditator become incapacitated and dependent on family and psychiatric care over several years. I am not aware of his long-term background. Other monks explained he had been too earnest and tense in his practice.

<sup>183</sup> *byang chub sems*, the 'mind of enlightenment', is the selfless attitude that the Mahāyāna (or Tibetan Vajrayāna) Buddhist cultivates as one's motivation for attaining enlightenment in order to guide all sentient beings beyond suffering.

Like devotion, compassion is pronounced in the nuns' characters, and in the absence of their ready theoretical explanations of their practices, both qualities stand out in their conversations and behaviour as indications of what they are becoming. For all their renown as 'Tibetan yoginī' who can dry off wet sheets in winter and hold their breath for minutes during *rtsa rlung* yoga, I and other foreign visitors have found the strongest first impression the nuns make is with their warm-hearted character. The nuns walk up to guests to hold and warm their hands, to see that they are fed and dressed warmly during ceremonies in the shrine hall, and they are sensitive to a person's states of mind and offer sincere advice when they see a person is unhappy.

### **rDzogs chen as the hermeneutic imbuing all of Ge bcags' practices**

The above analysis of Ge bcags' practices shows the importance of *yi dam* at Ge bcags Nunnery. It is not to ignore some historical and contemporary Tibetan schools of thought that posit the independence of formless rDzogs chen or Mahāmudrā meditation from tantric visualisations. Such interpretations contrast tantric visualisation practices (which involve some mental construction) as part of a 'path of transformation' (*sgyur lam*) with what they consider the pure Mahāmudra or rDzogs chen approach of self-liberation (*rang grol*) which non-discursively self-liberates through 'letting be' in original nature (*rang bab*) (Germano 1994: 226-227; Studstill 2005: 130). In contemporary Tibetan practice these methods are rarely insulated entities, however, and at Ge bcags they are inextricable. In rDzogs chen, spontaneous perfection (*lhun grub*) is considered inseparable from one's primordially pure nature (*ka dag*), and this imbues all practice elements at Ge bcags as the tradition's overarching hermeneutic. This principle of primordial purity (or Buddha nature, *bde gshegs snying po*) is again the 'foundation' (*gzhi*) that is taught from the beginning of the nuns' careers and underlies all of their lifelong training. In viewing oneself as already a Buddha in *yi dam* practice, fully complete with all enlightened qualities, the nuns do not stray from immediate presence of awareness, and this non-straying cultivates abiding in nondual *rig pa* (Studstill 2005: 168).

### The relation of rDzogs chen and tantric deity *sādhanā* among Ge bcags' texts

At Ge bcags, the relationship of rDzogs chen and tantric deity *sādhanā* interestingly mirrors that in some of the earliest tantric literature, as seen in recent studies of early Mahāyoga and 'mind series' (*sems sde*) texts. van Schaik and others have found the rDzogs chen doctrine of primordially enlightened awareness and associated terms appearing in Mahāyoga's earliest tantra, the Guhyagarbha (rGyud gsang ba snying po) (Karmay 2007; van Schaik 2004, 2004a; Rich 2016). van Schaik and Germano have both observed in such early Mahāyoga material that rDzogs chen was embedded as an interpretive approach with close relation to deity *sādhanā*, while sometimes found in separate, pithy commentaries (Germano 1994: 211; van Schaik 2004a: 5). In such cases, 'rDzogs chen'<sup>184</sup> does not seem to have been a distinct tradition from tantra<sup>185</sup>. van Schaik cites a passage from such a separate rDzogs chen commentary, written by a Mahāyoga figure probably in the early 9<sup>th</sup> century, which explains how deity yoga is to be approached in reference to the Guhyagarbha tantra:

It does not matter whether all of the phenomena of mind and mental appearances, affliction and enlightenment, are understood or not. At this very moment, without accomplishing it through a path or fabricating it with antidotes, one should remain in the spontaneous presence of the body, speech, and mind of primordial buddhahood (in van Schaik 2004: 174).

While such a commentary written in reference to the Guhyagarbha tantra did not refer to specific rituals, it existed alongside other manuals directing Mahāyoga deity yoga rituals (van Schaik 2004). Whether or not this pattern is found in wider research of early tantric and rDzogs chen literature, or accords with other Tibetan Buddhist presentations of the two, it is very much the case with rDzogs chen literature and praxis at Ge bcags.

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<sup>184</sup> One of the earliest appearances of the term 'rDzogs chen' is in the Guhyagarbha tantra (rGyud thams cad kyi rgyal po dpal sgyu 'phrul rtsa ba'i rgyud gsang ba snying po) referring to the ritual moment of climax in sexual yoga. As a term referring to the doctrine of spontaneous perfection and primordial purity, 'rDzogs chen' followed later (van Schaik 2004: 167-168).

<sup>185</sup> It appears that gNub chen sangs rgyas ye shes (9<sup>th</sup> century) later organised Atiyoga/rDzogs chen as a vehicle within the ordered system of nine *yāna* (*theg pa rim pa dgu*) in the ninth century in Tibet (Rich 2016; van Schaik 2004).

Despite the close relation of deity *sādhana* and rDzogs chen at Ge bcags, throughout Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's Sixteen Volumes there are distinct sections of rDzogs chen instructions, some of them twenty-one folios long, with no reference whatsoever to the tantric *sādhana* visualisations and rituals the nuns spend most of their day practising (see Tshangs dbyangs vol. 11: 161-182). A typical passage from one of these states: 'It is not attained by effort; the true nature is effortlessly seen. Let go of tiring mental activity and simply view the face of Samantabhadra' (Tshangs dbyangs vol. 11: 171). Among Ge bcags' texts there are further supplementary rDzogs chen commentaries composed by lamas of other lineages that have no reference to rituals, for example, a handwritten *khrid ka* instruction from rDza dpal sprul rin po che that most of the older nuns read quietly on occasion. At the same time, there are plenty of separate ritual manuals filling Ge bcags' thick volumes of texts, that guide the ritual recitations and activities of individual and collective *sādhana*. However, throughout all of Ge bcags' *sādhana* texts (that comprise the bulk of the nuns' regular reading), the rDzogs chen hermeneutic is present, contextualising and guiding the interpretation of *yi dam* visualisation and rituals. One of countless examples from Ge bcags' *sādhana* literature is this confession (*bshags pa*) verse from the bKa' brgyad *sgrub chen* text:

The dharmadhātu is free of conceptual elaboration  
 The dualistic view of existence or nonexistence is so wearying  
 Conceptually grasping at phenomenal characteristics is so afflicting  
 I confess in the great, spacious bliss beyond concept!<sup>186</sup> (Tshangs dbyangs vol. 13: 254)

The ability to abide full-time in rDzogs chen nondual awareness (*rig pa*), during and outside of formal practice sessions, is the consummate aim of Ge bcags' lifelong training program. All components of the nuns' practice system are intended to support their ability to prolong and integrate this 'vibrant and ceaselessly active type of awareness', as Germano has usefully described it, into their everyday lives (Germano 1994: 225).

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<sup>186</sup> *Chos kyi dbyings nyid spros pa med pa la/ yod med gnyis su lta ba thang re chad/ dngos po mtshan mar 'dzin pa nyon re mongs/ spros med bde chen klong du bshags par bgyi/*

### The three levels of Vajrayāna transmission at Ge bcags: *dbang*, *lung* and *khrid ka*

Three integral transmission streams of the nuns' Vajrayāna learning tradition are tantric empowerments (*dbang*), textual transmissions (*lung*) and personalised meditation instructions (*khrid ka*; also *man ngag*, *gdams ngag*). *dBang* and *lung* necessarily involve textual recitations. *Khrid ka* often, but not always, involves scripture, as when a lama teaches from a rDzogs chen text like Tshig gsum gnad brdegs or mKa' lding gshogs rlabs<sup>187</sup>. The pith of *khrid ka* is transmitted through symbols and spontaneous speech, and even at times through charged periods of silence.

*Khrid ka* is like the life breath of Ge bcags' teaching tradition. In the context of Ge bcags' rDzogs chen training, *khrid ka* (often *sems khrid* in bKa' brgyud terminology, 'pointing out instructions' in English) is the direct, spontaneous exchange of meditative insight, shared from the teacher's experience of nondual *rig pa* (literally, 'knowing'). Such knowledge is said to be nonverbal and knowable only through one's own meditation experience (Shabkar 2012). Kapstein acknowledges that such personalised instruction is:

... the articulation of the dynamic interaction between master and disciple; it expresses the essentially hermeneutical movement in which the disciple is reoriented in the depth of his or her being to the goal of the teaching (Kapstein 1996: 276).

I witnessed a Ge bcags nun's visit with a senior male yogin of the lineage in his high mountain hermitage, where she travelled specifically to receive his *khrid ka* oral instructions. The yogin was sitting on a chair in a mudbrick hut, next to a wide window looking out to a vast panorama of sky. The nun sat down at his feet, and began to sing a plaintive song to him of spiritual aspiration, spontaneously and without a book. They then both sat in silence for about ten minutes, calmly looking at each other in the eyes (a moment of this was captured in the photo below). This very interaction was the transmission. I was not familiar with the words of the song, which came to her very naturally. It may have been a celebrated segment from a *nam thar* that she had memorised.

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<sup>187</sup> 'Three Words that Strike the Vital Point', based on a verse attributed to dGa' rab rdo rje, and 'Flight of the Garuda', by Zhabs dkar tshogs drug rang grol. These texts very directly point to nonverbal meditation experience.



Figure 27: Silent interaction between a senior male yogin and a nun. Photo: Caterina De Re, 2013.

The formal empowerments (*dbang*) and textual transmissions (*lung*) which lay the scriptural lines of any Tibetan Buddhist lineage are always conferred by male lamas associated with the nunnery. Generally, *khrid ka* instructions are formally transmitted by male lamas within the four levels of tantric empowerments or rDzogs chen teaching gatherings; however it could be said that *khrid ka* is sometimes informally passed from elder to younger nuns during the natural exchanges of daily life. The overall practical knowledge of how to apply the indications in Ge bcags' texts, such as 'unite mind and *prāṇa*' and 'rest in the nature of mind'<sup>188</sup>, is embodied by the nuns and shared in casual conversations. So is their practical knowledge of ritual music, *mudrā* and visualisations of each *sādhanā* practised in the retreat divisions and *sgrub chen*. The nuns may not identify these casual exchanges of knowledge as formal *khrid ka* instructions, but the nunnery functions day-to-day largely on the basis of such shared understanding.

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<sup>188</sup> 'rlung sems byer med du zhogs' (from a handwritten copy of Ge bcags' *gTum mo Aspiration Prayer, gTum mo'i gsol 'debs*); and 'sems rang bab du gnas' (from a handwritten copy of a Ge bcags meditation instruction, *Nyams len rgan pos mjug khrid bzhugs so*).

It is interesting to note that of these three levels of Vajrayāna transmission, the nuns transmit the essential knowledge of their experiential tradition through such informal, oral exchanges, but their voice is virtually silent in textual mediums. The ineffable quality of yogic knowledge, born from experience but not of words, lends it a quieter voice in the arena of ideas, and when it is not written down, it can be overlooked altogether by history. While senior Ge bcags nuns presumably experience yogic knowledge after many years of dedicated training, it is not articulated by them beyond the practical sphere of the nunnery and its branches. The same is not true for the male members of the Ge bcags lineage, several of whom have composed written volumes of Buddhist commentary and *rnam thar* and been memorialised in the nunnery's written annals<sup>189</sup>.

To what extent a Ge bcags nun gains rDzogs chen understanding through daily life interactions with older nuns, in discussions over meals and between friends on the hillside, is major question I still hold. Several of the older nuns, aged fifty to seventy, are able to casually share impressive insights into the nature of awareness and reality – comparable to what I have heard from accomplished male lamas and from rDzogs chen texts – yet these nuns are not usually designated as teachers in the nunnery. How much does the psychological projection of 'guru' ('lama') onto certain types of human beings (usually an older male at Ge bcags) affect a nun's ability to comprehend the higher knowledge they share?

### **What the nuns say about the ultimate purpose of their practice tradition**

I remark in other chapters on the nuns' general reticence to give theoretical explanations about their texts and practices. I often interpreted this to be due to their culturally conditioned meekness, bearing in mind that their curriculum does not have a significant theoretical learning component to equip them with such explanatory language. While humility is likely one reason for their silence, the nuns' lack of ready theoretical explanations about their practices actually says a lot. As mentioned, most of Ge bcags' instructions are for guiding the nuns through the many challenges and pitfalls that arise as they reorientate their

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<sup>189</sup> Including Tshangs dbyang rgya mtsho, Dung dga' bkra shis rgya mtsho, dBang drag rdo rje, O rgyan nyi ma, Jo dga (a.k.a. Jo skyabs) and others.

mind-bodies towards rDzogs chen *rig pa* awareness. This is true of most Completion Stage literature across practice lineages (Kongtrul 2002: 18). When it comes to the actual nonverbal knowledge that accomplished nuns come to know through their meditation practice, however, what can be said?

The Ge bcags community has favoured analogies for the way their tradition's highest wisdom is knowable through experience, but inexpressible in words. At the beginning of this thesis, the nun Che mchog described how learning through Ge bcags practice is like a vase being filled up: until she has fully experienced it, there is nothing she could say. Another analogy commonly shared at Ge bcags is that *rig pa* 'knowing' is like a mute person tasting sugar: a mute person knows the taste experientially, but they are unable to put it into words. Older Ge bcags nuns have steadfastly trained full-time for decades to gain familiarity with nonconceptual *rig pa* awareness, and presumably a number of them have accomplished this. Such nuns' meditative insight is not directly perceivable, but it can be inferred from their poised and compassionate personalities, the steady gaze of their eyes, their ability to live in close quarters with many other nuns, and in other human ways that demonstrate their states of mind. An older male lama who used to live at Ge bcags in the 1980s and 90s, who now looks after branch nunneries, explained his perspective on the Ge bcags nuns' purpose in their lifelong practices:

The nuns are motivated by *bodhicitta*. And they don't have much suffering (*sdug bsngal*, mental fetters) like jealousy or anxiety, do they? They are easy-going and cheerful, confident in their true nature being Buddha nature. They know this with confidence that emerges from their heartfelt trust in the guru and the teachings (personal communication, Karma dam chos, June 2020).

In her study of the Tibetan *smyung gnas* ('enduring the fast') fasting ritual of Avalokiteśvara and its origins in the story of the Kashmiri nun, dGe slong ma dpal mo, Vargas-O'Bryan (2001) points to the particular resonance such human stories have in communicating Buddhism's main principles of suffering and transformation. dGe slong ma dpal mo's story is of a woman whose intense suffering from disease reoriented her towards the compassionate Buddha, Avalokiteśvara, to her own healing and her founding of the lineage of *smyung gnas* practice. Despite there being other purificatory fasting practices in Tibet, and a lack of historical

certainty about dGe slong ma dpal mo and her many texts, *smyung gnas* has evolved as the favoured fasting practice among Tibetans from all walks of life, with annual *smyung gnas* retreats organised across Tibetan communities during the month of Sa ga zla ba<sup>190</sup>. Vargas-O'Bryan draws attention to how life stories of Buddhist women, with their transformation of intense pain and adversity, have held the attention of Tibetans for centuries by demonstrating Buddhist principles in a human way that doctrine alone cannot communicate. This is true of many *rnam thar* of Tibetan male saints as well, and it is one of the main roles that the *rnam thar* genre performs overall. The human transformation of suffering through Buddhist renunciation and practice is the religion's central soteriological theme (with the Buddha as the doctor and Dharma as the medicine as metaphors for liberation) (Vargas-O'Bryan 2001: 157).

Outside of Sa ga zla ba retreats, as Vargas-O'Bryan notes, it is in nunneries where *smyung gnas* are most often practised and dGe slong ma dpal mo's story implicitly retold. In Ge bcags' revival period after the Cultural Revolution, the nuns committed to each performing eight *smyung gnas* every year (additional to the hundred sets of *smyung gnas* a new nun performs after joining the nunnery), and they have maintained this without interruption to the present. Ge bcags' surrounding lay population takes special interest in the nuns' *smyung gnas* practices, making regular offerings for *smyung gnas* prayer dedications for deceased loved ones. The nuns' demonstrated renunciation and hardships in the *smyung gnas* seems to speak to the laity's faith in the purifying power of the practice.

The Ge bcags nuns have little to say about the highest knowledge that they cultivate, so they perhaps make their most lucid point as human exemplars of the meanings of their tradition. Indeed, this is how they have communicated and carried out their roles as clergy in wider Nang chen society and earned their reputation as practitioners worthy of royal endorsement. Within their families and the lay population that surrounds them, the nuns act as counsellors, ritual specialists, mediators and human examples of faith and personal fulfilment in Buddhist practice.

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<sup>190</sup> The fourth Tibetan lunar month that celebrates the birth, *nirvāṇa* and *parinirvāṇa* of Śākyamuni Buddha.

### How the Ge bcags nuns die

In the final analysis, the way that Ge bcags nuns die is a striking proclamation on their tradition and practices. I discussed earlier the manner in which many of the elderly Ge bcags nuns have passed away, and the role that their examples have played in the influx of new nuns since the 1980s. Seven elderly Ge bcags nuns have passed away since my first visit to the nunnery, and all but one remained physically independent until shortly before their deaths, collecting their own boiled water from the central kitchen, wandering on their own throughout the nunnery grounds and participating in collective *sgrub chen*. They were also generally reported as having positive states of mind in their final days, giving candid advice to younger nuns to practise well and not waste their lives, and describing images of their *yi dam* (such as Tārā and Hayagrīva) appearing in the space before them in the days and hours before they died. A few Ge bcags nuns reported<sup>191</sup> supernatural signs appearing when these elderly nuns died, including flowers growing out of the snow in winter and unusual rainbow patterns appearing over the sky burial site when her body was offered to vultures. These events are highly meaningful to the Ge bcags community; they speak compellingly to the nuns' orientation and sense of purpose in their lifelong practice tradition.

A number of younger nuns, aged approximately twenty to fifty years-old, have also passed away over the years I have visited Ge bcags Nunnery. Most of these died without any reports of special events at their passing. One, however, Thar phyin chos mtsho, passed away in the Nang chen County hospital, staffed by Chinese and Tibetan doctors educated in Chinese state schools and trained in modern conventional medicine. In the days before she died several nuns and monks sat praying at her bedside. In her final moments she asked their help to sit up straight so that her central channel (*rtsa dbu ma*) which runs along the spine, and thereby *prāṇa*, would be straight and clear for her consciousness at death. Although she had been bedridden with a stooped spine for months<sup>192</sup>, she managed to sit up straight with her legs crossed, and then passed away. A male lama who was present called in the medical staff to

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<sup>191</sup> Not publicly, but when I asked them.

<sup>192</sup> She died from tuberculosis.

witness her death at this point; his intention was to challenge their materialist view at a time when many in Nang chen society were rejecting their traditional religious beliefs (personal communication, dBang drag rin po che, September 2016). Impressed by her straight posture and the atmosphere in the room as she died, the staff made an exception to hospital rules and let her body and the vigil remain for twenty-four hours. Her body was then moved elsewhere, and she was reported to have stayed in *thugs dam* for seven days in total after her death<sup>193</sup> (personal communication, O rgyan chos sgron, August 2014). This story of Thar phyin chos mtsho's passing has since been repeatedly retold by Ge bcags nuns and male lamas as evidence that inspires and reaffirms their practice.

Another young Ge bcags nun, towards the end of her prolonged terminal illness, disassociated her physical experience of her illness from her self-consciousness as a method of practising compassion and reducing her own suffering. One of Ge bcags' rDor slob explained how this appeared:

She hadn't yet done a three-year retreat. She had only done some *sgrub chen* and spun the Mani wheel<sup>194</sup>. She was sick for a long time and coughing blood. Towards the end she started to talk of another person in front of her that was sick and suffering, whom she felt sorry for. This sick person was her own aggregates<sup>195</sup>! She felt mercy for the person but no physical suffering herself. She wore two *mala* rosaries around her neck, one for her and one for this 'sick person' (personal communication, O rgyan chos sgron, August 2014).

At the end of Chapter One I quoted a middle-aged nun relating how most of the elder nuns who raised her age group did not complain of suffering from disease before they died ("My body has disease, but I am fine."). Sumegi (2013) discusses the different types of bodies within Tibetan Buddhist subtle body view and praxis, within which the ability to separate one's identification from the body's physical pain is comprehensible. In dream yoga (*rmi lam*

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<sup>193</sup> That is, after her heart and breathing ceased, her flesh remained pliant and her heart remained warm for this period of time while, according to Tibetan Buddhist explanations, her consciousness remained in 'clear light' (*'od gsal*) or nondual self-awareness.

<sup>194</sup> A large wheel at the entrance of the nunnery's shrine hall with millions of mantras inside that is spun as an action of prayer.

<sup>195</sup> In Buddhist technical terms the 'aggregates' (*phung po*) are the psychophysical aggregates that make up a person: material form, sensations, perceptions, mental activity or formations and consciousness. Here the nun simply meant her physical person.

*rnal 'byor*), for example, a practitioner deliberately disassociates a psychic body from the gross physical body in order to experience less bounded states of consciousness (Sumegi 2013: 71). Similarly in Tibetan Buddhism, after the gross body perishes the subtle body is understood to continue as a mental body (*yid lus*) in intermediate states (*bar do*) between death and rebirth (Sumegi 2013: 75). This view of a continuum of subtle body consciousness is fundamental in the nuns' engagement with their texts and practices.

## Conclusion

The analysis in this chapter has shown that the subtle body of Ge bcags' Vajrayāna tradition is a paradigm encompassing all elements of the nuns' practice tradition and culture – including, most importantly, the nondual quality of their highest knowledge. Within the integrative mind-body orientation of the nuns' practices and worldview, *yi dam* deity visualisation and nonconceptual meditation are inextricably related, as are formal written and informal oral modes of knowledge transmission. Above all in this analysis of Ge bcags' practices and their underlying principles, the nuns' most pronounced expressions of their knowledge (which they do not write or readily articulate, and is ultimately nonverbal) is through their ways of living and dying. The nuns' human example is the most integrated whole of their mind-body knowledge cultivation.

## CHAPTER FIVE:

### Ge bcags' tacit quality of knowledge and the nuns' ways of reading

Before a Ge bcags nun can engage with any of the practices outlined in Chapters Three and Four, first she must learn to read. Chapter Five begins by considering the importance of reading in Ge bcags' tradition, and how the nuns learn to read and memorise. I examine the collective and literally embodied ways of reading and learning at the nunnery, with reference to literature on tacit knowledge and orality and literacy. The chapter then further examines the relationship of texts to oral teachings at Ge bcags, and the meaningful place of informality within a formal tradition of knowledge transmission.

#### Reading in Tibet

The ability to read is foundational for Buddhists in Tibet, for ordained as well as for lay people, in order to engage in the daily prayers and rituals central to Tibetan religious life. This is seen in Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's strong yearning as a young yak-herder to learn to read, along with his strong aspiration for Dharma practice (also in that his first full reading was of the bSam pa lhun grub prayer to Padmasambhava). Ge bcags' texts are themselves a literal foundation of the nuns' knowledge. They hold the signs, metaphors and verbal instructions to ritual and meditative experience, and serve as a medium of memory supporting the transmission of the nunnery's practical knowledge over generations.

Dreyfus and Ekvall have noted that a clear picture of Tibetan literacy levels across regions of pre-modern Tibet is elusive (Dreyfus 2005: 80; Ekvall 1964: 124). Speaking only of Nang chen, I can infer based on Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's *rnam thar* and my observations of Nang chen families and *dgon pa* that, at least for the last century, many people were likely capable of reading and comprehending prayer texts in community ceremonies and household daily recitations – prayers like bZang spyod smon lam (Prayer of Noble Conduct) and Tārā praises. Most people were not likely capable of comprehending written works across genres like medicine, poetry or Buddhist philosophy, nor were they competent writers. Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's life story illustrates that the workload of a Nang chen yak-herder allowed little time to develop literacy skills. The majority of Nang chen families were yak-herders, with

those in lowlands also involved in agriculture (Gruschke 2008). From the 1980s, with mandatory state schooling and movements towards Tibetan secular education, youth studying Tibetan language in higher secondary schools and colleges have become highly literate across genres of Tibetan writing and publishing. More recently, however, specialisation in Tibetan language is becoming increasingly rare as Chinese language is the dominant medium for economic, state administrative and educational purposes (Hartley 2017; Roche 2017). Before the Cultural Revolution in Nang chen, religion was the context of culture and its highest forms of knowledge, and people's motivation to read was often for religious-cultural purposes.

