

Himalayan Nature Representations and Reality

EDITED BY ERIKA SANDMAN AND RIIKA J. VIRTANEN

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Himalayan Nature: Representations and Reality

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Nakza Drolma: “mTho ris la, a mountain pass at the top of Brag dkar sprel rdzong, and a Buddhist pilgrimage site in Xinhai County, Qinghai Province, People’s Republic of China.”

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REPKONG TANTRIC PRACTITIONERS AND THEIR ENVIRONMENT: OBSERVING THE VOW OF NOT TAKING LIFE

Tiina Hyytiäinen

ABSTRACT

This paper is based on my fieldwork in a Tibetan farming and semi-pastoral village located in the Amdo (Chinese: Qinghai) Repkong area. The villagers resemble ordinary rural Tibetan householders: farming, herding, and raising their children. For extra income, they collect caterpillar fungus, a medicinal mushroom endemic to the Tibetan Plateau. They are not ordinary householders, however. They observe daily and periodical commitments to tantric Buddhist practices and rituals. Their supervising teacher, the present lineage-holder at a local hillside monastery, has given as prerequisites to both his male and female disciples at least two of the five Buddhist lay precepts. The most salient of these precepts is not taking life. The majority of the sources of livelihood practiced by the villagers, however, involve the killing of insects at least. Based on my interviews and observations, I will first describe the living environment of the tantric practitioners, concentrating mostly on the women, and their religious practices. Then I will discuss the caterpillar fungus trade and other local sources of livelihood. Finally I will describe how these religious practitioners seek to overcome the apparent contradiction of maintaining a vow of not taking life, given their living circumstances.

1. THE LIVING ENVIRONMENT

1.1 The village

In 2007 and 2008, I conducted fieldwork in a typical rural Tibetan village close to the Repkong (Tib. *reb gong*) county seat, situated in the Malho (*rma lho*; Ch. Huagnan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, about 180 kilometres south-west of Xining, the provincial capital of Amdo (Tib. *a mdo*; Ch. Qinghai), in the

borderlands between historical Tibet and China.¹ This farming and semi-pastoral village lies at an elevation of about 3,000 metres, at the dead-end of a steep and winding dirt road. Depending on the conditions of the road, the remote village can be reached by motorcycle or car. But at times, due to heavy autumn rains or winter slush, the only way to reach it is on foot. Summers are pleasant but short, whereas winters tend to be extremely cold, with temperatures sinking below -20 °C. Due to strong solar radiation, snow usually melts the same day it falls.

The village consists of around 100 households and 700 people, all of whom are subsistence farmers or herders. The farmers live in hillside mud houses whose interiors are decorated with wood. The living quarters, kitchen, shrine room, storage rooms and stables are all situated around a central courtyard equipped with a water tap and protected by high mud walls. At present, each household has electricity. The few herders who also farm live separately, down the hillside in smaller houses by the road. Fields terraced on the hillside are situated close to the settlement, whereas pastures are found further up the mountain. The government allocates fields for farming, according to family size. Farmers generally grow crops such as barley, wheat, peas and rapeseed. Most agricultural work is done by hand, but occasionally also with the help of a donkey. Herders keep livestock – such as sheep, yaks, 'bri'² and donkeys – to graze on the abundant mountain pastures.

As all produce is eaten or used and none is sold, annual incomes from farming and herding are very low.³ Hence, extra cash income is badly needed to pay running expenses. Although the village includes a medical clinic, a government office, a primary school, and some grocery and noodle shops, these provide few jobs. As a result, some villagers find periodical work such as road construction⁴ or selling fruit in the county town market. Another important source of cash income is the collection of caterpillar fungus, a medicinal mushroom harvested from the nearby mountains during the early summer months.⁵

1 In order to protect the identity of my informants, I use neither their names nor the names of their villages in this article. For the same reason, I do not describe actual locations.

2 The female version of a yak (*gyag*).

3 In 2008, the estimated average annual income in the village was Y2000 (€200) (Charlotte Jeffries, pers. comm.)

4 In 2008, the average local daily wage for road construction was around Y25 (€2.5) (Charlotte Jeffries, pers. comm.)

5 I would like to thank Hungchen Chenaktsang, Charlotte Jeffries and Wuqi Chenaktsang for their valuable background information.

1.2 The local monastery

A local Buddhist monastery is situated about a forty-minute walk from the village, along the dirt road down the valley and then up some mountain paths. The monastery lies on a mountain ridge at an altitude of about 3,400 metres. A picturesque view can be seen from the monastic compound: the mud houses of the distant hillside village, a river running through the valley, and a dense forest on the opposite slope. This forest, which belongs to the monastery, is guarded at night to prevent illegal logging. As forests in this region are scarce, trees are not cut down under any circumstance. In addition, new trees have been planted below the ridge where the monastery is situated.

The compactly built Nyingma (*nying ma*) monastery compound consists of several stone buildings. Standing at its entrance is a small *stūpa* (*mchod rten*). A temple (*lha khang*) on the left side of the compound houses an enormous Guru Rinpoche statue. Stretching all the way around the building is a line of large prayer wheels, used by people as they perform circumambulations of the temple to accumulate merit. A large assembly hall on the right side of the compound is decorated with elaborate Buddhist murals painted by famous Repkong *thangka* masters. The private residence of the current master (Tib. *bla ma*; Amdo *a lags*), as well as the resident monks' quarters, are scattered atop the hillside compound. A communal kitchen is used for serving meals and tea for guests and visitors during rituals and other events, while there is a small retreat centre on the premises with four rooms. Above the monastic compound there is also a hermitage and isolated meditation cave for longer retreats.⁶ A boarding school for boys being trained as *ngakpa* (*sngags pa*) lay tantric practitioners was built on the compound in recent years, but was not functioning in 2008.⁷

2. ALAK, THE PRESENT MASTER OF THE MONASTERY

The monastery was established about 200 years ago. The present master – in the Amdo dialect called Alak (*a lags*), a title comparable to that of “Lama” (*bla ma*; Skt. *guru*) – is in his late 60s and the third incarnation of his lineage. Like many of his contemporaries, Alak spent almost twenty years in prison and labour camps when Tibet was annexed to China. In the 1980s, however, Alak started

6 Usually, the retreat starts annually on the 15th day of the third Tibetan lunar month. In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, the longer retreats traditionally last for three years, three months and three days. Despite this, the retreats can be of various lengths.

