



## Buddhist nuns in Nepal and women's empowerment: A biographical approach



Kathryn LaFever

International Studies Program, 120 MacMillan Hall, Miami University, Oxford, OH 45056, United States.

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### ABSTRACT

While biographies of monks have proliferated over the centuries, there has been precious little writing on the life stories of the female members of the monastic community. Addressing the need for biographies about contemporary Buddhist nuns, and on helping these women to find their voices, this biographical narrative study documents and explores the life stories of a group of Vajrayana nuns residing in a Buddhist abbey in Kathmandu, Nepal. This study centers on concepts of empowerment but aims to explore how a group of contemporary nuns are utilizing and redefining their situated empowerment within their religious community and beyond. Through in-depth interviews, this research examines ways in which these contemporary nuns exercise and contest power within a Buddhist institution, predicated on core religious teachings that profess egalitarianism yet situated within a larger sociocultural milieu that is notoriously oppressive to women and girls. It explores what empowerment opportunities and challenges they face as twenty-first century nuns, and how their roles and identities as Buddhist nuns are evolving in increasingly empowering ways.

### Introduction

For millennia Buddhist nuns have served as exemplars of cherished Buddhist values, models of diligence to end the suffering of sentient beings, and archetypes of devotion to the Buddha's promise of liberation or enlightenment that is possible for all sentient beings. In the words of the Buddhist feminist scholar Rita M. Gross (1993), "They have lived the eightfold path of Buddhist individual and social morality [which] involves non-harming and working for the benefit of all sentient beings on all levels" (p. 134). These nuns have "continued to take ordination and strive for liberation within a system which taught them that they were less likely to reach this goal than men...[in] religious systems created by men and intended to fulfil male needs...[demonstrating]...their spiritual needs and capacity are as great as men's, maybe even greater" (Allione, 2000, p. 83). Regardless of their marginalized social status, Buddhist nuns have clearly demonstrated they do not possess substandard spiritual capabilities (Adiele, 2004). They have endured, often propelled toward enlightenment by tragedy and adversity (Blackstone, 1998), spending at least one lifetime suffering implicit and explicit inequities as women. Despite their virtues and achievements, millions of Buddhist nuns have persevered, and continue to do so, in relative anonymity within a religious institution where precious few nuns have left any biographical mark. Karma Lekshe Tsomo, a fully-ordained bhikshuni nun and one of the most prominent Western leaders of Tibetan Buddhism (Gross, 1993; Haas, 2013),

explains, "Buddhist women have actively worked for more than two millennia to implement Buddhist social ideals, yet rarely have their stories been told" (Tsomo, 2004a, p. 1). It is clear that, compared to monks, there exists few biographical accounts of the lives and work of Buddhist nuns. The omission of nuns' biographies from the corpus of Buddhist literature can be understood as one of myriad forms of gender exclusion and inequity to which nuns have quietly acquiesced for centuries, as a rich tradition of biographical writing developed around Buddhist monks, but not nuns. While Gutschow (2004) laments, "... why are humble nuns or elderly female renunciants so rarely honored?" (p. 234), there are any number of reasons for the absence of Buddhist nuns' biographies and life stories. A few factors include the "delicate tension" in Buddhist biography of expressing one's thoughts, feelings, and circumstances in the context of a religion that views the self or ego as an obstacle to enlightenment (Roesler, 2010, p. 4–5), or the endemic sexism fostered by "generations of monk editors" (Adiele, 2004, p. 90). Tsomo (2004a) asserts, "The contributions of Buddhist women...have largely gone unnoticed and unacknowledged, if not thwarted altogether... [So, it is] imperative to document the lives of Buddhist women, whether ordinary or exemplary, before these stories are lost forever" (Tsomo, 2004a, p. 17–19).

In that spirit, this study explores how contemporary nuns are utilizing and redefining their situated empowerment within their religious communities and beyond. It is predicated on the idea that nuns can be empowered by articulating and sharing their own narrative stories and

E-mail address: [lafevek@miamioh.edu](mailto:lafevek@miamioh.edu).

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experiences as well as by learning about Buddhist women who teach by their own example (Blackstone, 1998; Schaeffer, 2004; Schireson, 2009). Through in-depth interviews of Vajrayana Buddhist nuns living in an abbey in Kathmandu, Nepal, this study utilizes a biographical narrative methodological approach. This study examines ways in which these contemporary nuns exercise and contest power within a Buddhist institution, predicated on core religious teachings that profess egalitarianism, but situated within the highly-contextualized space of Kathmandu, where Tibetan culture converges with and diverges from Hindu culture in Nepal, a former Hindu kingdom notoriously oppressive to women and girls. This study explores women's empowerment, namely the empowerment opportunities and challenges they face as twenty-first century nuns in Nepal, and investigates what limits and enables them in achieving their aspirations. Are their roles and identities as Buddhist nuns evolving in empowering ways, and what do they indicate is possible to achieve in terms of fulfilling their monastic responsibilities in individual, local, and global contexts?