### **Learning to read at Ge bcags**

I discussed in Chapter Three some of the nuns' backgrounds and motivations for ordaining at Ge bcags Nunnery. The average age of a new Ge bcags nun is different today than it was twenty years ago. In the 1980s and 90s most girls joined Ge bcags in their early-to-late teens, almost all of them from local yak-herding families. Today the average age of a new nun is some years younger; each of the last several years a handful of five- or six-year-old girls have been sent to Ge bcags by their families to learn Tibetan reading and to absorb the blessings of the nunnery before they attend government primary schools in town. This early, temporary learning as a nun seems to be a deliberate cultural catchment by families before their children are sent into an education system outside of their native cultural background.

Most new nuns have older relatives at Ge bcags whom they live with for the first few years after coming to the nunnery. Basic needs are looked after by the older nun(s), and the new nun in turn helps with chores like boiling water and collecting meals when they are served from the nunnery's common kitchen. The first training requirement for a new nun is to learn to read, and she is taught personally by the older nun (sometimes there may be several) with whom she lives. She is first taught how to spell (*sbyor klog*), in their room or elsewhere in the nunnery, early in the morning and at intervals throughout the day. This is accomplished through a step-by-step rhythmic recitation of stringing together basic consonants with all permutations of vowels, head and subjoined letters, and finally prefixes and suffixes to form whole words. After mastering words, she learns to form sentences, picking up on the

meaning and grammatical particles as she goes. She is taught these steps personally by her elder nun, and practises reading sentences and pages in a playful way, together with other young nuns. Young nuns or monks in any Tibetan *dgon pa* can be seen channelling their childhood enthusiasm into the step-by-step rhythmic reading allowed for by the metric verse format of Tibetan religious texts.



Figure 28: Young *Ge bcags* nun reading with older nuns. Photo: Olivier Adam, 2017.

After gaining competency in reading sentences, younger nuns are pushed to read challenging texts like the *Padma bka' thang*, a life-story of Padmasambhava cherished by many Tibetan communities. The *Padma bka' thang* is a large and daunting book to a new reader, filled with rich vocabulary, poetic nuance and complicated mantras (Tibetan phonetics of Sanskrit), and practising with this book elicits a nun's reading proficiency. It is especially useful in facilitating reading ability of the *sgrub chen* texts that *Ge bcags* nuns spend much of their daily lives reading, which are replete with complicated *dhāraṇīs* and extended mantras (*gzungs sngags; dzrab dgongs*).

There is no secular syllabus of varied topics to learn at *Ge bcags*, so learning to read complex religious texts consumes much of a nun's mental focus in her first few years in the nunnery. She also spends her first years learning to play ritual instruments and sculpt the many different types of intricate *gtor ma* cakes that are offered during *sgrub chen* and other ritual

ceremonies. Young nuns participate in the nunnery's *sgrub chen* and other collective ceremonies in the main temple, where the energised ritual atmosphere and communal chanting gives a synergetic boost to her reading stride. It takes a typical new nun three or four years to gain full proficiency in reading Ge bcags texts. I was impressed to see a ten-year-old nun capable of reading an entire *sgrub chen* text, including pages of complicated mantra, at the same speed as older nuns (while I, who had learned Tibetan for fifteen years, struggled to keep up). A young nun also practises reading alone, like when she is on yak-herding duty and can be spotted on mountainsides hovering over her text, sounding out words and sentences while the yaks graze around her. Most of the time Ge bcags nuns are not solitary readers, nor for that matter are monks and nuns of any Tibetan *dgon pa*, where hours of daily religious life are spent in collective recitation of *sādhanā* liturgies to tantric deities. Even more time is spent this way in rNying ma and bKa' brgyud *dgon pa* that typically have annual schedules of several *sgrub chen* ceremonies<sup>196</sup>. Again, this has changed in practice lineage *dgon pa* over the last two decades since many have increased their programs of commentarial textual study (*bshad grwa*), and the ways in which these communities read are re-orientating towards different knowledge goals (McDougal 2016).



Figure 29: *gTor ma* for a *bKa' brgyud sgrub chen*. Photo: author, 2018.

<sup>196</sup> dGe lugs pa *dgon pa* also have extended group ceremonies of tantric *sādhanā* like Guhyasamāja and Yamāntaka, though they are not usually called *sgrub chen*.

There are no scheduled group reading or grammar classes at Ge bcags, and the personalised manner of learning to read reflects the personalised manner of knowledge transmission at Ge bcags overall. Informality is a meaningful tenor in their learning tradition, as will be further discussed below. Over the last few years with a new cultural emphasis on degree-oriented education in Tibetan *dgon pa, mkhan po* occasionally visit Ge bcags and teach classes on Tibetan grammar and philosophy. For most of Ge bcags' history, however, there were few formal classes of that kind and nuns learned grammar mainly by doing; that is, they intuited the logic of grammar by repeatedly reciting and enacting the texts in practice over years. A new nun's initial knowledge of grammar also depended on the literacy level of her household and that of the older nuns who taught her. In most cases this was fairly low, but in aristocratic families literacy was cultural capital and promoted among family members, with elder lay and ordained relatives teaching the younger ones how to read. Nuns from such families stand out among the Ge bcags nuns for their literacy skills. They occasionally teach lessons on spelling and grammar to groups of nuns, and they take leading roles in textual production. In the nunnery's early years in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, for example, the nun-lama mTsho rgyal sgröl ma from the aristocratic Rakshi clan was a main scribe of Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's collected works. In 2018, two nuns in their late forties from educated families were integral in editing the most recent publication of Ge bcags' ritual texts, a project led by Tshogs gnyis rin po che and published in collaboration with dPal yul monastery in gDe dge.

### **Purpose of the nuns' writing**

Almost all of Ge bcags' texts, prior to digital publication in the 1980s, were in cursive scripts (*dbu med; yi ge bar ma* in Nang chen dialect), as were those of other practice lineage communities in Nang chen<sup>197</sup>. As mentioned, the Ge bcags nuns have not written their own

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<sup>197</sup> The prevalence of cursive writing (*'khyug yig*) over block-style printing (*dbu can*) in pre-modern practice lineages may point to the educational differences from more scholastic Tibetan schools discussed in Chapter Two. Dreyfus highlights the rarity of writing skills in pre-modern dGe lugs pa monasteries where debate was emphasised, and exoteric studies were sometimes separated from higher tantric recitations until later in a monk's career (Dreyfus 2003: 120). Perhaps correspondingly, *dbu can* is often found to be the predominant writing form in dBus gtsang and A mdo areas with majority dGe lugs pa populations. In practice lineages like Ge bcags, higher tantric recitations comprise much of the daily reading. Prayers and pith instructions of various lamas may be copied and added to these daily recitations, while a proliferation of commentary in monastic colleges also involved more first-hand writing. The number of men who wrote commentaries from Tshangs

commentaries or histories, unlike some male members of their community. The nuns can read cursive and printed scripts at high speeds, including pages of complicated mantras, however most nuns do not become fluent writers. As in semi-literate societies whose core knowledge is primarily tacit and orally transmitted, writing is more of a practical tool for the Ge bcags nuns than a creative means to facilitate the expression and development of ideas (Abram 1996: 71).

Scriptures are the basis for engaging in almost every one of the nuns' practices<sup>198</sup>, so having copies of texts is a requirement for each nun. In the nunnery's first decades, and later in the 1980s and 90s before the spread of electronic printing presses, the nunnery's scriptural corpus was handwritten by expert scribes, while nuns became practised writers from handwriting their own inserts of supplementary prayers and practices. As a result, the oldest nuns at Ge bcags today – those above fifty who were literate before the arrival of Tibetan electronic publishing – are capable of clearly writing in the cursive script common throughout the *dgon pa* of Nang chen, and a few are expert printers. These nuns are fairly capable spellers and can transcribe religious passages and short phrases of practical explanation, although most would not be able to compose a description or narrative without spelling and grammatical errors. Many Ge bcags nuns in their thirties and forties who have trained since the establishment of modern Tibetan publishing houses write an uneven script and misspell words common in spoken Tibetan. This is true across the *dgon pa* and households of Nang chen where people's names are often misspelled, like 'Jam mtshan' which transliterates the Nang chen pronunciation of rGyal mtshan (Victory Banner), and 'sGron ma' for sGrol ma ('Drolma'; Green Tara).

A browse through a nun's volume of daily recitations (typically about five to six hundred pages) shows a melange of different handwritten and electronically printed pages on different sizes and textures of paper. The page ends are black from her flipping them with unwashed fingers, and the volume's colourful, hand-sewn cloth cover (*dpe ras*) is blackened

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dbyangs rgya mtsho's emerging community alone (Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho, Dung dga' bkra shis rgya mtsho, O rgyan nyi ma, dBang drag rdo rje, Jo skyabs and likely others) shows the usefulness of cursive script.  
<sup>198</sup> All except for rDzogs chen, which is guided by oral and textual instructions, but practised as a formless meditation without recitation of a scripture as a basis.

and pungent with the smell of Ge bcags – a mixture of yak dung smoke, fresh air, dirty clothes and medicinal herbs. Nowadays, Ge bcags’ collected volumes of Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho and Ratna gling pa have been republished twice since the 1980s, and all *sgrub chen* texts have been electronically re-printed, while photocopiers in town can copy the nuns’ random page inserts of prayers and instructions that they formerly wrote by hand.

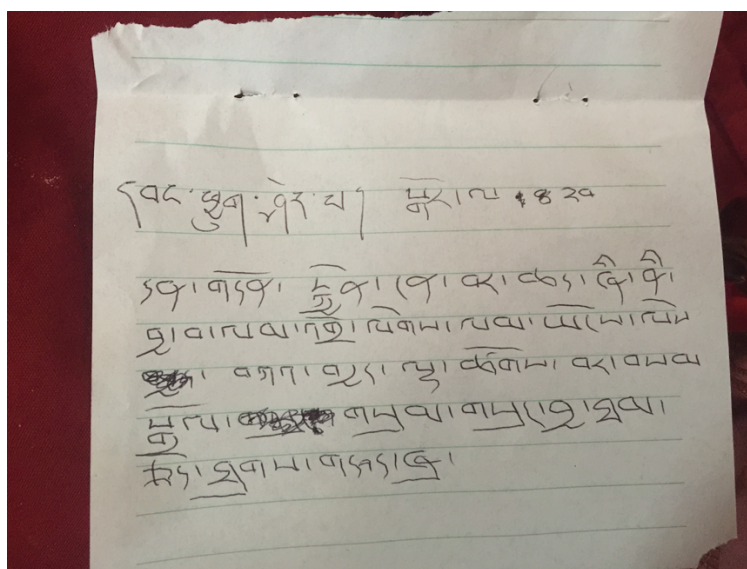


Figure 30: A nun’s handwritten dedication. Photo: author, 2018.

The note was passed with twenty yuan, and says ‘May the gathering deities of bKa’ brgyad take to heart [this prayer] and protect so that all malignant obstacles and harmful spirits are intercepted, cleared and liberated for the easy success of dBang phyug shes rab’s endeavours’.

During a month-long 2018 stay at the nunnery, one of the only reasons I saw for the nuns’ handwriting was to write dedications for family and community members during ritual sessions, on small pieces of paper torn from bags or notebooks. These dedications for their relatives are made during tea and meal breaks, usually twice a day during *sgrub chen* and other collective ceremonies, and are an important dimension of nunnery practice. Two nunnery managers stand at the front of the shrine hall and read out lists of dedications: names of people and the obstacles to be removed to the purposes they want to accomplish. In the bKa’ brgyad *sgrub chen* in 2018 dedications were made for family members and friends for the following purposes: that a household not be washed away by floods; for families’ successful cordyceps business; for safe travels; for successful surgery, healed sicknesses and long lives; to dispel nightmares; for success in children’s school exams (the most common dedication); and for the deceased to have successful passage through the intermediate state

between death and rebirth (*bar do*). These become long lists recited during collective tea and meal breaks, with the nuns passing torn papers of written dedications with yuan money notes to the front of the shrine hall to be read out. The spelling of names is not always correct and the dedication purposes are written in stock religious phrases, like ‘to remove obstacles and accomplish the wishes of’, or ‘for long life without illness, and to be blessed by the Lama’.

### Earlier rarity of scriptures at Ge bcags

Scriptures have always been precious to Tibetans, and even as recently as the 1980s printed texts were relatively rare in Nang chen. A forty-seven-year-old Nang chen nun who now studies Buddhist philosophy at the large monastic community of Ya chen sgar in Sichuan Province told me that when she was a child, there were not enough printed volumes for each person to have a copy for oneself. Systematised, degree-oriented study was unusual in Nang chen (especially for nuns), and the word ‘rDzogs chen’ was not often uttered<sup>199</sup>. Today electronic printing and the internet have revolutionised learning culture in Eastern Tibet, in a way comparable to democratisation of written knowledge during the European Reformation, but even more far-reaching in that Tibetans are now also processing information from the internet. The contemporary flourishing of lay Tibetan literature is a new chapter in Tibetan written history (Hartley & Schiaffini-Vedani 2008). Another watershed is the widespread printing and use of the term ‘rDzogs chen’ on the internet and in people’s conceptualisation and articulation of Buddhist theory and practice<sup>200</sup>.

### Memorisation: learning by heart

The verse format of almost all Ge bcags’ texts in a way serves as the tradition’s interface between orality and literacy. The nuns memorise hundreds of pages of texts in order to have

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<sup>199</sup> This same nun told me in 2018 that the words ‘*rig pa*’ and ‘rDzogs chen’ were rarely spoken in Nang chen thirty years ago, before the spate of digital printing houses and globalisation of Tibetan Buddhism. “We knew these words, but lamas rarely uttered them,” she said.

<sup>200</sup> It seems important to consider how the meaning of rDzogs chen terms, many of them intending an experiential, nonconceptual kind of knowledge, may be conceptually reified through their popularity in English-language Dharma books and the usage of ‘*rig pa*’ in neuroscience studies (Amihai & Kozhevnikov 2014; Lutz et al. 2007).

in mind their *sādhanā* and meditation instructions. They memorise deliberately, earning prizes as young nuns for successful memorisation of nunnery prayers, but more so they memorise through repeatedly reciting the same texts over years. Ge bcags' eldest nun had the entire bKa' brgyad *sgrub chen* scripture of 450 pages memorised from a lifetime of performing the *sgrub chen* each year (personal communication, July 2018). This eldest nun lived from 1929 to 2020, and had joined the nunnery at age twelve before the Cultural Revolution.

Memorisation is integral in Tibetan monastic learning and its methods are common across schools, i.e. memorising through vocalisation with supportive rhythmic melody, rather than through visual mnemonic devices (Dreyfus 2003: 86). 'Learning by heart' is an apt phrase for Buddhist monastic memorising, where knowledge is intended to become fully integrated in one's being, as Yuasa has lucidly highlighted (Yuasa 1987). However a comparison of Dreyfus' study of dGe lugs pa learning with learning at Ge bcags shows that we cannot generalise too broadly about Tibetan monastic learning and memorisation (Dreyfus 2003). The Ge bcags nuns are not required to deliberately memorise chapters of philosophical scriptures in the manner of a Tibetan scholar-monastic. While a vast amount of memorisation does occur throughout Ge bcags training, this is of higher tantric *sādhanā*, meditation and prayer texts. The bulk of the Ge bcags nuns' memorisation happens over years of reciting these texts in daily practice, and not deliberately within a period of days or weeks as in scholarly monastic centres (Dreyfus 2003: 85-87). The purpose of the nuns' memorisation also differs from that of the Ge lugs pa monks in Dreyfus' study, who memorise to store, organise and retrieve core content of their scholastic curriculum<sup>201</sup> (Dreyfus 2003: 79).

Tibetan scholar-monks and nuns *speak* the scholarly pages they have memorised, repeating and deliberating the words in debating and expositional arenas. They may have prayers and liturgies memorised that they collectively recite each day in their shrine halls, but this does not comprise the bulk of their reading and memorisation. Ge bcags nuns, on the other hand,

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<sup>201</sup> dGe lugs pa scholar-monks and nuns do memorise liturgies for collective rituals over time, as in any Tibetan *dgon pa*, but most of their attention in the first decades of their training is given to studying exoteric treatises of Buddhist philosophy.

primarily *chant* all that they have memorised. Most of the nuns' time is spent ritually reciting and enacting written *sādhanā* and meditating on verbal pointers to the nature of mind. Furthermore, the main form of Ge bcags examination is practical (*rgyugs sprod*), whereby a nun performs her yogas or describes her meditation experience to a teacher in person. The nuns occasionally speak about the texts with other nuns as they consider their meaning, but philosophical and logical treatises like Madhyamakāvatāra and Pramāṇavārttika are almost absent from the Ge bcags nuns' curriculum and learning goals, and the nuns do not generally approach their written texts critically. The meaning they store in mind is predominantly practical, recalled in ritual and meditation, and, as we have seen, it is oriented towards experiential, embodied knowledge.



Figure 31: Nuns carrying Ge bcags' scriptures on a dpe skor ('scripture circumambulation') around the nunnery. Photo: Ge bcags dgon pa, 2015.

### But how do they learn?

Without regular scheduled classes on interpreting the texts, how exactly do the Ge bcags nuns learn? As a faith-based tradition, reading at Ge bcags can be compared to reading in other religions such as Judaism, where the scripture (Pentateuch) and reading are fundamental to the tradition's learning. However unlike Judaism, where ways of reading are explicitly prescribed as literal, allegorical, inquiring and esoteric (i.e. *Pardes exegesis*), interpretation of scripture at Ge bcags is not clearly stipulated (Ostow 2018: 21-22). There are interpretative guidelines for reading Tibetan Buddhist scriptures that the nuns are aware of, like 'expedient' and 'definitive meanings' (*drangs don, nges don*; Skt. *neyārtha, nītārtha*), or 'outer', inner' and 'secret' (*phyi, nang, gsang*) degrees of subtlety in meaning. In Tibetan monastic colleges where content is primarily philosophical and approached ratiocinatively, these interpretative guidelines are explicitly taught and considered when reading texts. They are applied less to texts at Ge bcags, where meaning is not so deliberately pointed out, but arrived at primarily through practice. A Ge bcags nun may discuss the meaning of words and passages with teachers and friends, but she does not logically deliberate upon their meaning as much as she experiences it through repeated enactment with her mind-body.

Ge bcags reading is above all a repeated reciting of the texts, over and over again, through years of enacted ritual, visualisation and contemplation, while listening to instructions and looking to the active examples of older nuns and lamas. For Ge bcags nuns, meaning sinks in through a repeated, felt engagement with the words – recited collectively and without any specific audience in mind<sup>202</sup>.

In this way, Ge bcags learning is more like the practical training of dance or music that entails repeated performance of codified formulas with one's body, imagination and breath.

'Repetition is not repetition. The same action makes you feel something completely different by the end,' said the German dancer, Pina Bausch (Kisselgoff 1985). Prolonged repetition in any learning process tends to bring flash moments of comprehension, when understanding

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<sup>202</sup> Although reading in a *sgrub chen* is addressed to a transcendent object of devotion (i.e. Buddha and the ideal that represents), which too has an effect on mind-body.

‘clicks’ or ‘sinks in’. The hourly, daily and yearly repetitions of *sādhanā* at Ge bcags, with their complex recitations and ritual procedures, seem designed to exhaust the ordinary thinking mind, and to bring about a cognitive shift that enables one to comprehend the deeper, transcendent meaning as it sinks in. A similar intent is seen across traditional ritual practices that entail fasting, sleeplessness, abiding in extreme temperatures, isolation, rhythm, singing, etc., that exhaust the ordinary mind and bring about an altered state of consciousness (Neihardt 1972: 149-158; Schumaker 1995: 72; Walsh 1990).

To flesh out Ge bcags reading even further, the subtle body view that imbues the Vajrayāna framework of ‘body, speech and mind’ (*sku gsung thugs*; also *sgo gsum*, ‘three doors’) indicates not only a mental process, but the entire human being involved in learning (Gyatso 1998: 190). The knowledge of Ge bcags texts is not ‘acquired’, but recited, enacted, and ultimately embodied in self-realisation of oneself as the nondual nature of the *yi dam* deity. The nuns’ learning happens amid subject and object, in an interdependent process of reader, text and everything in the world in between.

### **A comparative note on ‘tacit’ and ‘explicit’ knowledge**

In these ways, much of Ge bcags’ learning involves ‘tacit knowledge’, defined by Polanyi as knowledge known by the person which is not codified or verbally explicable (Polanyi 1958, 1966). Common examples of tacit knowledge are riding a bike, carpentry or surgery skills, facial recognition, music and the experiential knowledge of indigenous earth-based cultures. As is the case in Ge bcags’ knowledge transmission, tacit knowledge is acquired through socialisation, trust, verbal instructions, demonstrations and observations of people who hold the knowledge (Collins 2010: 99; Ngulube 2003: 24-25). The definition of tacit knowledge recalls the baseball batter’s swing example in Chapter Four and Yuasa’s theory of the body and cultivation, where knowledge is a mind-body integration. A crucial difference between most examples of tacit knowledge and that of Ge bcags and other Buddhist traditions, however, is that in most cases the person involved in a knowledge-based activity may not be simultaneously conscious of the knowledge itself (such as when riding a bike or expertly hitting the ball). At Ge bcags, the most advanced and quintessentially tacit (i.e. nonverbal) knowledge is *rig pa*, which by its very definition is self-consciousness (*rang rig*).

The interaction between tacit and ‘explicit’ (verbally explicable) knowledge is considered vital in the evolution of new knowledge (Ngulube 2003: 21). In the case of many pre-modern indigenous knowledge systems, where, like Ge bcags, knowledge is experiential, social and embedded in the natural environment, common mediums for making tacit knowledge explicit are music, story-telling, textiles and artefacts (Ngulube 2003; Polanyi 1966). Such external mediums are all elements of Ge bcags’s tradition, particularly in a *sgrub chen* with its three-dimensional mandala that centres the ritual with images, music, recitation, elaborate *gtor ma* and other symbolic artefacts. Story-telling through the *rnam thar* genre is also important in Ge bcags’ learning, as we have seen. However, learning at Ge bcags also differs from most tacit knowledge systems in its large volumes of texts and their role in the dynamic, iterative and looping process of internalising tacit knowledge through mind-body cultivation (Chugh 2018: 1). It would be interesting to further investigate through the tacit/explicit knowledge framework to see if there is a correlation between the degree of self-consciousness in tacit knowledge and the role of written texts in its conversion.

### **Orality and literacy theories, and reading at Ge bcags**

As Jabb and others have highlighted, the inter-relation between textual and oral knowledge was especially complex in Tibet, where itinerant yogins taught Dharma to semi-literate lay communities through poetic song and theatrics, and everyday speech has a resonant voice in written literature (Jabb 2015; Gyatso 1998; rDo rje 1998). Chapter Two discussed the voices of the laity and non-human followers in Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho’s writings. I have discussed how any clear division assumed by modern Western thought between individual and collective, or private and public, does not clearly exist in the life-learning world of Ge bcags Nunnery. Nor does a division between oral and written knowledge.

Anthropology’s earlier belief in a dichotomy between orality and literacy – a belief which passed through stages of crediting one or the other with superior knowledge – has faded with insights into ways that orality and textuality interact with each other (Boyarin 1993; Ong & Hartley 2002). Havelock (1963, 1986), Ong (1958, 1986) and similar theorists posited that the transition from orality to literacy in modernising societies was one from acoustic speech to visualised speech, accompanied by a cognitive shift towards abstract, privatised

thinking<sup>203</sup>. Ong argued that writing is a technology that allows for long-lasting preservation of speech and ideas, however it is at the expense of sense-embedded knowledge and vitality (Ong 1986: 31). Subsequent thinkers like McLuhan, Goody and Street expanded the scope of this theoretical trajectory with questions about literacy's relation to a society's ideology and political power (Fabian 1993: 80-82).