7 The ngakpa boys' school was built by the Ngakmang Institute based in Xining. The school has trained students first in elementary studies and later in specialised ngakpa studies, including tantric Buddhist texts and astrology, but has not been accepting any students in recent years.

reconstructing his monastery, which had been completely destroyed before and during the Cultural Revolution. In 2008, the villagers were planning to start rebuilding a large *stūpa* that was also demolished at that time.

Initially a monk, Alak was urged to marry during the political and social upheavals of the 1960s. Later he divorced his first wife; he is currently married to his second wife, the Sangyum (*gsang yum*).⁸ The childless couple lives in a modern flat on the outskirts of Xining, near the Minorities University where Alak used to teach Tibetan studies before his retirement. Despite being a ngakpa, a married lay practitioner, Alak keeps his hair shaved like a monk.⁹ He visits his monastery in Repkong periodically. Due to harsh winters and the poor condition of the dirt road, nowadays he mainly spends summers there.

Before 1959,¹⁰ one found entire families living at Alak's Repkong site.¹¹ In the 1980s, however, Alak decided to convert it into a monastery. Alak realised that only monks are able to fully concentrate on religious practice, as they are not burdened with the householder's usual problems, such as making money to support a family.¹² At present, Alak has hundreds of disciples, both ordained and lay, from the wider areas of Malho (*rma lho*; Ch. Huagnan) Prefecture.¹³ Some of his close disciples reside at the monastery, others in nearby villages. In 2008, there were 25 to 30 monks, eight male lay practitioners and a few other people undertaking long retreats at the monastery. To support the monastic way of life on the premises, however, the resident married ngakpas are not allowed to have their families live there, but in the nearby villages.¹⁴ Since the late 1980s, Alak has also been accepting *ngakma* (*sngags ma*) female disciples as well.

8 *gSang yum*, which literally means 'secret mother', refers to the consort or wife of a respected teacher.

9 A ngakpa observes a vow of never cutting his hair, as it is the abode of deities and the source of special powers. According to Wuqi Chenaktsang (personal communication), Alak likely keeps his hair shaved as he initially was a monk.

10 The year 1959 marks the year when a failed uprising took place in Lhasa and the Dalai Lama escaped to India. It was followed by gradual political tightening on religious and other matters.

11 Based on a personal interview with a woman who lived there as a child with her family in the 1950s.

12 The monks and other ritual experts are supported by relatives and common laypeople. This is considered a highly meritorious act in Tibetan society. It can be claimed, in a simplified way, that in exchange for material support, monks and other ritual experts provide laypeople with ritual services and prayers. On several occasions, I observed lay women climbing up the mountain paths to the monastery carrying heavy loads of meat, tsampa barley flour (*rtsam pa*), butter, milk and even firewood to be distributed to the resident monks and ngakpas.

13 In the case of a new unmarried disciple, Alak decides whether he is going to be a monk or a ngakpa according to the "individual's karmic connections".

14 Beside the elderly female cook and Alak's wife, all the permanent residents at the monastery are male. A constant flux of female pilgrims and visitors come to pay their respect to Alak, however, making offerings in the temple, circumambulating it, and bringing food provisions for the

In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, the role of a personal religious teacher is very central, even indispensable. The root teacher guides his disciples on both personal and communal levels, in both religious and mundane matters. Disciples generally aspire to follow every aspect of his instruction. By transmitting his lineage, knowledge, meditative experience and blessings to disciples, a teacher is considered to be the source of religious realisation. The strength of the tradition accordingly depends on the continuation of lineage and teachings.¹⁵

During a ceremony held in the temple in 2007, a young boy was seated on the throne next to Alak. This ten-year-old boy from Yushu (*yul shul*) is currently being trained and educated by the senior monks and ngakpas at the monastery. As the likely successor of the lineage, he is receiving the relevant teachings from Alak.

3. TANTRIC PRACTITIONERS: THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND IN AMDO

The ngakpa tradition is a non-monastic lay tradition in which the practice of tantric Buddhism is particularly emphasised. The lay male practitioners are called ngakpas (*sngags pa*) and lay female practitioners ngakmas (*sngags ma*) or ngakmos (*sngags mo*). They can be best described as ordinary householders who have families, children and work, but at the same time uphold extensive vows to do both daily and periodical Buddhist practices and meditation retreats.¹⁶ In addition, they have a commitment to perform a common ritual together twice a month. Like monks and nuns, they offer religious services for the larger community, such as prayers for the sick, blessings for one's home, and rituals at the time of death.

Ngakpas are found in *Bön* and all the four schools of Tibetan Buddhism, but they are the most prominent in the Nyingma (*nying ma*) tradition. It is claimed that there were thousands of ngakpas in Central Tibet before the monastic institutions emerged in the 11th century. It is also held that at that time, the ngakpas were forced out of Central Tibet into the border areas of Amdo, Kham (*khams*; Ch. Sichuan), and Golok (*mgo log*), where they took up residence in remote places to continue their tradition.¹⁷

ritual experts.

15 See Samuel (1993: 279–289) for a detailed discussion on the meaning of lama, reincarnate lamas and the question of succession in the Tibetan tradition.