## Methodology

This study utilizes biography as a research process and product to examine the lives of Vajrayana Buddhist nuns. Emerging from sets of semi-structured interviews and dialogic interactions, this biographical research design (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2013) analyzes data and knowledge to interrogate a larger global issue, women's empowerment, thereby connecting a group of Buddhist nuns to "wider social and cultural processes" (Merrill & West, 2003, p. 95) as well as significant sociohistorical circumstances in local, regional, and global contexts. As a form of narrative inquiry, biography aspires "not to render facts about a life, but a different and somehow more essential type of truth about a person" (Roesler, 2010, p. 2). It utilizes perception, description, interpretation, and analysis to validate firsthand, lived, and subjective experience as a basis for knowledge, which is normative, historical, and social (Kim, 2016, p. 211). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) argue that the subject, and the interviewer's relationship to the subject, continually evolves and shifts, and that value of such a research methodology is its capacity to capture and illuminate human experience (p. 129). The research process reflects and creates the interviewer and informant as it destabilizes the boundaries between them (Sikes & Gale, 2006), for biographers are not bystanders observing and recording from the outside but active participants in the biographical process (Roesler, 2010, p. 2). Human beings construct their identities with their own and other's narratives, and the spoken or written accounts of people's lives and experiences are legitimate sources of knowledge (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Kim, 2016), which provide valuable insights, for example, into historical situations and material circumstances. Biography contributes partial, contextualized, intersubjective, and qualitative interpretations and bases for future understandings and makes no claim to be definitive (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 5). As a qualitative research design, biography reinforces the epistemological view that, "there is more than one way to tell a story and more than one story" (Pagano, 1990, p. 14). Yet, beyond storytelling, it incorporates "a set of theoretical and methodological tools and a research literature" (as cited in Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, p. 3), comparing the interview data with existing theories, literature, and research. Moreover, biography provides windows or "lenses" (Richardson, 2000) through which the manifold realities of social life can be explored and understood (Sikes & Gale, 2006), providing a nuanced ontological view of reality that re-complicates (Greene, 1995) the lives and identities of the participants. It recognizes the situated nature of truth, located at a particular point in time and space, and that alternative ontological perspectives and dialogues can be exchanged productively (Gergen & Gergen, 2003, p. 587; Roesler, 2010). While research can be seen as a political act centered on social justice and consciousness, it helps to reveal others and ourselves in a new light, enriching compassion and self-understanding, as well as facilitating the bonds between

those who may have had the same or similar perceptions or experiences (Ellis et al., 2011). It forms the basis of shared understandings of those who actually experienced certain events but also the common ground of shared understandings within a community (Denzin, 2013) and socio-historical context. It initiates hopeful steps toward the more equitable reconfiguration of the systems and institutions that govern our lives (Tierney, 2003, p. 312–313) and the impetus to create a more egalitarian and gender-inclusive world that I wish to see (Munro, 1998, p. 1). This approach discloses something that would otherwise be inaccessible about the lives and work of these women. What is possible to know about these Buddhist nuns is a partial understanding of complex and emerging truths. The truths revealed do not necessarily represent universal knowledge but rather underscore the situatedness (Hawkesworth, 1989, p. 536) of highly contextualized knowledges (Ellsworth, 1989; Olesen, 2003).

This study seeks to enlarge the discourse of biographical Buddhist research by documenting and exploring the life stories of twenty-first century Vajrayana Buddhist nuns. Considering there is an extensive Tibetan Buddhist autobiographical tradition, which focuses on monks, not nuns (Roesler, 2010, p. 5), this study seeks to provide, "Biographical research [that] gets to parts often neglected in conventional research and helps us to begin to weave new empirical and theoretical connections" (Merrill & West, 2003, p. 95). It explores how, compared to men, women tend to respond differently to stories and construct narratives that emphasize different components (Blackstone, 1998, p. 9; Schaeffer, 2004, p. 91). Further, this biographical research design corresponds to the first of the three main purposes of Buddhist biography: To provide models of emulation, original texts for a particular Buddhist community or lineage, or narrative explications of Buddhist doctrine (Colville, Roesler, & Shaw, 2010). It seeks to de-marginalize these interlocutors and emphasize Buddhist nuns as individuals (Stanley & Wise, 2002, p. 161) gaining their voices. This study reflects utmost respect for all members of the Buddhist monastic order as it protects the confidentiality and anonymity of these nuns. It attempts to represent the public spheres of the nuns' lives and to represent the nuns in fair and accurate ways (Sikes & Gale, 2006).

There are potential limitations and risks to every research design and biography is no exception. Biography is a contested and competing form of narrative inquiry (Chase, 2005) that contributes only partial, contextualized, intersubjective, and qualitative interpretations and bases for future understandings and makes no claim to be definitive (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 5). More positivist, formalist or reductionist theoretical perspectives critique the biographical research values of subjectivity, intersubjectivity, and bias, notably concerning issues of research reliability, validity, legitimacy, and trustworthiness (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998; Riessman, 2007). Potential pitfalls include misrepresenting a group or phenomenon and focusing too narrowly on outliers, singularities, or a limited set of questions, as well as imposing false binaries and reinforcing the Othering of participants (Merrill & West, 2003, p. 95). "Giving voice" implies an unequal social power dynamic between the researcher and the interlocutors, and risks reinforcing the positivist notions that biographical inquiry seeks to avoid (Kearney, 2002; Munro, 1998). Normatively, biographical research should construct accurate rather than desirable histories (Gross, 1996, p. 74), avoiding nostalgic, romanticized distortions of history or memory or over-generalizations about lived experience (Grumet, 1990). This study acknowledges the potential limitations of biography, namely that its meanings are not static or easily grasped, compounded by cultural and language barriers (Polkinghorne, 1988). To paraphrase Rorty (1982), what is at issue is not that biographical methodological approaches are irresolvably different but that they should be respectfully allowed to produce texts that disclose something about how to improve the world and what it means to be human (p. 197).

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