Fabian reiterates the argument of Schön (1987) that the full transition to a visual, private process of silent and consumptive reading took place in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, with an accompanying abstraction of thought and decline in human physical movement (Fabian 1993: 83). Abram extends this argument in his *The Spell of the Sensuous*, where he re-articulates the philosophies of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty in arguing for a more interdependent – indeed a more Buddhist – view of reality that recognises the sensory context of human knowledge (Abram 1996). Abram asserts that phonetic alphabets disassociate humans from full sensory engagement with nature, and separate written knowledge from the animated, experiential knowing of purely oral traditions (Abram 1996: 111). These arguments speak compellingly to the full-bodied learning process of Ge bcags' tradition, however they do not apply to Ge bcags reading, nor to pre-2000 Tibetan society in general, where much of the written word (based on a phonetic alphabet) was integral in facilitating a mind-body connection. Tibetan people lived intimately with the landscape and many of their texts hold ritual knowledge to negotiate the forces of nature. As this thesis makes evident, Ge bcags' tantric texts often function to harmonise human lives with the animate world and are premised on their subtle body connection.

Ge bcags, where the nuns read hundreds of pages each day, offers a prime case towards a broader understanding of ways of reading. The nuns read together more often than they read alone, and they collectively participate, along with male lamas, in the transcribing, hand-copying, editing, curating and publishing of their texts. The collective nature of the nuns' participation in all of these, with their 'subtext of shared values', is a key factor in considering

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<sup>203</sup> Havelock argued that the Greek alphabet is the only one with phonetic ability that allowed speech to *look* how its *sounds*, which allows quicker mental processing and enactment than languages whose spoken sounds are not visualised on paper (Havelock 1987).

how they mentally process the meaning of texts (Long 1993: 195).

What modern English language speakers often mean by 'reading a book' does not apply to Ge bcags reading. Any image I could capture of a Ge bcags nun reading is far from an image of an 18<sup>th</sup> century natural philosopher reading a textbook, of a passenger reading a novel on a train, or of a university student reading and writing analytically on a computer screen. A Ge bcags nun is not an isolated person consuming words from a page in an entirely mental process. Rather, she reads out loud in her meditation box, rhythmically and socially, sometimes in tandem with yogic breathing. She actively visualises and intuitively while reciting, and she usually reads aloud with her breath or vocal cords. A Ge bcags nun reads books wrapped in colourful brocade, texts that she treats as sacred, placing them on carved wooden stands and never on the floor. Perhaps most importantly, she usually reads with religious emotions of devotion (*mos gus*) and loving altruism (*byang sems*; Skt. *bodhicitta*, or *byams brtse*) and with the pure vision (*dag snang*) that the words are intended to evoke. This passage from a prayer book intimates the inspirational tone of Ge bcags texts:

The foundation of all is unconditioned. Its vast, self-arising expanse is inexpressible. Neither samsara nor nirvana have a name for it. When it is known, it is Buddhahood<sup>204</sup> (Rig 'dzin 2004: 155).

The above discussion of orality and literacy, and tacit/explicit knowledge, brings into relief the embodied ways of learning in a Tibetan community like Ge bcags, and the active 'social infrastructure' of reading in which collective processes of interpretation contribute to the production of textual meaning (Long 1993: 183; 2003). However, these theoretical approaches do not address South and East Asian contemplative methods of knowledge (especially when those methods consciously cultivate nondual awareness) as a factor in a society's ways of reading and textual production (Abram 1996; Boyarin 1993; Collins 2010; Havelock 1986; Ong & Hartley 2002). The role and decline of meditation in the modernisation of earlier Christian knowledge systems (and its current revival through mindfulness and yoga), and the institutionalisation of meditation in Eastern knowledge systems such as those

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<sup>204</sup> *kun gyi gzhi ni 'dus ma byas/ rang byung klong yangs brjod du med/ 'khor 'das gnyis ka'i ming med do; de nyid rig na sangs rgyas te/*

of pre-modern Tibet, would be interesting developments to consider in further studies of orality and literacy. In this regard, Yuasa's theory (1987) of the body and of knowledge in Asian traditions as mind-body integration contributes further to understanding learning at Ge bcags, where there is no fundamental dichotomy between embodied, social orality and abstract, privatised literacy: the two give meaning to each other.

### **The essential relationship of oral instructions to Ge bcags' texts**

Tibetan manuals on Vajrayāna practices are typically pithy, allowing for oral instructions to fill in the gaps and carry the live quality that constitutes *sgrub brgyud* practice lineages<sup>205</sup> – also called 'hearing lineages' (*snyan brgyud*) because of their reliance on face-to-face, oral transmission (Gyatso 1999). The material sound, personalised intonation and bodily gestures of oral instruction all shape the content of knowledge transmitted, making it qualitatively different to that gained through critical, textual study (Goody & Watt 1963: 306; McNeill 2002). The pith of Tibetan practice lineages is re-animated in the mind-bodies of subsequent practitioners, with the support of written texts that preserve the oral instructions of previous masters and share the task of symbolic indication. Oral and text-based knowledge are not at odds with each other in Tibetan Buddhism, nor are the categories of sacred and profane (Jabb 2015: 236, 264).

In the modern revival period in Eastern Tibet from the 1980s to the present, facilitated by the expansion of rNying ma monastic centres like bLa rung sgar and Ya chen sgar, rDzogs chen pith instructions have been transmitted by renowned, elderly lamas to huge crowds of monks and nuns, usually as part of an important rNying ma scriptural teaching or empowerment. In 2013, for example, the elderly lama sKal bzang bstan pa'i dbang phyug taught Ye shes bla ma ('Unsurpassed Wisdom', an advanced rDzogs chen scripture by 'Jigs med gling pa), to nearly two thousand monks and nuns in mGo log. This lasted one month and involved *dbang* empowerments and periods of *khrid ka* instructions. Not all sections of the transmission were explicitly written in the text the lama was referring to, but they were nonetheless integral in

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<sup>205</sup> This is true also for Tibetan philosophical traditions, as Dreyfus points out, where oral commentary sustains intellectual understandings of Indic root texts (*rgya gzhung*) (Dreyfus 2003: 157-160).

transmitting the knowledge indicated in the text<sup>206</sup> (personal communication, dBang drag rdo rje, June 2016).

There are of course written, and to some extent standardised, rDzogs chen teachings, as evident in countless books and translations available, however the pith of rDzogs chen instructions in traditional Tibetan practice are oral, personalised *khrid ka* instructions (also *man ngag*; *gdams ngag*). Any Tibetan practice lineage lama at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century would say that rDzogs chen and/or Mahāmudrā must be learned in person from an experienced teacher and cannot be learned from books (personal communication, rDo rdzong and Chos rgyal rin po ches, May 2007). A survey of English-language Tibetan traditional texts on rDzogs chen finds they are mostly transcriptions of oral teachings given by meditation masters (Lingpa 2014; Padmasambhava 2001; Tulku Thondup 2014; Tulku Urgyen 1999; Shabkar 2012).

### **Informality and oral transmission of nonverbal rDzogs chen knowledge**

The nexus of nonconceptual awareness (*rig pa*) that is the hermeneutic imbuing all of Ge bcags' written texts is reflected in the informality found in its learning tradition. This is particularly so when it comes to communicating the nonverbal knowledge of rDzogs chen, the transmission of which involves oral instructions (and can even be silent, as mentioned in Chapter Four). According to the rNying ma school, rDzogs chen's *rig pa* awareness is not an altered state of consciousness, but the very basic nature of mind<sup>207</sup>. It is not presented as a positive mental framework to be developed, but as a meditative approach to relax the conceptualising habit that obscures such naturalness (Padmasambhava 2001; Tulku Urgyen 1999). The spontaneous, personalised delivery of rDzogs chen oral instructions functions to catch the habitual mind unguarded and point it towards a wholly different way of nonconceptual perceiving.

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<sup>206</sup> Over the last decade, many Ge bcags nuns have left during summer months to join these mass rDzogs chen teachings. This is challenging the nunnery's rules of stability and raising questions about the future of its organisation. These enormous rDzogs chen teaching events merit further study as Tibetan cultural revival movements at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

<sup>207</sup> *Sems nyid*, perhaps better translated in English as 'the nature of heart-mind/mind-body'.

As discussed in Chapter Two, informality is reflected in Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's *mgur*, which he composed with great skill using prosaic day-to-day examples to communicate profound rDzogs chen principles (cf. Sujata 2015: 200). Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's rDzogs chen teachings, first spoken by him and later written by scribes, serve as references for his followers, and the nuns refer to these writings between scheduled recitations. The following passage from Volume Eleven serves as an example of his rDzogs chen message:

It is called 'meditation', but it is not the domain of the conceptual mind. You cannot create awakening with your intellect. No matter how good your meditation may appear, conceptual meditation only obscures your ultimate nature. How, then, is so-called meditation to be practised? Meditation means leaving your mind as it is, uncontrived. If realisation could be contrived, all sentient beings would be realised. Even a positive mental object obscures the essential self-arising nature<sup>208</sup> (Tshangs dbyangs vol. 11: 174)

It is in passages such as these that the nuns 'read' rDzogs chen, however the pith of rDzogs chen transmission at Ge bcags (and generally in Tibetan *sgrub brgyud*) occurs through the energetic exchange of personalised *khrid ka* instructions. At Ge bcags these are often informal and sometimes unscheduled, as when nuns gather in a visiting lama's room after dinner, leaning comfortably on his raised seat and sharing tea, or with the unexpected visit of a yogin who arrives on horseback from a nearby hermitage<sup>209</sup>.

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<sup>208</sup> *sgom pa zhes kyang blo yi yul min te/ blo yis bsgoms kyang blos byas sangs mi rgyas/ bzang bzang 'dra yang don dam ngo bo bsgribs/ 'o na sgom zhes ji ltar bgyi zhe na/ ma bcos 'jog la sgom zhes bya ba yin/ bcos mas rtogs na sems can kun kyang rtogs/ dmigs pa bzang yang rang byung ngo bo bsgribs/*

<sup>209</sup> Today some of these types of exchanges happen less often.



Figure 32: A spontaneous summertime teaching on the nunnery hillside. Photo: author, 2006.

In the above photograph, the elder yogin Padma dri med (who passed away in 2018) had just arrived on horseback from his mountain hermitage about two kilometres away. This was in 2006 before telephone service to the area, and most of the nuns did not know in advance that he was coming. This yogin was regarded as one of two most senior male lamas of the Ge bcags lineage living at the time, both having trained within the Ge bcags tradition before the Cultural Revolution and both having maintained lifelong retreat with the dreadlocked appearance as yogins. During his visit the entire nunnery community gathered around Padma dri med on the hillside and sat for the whole day, drinking tea, eating, laughing and crying while they listened to his stories and insights. Throughout all of this, the yogin spontaneously shared *khrid ka* instructions on the nature of mind: verbal pointers, hints, gestures and an energetic exchange indicating the unconditioned awareness (*rig pa*) that is the ultimate intent of Ge bcags learning.

#### **A comparative note on formality and informality in Mahmood's 'rehearsed spontaneity'**

In Mahmood's study of a group of women in the Egyptian women's mosque movement, she found a symbiosis between the emotions and actions of their day-to-day lives and their

engagement in *ṣalāt* ritual prayer (Arabic: *ṣalāt*; Persian *namāz*) (Mahmood 2001). The performance of *ṣalāt*, enjoined upon all Muslims, is said to be correct in having four elements: intention towards God, a prescribed sequence of gestures and words, physical purity and proper attire. Understanding scriptural text is not considered essential, as evident in the fact that most Muslims do not understand the Arabic in which all *ṣalāt* is written. At the same time, heartfelt *khushū'* in *ṣalāt* – *khushū'* being a 'tenderness of the heart appropriate to when one is in the presence of God' – was stressed by Mahmood's women as centrally important, the cultivation of which spanned all dimensions of their lives and being (Mahmood 2001: 830). For Mahmood's participants, chanting formal prayers was an extension of their attitudes and feelings throughout the mundane events of the day. Their sympathy for the injured, their respectful speech in conversations and their patience with siblings all had a direct correlation with their ritual performance of *ṣalāt*, and cultivating such attitudes and actions in daily life strengthened their enthusiasm and performance of formal prayers.

In many ways, this 'rehearsed spontaneity' that Mahmood observed in her participants' religious lives mirrors that of the Ge bcags nuns' ways of learning – like the nuns' integration of mundane work such as yak-herding as spiritual practice, and the sacredness found within informality at Ge bcags. The importance of heartfelt intention and feeling of *khushū'* in becoming fully pious Muslim women also brings to mind the importance of devotion (*mos gus*) as a cognitive orientation in the Ge bcags nuns' development. Mahmood's participant explained: 'the act of prayer performed for its own sake, and without adequate regard for how it contributes to the realization of piety, is "lost power"' (Mahmood 2001: 833). A Ge bcags nun, telling me how they like to wake at 3 or 4a.m. in the winter for practice, spoke similarly of their recitations: "You must chant from the depths of the heart with faith, otherwise the words are wasted." In both groups of women, embodied habituation of a spiritual orientation and feeling in all dimensions of life is core to their ways of learning, and evidently more instrumental in shaping consciousness than simply the meaning of the words in their scriptures.

The pedagogies of Mahmood's participants and of the Ge bcags nuns call into question theories that polarise formal ritual and everyday pragmatic actions<sup>210</sup> (Mahmood 2001: 833). We have seen in the Ge bcags nuns' lifeworld that there is no clear boundary between sacred and profane such as the modern Western mindset tends to presuppose. Instead, there is an ineluctable relationship between the nuns' mundane bodies and their religious practices; between prescribed *sādhanā* activity and the nuns' embodiment of spirituality outside of formal sessions. Ge bcags ritual is scriptural, but it is not entirely prescribed; indeed, Ge bcags' *sādhanā* are designed to allow for spontaneous, natural qualities to arise (*lhun grub*). This way of learning brings to mind Mole's argument concerning attention as a relational phenomenon which integrates and unifies diverse task-relevant cognitive processes. Mole identifies this process of attention as 'cognitive unison', and analogises that just as there is no individual in an orchestra in whom unison resides, so attention cannot be found in a part of the brain (Mole 2011: 57). The same is true for meaning at Ge bcags: for the nuns, meaning does not reside in the texts alone, nor for that matter in the brain, but in unison with all elements of their lifeworld and learning processes.

## Conclusion

This chapter has served to highlight the collective and embodied, sensual nature of reading and learning at Ge bcags. Once again, Yuasa's theory of nondual mind-body integration makes sense of the complementary and inextricable relationship of Ge bcags' texts to the personalised oral exchanges of experiential knowledge at the nunnery. This discussion of Ge bcags' texts and their role in the nuns' learning has provided an essential perspective with which to view Ge bcags' *sgrub chen* practice, which is the subject of the following chapter.

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<sup>210</sup> Mahmood's study largely argues against such bold dividing lines between sacred and profane, and between an objective habitus (physical embodiment of cultural knowledge, behaviour, etc.) and the female subject.

## CHAPTER SIX:

### Ge bcags' annual bKa' brgyad *sgrub chen*

Having investigated the content and role of Ge bcags' texts and the nuns' ways of learning, Chapter Six focuses on one of Ge bcags' annual nine-day *sgrub chen* – the type of practice that best represents all elements of Ge bcags' tradition. I begin by introducing and briefly considering the historical origins of the particular *sgrub chen*, and its place within the rNying ma school's categorisation of Mahāyoga, Anuyoga and Atiyoga inner tantras. I examine the atmosphere and general procedure of the *sgrub chen*, including elements of the ritual performance and the nuns' dispositions in the intensive practice. I then consider the knowledge orientation of the Mahāyoga, Anuyoga and Atiyoga structure of the *sgrub chen* towards increasingly refined levels of awareness. As a method of examining the *sgrub chen's* language, the pith of the chapter involves a translation of a passage from the *sgrub chen* text, with consideration of the challenges of translating Vajrayāna into the culturally different language of English. Finally, the chapter looks at how the nuns read their *sgrub chen* text, and the non-literal ways that the *sgrub chen* communicates meaning.

#### Approach of the chapter

A detailed analysis of the historical origins of the *sgrub chen* text or its ritual components would stray beyond the scope of this thesis. This chapter instead takes a hermeneutical approach in considering the various levels of context that together give rise in the nuns' experience to the *sgrub chen's* meaning, while referring generally to the ritual framework of the *sgrub chen* ceremony. Considering the complexity of the *sgrub chen* and its many features, this approach first looks broadly at the atmosphere of the ceremony and the nuns' roles and collective engagement, and then more closely at the words of the scripture, and how the nuns read them and process their meaning. This approach seeks to infer the embodied knowledge that the nuns accomplish through the many *sgrub chen* they repeat over the years.

A hermeneutical approach is particularly appropriate for Ge bcags' tantric texts, which, as we have seen, assume a correspondence of mind and body, and of the inner and outer worlds of

humans and nature. As the thesis has been demonstrating, Tibetan tantra is not always rational and its highest knowledge is said to be ultimately true, though not objective. In practice lineage explanations in particular, reality and ultimate knowledge of reality are understood as one and the same, as a nonduality of object and subject (*gzung 'dzin gnyis su med pa*) (Mi pham 1998; Pettit 1999: 4, 13, 317). The knowledge the Ge bcags nuns cultivate through their tantric and rDzogs chen methods is not the sum of its separate parts; rather, the parts – including the words of the texts – are only meaningful as sums of a whole. In his argument for a non-representational theory of interpretation, Huntington clearly describes the context of texts such as those at Ge bcags, as ‘a world that can be discussed, felt, entered into and lived, but not represented from the outside in the kind of schematic formulas characteristic of denaturalized discourse’ (Huntington 1995: 291).

### **A brief introduction to *sgrub chen***

*sGrub chen* are extensive group *sādhanā* ceremonies that encapsulate the practice tradition of Ge bcags. Each comprises at least seven full days of enacted ritual, meditation and recitation of texts, all blending with emotive and theatric elements to create a heightened, charged environment in which participants experience the presence of the *sādhanā*'s main deity(ies). As collective *yi dam* ceremonies they can be considered the essence of Ge bcags' practice system writ large, including all elements of Generation and Completion Stages – visualisation, a three-dimensional mandala palace, *mudrā* gestures and dance, music, wildly colourful *gtor ma* cakes and a profound meditative atmosphere that deepens throughout the ceremony. Ge bcags' eighteen annual *sgrub chen* amount to nearly half of the nuns' year at the nunnery, and along with other collective prayer ceremonies account for most of their time.

*sGrub chen* are considered powerful tantric ritual ceremonies for subduing negative forces in the world, harmonising and repairing community dynamics, and fostering peace and prosperity for the participants and their relations. Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho dedicated Ge bcags' *sgrub chen* for ‘the Dharma and sentient beings, for the long life of lamas and the awakening of sentient beings who are as vast as space’ (rDo rje 1998: 171). While being part of a religious tradition with a clear soteriological orientation, many intended effects of the

*sgrub chen* are worldly, such as longevity, prosperity and pacification of obstructive forces in society and nature. Ge bcags' intensive *sgrub chen* tradition was in fact explicitly engineered for these goals: Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho states that he arranged the ritual methods of Rat gling *gter ma's* fierce *yi dam* deities for practically subjugating wild and negative forces that hindered the aims of Ge bcags' practitioners and their surrounding communities<sup>211</sup> (rDo rje 1998: 211, 335).

This pragmatic, ritual orientation of Tibetan tantra, highlighted by Samuel (1993: 258-269), is again within a world (or worldview) where no bold line divides inner and outer dimensions, nor sacred and mundane. As far as worldly ends accompany the altruistic aims of spiritual practice, they are considered non-contradictory and unapologetically pursued, as obvious in the pantheon of Vajrayāna deities that accomplish both worldly and spiritual goals (for examples, Tārā who aids fertility and Mahākāla who wards off adversaries). The end goal of Mahāyāna Buddhism is worldly, after all, in the sense of being embodied as a bodhisattva after enlightenment, having awakened to the inseparability of form and emptiness (Namdrooling 2002: 50). This worldview is apparent in the unification of Dharma and politics (*chos srid zung 'brel*) in premodern Tibetan polities and other Tibetan cultural dispositions ('Brong pa rgyal po 2003; Karma phrin las 1965).

In Ge bcags' first decades, Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho established twenty *sgrub chen* at the nunnery every year, most of them seven days long, some fourteen days long and a few lasting one month each. Ge bcags was and continues to be a ritual powerhouse, and as a *dgon pa* with familial links to the Nang chen kingship it was relied on, until the 1950s, to perform longevity and other empowering rituals for the king and his family. This further bolstered the social valuing of Ge bcags' practice tradition in Nang chen society prior to the Cultural Revolution (rDo rje 1998; personal communication, Kun bzang nyi ma, September 2018).

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<sup>211</sup> There was also a strong consciousness in Tshogs gnyis and Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho of an imminent invasion by 'uncivilised outsiders' (*kla klo*), and *sgrub chen's* ameliorating effects (rDo rje 1998: 211).

## A brief explanation of bKa' brgyad, the Sādhanā of Eight Heruka

bKa' brgyad ('Eight Pronouncements', or Sādhanā of Eight Heruka) is a nine-day annual *sgrub chen* that takes place in Ge bcags' short summer season. It is the *sgrub chen* in which I participated from 22<sup>nd</sup> to 30<sup>th</sup> of June 2018 for the purpose of this analysis. bKa' brgyad is quintessential among rNying ma *sādhanā*, comprising the practical 'sādhanā class' (*sgrub sde*) of eighteen Mahāyoga tantras and an intricate, intensive example of Generation Stage practice at Ge bcags Nunnery<sup>212</sup> (Trautz 2018: 512-513). The scripture is steeped in symbolic tantric language, as apparent in the translation later in this chapter, and as with all tantric scriptures it is not always obvious to the beginner when to read the language literally or figuratively (Fremantle 1971: 20). Of the eighteen annual *sgrub chen* at Ge bcags, bKa' brgyad is the most complicated as it has not one but eight mandala of wrathful male deities integrated in one *sādhanā*, with hundreds of groups of deities involved – truly enough to confound the thinking mind. It is hard to imagine there being any distractions in a mind that is visualising such complex imagery.

Tibetan tradition traces the bKa' brgyad *sādhanā* to time immemorial when caskets were placed in a charnel ground by Buddha Vajradhara and a *ḍākinī* near present-day Bodhgaya, India (Khenpo Namdrol 1999: 26-28). The wrathful male *heruka* deities of bKa' brgyad are ancient Indian prototypes, most of them obscure to Tibetan lineages, so it was no wonder the nuns could not explain much to me about them and their mandalas. The eight bKa' brgyad deities are:

- 1) 'Jam dpal gshin rje (Yamāntaka), the deity of body
- 2) Padma gsung (Hayagrīva), the deity of speech
- 3) Yang dag thugs (Vishuddha/Sri Samyak), the deity of mind
- 4) bDud rtsi yon tan (Vajra Amṛta), the deity of qualities
- 5) rDo rje phur ba; rDo rje gzhon nus (Vajrakīlaya/Vajrakumara), the deity of activity
- 6) Ma mo rbod gtong (Matarah), the deity of calling and dispatching
- 7) 'Jig rten mchod bstod (Lokastotrapuja-natha), the deity of worldly offering and praise
- 8) Mod pa drag sngags (Vajramantrabhiru), the deity of wrathful mantra

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<sup>212</sup> The classification of Mahāyoga's eighteen tantras and bKa' brgyad as its *sgrub sde* is a later development in Tibetan tradition, and not found in Indic commentaries (van Schaik 2008: 45; Almogi 2014). The *sgrub sde* classification highlights bKa' brgyad as a *sādhanā* of tantric deity practice, which is relevant here.