16 By contrast, most laypeople strive to accumulate merit to improve their conditions or achieve a better rebirth by circumambulating sacred places, doing pilgrimage, reciting mantras, and making offerings to the monastic communities. It is uncommon for them to study Buddhist texts or engage in formal meditation practices.

17 For the eight holy pilgrimage sites of ngakpas in Repkong, see Chenaksang (2010).

Historically the ngakpa community was called *gos dkar lchang lo'i sde* in Tibetan, which means 'the community with white dress and long hair'. White dress refers here to the white lower garments; the white, red and blue shawls of the yogic lineage; and the conch shell spiral earrings that ngakpas traditionally wear. All of these accoutrements represent aspects of the Buddhist teachings (Ngakpa Ga'wang 1997). Long hair refers to the specific commitment of the ngakpas never to cut their hair. As the sacred seat of meditation deities (Tib. *yi dam*; Skt. *iṣṭadevatā*) and *ḍakas* and *ḍākinīs*,¹⁸ hair is considered to contain special powers (*nus pa*). The ngakpa is also called *sngags dbang* in Tibetan, which literally means 'mantra-holder'. This epithet refers to the ordination of ngakpas with vows based on the tantric tradition rather than the *sūtra* tradition. Monks and nuns renounce the external world, for example, by observing the outer vows of celibacy and not taking intoxicants. Ngakpas, however, rely mainly on internal renunciation, which translates to maintaining a constant state of awareness in their daily life and relationships.¹⁹

Numbering in the thousands, ngakpas are a common sight in Amdo, especially in the areas of Repkong and Bayan (Ch. Hualong). Ngakpas usually receive their religious training from family members, local yogis, or individual lamas. They are known to favour authentic religious experience over book learning. Their most important practice is Dzogchen (*rdzogs chen*), the Great Perfection, whose practitioners aspire to remain at all times in the natural state of awareness.²⁰ Their services to the community include tantric rituals, performing divinations (*mo*), giving medical and astrological advice, performing exorcisms, distributing amulets, and controlling the weather. The intensity of their spiritual discipline is apparent in their practice of *chöd* (*gcod*) in charnel grounds, designed to "cut" attachment to the body, mental obscurations, dualism and fear.

3.1 Ngakmas in the village: The beginning and their outer appearance

One senior ngakma I interviewed described how ngakma practices began in the village. In 1988, a group of ngakpas were practicing a collective ritual at the monastery. Their wives present at that time asked Alak if they could join in.

¹⁸ Male and female manifestations of enlightened energy.

¹⁹ The famous ngakpa Khetsun Sangpo Rinpoche (1920–2009) stated in an interview: "Many people begin to follow the ngakpa tradition because to outward appearances the life looks like that of a lay person in which you can engage in everything: you can take a woman or you can drink alcohol. But what they don't initially know is that there are very subtle restrictions and disciplines or awareness that must come with that. It is even harder than staying in a monastery." <www.snowlionpub.com/pages/N76_1.html>, accessed 15 Nov. 2010.

²⁰ For a short, systematic introduction to Dzogchen, see Germano (2005).

When Alak agreed to their request, these nine women formed the pioneering ngakma group that continues to perform religious rituals together even today. Alak is one of very few lamas to permit women to participate in lay religious activities in a serious manner. As there are only a few known examples of ngakmas in the past²¹ and no proper lineage to trace back to (something which is considered of utmost importance in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition), many lamas are reluctant to engage on this course. Accepting new disciples also means additional responsibility for these lamas.

In 2008, there were approximately 200 ngakmas living in various Repkong farming or semi-pastoral villages.²² There were about thirty ngakpas and fifty ngakmas between the ages of 18 to 64 in the village where I conducted my fieldwork. The most senior practitioners had been ngakmas for as long as twenty years. Many of these women were married to ngakpas, though not necessarily all. Some were unmarried and elderly; others were single young women. A number had ngakpa or ngakma relatives in their family.

Ngakpas can be easily recognised by their outer appearance. The most visible sign is their long hair, which is usually held back with an orange headband. When visiting the county town, I observed that they always covered their head with a cap, as if not wanting to draw special attention to themselves.²³ On ritual occasions, the ngakpas wear a maroon-coloured robe (resembling a monk's robe); elsewhere they wear ordinary Tibetan or Chinese-style clothes. The ngakpas residing at the monastery wore their maroon ritual dress at all times. I never saw them wearing the traditionally described white lower garments or conch shell earrings. Only the very senior ngakpas (above 60 years of age) wore red and white striped shawls or upper garments during ritual occasions.

Contrary to ngakpas, ngakmas look like ordinary Tibetan farmer or pastoralist women. Due to the all-pervasive dust, while working in the fields and herding, the women wore ordinary working clothes like trousers and pullovers and tied a scarf around their heads. It was not possible to tell at once from their outer appearance that they were ngakmas. On ritual occasions, the ngakmas dressed in a traditional Tibetan sheepskin dress. In an interview, Alak stressed, however, the importance of having a distinctive dress for ritual purposes. He described

21 Such as Yeshe Tsogyel and Machig Labdrön. About them and other female examples, see Gyatso & Havnevik (2005).

22 There are strong indications that the numbers of female practitioners in particular are steadily rising in the area.

23 For example, the government officials need to keep their hair short and tidy at all times. I suspect that long hair may be considered an aristocratic remnant from the "old Tibet".

a plan to design and stitch for the female practitioners a ritual dress based on a traditional model from Central Tibet.²⁴

The general rule of not cutting hair applies to ngakmas as well. For this reason, they are not allowed to cut their hair under any circumstance. While ngakmas are said to have traditionally kept their hair in a single braid, elderly women in the village seemed to keep their hair in the standard rural Tibetan manner in two braids, while younger women kept their hair in a single ponytail. There were plans, however, for the women to revert to the traditional ngakma custom of keeping their hair in a single braid.

3.2 Setting the ground: The preliminary practices

In order to become a ngakma, a woman must ask for Alak's permission to begin the preliminary practices (*sngon 'gro*), which consist of six sets of observances repeated 100,000 times each. These include physical prostrations, refuge and *bodhicitta* prayers, Vajrasattva purification practices, maṇḍala offerings, *chöd* (*gcod*) offerings and guru yoga.²⁵ The preliminary practices are considered to purify the body, speech and mind of the practitioner and to remove general obstacles from his or her spiritual path. Similarly, these strenuous and time-consuming practices are considered to be a preparation for more advanced Buddhist teachings, meditation and ritual practices, and experiences of realisation. As standard requirements in all the Tibetan Buddhist schools, they are widely prevalent, though their content varies from lineage to lineage.

Alak remarked that he does not give further instructions to his disciples until they complete their preliminary practices. While some recent disciples were only starting their practice, most of the older ngakmas had already finished. Some had even completed them as many as four times.²⁶ Regarding actual practice, however, Alak made some concessions to the women. Because farming and herding are so physically strenuous, he allowed them to do half-prostrations instead of full pros-

24 Personal communication with Hungchen Chenaktsang from the Ngakmang Institute, 23 August 2010. He told me that in the autumn of 2010, the ngakmas in the village are carrying out this plan of making the ritual dresses.

25 For a close explanation of the preliminary practices, see Powers (1995: 256–275).

26 When visiting Tibetan nunneries in India in the 1990s, I marked that perhaps due to a lack of qualified and dedicated teachers, the nuns often repeated the preliminary practices. They did not seem to have a chance for proper Buddhist teachings and guidance in further practices. I suspected that asking the nuns to repeat the preliminaries again and again was an easy way to keep them occupied in something “meaningful”. I believe that the situation has recently changed at least somewhat in India, as many nunneries are building proper curriculums for study with financial support from Western women that have taken up their case.

trations. They were also permitted to integrate the practices in their daily life. For example, instead of having to recite mantras when sitting on a meditation cushion, they could do them while farming, herding, and running daily errands. According to the women, the 100,000 maṇḍala offerings were the most difficult of all to accomplish, as they required some special arrangements (such as leaving home and going into retreat). Still, many mentioned completing this part of the practice in about 25 days in a nearby meditation cave, enjoying it tremendously during the quiet winter months when there is less work.

3.3 The ngakpas and ngakmas: Mutual cooperation in the village

Alak stressed the interdependence of the ngakpa and ngakma activities. He explained that practitioners mutually support each other's practices in a given place. He explained that if there were already ngakpas in the local village, the activities of the ngakmas arose almost naturally. Otherwise it was impossible to initiate lay female activities. Alak also expressed a wish to develop similar activities in other pastoral areas. As the pastoral communities are much more widely dispersed than the farming communities, it is difficult to gather people together for periodical teachings and communal rituals.

In the ngakpa temple (*sngags khang*) of the local village, certain ngakpas appointed by Alak assemble for their daily and periodical rituals, calling practitioners with a conch shell. Sometimes the women also hold their collective practices in the temple. When I visited the ngakmas for the first time, they had assembled in the ngakpa temple for the tenth day practice of the Tibetan lunar calendar. In general, the ngakpas and ngakmas always do their practices separately, except once a summer when they share a picnic in the grasslands with Alak and all the villagers.

It is in the village ngakpa temple that Alak also grants ngakpas and ngakmas their Buddhist lay precepts.²⁷ In a ritual ceremony, they are required to take at least two of the five lay precepts (*dge bsnyen*): to refrain from taking life (killing), stealing, false speech, sexual misconduct or taking intoxicants.²⁸ They can also choose to take all the five precepts. In any case, one of the vows has to be the precept of refraining from taking life. Lay precepts are used as a support in Buddhist practices

27 According to Alak, all ngakpas and ngakmas must take the Buddhist lay precepts. Not all the women I interviewed, however, were clear about whether they had taken the vows or not.

28 There are multiple sets of vows in Tibetan Buddhism such as the individual liberation (monks' and nuns') vows, the refuge vows, the bodhisattva vows, the tantric vows, etc. See Powers (1995). However, a common view is that once control over the subtle internal energies and channels (*rtsa rlung*) has been attained through certain bodily practices, vows no longer have meaning (Samuel 1993: 278).

in daily life and for increasing one's awareness. While minor downfalls of the vows can be purified by recitation of the Vajrasattva mantra and other similar means, greater downfalls are considered to lead to rebirth in lower realms or hells.

In interviews, Alak did not differentiate between his male or female disciples. He emphasised that, in his view, a good practitioner is a good practitioner, whereas a bad one is a bad one. Alak described that his curriculum for the ngakpas and ngakmas consists of first taking the Buddhist lay precepts and completing the preliminary practices, which are then followed by the tantric development- and completion-stage practices.²⁹ Dzogchen is ultimately the main practice for ngakpas and ngakmas. The more qualified, experienced ngakpas are known for their special powers (e.g. making rain, performing divination, exorcism). According to Alak, ngakmas can develop the same special powers, but as yet there is no history of females displaying them.

Why have these women chosen to take up such challenging practices at this very moment? After all, they were already quite busy being farmers, herders, wives, daughter-in-laws and mothers.³⁰ In interviews, the women explained that they had aspired to become ngakmas in order to do something truly meaningful with their lives. After losing someone close to them, like a mother or a husband, some had turned to religion for consolation. Others said that by becoming a ngakma, they had fulfilled a wish expressed by their parents. They also often had inspiring examples of ngakpas or ngakmas in their family or among their relatives. I observed that becoming a ngakma was almost like a contagious fad among the village women. I assumed that it gave them a sense of purpose amidst their hard, repetitious rural life, as well as a sense of true community. It additionally provided the women with the possibility of using their reading and writing skills, however minor.³¹ When I asked some other village women whether they would also like to join the ngakmas, they replied that due to being illiterate, they could not.³² In other words, according to the villagers, being a ngakma seemed to

29 Development-stage (*bskyed rim*) tantra involves the visualisation of deities, the recitation of mantra and resting the mind in a meditative state. Completion-stage (*rdzogs rim*) involves manipulating the channels and energy centers of the subtle body.