In addition is a ninth deity, Che mchog, or Mahottara Heruka, who is viewed as a combination of the eight, and is a main deity for self-visualisation (*bdag bskyed*; ‘self-generation’) in the *sgrub chen*. Notably, these deities correlate with body, speech, mind, qualities and activity, following the Mahāyoga framework of the Five Buddha Families (rGyal ba rigs lnga) and the subtle body correspondences it entails (Tshangs dbyangs vol. 13; Trautz 2018: 498).

Ge bcags tradition tells that Padmasambhava transmitted bKa’ brgyad as instructions for practising the eighteen Mahāyoga tantric scriptures to nine of his twenty-five disciples at bSam yas chims phu (Tshangs dbyangs vol. 13: 367-446). Subsequently, major *gter ston* spread a variety of bKa’ brgyad teachings across Tibet, like Nyang ral nyi ma ’od zer (1124-1192) whose bKa’ brgyad bde gshegs ’dus pa<sup>213</sup> is the largest and perhaps best-known bKa’ brgyad cycle (Almogi 2014: 104). Ratna gling pa propagated the rTsa gsum bla ma bka’ brgyad<sup>214</sup> *gter ma* cycle, which was later passed by sGrub dbang tshogs gnyis to Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho, and then adapted by Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho as the scriptural tradition the Ge bcags nuns now follow in their *sgrub chen*<sup>215</sup>. Ge bcags’ bKa’ brgyad is unusual in having Mahāyoga, Anuyoga and Atiyoga sections, whereas most other bKa’ brgyad cycles categorise themselves as only Mahāyoga (personal communication, mKhan po Tsher ring bkra shis, December 2019).

Several scholars have examined the evolving classification system of Mahāyoga, Anuyoga and Atiyoga over Tibetan Buddhist history, and how the practices of each class have overlapped in different compilations (Almogi 2014: 62; Dalton 2016; Mayer 2015; van Schaik 2008). van Schaik highlights gNubs sangs rgyas ye shes’ establishment of the nine *yāna*, with Atiyoga as the ninth vehicle, as a way of structuring and thereby fortifying rNying ma lineages amidst an influx of new tantric translations in the ninth century (van Schaik 2004). Exact delineations of rNying ma’s tantra classes are therefore difficult, but Mayer proposes the loose generalisation that the three inner tantras (i.e. Mahāyoga, Anuyoga, Atiyoga) indicate progressive levels of subtlety and inwardness (Mayer 2015: 390). This follows the historical

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<sup>213</sup> ‘Eight Pronouncements Gathering of Sugata’

<sup>214</sup> ‘The Three Roots’ Guru [of] the Eight Pronouncements’

<sup>215</sup> Titled, *The Eight Pronouncements [of] the Three Roots’ Guru, Generation [and] Completion of the United Three Yogas* (Tshangs dbyangs vol. 13: 1).

interiorisation of Buddhist ritual in early Tibetan Buddhist history that Dalton and Rich have both discussed, whereby ritual and the object of worship shifted from external space inwards, to the body of the practitioner as the central deity (Dalton 2004; Rich 2016: 89-100).

Thus, as noted in Chapter Three, Mahāyoga comprises the *sādhanā* visualisations of Generation and Completion Stages, Anuyoga involves the subtle body energies in yoga and Atiyoga awakens to the already perfected, nonconceptual nature of the meditator's awareness (Rich 2016: 90-91). Following Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's *sgrub chen* scripture, and the now mainstream classification of tantras from the rNying ma rgyud 'bum<sup>216</sup>, this is how the Ge bcags nuns relate to the Mahāyoga, Anuyoga and Atiyoga sections of their *sādhanā* practices: as increasingly refined levels of practice towards the highest nature of nondual awareness, Ati, or rDzogs chen (personal communication, Ra ya mkhan po rdo rje, September 2018).



Figure 33: Nuns entering the shrine hall for a *sgrub chen*. Photo: Jerome Raphalen, 2006.

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<sup>216</sup> 'The Hundred Thousand Old Tantras', by now the mainstream rNying ma canon. Ratna gling pa was one of its initial compilers in the fifteenth century and the Ge bcags community especially adheres to it.

## Mood and setting

The bKa' brgyad *sgrub chen* was nine days long. We were woken in the dark each morning at 4:30a.m. by two long, bass horns (*dung chen*) bellowing out from the roof of the shrine hall at the centre of the nunnery grounds. Most days the *sgrub chen* ended at 7:45p.m.; lunch break was one hour, and toilet breaks were a quick two minutes several times a day. This made for long, unbroken sessions of *sgrub chen* practice – all nuns in the main shrine hall seated in rows lined with Tibetan carpets, each nun's place marked by her pile of texts and bowl. The deep trumpet call in the early morning is a distinctive sound at Ge bcags dgon pa, and heightens the atmosphere of charged meditative silence that pervades the place. When *sgrub chen* are not happening, it wakens nuns to their first meditation session (*thun*) in the dark every morning at about 4:30a.m..

The bKa' brgyad *sgrub chen* begins at the start of the full summer season, usually at the end of June or the beginning of July after a six-week recess. Following the urbanisation of Tibetan livelihoods over the last thirty years, and expansion of cordyceps trade for Tibetans, the nunnery now grants a six-week holiday over May and June for the cordyceps harvest. Most nuns go to family homes (most of them in towns but a few still in highland herding camps) to look after toddlers while adults and older children head to mountaintops to harvest the caterpillar fungus. By the end of June, the nuns return to the nunnery to start the bKa' brgyad *sgrub chen*, some of them with tiny nieces or nephews in tow to spend time with their nun-aunts. Nuns bustle around preparing for the elaborate rituals, shouting back and forth to each other across the nunnery grounds. When a nun returns, walking up the steep dirt road towards the nunnery, others cheerfully shout out to her "'O brgyal?" ("Did you suffer [on your way]?"), to which she replies, "dKa' ma ti" ("It wasn't hard"). In earlier decades nunnery rules were strictly followed and no nun would dare overstay the allotted holiday. In recent years, with modernising changes in Tibetan society and monastic culture, it is harder to impose the rules and some nuns arrived days late for the *sgrub chen*.

The main shrine hall (*'du khang*, 'gathering building') in which all *sgrub chen* take place is a two-storey building (with a third, half storey enshrining scriptures at the top) with high ceilings supported by twelve pillars, constructed with steel, stone and concrete between

2011 and 2015. It replaces a previous shrine hall – a two-storey mud, stone and wooden structure built by the local community of humans and animals after the Cultural Revolution in the 1980s (the very first one was destroyed). Ge bcags' previous shrine halls had few windows and no electricity, and generations of nuns spent long hours reading their texts by candlelight. The new one is an example of recent material improvements for the nuns' wellbeing, as it has electricity and does not leak during regular rainstorms and blizzards in the valley. The shrine hall is the central building at the nunnery and the hub for community practices and transmission ceremonies.

The summer weather during the nine-days of the bKa' brgyad *sgrub chen* in 2018 was a mixture of rainy and sunny (sunny, warm weather being the rarest kind at Ge bcags), but we hardly paid attention to it from inside the shrine hall. In breaks, the nuns relished the seasonal yak milk and yogurt that was donated by neighbouring pastoral families and served every few days of the *sgrub chen*.

### **Roles, their arrangement and ritual music**

The nuns sit in rows on either side of the shrine hall, with the central statues on the shrine (Padmasambhava and Śākyamuni) facing down the centre. At the top of the hall is the large, three-dimensional mandala that serves as the spiritual anchor of the whole ceremony. In the days before the *sgrub chen*, nuns had prepared this mandala with *gtor ma* and all manner of ritual objects and symbols, some of them surprisingly wild and ornate. From a ritual vase on the mandala a multi-coloured string travels and is tied to a vajra held at the heart by the main rDor slob (Vajra Master), who sits on a high throne at the head of the upper row. This thread symbolises the indivisibility of the actual deity (*ye shes sems dpa'*; Skt. *jñānasattva*) of the mandala and oneself as the practising deity (or 'commitment being', *dam tshig sems dpa'*; Skt. *samayasattva*), like an unbroken electric current powering the *sgrub chen* and the nuns' realisation of themselves as buddhas. When the rDor slob leaves the shrine hall for the night, another nun holds the vajra and string until the morning. Recitation of the main mantra and liturgy is maintained continuously by two nuns through the night, so that the *sgrub chen* continues uninterrupted for the entire nine days. During tea and meal breaks, when the rest of the nuns have stopped chanting, a soft singing of the main mantra is heard from the head

of the shrine hall where two nuns maintain continuous chanting. The unbroken recitation of the deity's main mantra throughout the nine days is considered the *sgrub chen*'s lifeforce (personal communication, Ge bcags nun, September 2018).



Figure 34: Mandala for the *bKa' brgyad sgrub chen*. Photo: author, 2018.

The nunnery has two *rDor slob* who together lead the rituals of the *sgrub chen*, and all of the nunnery's communal practices. One is the primary leader and the second sits next to her on a lower seat during the nine days, dressed in the same regalia and acting with her in most standing rituals. These two nuns are nearly fifty years-old and have trained intensively at Ge bcags since childhood. Much of their training was guided by the group of elder nuns who survived the Cultural Revolution and re-established the nunnery's traditions from the 1980s, with the highly disciplined and dedicated ethic the nunnery held in the 'old time' (*dus rnying*, by which the nuns refer to the period before the Cultural Revolution and modernisation). The present two *rDor slob* were appointed to their roles in the late 1990s by the previous *A lde'u*

rin po che, an important 'Brug pa bka' brgyud lama from the Nang chen royal monastery, Tshes bcu sgar, and an important guiding figure in the nunnery's revival. The nuns were reluctant to assume rDor slob roles – a position usually assumed by male lamas in Tibetan Buddhism – but A lde'u rin po che strongly encouraged them, and it is difficult to say no to a high lama in Tibet.

The rDor slob maintain a humble disposition with all the nuns, who share food, practice and living spaces with them, and they lead by example more than by verbal authority. This prompted me to reflect further on example as a teaching and disciplinary means in the nunnery, and how other nuns were motivated in the *sgrub chen* by admiration and respect for the rDor slob's concentration for the whole nine days. While most nuns dozed now and then in the long *sgrub chen* sessions – some trying to fight sleep more than others – I did not see the rDor slob doze or even slump once during the nine days. By the end of the *sgrub chen* I came to appreciate, more than I had in my previous years in nunneries, the in-depth expertise a rDor slob requires to be able to understand, enact and fully embody the ritual manoeuvres and psychic subtleties of the role. There is no way of faking mastery of these extremely complex practices; it can only be gained through accumulated experience over time.

The two front rows that run through the centre of the shrine hall are filled with the oldest Ge bcags nuns – again, averaging forty-five to fifty-five in age in 2018. These nuns also maintained an impressive level of concentration throughout the entire *sgrub chen*. No disciplinarian was walking up and down the rows forcing nuns to stay awake, and younger nuns in back rows simply dozed off unselfconsciously in long sessions. While the nunnery does have acting disciplinarians (*chos khrims*) on a three-year rotating basis, in a female community of nun-peers who share rooms, backgrounds and training it is awkward for them to assert their authority upon each other. In my observations, the main factor upholding Ge bcags' discipline and schedule is the nuns' individual and collective conscience. For example, mobile phones have operated at the nunnery since September 2017, and all would agree that they are an obstacle to focused contemplation. Many nuns had phones inside the *sgrub chen*, but I never once saw them using them other than to take photos and videos. A few explained to me that a nun would have to exit the shrine hall to talk on the phone, which she

would be looked down upon for, and knowing this is enough to stop her from doing so<sup>217</sup>.

The poised example of the senior nuns and their opinions of each other seem to function as an unspoken rule against misbehaving in group practice.



Figure 35: The two front rows of the *bKa' bryad sgrub chen*. Photo: author, 2018.

Across from the rDor slob at the head of the opposite row is the chant leader (*dbu mdzad*) who initiates and maintains the chanting and rhythm of the musical instruments. The entire written *sgrub chen*, all in verse, is recited with different rhythms and melodies, slowing and intensifying or speeding up and lightening, according to different phases of the practice. Most rhythms are monotonous and slow, reminiscent of some ancient war chants, and I was told that these have hardly been altered over generations<sup>218</sup>. I wondered how such

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<sup>217</sup> At peak theatric moments in the ceremony, however, most nuns joined in a frenzy of photo- and video-taking with their phones. This happened during song and dance offering performances (*glu bros mchod pa*; *gar gyi mchod pa*) when all participants dressed in *dākinī* headdresses of the Five Buddha Families, and when the rDor slob dressed in Rat gling hats and performed subjugation ritual dances (*rta bro*). The rDor slob did not take any photos themselves, and did not complain about being filmed, though I imagine it challenged their concentration and weakened the other nuns' own absorption in the ritual.

<sup>218</sup> Curiously, the Ge bcags nuns' rituals that are connected to nature have more creative, almost feminine, melodies.

monotonous rhythms would remain unchanged over time within such a visually creative and emotionally stimulating practice as a *sgrub chen*. Ritual melodies (*dbyangs*) vary across monasteries and lineages, and Tibetan tradition allows communities to adapt their own tunes. There would have been plenty of opportunity for inspired Ge bcags nuns to adapt new melodies over years of performing *sgrub chens*, but this does not seem to have happened. This may be another instance where standardised formality and freedom meet in Ge bcags' knowledge tradition.



Figure 36: A Ge bcags sDor slob performing dedication prayers on the final day of a *sgrub chen* with the nuns at a branch nunnery, 2020. Photo: Ge bcags dgon pa.

Musical instruments in the ceremony included two large and eight small drums, two large and several small trumpets, several sets of cymbals and a conch shell. These were all played by nuns in the front rows. The *dbu mdzad* sets the pitch (*gdang*) and tempo for the group chanting, which follows the simple melodies the nuns have memorised. At the time of writing, no microphones or speakers are used at Ge bcags where solar electricity has only existed since around 2012. Every now and then, the nuns playing small drums stood up next to their bench and prostrated several times. I thought at first this was an unwritten

devotional element of the practice, but later learned it was ‘confession’ (*bshags pa*) for missing drumbeats in the prescribed musical rhythm.

### Spacious overview of the ritual performance

A slightly distanced overview of the pronounced actions of the *sgrub chen* looks like this: Early in the morning’s chanting, two nuns wearing resplendent brocade slowly escort Guru Padmasambhava (visualised) and the rDo slob into the centre of the shrine hall, gracefully leading the way with an incense trail. For most of the day the nuns are seated, chanting their large piles of scripture placed on carved wooden stands (*dpe cog*) in front of them. Each nun has two hats that are worn for different sections of the chanting – a red plumed hat representing Indian and Tibetan *paṇḍita* and a ‘lotus crown’ (*pad zhwa*) representing Guru Padmasambhava. Several times throughout the day the nuns stand up wearing one of these hats, face the mandala at the top of the hall and recite several pages of scripture to invoke a descent of blessings from the deities (*byin ’bebs*) to consecrate the visualised mandala.

Hand gestures (*mudrā*) are performed often during the chanting to symbolise offerings to the deities or consecrating actions of the ritual. Along with regular hand *mudrā* are short standing ritual dances (*rta bro*; ‘Hayagrīva dance’) performed each morning and afternoon by the two rDor slob as embodied symbols of subjugation and consecration. They perform these dressed in costumes of elaborate, brocaded aprons and hats symbolising *ḍākinī* of the Five Buddha Families or a wrathful deity. In subjugating rituals the rDor slob holds a ritual dagger (*phur ba*; Skt. *kīla*) and black cloth (*yal dar*), turning on one leg in slow, circular movements (*phur skor*) in a performance enacting a wrathful deity (usually rDor rje phur ba; Skt. Vajrakīlaya in rNying ma subjugating rituals). Mastery of this embodied movement is said to be fully experiencing oneself as the deity while carrying it out (personal communication, dBang drag rin po che, November 2019).

At 6:30a.m. there is a morning tea break. For this, young nuns walk up and down the rows serving clear salted tea from large kettles and *tsam pa*. They are generous and refill each nun’s bowl as many times as requested. As highland, yak-herding women in a freezing climate, the Ge bcags nuns are robust and have hearty appetites. *Tsam pa*, made of roasted

barley flour, is a filling meal and I was constantly amazed how much of it they could eat – up to three or four large bowls along with other meals. Each nun has her own hand-sized bowl where she adeptly mixes a heaped pile of the flour with increments of tea into a paste or dough, which she licks or eats with her hands. At around 11a.m. soup is served in the same bowls and most nuns drink two or more helpings. To my foreign taste buds the soup was tasteless, made only of water, flour, oil, a bit of salt and leafy greens from the nunnery greenhouse. There are no spices at Ge bcags and older nuns are averse to chilli, though younger nuns have grown up eating Chinese instant noodles and have developed a taste for it. Another tea break with *tsam pa* follows in the afternoon around 3p.m., and evening soup is served around 6p.m.. After meals the nuns lick their bowls clean or leave them in their tables to dry in the cold, arid atmosphere for the next tea break. There are few pieces of cutlery at the nunnery and these are usually given to guests. The nuns instead drink or lick their food from their bowls or use a twig from a nearby shrub as a utensil.

Toilet breaks are as collective an activity as the *sgrub chen* itself, and last no more than two minutes; I counted one on my watch and the gong rang to call us back after a minute and forty-six seconds. This showed me again how the nuns have a reservoir of enthusiasm for practising together. There is no external authority motivating the nuns to practice so prolongedly. They never cut a practice session or day short so that they could go home to rest, though at any time they could have.

There is a one-hour lunch break at midday (it was never stretched) when the nuns relax in their rooms and eat more *tsam pa*. At around 7:30p.m. each evening the group ceremony breaks for the day, although as mentioned above, two nuns continue *sādhanā* and mantra recitation all night in the shrine hall.

The *sādhanā* was repeated twice on each of the main seven days with a few variations, like the addition of sacrificial fire offering (*sbyin sreg*) on the second last day, with a handful of nuns dressed in full *ḍākinī* regalia, and an elaborate feast offering (*tshogs*) when all nuns dressed in colourful *ḍākinī* hats representing the Five Buddha Families.



Figure 37: Nuns' seats during a break in the *bKa' brgyad sgrub chen*. Photo: author, 2018.

### Texts and dis-order of recitation

Each day of the *sgrub chen* the whole *bKa' brgyad* volume (the thirteenth of Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's Sixteen Volumes) is recited once from beginning to end, though not in consecutive order, and a few sections are left out. The sequence of reciting Tibetan tantric liturgies, especially in communal ceremonies, can be famously complicated. Reading jumps from the front of the text to the end, continues from the front and jumps elsewhere again and again. By the ninth day of the *bKa' brgyad sgrub chen* I had noted the page numbers, yet only barely caught on to the recitation order, which also varied each day. Most of the *Ge bcags* nuns seemed to know it by heart, since all *sgrub chen* share common elements and they have performed them numerous times annually for years. There is no widely written logic in Tibetan Buddhism for such sequential disorder, but monks and nuns in three *dgon pa* I have lived at told me it is to facilitate expertise of the ritual ceremony. "*sGrub chen*

recitation is not just normal book reading. It requires know-how, and the disordered sequence of reading proves one's expertise," explained a Ge bcags lama<sup>219</sup>.

The texts are written entirely in verse form and the chanting is all metric, with varying tunes and rhythms as the pages are turned. The day's chanting is punctuated with long passages of complicated mantras, the longest continuing for sixteen pages (Tshangs dbyangs vol. 13: 88-103).

There are core perceptual elements of Tibetan *sāadhanā* and *sgrub chen* that are by now more than familiar to Tibetan Studies – like the Five Buddha Families (rGyal ba rigs lnga) and their associated elements, mandala, the subtle body, a philosophical premise of an innately pure nature of consciousness and *yi dam* deification as the method for its realisation (Beyer 1973; Gyatrul 1996; Kohn 1988; Kongtrul 2002). The subtle body of *nāḍī* and *prāṇa* is an integral element in the intention of the *sgrub chen*, in accordance with the principle shared by all tantric systems that the outer world correlates with the inner world of the conscious being. Tantric practice, in this sense, all takes place within the practitioner's body-mind, alluding once again to the tradition's knowledge goal of nondual union (*zung 'jug*) (Fremantle (1971: 8). A passage from the bKa' brgyad *sāadhanā* illustrates how the entire scope of Buddhahood and its expression as a mandala of deities is visualised within the human being:

The external container [world] of the five elements and five female buddhas are an inestimable palace,  
The inner essence of migrators [living beings] are the meaning of Buddha nature [sugatagarbha]  
The aggregates and elements [physical bodies] are the primordially victorious peaceful and wrathful deities  
Within the [buddha] field of primordially pure phenomenal existence  
I visualise myself from the state of self-aware, spontaneous arising<sup>220</sup> (Tshangs dbyangs vol. 13: 31)

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<sup>219</sup> However, not all *sāadhanā* are disordered. The bDud 'joms gter gsar *sāadhanā* 'Chi med srog thig ('Immortal Life Essence') is clearly sequenced, which suggests this is not always the underlying intention of the order of recitation (personal communication, Geoffrey Samuel, November 2019).

<sup>220</sup> *phyi snod 'byung lnga yum lnga'i gzhal yas khang/ nang bcud 'gro ba bde gshegs snying po'i don/ phung khams ye nas rgyal ba zhi khro'i lha/ snang srid ye nas dag pa'i zhing khams su/ rang rig rang byung ngang du rang gsal gdab/*

### First and last days: the ritual boundary

All nun-participants will have previously received the *dbang* empowerment of the bKa' brgyad deities. The first day of the *sgrub chen* began in the afternoon with the communal establishment of a ritual boundary through a propitiation ceremony (*rgya tho*; 'kings' cairns') to the Four Heavenly Kings (rGyal chen bzhi<sup>221</sup>). In accordance with the whole of Ge bcags' Vajrayāna tradition, this included propitiating female mountain protectresses (*bsten ma*) and spirits of the nunnery valley. Wearing red plumed hats and their yellow outer robes reserved for formal occasions, the nuns walked in procession around the shrine hall, led by the two rDor slob and other senior nuns. The procession stopped at cairns in the ground in four directions to offer *gtor ma* and libation to the Four Heavenly Kings, reciting pages beseeching them to guard the ritual space for the *sgrub chen's* accomplishment. At the end of the procession the rDor slob folded a small paper printed with a red pattern of wrathful mantras (*drag sngags*) into a yak horn, which was buried underground outside the main entrance to the shrine hall and then ritually subdued using a *phur ba* dagger and black triangular<sup>222</sup> box (*hom khung*, explained as a firepit jail for obstacles). This was to magnetise and suppress all malignant spirits and energies (as is usual in Tibet, personified as beings) and overwhelm them with the spiritual purity of the ceremony's *bodhicitta* intent. This rite was repeated twice each day of the *sgrub chen* within the shrine hall for the same purpose of averting negativity and obstacles.

Establishing the ritual boundary through *rgya tho* is for preventing outside influences from entering the ritual space, and the inner ritual energy from exiting. At Ge bcags this means that no outsiders, including family members of the nuns, are permitted to enter the shrine hall during a *sgrub chen*, except on the last day to receive an empowering rite (*dbang*) with consecrated substances<sup>223</sup>. This was strictly upheld in the bKa' brgyad *sgrub chen* I attended.

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<sup>221</sup> These are guardian deities common to Mahāyāna Buddhism originating from Indian Lokapāla (Skt. Caturmahārāja), each looking after a cardinal direction of the world.

<sup>222</sup> The triangle (representing 'wrath', or *drag*) being one of four shapes symbolising the four main tantric actions to be enacted in *sgrub chen*: pacifying, increasing, magnetising and subjugating (*zhi*, *rgyas*, *dbang*, *drag*).

<sup>223</sup> During a *sgrub yang*, or 'light accomplishment' ceremony, outsiders are allowed inside. I had recently disrobed as a nun, shortly before the bKa' brgyad *sgrub chen*, and was determined to unashamedly wear my tunic and trousers, but the Ge bcags nuns would not have it. They had only known me as a nun and insisted I could not participate in the *sgrub chen* in lay clothes. By the third day they had forced me back into a full set of robes, with a brocade vest and ritual hats. Collectivity and representation are important in the *sgrub chen*.