30 For a general description of the different roles of Tibetan women in Amdo, see Hyytiäinen (2008).

31 Most of these turned out to be school dropouts. After leaving their native village and its primary school to attend middle school (which was typically a boarding school), they often described "having lost interest" in school. Sometimes their parents called them back to help in the household or they were preparing to enter an arranged marriage. In the interviews, they expressed remorse at not having completed their schooling and hoped for their gifted daughters to enter the university "because I couldn't as I had to get married". Two of the women who had completed middle school were looked upon as "scholars".

32 Ngakmas need to be able to recite long Buddhist texts for some rituals.

correspond with being a literate woman and thus accorded a special, respected status in the village.

4. CATERPILLAR FUNGUS (*CORDYCEPS SINENSIS*) AS A SOURCE OF CASH INCOME

4.1 Collection and trade

In the spring of 2005, while travelling through the Tibetan areas of Kham and Amdo, I witnessed for the first time the caterpillar fungus trade season and its impact on the local communities. For instance, while visiting an orphan school at the request of its foreign donors, all the children became unexpectedly absent when supposedly “digging the caterpillar fungus up on the mountains”. Another time, during a visit to a local Tibetan family, I witnessed their daughter returning home after dark, very contented, carrying ten specimens of caterpillar fungus. When travelling on buses in May in Golok, an area famed for its abundance of caterpillar fungus, I found people frequently offering to sell it; the streets of bigger towns seemed to be full of its traders and buyers.³³ At that time, I also talked to two Tibetan men from Bayan who had spent almost Y3,000 – a fortune by local standards – for permits and other expenses related to the collection of the fungus. They had not been able to find a single specimen.

Daniel Winkler has extensively studied the caterpillar fungus and its trade in Tibetan areas. The caterpillar fungus is called *dbyar rtswa dgun 'bu* in Tibetan (or *'bu*, for short), which literally means ‘summer grass, winter worm’ and appositely describes the characteristics of the fungus.

Caterpillar fungus (*Cordyceps sinensis*) is an insect-feeding fungus, which parasitically attacks moth larvae. The fruiting body (stroma) of the fungus resembles a brown blade of grass, which is visible above ground. Collectors need to locate this among the brown grasslands in May and early June, before green grass and mountain flowers cover everything around mid-June. Given the fact that distribution areas of the caterpillar fungus are also extremely vast and remote, spotting caterpillar fungus is very hard. (Winkler 2005: 69–71)

The caterpillar fungus is used in both traditional Tibetan and Chinese medicine, mainly for strengthening the immune system, but also as a treatment for hepatitis B, asthma, tuberculosis and cancer. Importantly, it is also reputed to be an aphrodisiac. (Winkler 2008b: 293) The caterpillar fungus is in great demand, largely by

³³ In 2008, the Golok Prefecture imposed a complete ban on the collection of caterpillar fungus by non-residents.

Han Chinese both within and outside China. The majority of collectors, however, are Tibetan farmers and pastoralists hailing from the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), Sichuan, Qinghai, Gansu and Yunnan. These Tibetan communities have access to the natural habitat of the caterpillar fungus, fertile alpine grasslands at elevations of 3,000 to 5,000 metres. (Winkler 2008b: 295)

With economic liberalisation, caterpillar fungus has developed into the most important source of cash income for rural Tibetans.³⁴ Nearly all rural households who practice traditional subsistence herding and agriculture participate in its collection (Winkler 2008a: 18). As Winkler points out, rural Tibetans have the required expertise and skills to benefit from the collection of the caterpillar fungus. Their knowledge of the environment and where and when to find it is crucial. Additionally, they are also able to endure the exceptionally harsh conditions of camping when collecting. Current government policies support the engagement of local Tibetans in this trade. (Winkler 2008a: 4, 18)

The badly needed cash income generated from sales of caterpillar fungus pays for medical expenses, school fees, new houses, DVD players and sundry goods.³⁵ Furthermore, it is used as capital for starting entrepreneurial activities such as small shops. Motorcycles and trucks are purchased for transportation. Generous donations are offered to monasteries. (Winkler 2008a: 18) As a result, the trade has amplified local economic development in a way that no other government policy has (Winkler 2008a: 22).

Controversially, however, the caterpillar fungus trade can also cause fights and other complications in local areas, including environmental problems such as degradation of the grasslands (Winkler 2005: 75). Should this source of income dry up through resource destruction or a market crash, the impact on rural Tibetans would be devastating (Winkler 2008a: 31).³⁶

The collection of medicinal plants and fungi for personal use or trade has a long-standing history in Tibetan areas. In the past, however, collection was

34 According to Winkler (2008a: 18), caterpillar fungus traded in Lhasa for Y24,000–Y72,000 (€2,400–€7,200) per kilogram in 2006. Between 1998 and 2008, its value increased more than eightfold. While individual specimens sold for Y1–Y5 in 1998, in June 2008 prices had risen to Y30–Y60. Collectors can find up to fifty caterpillar fungus specimens per day, the average being 10–15.

35 For most households, an estimated forty percent of all income is subsistence production, mostly food. Winkler (2008a: 24) estimates that caterpillar fungus income comprises forty percent of all cash income for rural small towns.