Nuns who returned late to Ge bcags from the recess had to wait a full day before being purified by the rDor slob's ritual vase and entering the shrine hall. This does not mean that outsiders are completely excluded from the ceremony, however. From the nuns' Buddhist perspective, their practice extends through consciousness as far as their interdependence exists with their wider community, and many were included by name in dedications recited aloud twice a day.



Figure 38: Nuns establishing a *rgya tho* ritual boundary at a 2016 *sgrub chen*. Photo: Ge bcags dgon pa.

On the final day a *dbang* ceremony took place where senior nuns distributed the accomplished spiritual powers (*siddhi*) of the *sgrub chen* in the form of vase water and consecrated food (mostly dried fruits and sweets) to the nuns and visitors. Laypeople including many children entered the shrine hall to receive these, turning the atmosphere into a festive chaos. The nuns also disassembled the mandala and the protective boundary on the final day, and concluded with extensive dedication prayers for several hours.

### The attitude and perceptual framework of the nine-day practice

On the third day, the nun next to me asked if I knew how to do the *sgrub chen*. By then she had seen that I could keep pace with their reading (excepting the mantras) and understood most of the words. Her question highlights how much of the *sgrub chen* takes place beyond

mere chanting of the text.

Tibetan deity practice enjoins continual contemplation of all appearances as the deity and its surrounds, all sounds as their mantra, and all thoughts as the deity's (Buddha's) mind, or *samādhī*. This is to be contemplated not just while reciting the descriptive lines of the scripture, but throughout all sessions and breaks in between. Remembrance of the deity's symbolism of enlightened qualities along with confidence in one's divine identity is the psychological driving force of Vajrayāna Generation Stage practice. Remembered individually and collectively, it is said to be the synergetic practice that 'accomplishes' the *sgrub chen* (Padmasambhava 2013: 69). The rNying ma lama Orgyen Topgyal Rinpoche states:

To say that all appearances, including your own body, are the deity means that the three aspects of visualization, the clear visualization, remembering purity, and vajra confidence need to be practiced as one (Padmasambhava 2013: 68).

Being derived from *gter ma*, Ge bcags' tradition is fundamentally tantric Buddhist, and pure vision (or 'sacred outlook', *dag snang*; seeing Buddha nature in all) is the paramount cognitive training<sup>224</sup>. bKa' brgyad begins by contemplating<sup>224</sup> the underlying theme of the *sgrub chen*: that the nature of consciousness and the universe it experiences have always been essentially pure, or divine<sup>225</sup>, and suffering is due to a lack of awareness of this, which is to be overcome by the ritual practice. Three basic elements of being – form, sound and thought – are explained accordingly, setting the epistemological basis of the entire 'great accomplishment' (*sgrub chen*):

All phenomenal existence is an inestimable palace of great bliss  
 All appearances of form are wisdom deities of self-awareness  
 All resounding sounds are [pure] consonant and vowel sounds  
 All thoughts are the traceless *dharmakāya*  
 Close the door of dualistic perception that does not recognise this

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<sup>224</sup> And the pith of the Tibetan tantric commitments (*dam tshig*, Skt. *samaya*) (Ngari Panchen & Gyalpo 1996: XIII).

<sup>225</sup> 'Divine' meaning by Vajrayāna definition Buddha nature (*bde gshegs snying po*), defined as *ngo bo stong pa* (empty of essence), *rang bzhin gsal ba* (clearly cognisant) and *thugs rje kun khyab* (spontaneously compassionate) (Padmasambhava 2001: 116).

[And] open the door of self-awareness, self-luminosity, self-liberation<sup>226</sup> (Tshangs dbyangs vol. 13: 24-25)

With this perceptive basis of the *sgrub chen* established through pure vision, it then continues to build, from the ground up, the world that is to be experienced by the practitioners. The basic elements – earth, air, water and fire – are progressively developed in the practitioners’ imagination into a multi-directional cosmos (according to ancient Indian cosmology) with its mountains, sky, oceans and fire, ‘speaking’ these imaginations into existence through vibrational mantra sound<sup>227</sup>.

Like all of the nuns’ *sādhana* practices, the primary mental activity in the *sgrub chen* is *yi dam* and mandala visualisation with mantra recitation, which gradually cultivate an experience over the days of the *sgrub chen* towards the ceremony’s ‘great accomplishment’ of oneself and the world as embodied Buddha nature. Following the general framework of a *sādhana*, one begins by visualising the outer world as a divine palace (*gzhal yas khang*) and oneself and all beings within it as deities of the mandala. Sounds are mantra and all thoughts and feelings are the wisdom mind of the *yi dam* deity (i.e. Buddha). This is the creative, mental application of pure vision that constitutes the Generation Stage. Periods of reciting the mantra of the main bKa’ brgyad deities punctuated the daylong chanting with a quiet, collective hum. These periods felt like the real ‘sinking in’ of the *sgrub chen*’s meaning, and nuns that I observed in the two front rows looked deeply concentrated and content.

The real rDzogs chen, or Ati, level of the practice corresponds to the dissolution of the visualisation back into ‘emptiness’ (*stong pa nyid*; Skt. *sūnyatā*), or the complete relaxation of mental activity into an open awareness unconditioned by thoughts (i.e. *rig pa* in the rNying ma tradition). This heightened experience of *rig pa* awareness is the consummate accomplishment of all *yi dam* practice and *sgrub chen* at Ge bcags. It is, according to the rNying ma tradition, the fundamental reality to be awakened through Vajrayāna practice

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<sup>226</sup> *snang srid thams cad bde chen gzhal yas khang/ gzungs snang thams cad rang rig ye shes lha/ sgra grags thams cad a’ li ka’ li’i sgra/ dran rtog thams cad rjes med chos kyi sku/ de nyid ma rtogs gnyis ’dzin sgo bcad pa/ rang rig rang gsal rang grol sgo phyes shig/*

<sup>227</sup> Underlying all tantric systems is ancient Sāṃkhya’s cosmology of the creative evolution of *tattva* (universal evolutes) and *tanmatra* (basic sense elements), with subtle elements, beginning with consciousness, giving rise to the gross elements of the ‘outer’ world (Flood 2000: 510; Patkar 2004; Mallinson & Singleton 2017).

(Padmasambhava 2013). Dissolution of the visualisations into emptiness is described at various stages of the *sgrub chen* scripture, which the nuns collectively recite out loud and generally reflect upon. At times there are periods of collective silence in the *sgrub chen*, usually during the mantra recitation, allowing for prolonged nonverbal awareness in the nuns who have cultivated it. However, it is impossible to point to a ‘stage’ or moments in the *sgrub chen* when *rig pa* awareness is present individually or collectively in the nuns. As an observer, it is rather like an atmosphere that builds up in the community of nuns over days of the *sgrub chen* – like a profound silence that comes to pervade the chanting and ritual actions.

### **Mahā, Anu and Ati sections of the bKa’ brgyad scripture: increasingly refined levels of practice**

As mentioned above, bKa’ brgyad is the quintessential Mahāyoga *sādhanā* (as Mahāyoga’s ‘*sādhanā* class’ [*sgrub sde*]), and therefore quintessentially a Generation Stage practice (Ngari Panchen & Gyalpo 1996: 9). However, Ge bcags’ *sgrub chen* text of 446 pages plus various inserts categorises itself into three sections: Mahāyoga, Anuyoga and Atiyoga (a.k.a. rDzogs chen).

A bKa’ brgyad verse summarises these three:

Having accomplished<sup>228</sup> the assembly [of deities] according to outer Mahāyoga;  
and the profound path of the body mandala according to inner Anuyoga;  
As to accomplishing the ultimate heart meaning of vajra lifeforce...<sup>229</sup> [Ati] (Tshangs  
dbyangs vol. 13: 156)

The present bKa’ brgyad *sgrub chen*’s three sections of Mahāyoga, Anuyoga and Atiyoga each involves the generation of visualisations just described – of the palace, the main deity and surrounding deities and environment, all associated with the Five Buddha Families. The sections differ in their level of subtlety of mental activity and materiality. That is, in the first Mahāyoga section the palace is visualised outside of oneself, and one self-visualises as the main deity, Hayagrīva, within the palace. In the second Anuyoga section, one’s body is visualised as the palace and the whole mandala-complex of deities is located throughout the

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<sup>228</sup> Here ‘accomplished’ means mentally actualised into existence.

<sup>229</sup> *phyi ma ha’ yo ga lhar tshom bu tshogs sgrub dang/ nang a nu yo ga lhar zab lam lus dkyil sngon du song nas/ don dam snying po rdo rje’i srog sgrub bgyi ba la/*

body, so that one's body (or body-mind) is the entire context of the visualisation. In the third Atiyoga section, visualisation of the palace and mandala deities are repeated, expanding aspects of the Five Buddha Families and their correlating directions, qualities and lineage lamas; however here the mandala deities and their representations are all described as formless self-awareness (*rang rig*), including the very body of the deity. The following two lines from the Atiyoga section repeat on each page for nine pages, following a description for visualising deities and lineage lamas:

... uncontrived, self-arising awareness, body of the deity  
visualised from the state of self-luminous self-awareness...<sup>230</sup> (Tshangs dbyangs vol. 13: 160-168)

### Anuyoga

Generally, Anuyoga is the rNying ma class of tantra most focused within the body, employing subtle body constituents of *rtsa*, *rlung* and *thig le* (*prāṇa*, *nāḍī* and *bindu*). In the Anuyoga section of the *sgrub chen* scripture, the deities start to merge via mantra syllables visualised throughout the practitioner's subtle body, with the primary guru deities emerging from the mantra's seed syllables which are described as *prāṇa* and *bodhicitta* awareness. *Bodhicitta* in Vajrayāna is often used as a synonym for *thig le*, which in the rNying ma Anuyoga context often refers to semen or ovum<sup>231</sup> (Rangjung Dorje 2014: xxix, 8). The *cakras* of the practitioner's subtle body correspond to the abodes of mandala deities – both symbolically and as the visualised locations of deities. What this means for the nuns' processing of knowledge is interesting here, since the tradition understands the subtle body constituents of *rtsa*, *rlung*, *thig le* as aspects of consciousness. Awareness is therefore understood to pervade the whole body-mind. This is obviously markedly different from the modern Western idea of brain-centered knowledge, and not easily comprehensible by current anatomical, bio-medical views of the human body and mind.

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<sup>230</sup> *ma bcos rang byung rig pa lha yi sku/ rang rig rang gsal ngang du gsal gdab bo/*

<sup>231</sup> In higher tantric yoga practices *thig le* (Skt. *bindu*) may refer to the vital essences of semen and ovum; more often, as in Atiyoga (or Mahāmudrā) terminology, it refers to a point or sphere of light which has profoundly meaningful significance in rDzogs chen explanations of the mind's creation of reality ('Jigs med n.d.: 45-53).

Ge bcags' bKa' brgyad *sgrub chen* scripture is heavy with tantric terminology and little of it makes straightforward literal sense. This is partly because of its truncated verse format and sparsity of grammatical particles. It is also an aspect of its function as a guide towards tantric experience through the symbolic and poetic expressions for which rNying ma scriptures are famous (Klein 1985: 76). The scripture is dense in tantric allegory: every head, hand, gaze, article of the deities' clothing, etc., is symbolic and serves a soteriological purpose. None of Ge bcags' *sgrub chen* texts could make sense without personalised instruction and one's own practical experience. This is a given in Tibetan tantra, hence the importance accorded to *dbang, lung* and *khrid ka* personalised instructions in Tibetan Vajrayāna. Its texts are not intended to be read for their words alone, but to be realised and embodied through yogic experience.

The whole of the *sgrub chen*, being a Mahāyoga *yi dam sādhanā*, is fundamentally a Generation Stage practice of creative visualisation and contemplation, with a strong presence of Anuyoga and Atiyoga components throughout, like the subtle body of *rtsa, rlung* and *thig le* pervaded by a rDzogs chen view. The Anuyoga section of the bKa' brgyad scripture basically repeats the Generation Stage of the first Mahāyoga section, but with more complexity of mandala deity-clusters and more reference to them as aspects of the subtle body. The Anuyoga section is partly titled 'the body mandala' (*lus dkyil*) as all visualisations are focused within the practitioner's body as the deity (Tshangs dbyangs vol. 13: 133). In this sense, like the Mahāyoga section, it is essentially a description of the visualisation to be generated by the practitioner. The visualisation described unfolds like a kaleidoscope, multiplying and expanding *cakra* along the central channel and at the shoulders, hips and knees of the *sādhanā's* nine main deities, each *cakra* with sub-*cakra* of more deity-clusters<sup>232</sup>. The description is truly mind boggling, and I never came close to imagining it all within a single visualisation.

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<sup>232</sup> Interestingly, two lamas, unrelated and from different backgrounds, suggested the complex visualisation of deities and realms mirrors the neural complexity of the brain; perhaps the brain as the symbolic *gzhal yas khang* palace of infinite potential (dBang drag rin po che and rDza tshe ring bkra shis, personal communications, August, September 2019).

I noted above that the nuns could not explain much about the bKa' brgyad ritual's main deities. In general, I have asked different Ge bcags nuns over years about the meaning of *sgrub chen* passages, and they could not usually explain the words to me. Even a senior rDor slob nun who annually leads the summer bKa' brgyad ritual could not tell me from memory later in the year what the *sgrub chen's* principal deity is (granted there are eight Heruka deities, but there is a central one self-visualised). My point in highlighting this is hardly to suggest the nuns are unintelligent. Many of them are tantric ritual experts that require mastery of meta-cognition, psychology and environmental forces. The point I mean to make, in line with the overall thesis, is that meaning at Ge bcags is not assumed to exist objectively in words and ideas. Meaning merges through the nuns' repeated recitation of scriptures, ritual contemplation and a myriad of interdependences between the words, their mind-bodies, the community and natural environment.

#### **Translation of the Anuyoga section of the bKa' brgyad *sgrub chen* scripture**

To help make the point of how the nuns read their ritual texts and the quality of knowledge developed through their *sgrub chen*, I have translated the Anuyoga section of the nuns' bKa' brgyad *sgrub chen* scripture below. To a newcomer or younger nun, much of the bKa' brgyad scripture looks cryptic and complicated, at times incomplete. To convey this is the purpose of the translation. My intention is to show how the words might appear to the nuns when they first read the *sgrub chen* text, so I did not interpolate any syntax for coherency as one would in a translation for Western Buddhists. The few words that I added to the translation are in square brackets. A second, more annotated version of part of the translation is in Appendix A and shows the text's fuller meaning, as mature nuns might understand it after years of performing the annual ceremony, or as interested Western Buddhists might read it. I carried out the translations with the guidance of several Ge bcags nuns and a Ge bcags male lama during a six-month stay in Nang chen in 2018, and a rNying ma *mkhan po*, rDza tshe ring bkra shis (who is from a neighbouring region of Nang chen), in Sydney, Australia from August to December 2019.

Here it is worth turning attention again to problems of translating Buddhism into English, where Buddhism is by its own definition concerned with immediate experience, and oriented

towards mind-body union (see the Aṭṭhakavagga of the Sutta-nipāta: Sn 886; D I 16 as translated by Bhikkhu Bodhi 2017: 150-158; Guenther 1977: 36; Yuasa 1987). English terminology, besides being ill-equipped to communicate a fully integrative mind-body (or body-mind), brings with it strong associations from its own conceptual history (Guenther 1977: 36-59; Della Santina 2001: 98). This is of course the problem of translating between any languages, but it is especially so when translating Tibetan Completion Stage texts which aim for nondual awareness within a subtle body paradigm. As examples, the English terms ‘natural state’ (for *gnas lugs*), ‘unfabricated’ (for *ma bcos pa*) and ‘intellect’ (for *blo*) used in Mahāmudrā and rDzogs chen instructions have rather different connotations than their Tibetan equivalents do for readers such as the Ge bcags nuns in their highland, mudbrick *dgon pa*.

As Cabezón (2001) and Della Santina (2001) have both asserted, we will not likely have a standardised English terminology for the translation of Buddhism, nor can translation be fully successful, until a Buddhist cultural milieu is created in the English-speaking world. A necessary part of the translation process is thus expanding the semantic limits of existing English terms to create that cultural milieu (Cabezón 2001: 70-71; Doboomb Tulku 2001<sup>233</sup>: 12). Since the varied contexts of subject matters and intended audiences can differ so widely in Buddhist translation, lexicographical rules cannot necessarily be fixed (Dreyfus 2001: 175-176; Lindtner 2001). Different kinds of texts require different kinds of translation approaches. A precise technical rendering of terms may be the best approach for translating philosophical texts, whose concerns are intellectual and which operate through terminological precision (Napper 2001; Ruegg 2001). In Completion Stage texts, however, where words are often symbolic of wordless experience, the very function of language is often indicative and allegorical. We have seen how Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho’s own use of language was spontaneous and flexible, calling on ordinary speech and *mgur* poetry to communicate his contemplative understanding to different listeners. When it comes to translating such Vajrayāna texts and oral teachings, and one cannot literally translate into a second language

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<sup>233</sup> Notably, the recommendations that emerged from the conference that produced this key volume on translating Tibetan Buddhism (largely written by scholars of Tibetan philosophical texts) did not include Buddhist practice as a meaningful element in informing translation (Doboomb Tulku 2001: 12-13).

the meaning explained by an experienced practitioner, how much meaning is altered through an ‘accurate’ word-for-word translation?

In a sense, this whole thesis is a translation project, one that aims to communicate the quality of learning that Eastern Tibetan rNying ma and bKa’ brgyud practitioners such as the Ge bcags nuns derive from their scriptures and practices. The following translation of the nuns’ bKa’ brgyad *sgrub chen* scripture aims to facilitate this, not by offering a literal rendering, but by demonstrating that a literal rendering does not communicate the complete meaning. I chose the Anuyoga section of the scripture because it is the one most focused within the body, revealing the subtle body elements and paradigm that are the basis of the Ge bcags nuns’ whole learning pathway.

As mentioned, the translation attempts to convey how the text might come across to young Ge bcags nuns as they begin their learning. How the text comes across to a young Ge bcags nun is of course impossible for me or anyone else to say; my attempt here is mainly based on what I have understood from my experience of Tibetan language and the guidance of the Ge bcags nuns and male lamas. The translation is word-for-word, however it is not annotated, and the terminology and phonetic Tibetan aim to get closer to the intended reading. For example, the contraction *sems dpa’* (of *byang chub sems dpa’*) I translated as *bodhisattva*, and not as Sanskrit ‘*sattva*’ or literally as ‘brave mind’, as *sems dpa’* is widely understood to mean the full *byang chug sems dpa’* in the nuns’ spoken and written Tibetan. A more refined philosophical term like *tshogs brgyad* (‘eight collections’, meaning the eight kinds of consciousness in the Yogācāra school) I translated literally, as older nuns would know the meaning, but most younger nuns would not. I included Sanskrit terms that are regularly found transliterated in Tibetan texts, like *nāga* and *yāna*, but I otherwise avoided Sanskrit equivalents of Tibetan terms.

The Vajra Seal Meditation Intent of Anu[yoga] Activity Body Mandala, from the Three Roots’  
Guru of the Eight Pronouncements

(Tshangs dbyangs vol. 13: 133-154. See Appendix B for the Tibetan text.)

[six syllables of untranslatable *dākinī* script (*mkha’ ’gro’i brda yig*)]

All-pervading, all-seeing *dharmakāya*, Kuntuzang  
The supreme teacher, three bodies of guiding migrators  
Mind, symbolic, hearing lineages, all awareness-holders  
Homage to Padma, indivisible *saṃbhogakāya* teacher.

*Having proceeded with the Mahā meditation instruction from the three roots’ lama Kabgye ritual text [on] generation [and] completion [stages], the practice of accomplishing the inner body mandala according to the Anu meditation instruction goes like this:*

HUNG

Primordially pure self-awareness, all-pervading suchness  
Compassionate, all-appearing, leading unrealised migrators  
*Lung*-mind’s essence of awareness, the causal HUNG  
The external world, primordially all good, the space of the five mothers  
Five aggregates, five elements, five families, father-mother<sup>234</sup> space  
Unconditioned, spontaneously existing immeasurable palace  
A bliss lotus, white and red sun, moon seat  
Self-awareness, unfabricated, spontaneously present, lord *rigzin*  
Transformed, Chemchok Heruka  
The great glorious, wrathful king, self-awareness  
Radiating dark maroon light, outshining the three worlds,  
Fifty heads looking on all [buddha] realms<sup>235</sup> of the ten directions.  
The body’s main face, nine dark maroon heads  
For looking at the [buddha] realms of the Eastern ten directions:  
Dark maroon, white, red, yellow, green, body’s five faces,  
White, yellow, red, green symbolising the four activities of body.  
Above that, lord of the family, Dor-sem, peaceful white face  
For looking at the realms of the Southern ten directions  
Qualities, the main face, nine yellow heads:  
Yellow, white, red, yellow, green – qualities’ five faces  
White, yellow, red, green symbolising the four activities of qualities.  
Above that, lord of the family, Rin-jung, peaceful yellow face  
For looking at the realms of the Western ten directions  
The main face of speech, nine red heads:  
Red, dark blue, red, yellow, green, speech’s five faces  
White, yellow, red, green symbolising the four activities of speech.  
Above that, lord of the family, Nang-tha, peaceful red face

<sup>234</sup> ‘father-mother’ throughout the passage translates the Tibetan *yab yum* – a symbol of male and female buddhas in sexual union, an archetypal Tibetan tantric symbol for nonduality.

<sup>235</sup> Throughout the passage ‘realm’ translates *zhing khams*, meaning a buddha field/pure land.

For looking at the realms of the Northern ten directions  
 Activity, the main face, nine green heads:  
 Green, white, red, yellow, green, activity's faces  
 White, yellow, red, green symbolising the four actions of activity.  
 Above that, lord of the family, Don-drub, peaceful green face  
 For looking at the realms of the upper ten directions  
 The main face of mind<sup>236</sup>, nine dark blue heads:  
 Dark blue, white, red, yellow, green, mind's five faces  
 White, yellow, red, green symbolising the four activities of mind.  
 Above that, lord of the family, Nam-nang, peaceful dark blue face  
 All baring fangs, gaping mouths, each with three eyes  
 A hundred earholes hearing sounds of the ten directions  
 Fifty tongues turning the Dharma wheel in the ten directions  
 Hair, moustaches, eyebrows, goatees blazing like fire  
 Wearing a five families' crown of dried skulls on his head.  
 The root syllable ripened, in order to see the inexpressible  
 All middle eyes are marked with fifty AKSHA  
 All right and left eyes are marked with the hundred syllables  
 The main ten hands leading those to be tamed of the ten directions  
 The right five, a vajra, hooked knife, trident,  
 Hand drum, wheel; the left five holding a bell and  
 A red skull, intestines, staff, plough.  
 The first ten of the remaining forty-five right hands  
 Are holding the innately pure aggregates, elements of the father-mother five families  
 Below these, sublimated, are ten blood-drinking father-mother [couples]  
 Below them are the eight bodhisattvas of the innately pure eight collections  
 Below these, six sages of innately pure obscured emotions  
 Below these, four gatekeepers of innately pure eternalism [and] nihilism  
 The first eight of the remaining forty-five left hands  
 Innately pure eight spheres, eight female bodhisattvas  
 Below them, the twenty-eight gods of innate purity of the twenty-eight desires  
 Below them, holding the eight female gatekeepers  
 Of the innately pure four immeasurables.  
 As to the main feet, fifty altogether:  
 Ten feet of the utterly completed ten grounds  
 Are stepping on directional guardians, self-embodiment of the ten impurities  
 The utterly completed twenty-one grounds [and] paths, twenty-one feet  
 Are standing upon the eight gods, eight *nāga*, eight classes  
 Nine feet of the entire nine *yāna*  
 Are standing on the nine related oath violators, mistaken understandings of the teaching  
 Ten feet for turning the Dharma wheel in the ten directions  
 Are stepping on fifty conceptual fetters<sup>237</sup> of mental conditioning.  
 Wearing three cloaks and smeared with three secretions

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<sup>236</sup> 'mind' (*thugs*) could also be translated here as 'heart-mind' or 'mind-body'.