36 The collection of caterpillar fungus has been regulated since 2006 through the issuing of collection permits for outsiders, although no overall policy yet exists. Some efforts have been made to improve collection practices. (Winkler 2008a: 15, 27) Many collectors complained that there are more and more people each year collecting and quantities are decreasing (Winkler 2008a: 26).

restricted by traditional bans. Namkhai Norbu describes in his *Journey among the Tibetan nomads* (1997) that “Rigya, the general laws that govern relations with the environment”, forbade the digging of caterpillar fungus and the nomads regarded it as a treasure of “the earth spirits”. Digging caterpillar fungus was believed to provoke earth spirits, who would strike the offender, his family and clan with sickness and punish his livestock with ill health. (Winkler 2008a: 29)

At present, the majority of rural Tibetans collect caterpillar fungus. Nevertheless, the traditional ban against digging is still maintained at some sites, such as sacred mountains. Since sacred mountains are considered the abodes of mountain gods, people are not supposed to disturb and upset them by destroying their living habitat. Through proper worship, the mountain gods are believed to ensure well-being for local individuals and communities. If disturbed, they can do the opposite. Regarding sacred mountains, Winkler (2008a: 29) reports visiting a village close to a sacred mountain and talking to the locals. At first his informants completely denied the existence of caterpillar fungus on their sacred mountain. When questioned further, they admitted that nobody dug there, revealing that out of respect and fear people still follow the older convention.

Monks and nuns in these areas also seem to obey the traditional ban of not digging the caterpillar fungus. As far as I know, they do not participate in the collection of caterpillar fungus – at least in public. I heard about cases where monks were even guarding a local sacred mountain against intruding collectors.³⁷ But Emilia Sulek (2009: 25), whose field work focused on caterpillar fungus trade in Golok, reports otherwise: “Monks leave their monasteries to look for additional income through *yartsa*, even though the codes of Buddhist monastic discipline prevent them from digging. As ever, reality runs counter to prescribed behavior.” While customs and conventions certainly vary from locale to locale, I still suspect that monks collecting caterpillar fungus would arouse strong disapproval among the laypeople, at least initially.³⁸

Furthermore, I talked to pastoralists on the grasslands around Lake Kokonor who themselves refrained from collecting caterpillar fungus. They considered that it kills the caterpillar and disturbs the natural environment of the spirits; according to their knowledge, it therefore contradicts Buddhist ideas. That said, they still participated in caterpillar fungus trade in other ways, economically benefiting from it. Specifically, they leased their own personal land allocated to

37 Wuqi Chenaktsang, pers. comm. (20 November 2010).

38 As an example of the disapproval expressed towards “fake monks” by locals in Labrang, see Makley (2007: 275).

herding or communal land around their winter houses to outsiders seeking to collect caterpillar fungus.

4.2 Caterpillar fungus collection and the village

For the months of May and June, most villagers move to the mountains above the monastery, at an altitude of over 4,000 metres, in order to collect caterpillar fungus. For villagers, it is an indispensable means of generating cash income to pay for schooling, health care, house renovation and other general commodities. As local school-teachers collect caterpillar fungus as well, the village primary school is closed and students do not attend school at all. County schools often schedule a holiday during that time. Having sharp eyes and being close to the ground, children also join the harvest. As a result, during the caterpillar fungus season, only the elderly and the very young end up staying behind in the village. This can result in various daily challenges. The resident monks and ngakpas in the monastery, for instance, mentioned finding caterpillar fungus harvesting time to be an especially difficult time for them to do mountain retreat, as there are no providers for them.³⁹

The villagers collect caterpillar fungus on a piece of communal land traditionally considered to belong to their village.⁴⁰ For the most part, they camp in tents on the mountain. Some villagers take their livestock up to the alpine pastures for grazing, though are careful to leave them below the campsite to avoid trampling of the fungus. Some even make the exhausting climb from the village almost every day. Conditions at the campsite and vast collection areas are hard, and the weather can be extremely cold or hot. In addition, people need to return to the village every ten days to restock provisions. The women described that while harvesting, they often need to lie close to the wet and cold ground or crawl on their knees to distinguish a caterpillar fungus from the grass. Once a caterpillar fungus is spotted, it is dug very carefully out of the ground with a knife or small hoe.⁴¹ It is afterwards dried, preferably in the sun but often in practice on the stove.

39 Villagers regularly bring provisions up the caves and, in general, look after those in retreat. This is considered to create religious merit.

40 The government officially owns all the land, thus leaving the residents only the usage rights. The traditional land rights are a heated question. Wuqi Chenaktsang mentioned (pers. comm. 20 Nov. 2010) that summer 2010 two villages nearby my field work site fought over a collection area. As a result, the officials interfered and in the end both the villages were banned from collecting caterpillar fungus from their traditional areas.

41 As Winkler (2008b: 296) points out, breaking off the fruiting body of the caterpillar fungus from the head of the larva greatly reduces its market value.

The caterpillar fungus harvesting season lasts about six weeks. Around mid-June, after the villagers have returned to the village and traded all caterpillar fungus specimens that they have found, Alak hosts a summer picnic for ngakpas, ngakmas and other villagers. For several days, under large tents set up in the valley below the monastery, they celebrate with good food, music and dance.

4.3 Caterpillar fungus and the vow of not taking life

One of Alak's disciples, a 73-year-old ngakpa, explained in an interview the traditional (and previously pervasive) view about caterpillar fungus. He stated that the problem with collecting caterpillar fungus, from the Buddhist point of view, is that one cannot be sure when digging whether the caterpillar is actually dead or not. By killing the caterpillar, a collector may entail a breach of his or her vow to not kill any sentient being. According to this ngakpa, a serious Buddhist practitioner should thus always refrain from collecting caterpillar fungus. Yet as Winkler (2005: 76) argues, it can be disputed whether the caterpillar is actually killed during the digging process. Technically speaking, it seems that the caterpillar is killed by the insect-feeding parasite fungus. Whatever the case, the standard local view is that Buddhist monks and nuns should not participate in the collection of caterpillar fungus.

I asked Alak about his views on the collection of caterpillar fungus and what would entail from killing in the process. Despite being deeply aware of the issue, he seemed to consider the matter in a very practical and down to earth manner. He told me that he has neither talked about the collection of caterpillar fungus with the village ngakpas and ngakmas, nor prohibited the practice. Alak was also very aware of the fact that the villagers are completely dependent on caterpillar fungus as their only source of cash income. For example, he pointed out the need for them to educate their children. The resident monks and ngakpas of the monastery, however, do not participate at all in the collection of caterpillar fungus.

I would further speculate that the cash income created from caterpillar fungus collection also greatly benefits Alak and his monastery. Money earned through this trade allows people to make generous donations to the monastery, supporting its general activities as well as individual monks and ngakpas. It also supports contributions to the maintenance of monastic buildings and infrastructural innovations, such as the planned rebuilding of the demolished *stūpa*.

4.4 How is taking life explained according to the Buddhist tradition

Let us for a moment assume that digging caterpillar fungus actually kills the caterpillar. How is killing described according to Buddhist ethics, and why is it considered so important not to kill?

The most basic and pervasive teachings attributed to Śākyamuni, the historical Buddha, relate to one's actions (Tib. *las*; Skt. *karma*) and their effects, not only in this life but in future lives. Buddha is said to have taught, in accordance with the prevalent view of his time, that one's present life is only one in a series of rebirths. Each rebirth is determined by one's actions in previous lives. According to Powers (1995: 54–55), the idea of karma refers to one's volitional actions – which may be good, bad, or neutral. As long as one remains within the cycle of rebirth, one's actions inevitably produce concordant results: good, bad and neutral experiences are the direct results of good, bad, and neutral karma. As long as one fails to recognise the cyclical nature of karma and rebirth, one will continue to transmigrate helplessly in cyclic existence.

Moral responsibility for one's actions is clearly illustrated in the Jātaka tales, stories of Śākyamuni Buddha that draw connections between his former lives and subsequent rebirths. Snellgrove (1987: 16–17) cites a Jātaka tale in which Śākyamuni Buddha gives an example of taking life and its karmic effects:

There is the case of the person, a woman or a man, who takes life, cruel with blood-stained hands, given to striking and killing, and without mercy to living things. When that karma is worked out and completed, with the dissolution of the body after death, he is reborn in a state of misery, in an unhappy destiny, in a state of punishment, or in hell; or if he is not thus reborn, but attains the state of man, wherever he is reborn he is short-lived.

Śākyamuni Buddha then gives an example of refraining from taking life and its karmic effects:

There is the case of a person, a woman or a man, who has put aside and refrains from taking life, who has laid aside the use of stick or a knife and dwells modest, full of kindness, and compassionate for the welfare of all living beings. When that karma is worked out and completed, with the dissolution of the body after death, he is reborn in a state of happiness or the world of heaven, or if he is not reborn in heaven but attains the state of man, wherever he is reborn he is long lived.

As Harvey (2000: 69) points out, killing in the Buddhist context specifically means the *intentional* killing of any living being. This is considered to bring the heaviest karmic results. If one has taken the precept of not killing, injuring

but not killing does not fully break the precept. Furthermore, death resulting accidentally from an attack does not break the precept. According to Buddhist ethics, the act of taking life (or any other negative action) is a complete action only when it includes all four elements of a negative action.⁴² Using a sheep that is about to be slaughtered as an example of these, first the butcher identifies the animal; recognition that it is a living being is the basis for the act. Secondly, the wish to kill the sheep arises, which is the intention to carry out the act. Third, the physical action of suffocating the sheep is the execution of the act. Fourth, when the animal's vital functions cease, followed by the separation between its body and its consciousness, that is the completion of the act of taking life.

4.5 Some practical solutions concerning the collection of caterpillar fungus

The ngakmas and ngakpas in the village hold to the standard Buddhist view on actions and their effects producing consequent rebirths, as explained in the previous section. They also consider digging up caterpillar fungus as killing and destroying the habitat of the spirits. In rural Tibetan areas, however, for laypeople the only sources of livelihood in reality are predominantly connected to killing. Due to their low level of education and lack of funds, few other options are available. How do people who cannot seek alternative work, having taken the vow of not killing, deal with the apparent contradiction? They seem to adopt practical strategies to deal with this question, taking small steps at a time. Having taken the vow of not killing, ngakpas and ngakmas were becoming increasingly aware of its significance and making critical changes, even small ones, in their lives.

The elderly ngakpa I interviewed suggested that perhaps the ngakmas and ngakpas involved in the caterpillar fungus trade make prayers while digging, and at the same time think they are intentionally searching for medicine to heal other sentient beings. One monk mentioned that ngakpas and ngakmas first have to take the vow of not taking life, and then later they need to purify their negative deeds. He claimed that in order to study and practice Buddhism, one has to eat.

None of the ngakpas and ngakmas mentioned the possibility of giving up the practice of collecting caterpillar fungus. Instead, they explained that they follow certain precautionary measures while digging. Since they dig in the same place every year, they are motivated to look after it. Accordingly, they carefully fill empty holes and leave the campsite clean of trash. They also claimed to never use local vegetation for fuel. Outsiders, on the contrary, may leave behind holes that

⁴² It is also considered worse to kill or injure a human being than an animal, or a larger or a more developed animal than a lesser one (Harvey 2000: 69).

they have dug and large amounts of litter in the campsites, such as instant-noodle containers, plastic bags and broken glass bottles (which are a sadly common sight in Tibetan areas). Besides damaging the fragile alpine environment, this leftover trash can also endanger grazing livestock.