<sup>237</sup> The meaning of the term *byi chings*, and its translation as 'fetters', is uncertain (personal communication, mKhan po Dza Tshe ring bkra shis, December 2019).

Adorned with three ornaments, vajra wings lifted  
 Nine dancing postures and ten glorious garments  
 Complete with five kinds of snakes and eight charnel ground implements  
 A blazing mass of wisdom fire burning deluded emotions  
 Mother is the sky face, queen of space, Kunzangmo  
 The nine main dark blue faces symbolising the nine *yāna*.  
 The hands of the utterly completed grounds [and] paths are eighteen:  
 The first main hands, a vajra, bell, embracing the father  
 The remaining eight right, the eight *keuri mamō*  
 The remaining eight left, the eight lion hybrid goddesses.  
 Seat of antelope hide, leopard skin skirt, born ornaments, charnel ground attire  
 Ornamented with blood, fat, semen, clots of human ash  
 The right stretched, the left drawn in, father-mother in sexual embrace  
 Kunzang Chemchok father-mother union  
 Three channels with five *cakra*, spontaneously existing.  
 A self-arisen immeasurable palace, not fabricated by anyone  
 In the *dharmakāya* realm of Ogmin at the heart  
 The mind support for all *sugata* in the ten directions  
 At the centre of a spacious blue all-victorious stupa  
 The seed of *lung* and bodhicitta awareness, HUNG  
 This, thoroughly transformed, guru *dharmakāya*  
 In essence, inseparable with the root guru  
 Sangdu, nondual father-mother, complete enjoyment<sup>238</sup>.  
 As to the lord of the family, *dharmakāya* Kuntuzangpo  
 Twelve Dzogchen teachers surrounded by a retinue  
 In the *sambhogakāya* realm Ogmin at the throat  
 The syllable AH of *lung*-mind awareness  
 This, thoroughly transformed, guru Tse-pak med  
 Nondual father-mother, body of complete enjoyment  
 Five classes' skull garland, five *rigzin* guru  
 Father-mother union, bodies of complete enjoyment.  
 Outside all the gathered deities of vajra lifeforce  
 Self-radiant father, body of complete enjoyment  
 Lord of the family transformed [as] Nangwa Thaye  
 Lord Chenrezig, compassionate gathering of secrets  
 Father-mother union, bodies of complete enjoyment  
 Transformed emanation body of one thousand buddhas  
 Father-mother, children all gathering around  
 Method-wisdom union, illuminating the complete enjoyment body.  
 The top of the head, in the greatly blissful *nirmāṇakāya* realm  
 White syllable OM of *lung*-mind awareness  
 This, thoroughly transformed, guru Padmasambhava  
 Father-mother nondual union, emanation body  
 Surrounding, the twenty-five subjects are

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<sup>238</sup> The annotated translation included in Appendix A ends here.

Learned sages, transformed, dressed as *siddha*  
 All father-mother union, complete enjoyment bodies  
 Lord of the family, greatly glorious Śri Singha is  
 With mother Zhi-tso in union, complete enjoyment  
 Surrounding, eighty *rigzin siddha* are  
 In father-mother union, bodies of complete enjoyment.  
 Lord of the family, lords of the three families, two *rigzin*  
 Four masters of the transmission stream of four empowerments  
 Fortunate *rigzin*, five *drwa-ma*  
 Lord of the family, all five conqueror families  
 All father-mother union, complete enjoyment.  
 In the qualities realm, navel *cakra*  
 Lord of the family, powerful sage with retinue, transformed  
 The syllable SVA of *lung*-mind awareness  
 This, completely transformed, the great Dorje Chang  
 Dark blue, vajra, bell, embracing Dorje Phagmo  
 Father-mother nondual union, complete enjoyment.  
 Buddhas, bodhisattvas, hearers, solitary realisers, transformed  
 All *sugata* without exception abiding in the ten directions  
 All father-mother union, complete enjoyment.  
 In the *nirmāṇakāya* realm of the secret centre *cakra*  
 Green syllable HA of *lung*-mind awareness  
 This, completely transformed, guru of wrathful energy  
 With five deities, four wrathful families, ten ferocious ones  
 Vajra holding gurus of the three times' *nirmāṇakāya*  
 Principal deity and retinue, father-mother, complete enjoyment  
 At the bliss-sustaining outer *cakra*, the secret centre  
 With all the retinue, Dorje Dragtsal, Ratna Kilaya  
 Dorje Phagmo, Senggey Dongma  
 Method-wisdom union, the complete enjoyment body.  
 The main father-mother, radiating [and] absorbing the four joys  
 Eight HUNG of condensed *lung*-mind awareness radiate out.  
 The right shoulder, appearing as a four channeled *cakra*  
 The shoulder *cakra*, realm of mirror-like wisdom  
 Blue HUNG of *lung*-mind awareness  
 Nam-nying, transformed, Yangdag Heruka  
 Dark blue, three faces, six hands, in embrace with the mother  
 Padmasambhava at the heart, Hungkara at the throat  
 At the top of the head, Dorje Sem, sovereign lord of a hundred families  
 In the four directions, sons of the four families, principal and retinue  
 All father-mother union, complete enjoyment.  
 The shoulder, appearing as a four-channelled *cakra*  
 Left shoulder *cakra*, glorious realm  
 Dark blue HUNG of *lung*-mind awareness  
 Sangye Yeshe, transformed, Shinjey Shey  
 Dark blue, three faces, six hands, in embrace with the mother.  
 At the heart, Lodan Chogsey, father and mother

At the throat, Jampal Shenyen, father and mother  
 At the top of the head, Rinchen Jung, sovereign lord of a hundred families  
 Four sons of the four families, all in sexual union  
 The hip, appearing as a four-channelled *cakra*  
 The left hip *cakra*, realm of discriminating wisdom  
 Dark red HUNG of *lung*-mind awareness  
 Gyalwa Chogyang, transformed, [is] glorious Ta-chog  
 Dark red, three faces, six hands, in embrace with the mother  
 At the heart, Nyima Ozer, in embrace with the mother  
 At the throat, Ludrub Nyingpo, in embrace with the mother  
 At the top of the head, sovereign lord of a hundred families, Nang Thaye  
 With supreme sons of the four families, father-mother, in the four directions  
 All in union, body of complete enjoyment.  
 The hip, appearing as a four-channelled *cakra*  
 The right hip *cakra*, realm of accomplishing wisdom  
 Green HUNG of *lung*-mind awareness  
 Dorje Dudjom, transformed, Kumara  
 Dark blue, three faces, six hands, in embrace with the mother  
 At the heart, Senggey Dradrog, in embrace with the mother  
 At the throat, Prachen Hasti, in embrace with the mother  
 At the top of the head, sovereign lord of a hundred families, Donyo Drub  
 With sons of the four families, father-mother, in the four directions  
 All in union, body of complete enjoyment.  
 The elbow, appearing as a four-channelled *cakra*  
 The main right elbow, realm of emptiness wisdom  
 Dark maroon HUNG of *lung*-mind awareness  
 Palgyi Yeshe, transformed, Ngondzog Gyalpo  
 Dark blue, three faces, six hands, in embrace with the mother  
 At the heart, Padmasambhava, self-radiant mother  
 At the throat, Dhana Samskri, in embrace with the mother  
 At the top of the head, lord of the family, Benzra Heruka  
 All supreme sons of the four families, father-mother, in the four directions  
 All in union, body of complete enjoyment.  
 All remaining realms of similar kinds in the ten directions, visualised  
 The elbow, appearing as a four-channelled *cakra* shaped with four spokes  
 The main left elbow, wisdom realm difficult to pass  
 Dark blue HUNG of *lung*-mind awareness  
 Nyagchen, transformed, inseparable with Chemchok  
 To liberate malevolent *rudra* demons without exception.  
 Glorious Ma Ning protector, guardian [of] Chemchok activities  
 Dark blue, three faces, six hands, in embrace with the mother  
 At<sup>239</sup> the heart, Rigzin Pegyal, in embrace with the mother  
 At the throat, Rigzin Bima, in embrace with the mother  
 At the top of the head, lord of the family, Ratna Heruka

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<sup>239</sup> Typographical error in Tibetan text, missing locative particle: *thugs ka* and not *thugs kar*

The assembled entourage of the five bodies, father-mother and sons  
 All embracing self-radiant mothers, holding awareness  
 Not shunning sensual pleasures, play of complete enjoyment  
 All remaining realms of similar kinds in the ten directions, visualised  
 The knees, appearing as a four-channelled *cakra*  
 The main left knee, wisdom realm, spacious freedom  
 Dark blue HUNG of *lung*-mind awareness  
 Glorious lion, transformed, body of the destroying tamer of conceit  
 Dark blue, three faces, six hands, in embrace<sup>240</sup> with the mother  
 At the heart, Shakya Senggey, self-radiant mother  
 At the throat, Rombu Guhya, in embrace<sup>241</sup> with the mother  
 At the top of the head, lord of the family, Padma Heruka  
 In the four directions, four sons of the four families, father and mother  
 All in union, body of complete enjoyment.  
 All remaining realms of similar kinds in the ten directions, visualised  
 The knees, appearing as a four channeled *cakra*  
 The main right knee, wisdom realm of perfect expanse  
 Dark green HUNG of *lung*-mind awareness  
 Bero, transformed, greatly glorious black powerful one  
 Three faces, six hands, legs spread, in embrace with the mother  
 At the heart, Dorje Drolo, in embrace with the mother  
 At the throat, Shintam<sup>242</sup> Garbha, in embrace with the mother  
 At the top of the head, lord of the family, Karma Heruka  
 In the four directions, four sons of the four families, father and mother  
 All in union, body of complete enjoyment.  
 All remaining realms of similar kinds in the ten directions, visualised  
 Visualisation of the four sons of greatly glorious Chemchok:  
 At the soles [and] palms of the main four feet [and] hands  
 The right palm, Raksha Heruka  
 The left palm, Guhya Heruka  
 The left sole, Sanu Heruka  
 The right sole, Yaksha Heruka  
 All in father-mother union, complete enjoyment.  
 At the four thumbs, four oath-bound private guardians  
 The other sixteen *pawo* and *khandro*  
 Sixteen father-mother minor *khandro*, clearly visualised  
 Remaining Dharma guardians of similar kinds, completely visualised  
 Four father-mother gate-keepers, four gateways, above, below  
 All in union, body of complete enjoyment.  
 The main outer eight-spoked *cakra*  
 In the four directions, four sub-directions, each in their own order  
 The entire eight assemblages, principal deities [and] retinues  
 With devotion, instantly imagined, vividly

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<sup>240</sup> Likely a typographical error in Tibetan text: '*phril* instead of '*khri*

<sup>241</sup> Again '*phril* for '*khri* in the Tibetan text, likely an error; '*swinging*' with the mother?

<sup>242</sup> Typographical error for transliteration of Skt. Śāntigarbha?

Meditate that all hairs, including the body hairs, of the principal deities  
 Completely transformed, palaces of victorious *sugata*  
 Emanate [and] absorb radiant white [and] red wisdom  
 Completely amassing like a heap of mustard seeds  
 In all of their three places, the victorious ones' body, speech, mind  
 Marked with white OM, red AH, dark blue HUNG  
 Lord of the family, inviting the five families  
 All empowered as children of the victorious ones  
 Heads ornamented, five families father-mother *sugata*.

OM AH HUNG OM HUNG TRAM HRI AH  
 MUNG LAM MAM PAM TAM

*Inviting the wisdom deities [ye shes sems dpa']:*

*In this way, from the three clear places, light radiates out inviting in exactly the same infinite wisdom beings from realms of the five families of the ten directions [and] four times, like Ogmin and others. They become inseparable with the commitment beings, like water placed in water, to permanently abide.*

HUNG  
 The place of Ogmin and realms of five families  
 Ngayab Ling and realms of the ten directions  
*Rigzin*, three roots, Kabgye deities  
 Like the loving affection of a mother for her child  
 Think with compassion of those to be tamed  
 With great love, please come!

OM AH HUNG BENZRA GURU BENZRA RATNA PEMA KARMA DHEWA DHAKINI SARVA SA MA  
 YA DZA DZA

HUNG  
 The victorious ones abiding, in the palace of the body mandala  
 The three roots, in a sphere of five lights  
 On a stacked seat of white [and] red sun [and] moon  
 Commitment [and] wisdom beings inseparable, permanently abiding.

BENZRA SA MA YA TITRA LHEN

HUNG  
 From the open expanse, your own unborn, unfabricated mind  
 In a mandala of the *thig le*, unimpeded self-awareness  
 All three roots' gathered deities [of] unfabricated great bliss  
 Seeing your very face here and now, I prostrate.

ATI PUHO  
 TRATI TSHA HO

*Offerings:*

HUNG

Form, sound, scent, taste, texture – five objects of sensual pleasure  
 White PENTSA and red RAKTA  
 Three *torma*, the method path great bliss  
 From the co-emergent open expanse, liberating union *samādhi*  
 One taste, inconceivable Kunzang offering clouds  
 Nonduality, freed from acceptance [and] rejection, please partake!

OM AH HUNG BENZRA GURU BUDDHA BENZRA RATNA PEMA KARMA DEWA DAKINI SAPARI  
 WARARA RUPA SHABHA GANDHE RASA SPARSHE PENTSA RAKTA BALINGTA TANAGANA  
 DHARMA DHATU A HO SUKHA PUDZA HO

*Praise:*

HUNG

Glorious great Kunzang, Chemchok Heruka  
 Great glorious source of all victorious *sugata*  
 Supremely powerful of the victorious ones, the ten directions, four times  
 I devotedly prostrate to Kunzang Heruka.  
 Mind, symbolic, hearing lineages, gathering of *rigzin* gurus  
 Victorious ones together with sons of the four times, ten directions  
*Yi dam mahāsiddha*, female Kabgye *dākinī*  
 Glorious great Chemchok, very activity embodiment  
 Mahākāla, father-mother, five bodies [and] sons  
 Gathering of *mahāsiddha*, Kabgye, teaching guardians, emissaries  
*Pawo*, *khandro* and oath-bound Dharma protectors  
 Together with father-mother guarding palace gatekeepers  
 All of them, unfathomable enlightened activities  
 I devotedly prostrate to all assembled mandala deities.

*Arousing mantra:*

From the body mandala palace, the three roots' *sugata*  
 Unmoving from the peaceful state of *dharmakāya*  
 The all-illuminating love of unimpeded compassion  
 Nondual *lung*-mind, emanating [and] absorbing, arouses the mantra.  
 The unmoving bliss-emptiness sound of mantra resounds  
 Its empty awareness<sup>243</sup> cutting the continuum of conceptual thought  
 Co-emerging awareness, state of empty clarity

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<sup>243</sup> Tibetan *rigs* is likely a typographical error for *rig*.

Until realising Dharmatā suchness  
[I] will not abandon practising the three roots mandala.

HUNG

On the lotus moon at the heart of the *dharmakāya* guru  
At the centre of a blue nine-pronged vajra, the heart lifeforce  
A blue HUNG upon a lotus  
The mantra garland, like a star garland, circles the periphery  
All of the other *cakra* assemblies  
Like the main mantra, each resounds like a dragon.

*The recitation:*

OM BUDDHA BENZRA RATNA PADMA KARMA SATVA SA MA YA MA NU PA LA YA  
BUDDHA BENZRA RATNA PADMA KARMA SATVA TVE NO PA TI TRA  
DRI DHO ME BHA WA SU TOKAYA ME BHA WA SU POKAYA ME BHA WA MA NU RAKTO ME  
BHA WA SARVA SIDDHI ME PRA YATTSHA SARVA KARMA SU TSA ME TSITAM SHRI YAM KU RU  
HUNG HA HA HA HA HO BHA GA WAN SARVA TA THA GA TA HRI DA YA BUDDHA BENZRA  
RATNA PADMA KARMA MA ME MUNTSA BUDDHA BENZRA RATNA PADMA KARMA BHA WA  
MA HA SA MA YA SATVA AA

*Recite as many as you can.*

*General mantra of the victorious sugata:*

A AA I I I U UU RI RII LI LII E EY O OE AM AA KA KHA GA GHA NGA TSA TSHA DZA  
DZNYA NYA TA THA DA DHA NA TA THA DA DHA NA PA PHA BA BHA MA YA RA LA WA SHA  
KA SA HA CHA

*Receiving the siddhi:*

Three roots' lama Kabgye *sugata*

Bestow the supreme empowerment of the joyful vase at the top of my head  
Radiating [and] absorbing the four joys, the nondual father-mother  
Bestow the supreme empowerment of secret, highest joy at my throat  
Bestow the supreme empowerment, exceptional wisdom at my heart  
Bestow the fourth empowerment of co-emerging joy at my navel  
Bestow the supreme empowerment of the fifth body, transcendent joy, at my secret [*cakra*]  
Descending [and] ascending, the sound of AALI KAALI  
Supreme *bodhicitta* nectar, the three roots' victorious ones  
Four joys in reverse ascendance to the top of the head  
In this way, may [I] obtain the empowerment of Dorje Chang!

OM AH HUNG GURU BUDDHA BENZRA RATNA PEMA KARMA DEWA DAKINI JANA SARVA  
SIDDHI HUNG  
KAYA SIDDHI OM  
WAKA SIDDHI AH

TSITTA SIDDHI HUNG  
SARVA SIDDHI SVA  
KARMA SIDDHI HA

*Thus, it is received.*

*Stage of dissolution:*

*The gathered deities of the surrounding assemblies dissolve away [as] the wisdom beings [jñānasattva]. The commitment beings [samayasattva] dissolve into oneself. All the gathered wisdom deities of the body mandala, inseparable with the commitment beings, dissolve into the greatly blissful white [and] red elements of the cakra; think that one has been sealed by an indestructible vajra. Stay in the dharmakāya state of self-aware emptiness.*

### **Questions and answers: quality of knowledge?**

During the *sgrub chen* it took several days to clarify with the nuns what the main deity is for self-visualisation. The text states dBang chen rta mchog and Che mchog he ru ka (in the Mahāyoga and Anuyoga sections respectively), but did this mean Hayagrīva, or was it Cakrasaṃvara, or both? dBang chen rta mchog is in fact Hayagrīva and Che mchog he ru ka is Mahottara Heruka, but at the time I was not clear, and the point is that neither were the nuns, though they perform this ritual annually. Several of the nuns (and a male lama) told me the main deity was Gu ru rin po che, which is true in principle as all *gter ma* are believed to originate from him, but not technically true of the visualisations outlined in bKa' brgyad. Their lack of precise answers confirmed two things for me, 1) that the *sādhanā* is indeed complicated, and 2) that precise details of the visualisation are not of prime importance at Ge bcags. I have encountered this repeatedly over my years with Ge bcags nuns when asking questions that Westerners typically ask about the details of deity visualisation: Is the deity's consort red or blue? Does it have a horse head on the side of the main head, and are there one or two skull-cups being held? Why does your Hayagrīva shrine have two differing images of the deity, and which one should I visualise in the practice? And so on. Often the nuns did not give an answer or they answered differently from another nun. Several times senior nuns told me not to worry so much about the details of the visualisation, but focus instead on trusting in the presence of the deity, which is inseparable with my root guru and the truest nature of my mind (in Tibetan terms, *dad pa*, 'faith' and *dag snang*, 'vision').

In fact there is a noticeable difference in the emphasis given by rNying ma and dGe lugs pa lamas in Generation Stage teachings. rNying ma pa lamas tend to emphasise a heartfelt confidence in the deity's presence, while dGe lugs pa lamas tend to emphasise clear and detailed visualisation as fundamental (Ngawang Dhargyey 1994: 62-68)<sup>244</sup>. Does this difference in emphasis, and the nuns' focus on faith and feeling more than a mental image, tell us something about the kinds of consciousness involved in the two approaches? Is one more mental and the other more intuitive? This links to the discussion in Chapter Five on ways of reading at Ge bcags. In Ge bcags' tantric learning, meaning sinks in over time, and is bigger than its parts. Meaning is felt, and finds its way in through ritual performance, contemplation and repeated recitation over years of practice. I expect that today's *mkhan po* from the *bshad grwa* at Ge bcags' branch monastery, Ra ya dgon, would have given me more precise answers about the visualisation, committing more to the details of the deity's image. This touches the pulse of the central question of this research concerning the quality of knowledge gained through primarily experiential training, such as in pre-modern practice lineages, in contrast to primarily intellectual styles of learning.

### **Ways of reading the *sgrub chen* text: the researcher versus the Ge bcags nuns**

As a Canadian woman educated until my twenties in 20<sup>th</sup> century post-Christian schools, although familiar with Tibetan Vajrayāna scriptures in various genres, the way I read the *sgrub chen* text was different to the way the nuns beside me read it. It was very clear to me that my relationship to the words of the *sgrub chen* text and the chanting was different to theirs. I thought a lot about the meaning of the words and sentences as I read them, pausing to try and comprehend the alluring passages and wanting to conceptually grasp their entire meaning. I had to relax and let go of my discomfort from reading rapidly through pages of words whose meaning I could not keep up with. I observed that the Ge bcags nuns, while being far more organically steeped in the language than I, were comfortable with a *respectful distance* from the words, almost like the words were sacred objects they were reading to bless their minds. These nuns do not have a collective historical consciousness of a European Enlightenment or scientific revolution; they do not critically approach the knowledge in their

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<sup>244</sup> This was also said by Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche in a public talk in Sydney, Australia on February 6<sup>th</sup>, 2020.

texts like I and most Westerners do. Yet this lack of critical approach in their learning does not preclude them from gaining their own self-knowledge. Self-knowing (*rang rig*) is literally the end goal of Ge bcags' whole education.

According to Vajrayāna tradition that posits *dad pa* and *dag snang* as essential forms of cognition for highest knowledge (*rig pa; ye shes*), my scepticism was an immaturity that needed further cultivation of the appropriate way of knowing. Tantric Buddhism of course partly evolved from Indian traditions like Sāṃkhya and Yoga, that see the thinking mind (*manas*, or mental consciousness) as the primary obstacle to spiritual liberation (Patañjali & Johnston 2009; Mallinson & Singleton 2017). As discussed in previous chapters, tantra is not apologetic that its highest knowledge comes from non-logical ways of knowing. In Vajrayāna the saying 'difficult to tame' (*'dul dka' ba*) is said to apply above all to those who hold to a solely intellectual way of knowing<sup>245</sup>.

This different relationship to the written word is also evident in the nuns' love for reciting prayers. During the *sgrub chen*, tea-breaks in the shrine hall lasted about twenty minutes each, during which the nuns chanted prayers from memory – prayers like bSam pa lhun grub (Spontaneous Fulfilment of Aspirations), bZang spyod smon lam (Aspiration for Noble Conduct) and sGrol chog (Tara practice). They chanted these prayers several times a day, day after day during the *sgrub chen*, and indeed throughout their years and lifetime at the nunnery. They seem to have endless enthusiasm for reciting these prayers over and over again, while I felt bored, no matter how elegant and inspiring the prayers' wording may be. For reasons of my own conditioning, I find repeated chanting of the same written words can feel prescriptive and insincere, and I prefer to silently call up a wordless prayer as a feeling 'from the heart'. Yet the Ge bcags nuns seem to access heartfelt feeling through the opposite.

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<sup>245</sup> Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche stated this in a public talk in Sydney, Australia on February 6<sup>th</sup>, 2020.

### Mantra in the *sgrub chen*: language as an embodiment of tantric nonverbal knowledge

The most important element of the *sgrub chen* is said to be the uninterrupted continuity of mantra recitation: Tibetan tantra is called the ‘Vajra Vehicle of Secret Mantra’ (gSang sngags rdo rje theg pa), and mantra is a defining practice of tantra overall (Mallinson & Singleton 2017: 260; Lopez 2000: 525). In tantra, mantra syllables are called ‘seeds’ (*yig ’bru*; Skt. *bījamantra*) that are said to embody tantric deities, and considered the ‘life force’ (*srog snying*; *thugs srog*) of *sādhana* (Padmasambhava 2013: 68; Tshangs dbyangs vol. 13: 151). Earliest iterations of tantric mantra were not considered to have linguistic meaning, beyond expressing a deity’s essence or enlightened quality (the deity being a personification of an enlightened quality) (Bharati in Staal 1975: 332; Mallinson & Singleton 2017: 259). Even if tantric mantras were at later times ascribed meaning in Sanskrit (Staal 1975: 333), their Tibetan transliterations in the *sgrub chen* are barely intelligible for the nuns. A Ge bcags male lama told me the bKa’ brgyad mantra are ‘the natural form of the deity’ (*lha’i rang gzungs*). I doubt any of the nuns could have given me more of an explanation (and it seemed meaningless to ask), beyond knowing the mantra are expressions of the bKa’ brgyad *yi dam*. Staal highlights mantra’s origination in an ancient Indian science of ritual and language that paid attention to sound’s vibration, the way phonetic sounds are produced and their relation to the breath (Staal 1996: 369-372). Forms of early Vedic mantra were transmitted mnemonically and by demonstration, with no tradition preserving specific meanings (Staal 1996: 369-374). Tibetan Vajrayāna mantra are far removed in time and in their usage from mantra’s earliest Vedic origins, and have been enshrined in writing from the outset of Buddhism in Tibet (Dalton 2004; van Schaik 2008). However, Staal’s point that mantra syllables were linguistically meaningless in their role in early Vedic ritual bears some consideration in regard to mantra’s role at Ge bcags.

This links to the point I made in Chapter Five about reading at Ge bcags Nunnery. Ge bcags’ texts are made meaningful through a living interdependence of experiential and written traditions. Its *sgrub chen* texts are recited with ritual intention, and their verses create emotive, numinous effects in the consciousness of the practitioner(s) (Staal 1975: 333). Their effect is perhaps more like the effect of music on the mind-body than that of interpreting written words. The *sgrub chen*’s pages with their grammatical rules provide a meaningful

linguistic framework that directs the nuns' visualisation and ritual enactment, but the intended meaning of the scripture overall is to function as a method of accomplishing a deity (i.e. embodiment of Buddha nature through *rig pa* awareness). *Sāadhanā* (*sgrub thabs*) extrapolates a full-bodied creative practice of bringing to mind the personified and relatable presence of a *yi dam* for the practitioner to identify with through visualisation, devotion and mantra recitation. As far as the verses are intentions to this end, they serve a similar function to their mantra and are not understood by the tradition to have entirely objective meanings.

To flesh out the body of the *sgrub chen* even more, the role of mantric 'seed syllables' is inextricably linked with the subtle body (Flood 2000: 510; Tshangs dbyangs vol. 13: 133-154). As seen in the translation above they are visualised at *cakra* centres and *nāḍī* channels and are uttered aloud, so that they are literally embodied by the practitioner. Tibetan tantric tradition holds that the human subtle body comprises 72,000 *nāḍī* channels, the extremities of which are formed as Sanskrit vowels and consonants through which the flow of conscious *prāṇa* is influenced. This is Vajrayāna's explanation for humans' propensity for language of highly complex sounds and their combinations (Kalu 1995: 111-112). Mantra in Ge bcags' practices is thus held to be innately energetic and powerful, interconnected with the *prāṇa* flow of the human subtle body and therefore to full-bodied cognisance. Moreover, mature Ge bcags nuns also incorporate *rtsa lung* yoga into all the practices they do, even when such yogic techniques are not specified in the *sgrub chen* texts, which brings an even deeper corporeal dimension to the *sgrub chen*'s meaning.

### **Design and tempo of the ritual music and chanting**

It is worth expanding on the internal effects of the varying tunes and rhythms of chanting noted previously. Some parts of the day's recitations were chanted extremely slowly, with a drawn-out, sonorous beating of the large drum that seemed to deepen the Ge bcags nuns' concentration. At other times, dedication prayers during tea-breaks were recited at a lightning pace, so quickly one could barely decipher the words let alone contemplate their meaning. Such high-speed chanting is common in *dgon pa* across Tibetan and Himalayan regions. This flexibility of speed suggests that the meaning the nuns relate to in the practice texts is not of the individual words per se, but the nuns' *feeling* of the prayer's intention. The

texts in this way serve as an essential element of a holistic ritual practice, which, as Kohn points out, involves an 'interplay of each element with the others and of the grand architecture of the festival as a whole' (Kohn 1988: 3).

In his article on a 2009 'Chi med srog thig *sgrub chen*, Samuel notes that there is more at play than the physically observable ritual manoeuvres of the ceremony, and the design of the *sgrub chen* indicates this (Samuel 2017). He gives the example of the standing 'cham dances acting out the dispelling of obstacle-making spirits, performed slowly in the late afternoon when the attention of participants is taxed. The theatric 'cham calls attention to the surface at this very time, reinforcing the *samaya* bond between the practitioners to persevere in the *sgrub chen* and on the lifelong path of overcoming obstacles (Samuel 2017: 186-187).

We have seen the nuns' collective enthusiasm to remain for the long hours of their annual eighteen *sgrub chen*, motivated, as they are in all their practices, by their tradition's highest contemplative rDzogs chen goal. The diverse melodies, tempo and pageantry of the bKa' brgyad *sgrub chen*'s chanting also have emotive, psychological effects that inter-depend with the nuns' states of mind and contribute to the *sgrub chen*'s 'great accomplishment'. Perhaps so do the varying levels of rational intelligibility throughout the text – from the melodic chanting of familiar language invoking a rain of blessings (*byin 'bebs*), to the vibrational mantra that sinks in during meditative recitation (*bsnyen pa*), to the philosophical passages that heighten the practitioner's meta-awareness of her own creation of the experienced mandala deities.

A function of rDzogs chen practice is to relax (or exhaust) the mental consciousness (*sems*; *yiḍ kyi rnam shes*; Skt. *manas*), and the *sgrub chen*'s patterns of chanting, performed steadfastly, are certainly effective towards this (Longchen 1989). I left the shrine hall just thirty minutes before the final verses of the nine-day-long *sgrub chen* were chanted (feeling the need to visit the toilet), but if I had stayed to the end might I have experienced an unexpected shift in mind or emotional release? I imagine there are other effects besides the exhaustion of thought intended by the *sgrub chen*'s design, such as the miraculous phenomena celebrated by the Ge bcags' community and pre-modern Tibetan society in general. The nuns are seasoned *sgrub chen* practitioners and know the effects of their endurance from years of experience. One can only infer that there are strong internal effects

of the *sgrub chen* motivating the nuns to repeat so many of them annually as the sinews of their tradition.

## Conclusion

The hermeneutical analysis of this chapter has demonstrated, through a focused examination of a Ge bcags text in practice, the holistic process by which the nuns make meaning in their Vajrayāna tradition. Outside of a first-person, seasoned experience of the *sgrub chen* ritual with its rDzogs chen orientation, the words of the text are incapable of communicating the *sgrub chen's* full meaning on their own. The tradition, while it may not logically or explicitly state it, is well-aware of this, as seen in the *sgrub chen's* design which allows cultivation of its intended, tantric quality of knowledge through repeated ritual enactment of the text and other creative, contemplative dimensions. We have also seen in this chapter how the knowledge cultivated by a Ge bcags *sgrub chen* is literally embodied through conscious subtle body constituents of *rtsa*, *rlung* and *thig le* as well as mantric syllables visualised throughout the practitioner's body. All of this adds to considerations of the problems of literal Buddhist translation, particularly translation of yogic practice texts into English.

## CONCLUSION

This thesis has been an investigation of the context and quality of the embodied knowledge the nuns cultivate at Ge bcags Nunnery. While referring extensively to the nondual knowledge goal of Ge bcags' training system, I have remained cognisant of the fact that it is not possible to articulate the inner experience of Ge bcags' nuns who are cultivating this knowledge through their lifelong practice. The highest knowledge of Ge bcags' tradition also cannot be approached directly, because of its tacit, nonverbal quality which I have aimed to elucidate; it is said to be nonconceptual 'knowing' (*rig pa*), attainable through cultivation of meditative practice, and is thus necessarily beyond verbal expression. (The nuns, who are not trained as intellectual scholars, were also reticent to theoretically explain the knowledge they cultivate.)

An important argument of this thesis is that knowledge and its cultivation at Ge bcags cannot be approached in an abstract way as a set of ideas or a type of objective knowledge acquired through intellectual endeavour. Since it is not primarily about book-learning and ideas, the knowledge at Ge bcags has been approached through investigating the living context of the Buddhist texts and practices that the nuns engage with. Each chapter has looked progressively at different levels of context, down to the micro-context of knowledge in the words of a *sgrub chen* text, which is the type of text the nuns spend most of their time engaging with.

Although this thesis has focused on Ge bcags' texts as a central object of investigation, we have seen that all of Ge bcags' modes of teaching are instructions on how to practice, and the texts are not meaningful without it. At Ge bcags there is no independent, abstract knowledge for its own sake. The words of Ge bcags' texts are not assumed by the nuns and their lamas to correspond in a literal way to the experiential knowledge that they intend: that gap is to be filled by oral instructions and practice. This is apparent in the nuns' ways of reading and in the overall Vajrayāna tradition of teaching and learning at the nunnery.

Within this study, the communal, embodied quality of Ge bcags' texts and knowledge has been revealed in the following ways: in the life-story and social relationships behind the

production of Ge bcags' texts; the nuns' ways of learning and the integrative subtle body that is their basis; the interdependence of Ge bcags' texts with oral instructions as teaching modalities; the allegorical nature of Ge bcags' scriptural language; and, perhaps ultimately, the values the nuns exhibit as human examples.

Ge bcags Nunnery is an unusually intensive example as a community of full-time yogic practice. Even among Eastern Tibetan practice lineages, Ge bcags is rare in being a rigorous training pathway with so little intellectual study. Nevertheless, just as an understanding of Ge bcags can be gained through taking into account the regional, cultural context and social fabric from which the nunnery emerged, so understanding the life context of Ge bcags' ways of reading its meditation and ritual texts can aid our understanding of other Tibetan Vajrayāna communities. As was pointed out in Chapters One and Two, the integral role of yogic practice in reading and in textual production can be seen in the life-stories and teachings of Ris med masters like 'Jam mgon kong sprul, 'Ju mi pham and 'Jam dbyangs mkhyen brtse dbang po, who spent long periods in hermitages and often wrote from visionary revelations. The same was the case for their contemporary, Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho, the founder of Ge bcags Nunnery.

Gómez highlights an important difference between academic Christian and Buddhist Studies: Christian Studies is a predominantly Western undertaking about a Western social phenomenon, whereas Buddhist Studies is largely a Western undertaking about something that is originally non-Western. Further, Christianity and secular studies of Christianity have long interacted in a way that Buddhism and Buddhist Studies have not (Gómez 1995: 190). Consequently there are additional challenges in Buddhist Studies that require the kind of hermeneutical shift advocated by Yuasa (1987: 1), one which reorientates our concepts and language to better access and comprehend Asian Buddhist terminology and the mind-body integration that is the goal of Asian contemplative traditions like Ge bcags. Such a reorientation calls for more integration of theory and method in contemplative studies, with more embodied methodologies of fieldwork and practical engagement with the texts and practices studied, particularly when these texts and practices are still worked with at the heart of people's lives. This ethnographical thesis offers such a reorientation, and accords

with the broader spectrum of philological approaches in recent decades of Buddhist Studies seeking more holistic understandings of Buddhist texts and practices<sup>246</sup>.

In studying the practices and ways of learning that comprise Ge bcags' Vajrayāna tradition, this research has also demonstrated the range of psychophysical elements involved in Tibetan contemplative methods. One occasionally reads in Buddhist Studies that the centrality of meditation experience in Tibet is a myth created by Western Asian apologists, as Gyatso highlights (Gyatso 1999: 116), or that the recitation of ritual texts is more concerned with ceremony and performance than meditative experience (Sharf 1995: 244-246). These may be true if our understanding of meditation is limited to silent, focused meditations like Śamatha and Vipāśyanā and we are looking for their training in large monasteries, however these are limited understandings when considering the range of contemplative practices in *sgrub brgyud* communities in a realm like Nang chen, where, as Turek has shown, hermitage networks were highly active (Turek 2012, 2013).

At Ge bcags Nunnery and other Nang chen hermitages, the creative visual and emotive elements entailed in *yi dam* deity and subtle body yogas are inextricable from the silent Completion Stage *rig pa* awareness that is their consummation. So too are the mantra recitations and remembrances that the nuns regularly engage with throughout daily life. A culturally contextualised understanding of Tibetan nondiscursive meditations based on observation of and descriptions from living communities such as presented in this thesis can offer important information for experimental design, and for the further development of a conceptual framework in cognitive neuroscientific studies of 'meditation' (*goms pa*, Skt. *bhāvanā*) and 'mindfulness'.

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<sup>246</sup> It is interesting that this hermeneutical shift in philology that has been occurring over recent decades is concurrent with the institutional assimilation of mindfulness into Western healthcare and education (not to mention the wellbeing industry). How this may be related, if at all, is beyond the scope of this thesis' investigations, but it seems a relevant question for future research.

## The future tense

As this study has discussed, significant cultural shifts have been taking place in Nang chen since the post-Mao Reform and Open period began in the late 1970s under CCP leadership. Since then, drastically altered administrative policies governing the economy and education of Tibetans in the PRC are changing social values and calling into question the long-term continuation of full-time tantric practice traditions like those of Ge bcags Nunnery.

A push for economic development has been the CCP's driving force towards achieving a harmonious socialist society since the post-Mao reforms (Gaerrang 2012: 59). For Tibetans, as an ethnic minority in Western China, this has meant assimilation along a rapid course of economic restructuring through China's 'Develop the West' campaign (Ch. Xibu da kaifa), which has entailed urban resettlement of Tibetan nomads and the implementation of compulsory nine-year education for all school-age children nationwide. The result has been a profound shift in Tibetan educational and cultural values. Within a single generation, Tibetan society in China has gone from centuries of monastery-centred religious education to CCP-administered secular education taught and received entirely by laypeople.

This has been accompanied by a new ethos of critical thought among the educated lay Tibetan population, and among the ordained population who have come to value evidence-based science through prominent lamas' collaboration with scientists and with Han Chinese followers. Nang chen Tibetans in the 21<sup>st</sup> century see themselves as having a 'new intellect' (*rig gсар*) which is better than their pre-modern one. A new prevalence of words in colloquial Tibetan like 'reasoned understanding' (*rtogs sad*), sometimes contrasted with 'blind faith' (*rmongs dad*), and 'new brain' (*klad pa gсар pa*) reflects the increased value placed on critical reason in the learning culture of Tibetans (personal communication, dBang drag rin po che, January 2014; Gayley 2013; Yü 2006, 2013)<sup>247</sup>. Gayley (2013, 2016) has identified important

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<sup>247</sup> This is not to imply that pre-modern Tibetan education did not have critical thinking. Jabb discusses how modern socio-political conditions have simply brought to the fore in contemporary Tibetan secular writing a critical thinking tendency that was already there (Jabb 2015: 243-244).

implications of this for Tibetan society and monastic institutions, particularly given the power of polemic that is amplified by digital dissemination<sup>248</sup>.

In the Buddhist *dgon pa* of Eastern Tibet these changing values have filtered down in various ways. Perhaps the most obvious is an increase of degree-oriented *bshad grwa* programs in the majority of large practice lineage *dgon pa* in Qinghai and Sichuan Provinces, and a concurrent increase in the worldwide population of *mkhan po* (and *mkhan mo*, female nun-scholars). In the Ris med period of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the *mkhan po* degree was reserved for *mkhas sgrub* ‘scholar-yogins’ who were both textually learned and accomplished in tantric meditation (as well as morally exemplary), like mKhan po kun dpal (c. 1862-1943), mKhan po ngag chung (1879-1941) and in subsequent generations like mKhan po padma shes rab (b. 1936). Today, degree-oriented scholastic study is the curricular norm for most monks and nuns in all Tibetan Buddhist lineages; hundreds if not thousands of monks and nuns graduate each year with scholastic degrees from Tibetan monastic institutions<sup>249</sup>. Today’s *mkhan po* and *mkhan mo* are scholars (*mkhas pa*), but unlike in the Ris med period, they are rarely also accomplished yogins (*sgrub pa*).

### Scholar-nuns and a future for Tibetan female textual production

As mentioned in the Introduction, I did not analyse gender as a central factor in the present research. My concern has been exploring how the Ge bcags nuns make meaning. The nuns’ conversations and behaviours both inside and outside of the nunnery did not reveal gender to be a consciously important factor in their self-identity. The nuns are aware that monks generally have better material conditions and are more efficacious in society, but the Ge bcags nuns’ female gender has not stopped them from pursuing the life course that they esteem and value and which makes them happy (some even pray to be reborn at Ge bcags in their next life). This is not, however, to say that gender is not a factor in the nuns’ learning experiences. As seen in the words of the nun Che mchog at the beginning of the thesis, nuns

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<sup>248</sup> The proliferation of digital information through the online medium of WeChat is another massive contributor to the thought content of Tibetans today.

<sup>249</sup> This is clear when accounting for contemporary *bshad grwa* in the rNying ma school alone: bLa rung sgar, Śri Singha and Zhe chen dgon as a few examples in Eastern Tibet; rNam grol gling, mTsho rgyal bshad sgrub gling and Min grol gling as examples in India.

tend to be timid because of their gender when it comes to voicing their knowledge, and although senior nuns are capable of imparting advanced practical instructions, formal *gdams ngag* instructions are always attributed to male lamas. In the quiet sphere of meditation practice Ge bcags nuns can realise their tradition's highest forms of knowledge, including *gtum mo* expertise, but written representation of their knowledge forms has always been undertaken by men.

This points to important questions about gendered knowledge and its expressions in Tibetan female writing, which merits a comprehensive research analysis. According to the modernising trends in large Tibetan *dgon pa* just mentioned, scholar-nuns are nowadays becoming the 'new normal' in Tibetan Buddhist nunneries. Over the last twenty years, for the first time in Tibetan history, equality of degree-oriented education is being given to nuns across all Tibetan Buddhist schools, with *dge bshes ma* and *mkhan mo* graduating each year who are capable of writing and publishing their own written works. Indeed, both of the two largest *dgon pa* in Eastern Tibet today – bLa rung sgar and Ya chen sgar – have nun-lamas and nun-scholars authoring philosophical commentaries and prayer texts<sup>250</sup> (personal communication, A ne mi 'gyur sgröl ma, May 2018). The number of Tibetan secular female authors has also grown in the post-Mao period. This development promises a fertile future landscape of female Tibetan textual production, which will facilitate deeper research on gendered knowledge in Tibetan Buddhism and society in general<sup>251</sup>. Time will tell if Tibetan nuns and lay women<sup>252</sup> will author tantric Buddhist commentaries and higher *khrid ka* meditation instructions in the future.

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<sup>250</sup> In fact, bLa rung sgar in Eastern Tibet was granting Tibetan nuns equivalent education and scholastic titles before nunneries in India, like Dolma Ling and Jamyang Choling, were doing so with the support of the Western-initiated Tibetan Nuns Project.

<sup>251</sup> An example of how Tibetan nunneries may evolve when they have achieved their own financial and curricular autonomy is the 'Brug pa bka' brgyud nunnery Dongyu Gatsal Ling in Northern India, founded independently in 1999 by Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo, out of a close relationship with its *ma dgon*, Tashi Jong (a.k.a. Khams pa sgar) The nuns follow a *bshad grwa* program of language and philosophy guided by Khams pa sgar *mkhan po* and senior graduate nuns, along with standard ritual training, annual two-month communal retreats and the option of long-term retreat to train as a *rtogs ldan ma*. In addition to this, the nuns have developed their own creative writing and performing arts components, including 'cham dancing and costumed impersonations that they perform at community picnics, that occasionally spoof their male authorities.

<sup>252</sup> And non-celibate ordained women in tantric lineages.

### The future of Ge bcags Nunnery?

In modern China, where superstition (Ch. *mixin*) is illegal and religion is legal as far as it serves socialist goals, the trend of rational and ethical reform in Eastern Tibetan *dgon pa* has enabled Tibetan Buddhism to survive and thrive within drastically altered circumstances. Such a trend is characteristic of religious modernisation around the world and can be seen in the responses of Buddhist societies under other politically centralising regimes – be they local as in Thailand under the Bangkok-centred state, or colonial as in Burma and Sri Lanka under British rule in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (Lopez 2002; McMahan 2008; Tiyanich 1997: 6-8). My Masters thesis (McDougal 2016) analysed post-Mao modernising conditions in Eastern Tibet and the resulting cultural shift in Nang chen *dgon pa*, with Ge bcags Nunnery as a point of reference for the changes. As noted earlier in the present thesis, Ge bcags Nunnery has been valued and respected in Nang chen society for the nuns' calibre of yogic practice. In the last decade, however, the nuns have been criticised by wider monastic society for their lack of philosophical study. Ge bcags' annual practice schedule has hardly changed, so this change in perspective about Ge bcags reveals wider shifting social values. A broader picture of Nang chen over the last fifty years sees that the monk-scholar (*mkhan po*) has replaced the dreadlocked yogin as the region's cultural hero.

The nuns and lamas of Ge bcags Nunnery have, on the most part, chosen not to alter their curriculum of full-time tantric practice with its eighteen annual *sgrub chen*, despite considerable peer pressure from other Nang chen monastics to develop more philosophical study. While the basic schedule of how the nuns spend their days and years remains intact at Ge bcags, recent cultural changes at the nunnery can be noticed in more subtle ways. In the Introduction I recounted an older nun's observations of the nuns' reduced enthusiasm for ascetic practice ("We nuns now need our tea to be tasty and hot"), and I mentioned in Chapter Three a laxity in adhering to previously binding recess rules. In the last decade a number of nuns have left Ge bcags permanently to join larger *dgon pa* like Ya chen sgar in Sichuan Province – an important centre of thousands of nuns and monks focused on rDzogs chen teaching and practice (with a growing philosophical component). The population that remains at Ge bcags is ageing and many nuns are unable to maintain daily 'khrul 'khor yoga,

which is physically demanding. Young nuns are not permitted by law to join the nunnery for more than a few years before they attend state primary school<sup>253</sup>. This means that the stream of practice from generation to generation that constitutes the nunnery's 'lineage' is losing some lifeforce.



Figure 39: Young nuns in front of a new shrine hall and quarters at Ge bcags, 2020. Photo: dBang drag rin po che. These nuns will likely stay at Ge bcags for three to five years.

A more subtle example of cultural change at Ge bcags is the simplification of previously elaborate ritual details, like the displaying of five-coloured scarves from the upper floor of the shrine hall to the throne of the guru during empowerment and long-life (*brtan bzhugs*) ceremonies. The nuns still perform this ritual detail but not as often as they used to. There have also been hiatuses over the last fifteen years in the nunnery's three-yearly *smān sgrub* (medicine consecration) *sgrub chen*, which was the first large communal *sgrub chen* carried out after Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho settled nuns in the Ge bcags valley, and the first one carried out in the nunnery's post-Mao revival. Yet another subtle change, resulting from Ge

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<sup>253</sup> One could easily argue that primary secular education is good for Tibetan Buddhist culture. The more important question seems to me to be about the content of that education and how it conditions the value orientation of citizens.

bcags' waning population, is the reduced frequency of spontaneous *rgyug len* meditation exchanges between older and younger nuns at unplanned times and places.

The most subtle change that I am alert to through my continued observations of Ge bcags and Nang chen society is to the worldview. I have discussed the language and subtle body worldview of Ge bcags and pre-modern Nang chen, wherein the outer and inner worlds of body and mind, and daily life and visions, are experienced as profoundly interconnected. One still hears reports of visions in Nang chen, such as a yak-herding girl who saw a protector deity in a mountain cave, and her community took her seriously, or a senior Ge bcags nun who regularly sees supernatural signs in *sgrub chen* heralding the arrival of a guru or events to come. What will the significance be to the cultural and mental health of Tibetan society if it modernises to the point when such dreams and visions are no longer heeded as 'real'?