During a one-month intensive workshop held in the village in November 2007, most of the ngakmas were studying elementary Buddhist texts for the first time. Many found the texts very difficult to understand, but remarked that even studying the texts was easier than collecting caterpillar fungus. Despite hard work and long hours on the mountain, ngakmas described the period as an opportunity to engage in intensive Buddhist practice. Having committed to special practices on the 10th and the 25th day practices of the Tibetan lunar calendar, they kept these up while on the mountain. They mentioned that when it snowed or bad weather hindered the digging of caterpillar fungus, or after it got dark, they would do more Buddhist practices and rituals together. On an individual level, while digging up caterpillar fungus, they recited mantras and continued their prescribed preliminary practices (or repeated them). Through these acts, they aspired to purify any negative actions such as possibly killing the caterpillar itself or disturbing the local spirits. In interviews, the women also stressed the importance of ngakpas and ngakmas cooperating together on the mountains. Bound together like brothers and sisters by their common oaths, they aimed at refraining from arguments and fights over caterpillar fungus – something that is quite common in the area. Instead they tried to help each other and work together.

4.6 Some practical solutions concerning agriculture and herding

Agricultural work inevitably involves the killing of insects and rodents. For this reason, monks and nuns in the past were banned from taking part in such work. However, when Tibet was annexed to China, and particularly during the early years of the Communist regime, monks and nuns were obliged to participate in productive agricultural labour. Likewise, when the great Tibetan monasteries were re-established in exile in southern India from the 1970s onwards, monks were at least initially involved in farming for their very survival.

To help safeguard the vows of ngakpas and ngakmas, Alak advised them when farming to use as little pesticides as possible, to lessen the killing of insects. To stop killing completely, one ngakpa I interviewed departed to the Repkong county town to find other work. Instead of farming, he is nowadays driving a taxi and occasionally doing woodwork, while his wife is selling fruit at the county

town market. Instead of farming or herding, some people also find periodical work doing road construction.

To reduce killing, some pastoralist women I interviewed said they avoided collecting yak dung (used for fuel) during the summer. At that time, dung is naturally full of insects. The women, however, pointed out how difficult this practice was, given their circumstances. Other family members may not necessarily be as concerned about keeping such practices, as there are also conventional expectations of how things should be done. In short, the practice required a lot of awareness. Another *ngakma* described how, in the past, she considered killing and eating animals as her unquestionable right. After taking the vow of not killing, she was forced to change her perspective. Similarly, another *ngakma* admitted having intentionally killed birds with stones in the past while herding. Only after becoming a *ngakma* did she give up this habit.

Due to the harsh climate and cultural conventions, Tibetans are also known for being big meat eaters. To avoid killing to get meat, some villagers have sold their livestock in order to give up slaughtering.⁴³ Instead they bought meat from the town marketplace.⁴⁴ Likewise, they also preferred eating large animals more than small animals. This is a standard custom among Tibetans, as it is considered better to eat one large yak and take only one life than, for example, take the lives of many small fish.⁴⁵ Moreover, all the *ngakpas* and *ngakmas* refrained from eating meat at least on the 10th and the 25th days of the Tibetan lunar calendar, as well as during the month of Saka Dawa.⁴⁶ Some even refrained from meat on eight special days of the month. During those days, I observed that, instead of cooking vegetarian food, they only took bread, tea and *tsampa*.

5. CONCLUSION

The issue of observing Buddhist commitments and vows, such as not taking life, in the midst of lay life with many inherent contradictory conditions is a complex matter that needs further examination. Based on my interviews and observations, I have tried to show, however, that the *ngakpas* and *ngakmas* in question seem to regard the five lay precepts seriously and try to observe them no matter what.

43 Traditionally, animals are slaughtered by means of suffocation.

44 This may sound hypocritical, but it is in accordance with the central ideas of Buddhism vis-à-vis personal actions and their effects: it is better to eat the meat that somebody else has killed than to kill intentionally oneself.

45 Traditionally, rural Amdo Tibetans eat only yak meat and mutton, not chicken or fish.

46 Saka Dawa is the full moon day on the fourth month of the Tibetan calendar, which commemorates Buddha's birth, enlightenment and passing away.

First, they become more aware of the vows and their meaning through studies and their own awareness. From their teachers they receive relevant formal explanations, according to the Buddhist texts. Then they examine how to implement the vows in their daily lives, according to their personal circumstances. Finally, they proceed to gradually change their thinking and behaviour, creating new practical solutions for observing the vows they have taken.

It is not uncommon for some – ngakmas, in particular – to express initial shock after learning the meaning of the vows made in the ceremony held in the village ngakpa temple. Seeking to become Alak’s disciple, some had just followed others, not even knowing what the ceremony was really all about. Most of these women, however, were aware of having received from Alak the necessary instructions and methods within the Tibetan Buddhist context to understand the downfalls of the vows, to purify their negative actions, and to create merit in order to ensure favourable conditions in this life and the preceding ones. After becoming more aware in their daily lives, at least, their negative actions when farming, herding and collecting caterpillar fungus were supposed not to be intentional anymore.

Being farmers and herders, there is currently no way out for the ngakmas – unless they change their lives radically and find other jobs in town. For ngakpas, the caterpillar fungus trade has possibly opened up some new job prospects, such as getting a motorcycle for transporting goods or opening a little shop.

Ironically, of the ngakmas I interviewed, almost all expressed a wish in the future to meditate in a cave “like real ngakmas do”. According to these women, “a real ngakma” is somebody who has left the family and village life behind. They gave an example of one ngakma, Alak’s disciple, who has been meditating in a cave up on the mountains for ten years. Despite frequent requests from her family, she has not agreed to return to hillside village life. For these women, it was a tempting idea to imagine having a simple, ideal life isolated in a cave instead of a busy lay life filled with constant worries about basic survival. It may be safely assumed that such an isolated environment would make it easier to observe commitments and vows and to maintain constant awareness.

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