In his book *The Ego Tunnel*, Metzinger (2009) explains the sophisticated interaction of sensory-cognitive conditioning and cultural practices that creates our experience of self and reality. When I tried to explain to Nang chen friends during my fieldwork what my research was about, I explained that it partly involved the changing view (*lta ba*) in society, with something similar in mind to Metzinger's articulation in the following paragraph:

Over the centuries, the theories we have devised have gradually changed our image of ourselves, and in so doing they have subtly altered the contents of consciousness. ... Human beings in other historical epochs—during the Vedic period of ancient India, say, or during the European Middle Ages, when God was still perceived as a real and constant presence—likely knew kinds of subjective experience almost inaccessible to us today. Many deep forms of conscious self-experience have become all but impossible due to philosophical enlightenment and the rise of science and technology—at least for the many millions of well-educated, scientifically informed people. Theories change social practice, and practice eventually changes brains, the way we perceive the world (Metzinger 2009: 17).

My main interest in this thesis has been the all-encompassing interaction of the Ge bcags nuns' knowledge (which, by traditional definition, is a 'view' of reality, *lta ba*) and the cultural practices by which they cultivate such knowing. Metzinger points to how far-reaching the

consequences of a society's theories, or conscious views, on reality are<sup>254</sup>. Behind my research questions in this thesis lies a more personal concern of what deep forms of subjective experience, valuable to human wellbeing, may be lost if the materialisation of values and knowledge continues in Nang chen society. As I mentioned in the Introduction, part of my motivation to write this thesis has been for the sake of posterity, to record the nuns' ways of learning and embodying the knowledge communicated in their texts, in light of the rapidly changing worldview in Tibetan Buddhist society.

### **Continued adaptations**

After the rapid adaptation of large Eastern Tibetan *dgon pa* in the early 2000s to the modernising conditions I have just discussed, Tibetan Buddhist leaders – even those who had led the way to more degree-oriented study – have tried to slow the momentum. Around 2015, several prominent lamas like Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche and Khenpo Tsultrim Lödro were speaking publicly about the danger of losing experience-based forms of Tibetan tantric transmission (see for example McDougal 2016: 99-101). Since then one can see a return to traditional contemplative values across Eastern Tibetan monastic and lay society, after an intense decade of radical secularism in which many Tibetans were questioning the value of their old ways.

Overall, the activities I have observed in Buddhist society in Eastern Tibet over the last fourteen years seem like the persistent response of a river flowing around the obstacles that modern life in the PRC is presenting, including government restrictions on the institutional flow of ideas and future construction of religious buildings. Full attendance in monastic three-year retreat centres has returned after a few years of empty places, and a significant number of lay people are engaging in meditation retreats in loosely managed hermitages – some motivated, like Westerners, by the stresses of the modern economy.

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<sup>254</sup> Generally, Metzinger's extremely intellectual (and ethnocentric) approach in this book to the question of consciousness is not in line with my argument for embodied methodologies when studying practices for cultivating higher consciousness.

Over the last six years the Ge bcags Nunnery community has been developing a meditation hermitage at a lower altitude, near Nang chen town which has modern healthcare services and more accessible food provisions. This hermitage is currently serving as a meditation centre for nuns, monks and occasionally laypeople, and is envisioned as the future hub of the Ge bcags lineage where nuns from branch *dgon pa* will train in its three-year retreat centre under senior Ge bcags nuns. The future population at Ge bcags Nunnery will likely continue to wane, perhaps to fewer than a hundred in upcoming decades, and their engagement in yogic practice may not be as vibrant and rigorous as it once was. After nine years or more of Chinese state education towards becoming a successful economic actor (Gaerrang 2012: 274-275), most young Tibetan adults are inspired by interests and life goals that are quite different from ascetic contemplative training in a remote yak-herding nunnery.

This thesis thus ends with an open question as to the future nature and status of Tibetan full-time *sgrub brgyud* communities, both inside and outside of the PRC, and our understanding of them in academia. It is possible, as one Ge bcags lama suggested, that the future of most meditative engagement in Nang chen will be motivated by the need for balance amidst the stresses and health challenges of busy life, and that lifelong yogic practice in mountain hermitages will become even more rare<sup>255</sup>. The Tibetan Buddhist adaptations to conditions in post-Mao China, however, have to date proven remarkably innovative and resilient. The present Ge bcags lineage is preparing for its long-term existence by adapting to current conditions so that continuation of its traditional practices will be possible.

Many areas for future research arise out of these questions about continuing adaptations, some of which have been identified in the thesis. These include: questions concerning gendered knowledge and its expressions in Tibetan society; the relationship of orality and literacy where nondual consciousness is a knowledge goal; the role of mass religious teaching events in contemporary Eastern Tibet and their impact on hermitage contemplative culture; the role of digital information and social media in the future of Tibetan Buddhist

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<sup>255</sup> If the increasing number of non-Tibetans engaging in traditional three-year retreats in developed countries, where cost is a major obstacle, is any indication, the future of Buddhist meditation practice in Tibet may defy such expectations.

monasticism; and the value of Vajrayāna meditation practices for neuroscientific and other investigations of meditation and mindfulness.



*Figure 40: A mass gathering for a rNying ma transmission ceremony at rDzogs chen Monastery in sDe dge County, Sichuan Province. Photo: author, 2018.*

This research project has provided a critical opportunity to study a unique female contemplative community where, due to its geographic isolation and its commitment to its lineage, its traditional practice system remains largely intact. Although changes are starting to become evident, they are still at an early stage. Compulsory schooling, the arrival of mobile phones and the internet, along with changes in worldview and social outlook in the broader society, will continue to lead to inexorable and far-reaching change. In particular, this thesis has given an account of the nuns' way of life and learning at Ge bcags Nunnery, with a focus on the tradition's texts and their role in the nuns' realisation of embodied knowledge. As an ethnographic study it provides a multifaceted picture and analysis of the Ge bcags nuns' Tibetan Buddhist contemplative community at a turning point in history.

## APPENDIX A

This lightly annotated translation of part of the Anuyoga section of the bKa' brgyad *sgrub chen* text aims to show its fuller meaning, as mature nuns might understand it after years of performing the annual ceremony, or as an interested Western Buddhist might read it.

**The Vajra Seal Meditation Intent of Anu[yoga] Activity Body Mandala, from the Three Roots' Guru of the Eight Pronouncements**

[six syllables of untranslatable *ḍākinī* script (*mkha' 'gro'i brda yig*)]

All-pervading, all-seeing *dharmakāya*, Samantabhadra  
The supreme teacher, three *kāya* of guiding migrators  
Mind, symbolic, hearing lineages, all awareness-holders  
Homage to Padma, indivisible *saṃbhogakāya* teacher<sup>256</sup>.

*Having proceeded with the Mahā[yoga] meditation instruction from the three roots' guru bKa' brgyad ritual text [on] generation [and] completion [stages], the practice of accomplishing the inner body mandala according to the Anu[yoga] meditation instruction is uttered thus:*

**HUNG**

Primordially pure self-awareness, all-pervading suchness  
Compassionate, all-appearing, leading unrealised migrators  
*Prāṇa*-mind's<sup>257</sup> pure awareness [is] the causal HUNG  
The external world [is] primordially all good, the space of the five *yum* mothers  
Five aggregates, five elements, five families, *yab-yum* space  
Unconditioned, spontaneously existing immeasurable palace  
[On a] bliss lotus, white and red sun [and] moon seat  
Self-awareness, unfabricated, spontaneously present, lord *vidyādhara*<sup>258</sup>  
Transformed, [is] Mahottara Heruka<sup>259</sup>  
The great glorious, wrathful king [of] self-awareness  
Radiating dark maroon light, outshining the three worlds,  
Fifty heads looking on all [buddha] realms of the ten directions.

Nine heads of the Body [with] the main dark maroon face

<sup>256</sup> Padmasambhava is usually identified as *nirmāṇakāya*, but not here.

<sup>257</sup> *prāṇa*-mind (*rlung sems*), often presented in *sgrub brgyud* texts as a dyad, follows the Vajrayāna principle that *prāṇa* and mental consciousness function inextricably like a horse and its rider. In practice at Ge bcags, this principle is fundamental.

<sup>258</sup> Referring to the Four Vidyādharas in Mahāyoga, personified as deities while representing levels of spiritual accomplishment: *rnam smin* ('complete ripening'), *tshe dbang* (power over life), *phyag chen* (Mahāmudrā), *lhun grub* ('spontaneous arising'). This is another example of deification of qualities in Tibetan Vajrayāna.

<sup>259</sup> The unified form of bKa' brgyad's eight *heruka* deities, and wrathful progenitor of all hundred Zhi khro deities.

For looking at the [buddha] realms of the Eastern ten directions:  
 Dark maroon, white, red, yellow, green – Body’s five faces  
 White, yellow, red [and] green symbolising the four activities of Body<sup>260</sup>.

Above that, lord of the family, Vajrasattva [with a] peaceful white face  
 For looking at the realms of the Southern ten directions  
 Nine heads of Qualities [with] the main yellow face:  
 Yellow, white, red, yellow, green – five Qualities faces  
 White, yellow, red [and] green symbolising the four activities of Qualities.

Above that, lord of the family, Ratnasambhava [with a] peaceful yellow face  
 For looking at the realms of the Western ten directions  
 Nine heads of Speech [with] the main red face:  
 Red, dark blue, red, yellow, green – Speech’s five faces  
 White, yellow, red [and] green symbolising the four activities of Speech.

Above that, lord of the family, Amitābha [with a] peaceful red face  
 For looking at the realms of the Northern ten directions  
 Nine heads of Activity [with] the main green face:  
 Green, white, red, yellow, green – Activity’s faces  
 White, yellow, red [and] green symbolising the four actions of Activity.

Above that, lord of the family, Amoghasiddhi [with a] peaceful green face  
 For looking at the realms of the upper ten directions  
 Nine heads of Mind [with] the main dark blue face<sup>261</sup>:  
 Dark blue, white, red, yellow, green – Mind’s five faces  
 White, yellow, red [and] green symbolising the four activities of Mind.

Above that, lord of the family, Vairocana [with] peaceful dark blue faces  
 All baring fangs, gaping mouths, each with three eyes  
 A hundred earholes hearing sounds of the ten directions  
 Fifty tongues turning the Dharma wheel in the ten directions  
 Hair, moustaches, eyebrows [and] goatees blazing like fire  
 Wearing a Five [Buddha] Families<sup>262</sup> crown of dried skulls on his head  
 The root syllable ripened, in order to see the inexpressible  
 All middle eyes are marked with fifty AKSHA  
 All right and left eyes are marked with the hundred syllables<sup>263</sup>  
 Ten main hands leading those to be tamed of the ten directions:

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<sup>260</sup> This begins a layout of the five components of a fully awakened Buddha – Body, Speech, Mind, Qualities and Activity – each expressing the ‘four ritual actions’ (*phrin las bzhi*: ‘pacifying’, ‘increasing’, ‘magnetising’ and ‘destroying’, *zhi, rgyas, dbang, drag*), whose purpose is to attract situations helpful to virtue and awakening and reduce adversity (Fremantle 1971: 17).

<sup>261</sup> ‘Mind’ (*thugs*) could also be translated here as ‘Heart-mind’.

<sup>262</sup> Five [Buddha] Families (*Rigs Inga*) are an archetype blueprint for Tibetan tantra and its mandalas, symbolising the interplay of inner and outer physical elements and psychological mind-body qualities. They are often listed as Buddha/Tathāgata, Vajra, Ratna, Padma and Karma.

<sup>263</sup> The mantra of Vajrasattva, as the nuns would know this to mean.

The right five [are holding] a vajra, hooked knife, trident,  
 Hand drum [and] wheel; the left five [are] holding a bell,  
 A red skull, intestines, staff and plough.  
 The first ten of the remaining forty-five right hands  
 Are holding the innately pure aggregates, elements of the Five *yab-yum* Families  
 Below these, sublimated, are ten blood drinking *yab-yum*<sup>264</sup>  
 Below them are the eight bodhisattvas of the innately pure eight consciousnesses  
 Below these, six buddhas of innately pure *kleśa*  
 Below these, four gatekeepers of innately pure eternalism and nihilism  
 The first eight of the remaining forty-five left hands  
 Eight female bodhisattvas [of] the innately pure eight objects of consciousnesses  
 Below them, the twenty-eight *īśvarī* goddesses  
 Of innate purity of the twenty-eight desires; holding below them  
 The eight female gatekeepers of the innately pure four immeasurables.  
 As to the main feet, fifty altogether:  
 Ten feet of the utterly completed ten grounds  
 Are stepping on directional guardians, self-embodiments of the ten impurities<sup>265</sup>  
 The utterly completed twenty-one grounds [and] paths, twenty-one feet  
 Are standing upon the eight gods, eight *nāga*, eight classes [of demons]  
 Nine feet of the entire nine *yāna*  
 Are standing on the nine related oath violators, mistaken understandings of the Teaching  
 Ten feet for turning the Dharma wheel in the ten directions  
 Are stepping on the fifty conceptual fetters<sup>266</sup> of mental conditioning;  
 Wearing three cloaks and smeared with three secretions  
 Adorned with three ornaments, vajra wings lifted  
 Nine dancing postures and ten glorious garments  
 Complete with five kinds of snakes and eight charnel ground implements  
 A blazing mass of wisdom fire burns deluded emotions  
 Mother is sky-faced Samantabhadrī, queen of space  
 [Her] nine main dark blue faces symbolise the nine *yāna*;  
 The hands of the utterly completed grounds [and] paths are eighteen:  
 The first main hands [holding] a vajra, bell, embracing the father,  
 The remaining eight right [hands], the eight *ke'u r'i* [Skt. *gaurī*] mother earth spirits [*ma mo*]  
 The remaining eight left [hands], the eight lion hybrid goddesses<sup>267</sup>  
 [With a] seat of antelope hide, leopard skin skirt, born ornaments [and] charnel ground attire  
 Ornamented with blood, fat, semen, clots of human ash  
 The right [leg] stretched, the left [leg] drawn in, in *yab-yum* sexual embrace,  
 Samantabhadra Mahottara in *yab-yum* union  
 [Having] three *nāḍī* with five *cakra*, spontaneously existing.  
 A self-arisen immeasurable palace, not fabricated by anyone,

<sup>264</sup> Two from each of the Five Families (*rigs lnga*) as in the Zhi-khro mandala

<sup>265</sup> Ten impurities represent ten levels of *shes sgrib* (cognitive obscurations to awakening), which each progressively obscure the ten grounds (or *bhūmi*).

<sup>266</sup> The meaning of the term *byi chings*, and its translation as 'fetters', is uncertain (personal communication, mKhan po Dza Tshe ring bkra shis, December 2019).

<sup>267</sup> Translating *phra men*, female beings that are not quite human and not quite divine.

In the *dharmakāya* realm of Akaniṣṭha at the heart  
The mind support for all *sugata* in the ten directions;  
At the centre of a spacious blue all-victorious stupa  
The seed of *prāṇa* and bodhicitta awareness, HUNG,  
This, thoroughly transformed, [is] guru *dharmakāya*  
In essence, inseparable with [one's] root guru;  
Guhyasamāja nondual *yab-yum* [in] complete enjoyment  
(Tshangs dbyangs vol. 13: 133-140).

**APPENDIX B**

The following pages include Appendix B, the Anuyoga section of Ge bcags' bKa' brgyad *sgrub chen* scripture from Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's thirteenth volume (pp. 133-154).

	<p>ཚུགས་ལྷན་ཁྲིམས་བཀའ་བརྒྱུད་ལས་ལྷན་གྱི་འཕེལ་རྒྱས་ལྟུང་གྱི་འདུན་ཚུ་མཛུགས་ཅིང་། (Lhika Dzogchen Ngagyalde sh)</p>
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ལྷན་ཁྲིམས་ལྷན་གྱི་འཕེལ་རྒྱས་ལྟུང་གྱི་འདུན་ཚུ་མཛུགས་ཅིང་།	ལྷན་ཁྲིམས་ལྷན་གྱི་འཕེལ་རྒྱས་ལྟུང་གྱི་འདུན་ཚུ་མཛུགས་ཅིང་།
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ལྷན་ཁྲིམས་ལྷན་གྱི་འཕེལ་རྒྱས་ལྟུང་གྱི་འདུན་ཚུ་མཛུགས་ཅིང་།	ལྷན་ཁྲིམས་ལྷན་གྱི་འཕེལ་རྒྱས་ལྟུང་གྱི་འདུན་ཚུ་མཛུགས་ཅིང་།
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## APPENDIX C

*The following are fieldnotes (mostly unedited) from my visits to Ge bcags over the course of the research. These are to help communicate the immediacy of those times at the nunnery, the character of the nuns and my positionality as the researcher. In some cases, I named nuns by their initials in my fieldnotes and I have not changed this.*

***Over evening soup in the guests' kitchen...***

7 September 2016

Now about 8p.m. in the stove room with two nun-managers (*gnyer pa*), Tshe ring and a Ge bcags monk. Tshe ring turns on the light and notices many dead bugs in the bulb. She opens the bulb, says a prayer and passes it around for each person to blow mantras on.

The nuns and visitors are friendly and say nice things about me. At lunch mTshon 'grus lha mo said I was a good nun and gave a thumbs up. I said I wasn't sure about that, and she leaned to the nun next to her and joked how another man slept in my room last night. They kept chuckling later about how they had put the monk-visitor in my room to sleep. (I was staying in an old building that houses visitors during special events. There was no extra sleeping space at Ge bcags, and Tibetans are not prudish in general. Without asking me they'd put a handsome young monk in the other bed in my room that night!)

***On male sprul sku...***

12 September 2016

mTsho rgyal sgrol ma was an excellent nun who took over leadership of Ge bcags after Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho passed, and his Ki la ka<sup>268</sup> house became her residence. The second mTsho rgyal sgrol ma thought better to return as a lama than as a *dge ma* (i.e. nun). I asked TL if a lama has to be a man and she said yes, and gave me reasons about what a *dge ma* can and cannot do in society.

She told me (like I often hear) that nuns in the olden days had incredibly profound practice. *Siddhi* is the marker of how good their practice was; she says nuns could fly.

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<sup>268</sup> The name of the area behind the main nunnery where this house is located.

***On telling Ge bcags stories and knowing what they are doing...***

12 September 2016

Two lay men were visiting, eating dinner in the stove room, listening to TL tell Ge bcags stories from the early days. One man said the nuns should invite a *mkhan po* (monk-scholar) to the nunnery, that they should study the philosophical texts to know the path. TL just gave a composed expression as a response. “Don’t need it, heh?” the man replied.

Early Ge bcags nuns had little variety in their food (*tsam pa* was prized since mills were rare). They grew turnips and made soup out of it. No oil. The nuns here seem content with their *tsam pa* and bland soup every day. Several tell me their favourite food is good *tsam pa* and some meat.

***On nuns reading you like a book...***

15 September 2016

The nuns here are very intuitive. Seems one can’t hide one’s state of mind from them; here mind is the main thing being paid attention. A long walk up the hill with KD and she takes the role of my friend. She was also keenly intuitive to how I was feeling. I sat in mTsho rgyal hole<sup>269</sup> at the top of the hill, glorious view of windswept blue sky, green hills and peaks all around. Sun on my face. KD stepped back and continued walking far up the hill to give me space. She couldn’t see me, but I was overwhelmed with emotion sitting there, and when I came up to meet her she said, “Did something happen there? What overcame you down there?”

The nuns also picked up on [an English visitor’s] arthritic knees... About three nuns have honed right in on her knees and asked if she is cold and they are in pain.

***On Ge bcags’ dogs and never leaving the nunnery...***

5 May 2017

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<sup>269</sup> A depression in the ground said to have been miraculously left from by the first mTsho rgyal sgrol ma in meditation. She was one of the founding figures of Ge bcags and Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho’s consort.

After lunch walked up to the hillside behind the three-year retreat, sat on the hill, and then Karma Thub bstan (aka Shes rab) of Tshe sgrub khang and Tshul khrim bzang mo of mGon khang (the 'protector chapel') called and came down with their wrathful dogs who promptly started fighting with dogs around the retreat centre. They took me up to their rooms and they told me how they've never left the *dgon pa*. Shes rab once went to Xining with dBang drag, besides that never further than Xianda (Nang chen town 5 hour drive away)! Tshul khrim bzang mo has never even been to sKye dgu! (i.e. Yushu, Prefecture capital about ten hours' drive from Ge bcags).

Karma chos dbyings dbang mo is now 25, the *sgrub g.yog* ('retreat servant') for 20 nuns in three-year retreat. One comes forward as the one who'll be the most helpful and she becomes the *sgrub g.yog*. She says it's not so difficult.

Then I went up to the hallowed home of the first Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho, met Ye shes chos sgron there, who looks pretty and not aged at all, though old knees. She has never been past Xianda! Like Shes rab, she's from 'Jam dmar<sup>270</sup> and just came up on a motorcycle (*'khrul rta*, 'motor horse') today from home where they are building a house. Like the two nuns above she never attends the annual sMon lam (Prayer festival) because she must keep up continuous practice in her meditation box, in her case, Thugs sgrub at Ki la ka, Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's original residence at Ge bcags. But because of her bad knees she has to lie down at night.

### ***Quiet summer month...***

10 August 2017

Today there is a one-day rDor sems puja; yesterday on the lunar 10<sup>th</sup> there was a mTsho rgyal puja. In this 7<sup>th</sup> Tibetan lunar month there is no *sgrub chen*. It is quite quiet now at Ge bcags and I wonder how many nuns are actually here. I did meet many in town who were seeing doctors, their parents or who were sick, or on duty as *gnyer pa* and *chos khrim*s

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<sup>270</sup> 'Red rainbow', a historic mani pile attributed to Thang thong rgyal po in Nang chen's lCi chu region with a concentrated population of herding families. Many Ge bcags nuns come from herding families in the 'Ja' dmar district.

(disciplinarian). Eight *sgrub chen* of winter begin, I think, with Gur sgrub (Gu ru drag po) after the 'Ja' dmar sMon lam.

### ***Rack of meat...***

24 August 2018

Popped into Em rje ye shes' (the resident nun Tibetan doctor) nicest concrete building at Ge bcags for curd and a visit. Then O rgyan chos sgron (one of two rDor slob nuns, niece of Shes bzang) turned up, having walked all the way from Ra ya dgon (about ten k.m.). Very hungry and pulled out the rack of dried meat she has stashed at Em rje ye shes'. There is a new branch nunnery at rDza stod; they asked her to come and teach but she had the car crash, then *smon lam*, then Gur sgrub, so she said no. dBang drag rin po che and Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho both had told the branch nunnery she could come to teach, then she said she couldn't come (it would have broken her commitment to Ge bcags' own rituals) so she was a little criticised for that.

O rgyan chos sgron said *rlung sems dbyer med* (*inseparable prāṇa-mind*) is the very significant teaching of Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho.

The young Ge bcags nuns say as an expletive "Guru Tsho rgyal sprul sku!" like we say "Oh my god!"

### ***On Ge bcags lineage holders and the future of the nunnery...***

1 October 2018

Shes rab bzang mo<sup>271</sup> got her *rig pa har sad* (sudden awakening to *rig pa*) when young, maybe in her twenties or thirties, in dark retreat (*mun mtshams*). She really did not feel any suffering near death. O rgyan chos sgron's family (Shes bzang was her father's sister) was very good to Shes bzang and brought her milk and curd, but she purged it out both ends. Still

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<sup>271</sup> Shes rab bzang mo passed in her late eighties at Ge bcags in c. 2013. She was renowned among local practice lineage lamas for her high rDzogs chen realisation, cultivated through full-time meditation practice that she able to maintain through the Cultural Revolution by feigning a disability. She was revered by the Ge bcags community and often referred to by the nuns. Her niece is one of Ge bcags' two rDor slob and the main lineage teacher at branch nunneries.

she expressed no suffering. At her moment of death she was uttering “Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho...”

I said to O rgyan chos sgron that Ge bcags was unusual in the world for its lifelong yogic practice training. She smiled with her Mahāmudra gaze<sup>272</sup> (same one as right after her car accident, when holding her head wound!) and knowingly said yes. I asked her if she thought Ge bcags lineage would remain strong in fifty to one hundred years; she answered confidently with a yes. (I felt at that moment that she knew it depended on her, and each nun there.)

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<sup>272</sup> This is hard to explain, but is a steady, meditative gaze this nun has in every situation I have seen her in.

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