

***EX ORIENTE LUMINA***  
***HISTORIAE VARIAE MULTIETHNICAE***

**Festskrift tillägnad Juha Janhunen  
på hans 61. födelsedag 12.2.2013**



**STUDIA ORIENTALIA 113**

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**Tiina Hyytiäinen, Lotta Jalava,  
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**Helsinki 2013**

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# AN A MDO TIBETAN WOMAN'S LIFE AND RELIGIOUS PRACTICE

*Kelsang Norbu (Skal bzang nor bu, Gesang Nuobu 格桑诺布)*  
*with C.K. Stuart*

I can't explain *chos* according to any theory.<sup>1</sup>

To me *chos* is chanting *ma Ni*,<sup>2</sup> circumambulating *stūpas* and monasteries, making offerings, and burning butter lamps for Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. To be a good person and doing no harm is the essence. It is important to have pure *dad pa*,<sup>3</sup> which is believing in *chos*, and respecting and appreciating lamas and monks. Strong *dad pa* allows those who practice *chos* to receive good *dge ba* 'merit'. Nowadays, there are *chos* and lamas, but few people have *dad pa*, particularly among the young generation. I saw and experienced so many changes and so much hardship during the early years of my life. It is all the result of my *las* 'fate'. I have very bad *las*. I was forced to do things that I still feel guilty about. Therefore, I have little attachment to or interest in '*jig rten 'khor ba*'.<sup>4</sup>

With my children's support, I am lucky to be enjoying a happy life once again in my late years. All I pray for is a safe, peaceful life for each of my relatives, wherever they are. For myself, I wish to wash away my sins, be reborn, and become a monk. That's my dream and why I practice *chos*. We have monasteries today but fewer and fewer monks. I'm very worried that one day the monasteries will become empty and then there will be nowhere for us to find lamas and monks to come to our homes to provide religious service. ('Phags mo, b. 1930)

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1 We thank Rdo rje don grub, Tshe ring 'bum, Rin chen rdo rje, Gerald Roche, and Timothy Thurston for helpful comments on this article.

*Chos* = religion, and in this context refers to Buddhism.

2 This six syllable prayer, oM ma Ni pad+me hUM, known as *ma Ni*, is the most commonly chanted prayer by Tibetans.

3 'Faith', 'devotion'.

4 'Cyclic existence', 'vicious circle', or 'round' of birth and death and rebirth within the six realms of existence, characterized by suffering, impermanence, and ignorance.

## INTRODUCTION

Important texts related to Tibetan women may be found in Allione (2000), Findly (2000), Gyatso and Havnevik (2005), Willis (1987), and Kleisath (2008).<sup>5</sup> As Adams (2008: 3) notes:

It is hard to find accurate and honest accounts of village life, historically or in the contemporary moment, especially ones that are written by Tibetans who are from these villages. We have many accounts written by foreigners, by researchers, by tourists and adventure travelers. But these often foreground the things outsiders consider important.

For the great majority of Tibetans, historical illiteracy has made detailed knowledge of the high canons of Tibetan religious discourse inaccessible. Consequently, it is important to ask questions about the half of Tibetans who are women, mostly illiterate in any language, and intensely religious: What are their life narratives, their religious beliefs, their religious practice? What does their religious practice mean to them? What, exactly, do they do and why? With such questions in mind, we set out to write about 'Phags mo,<sup>6</sup> an "ordinary" Mtsho sngon (Qinghai 青海) Tibetan woman born in 1930 who experienced the "old life", a very painful period beginning in 1958, and who now at an advanced age, enjoys unprecedented religious opportunities made possible by her family's economic status – she has visited religious sites in Mtsho sngon and Gansu 甘肃 provinces, the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), and India. These are opportunities that were inconceivable for women of her grandmother's generation. The vanishing accounts of the lives of such people as 'Phags mo and their contributions to Tibetan life and culture are often ignored. Such women and their self-interpretations must be studied to give a clearer picture of what it means to be "Tibetan".

'Phags mo of 'Dod rtse Village, Rdo sbis Tibetan Township, Xunhua<sup>7</sup> Salar Autonomous County, Haidong 海东 Region, Mtsho sngon Province has two daughters (b. 1953, 1957) and four sons (b. 1963, 1967, 1971, 1974). All have their own families. She lives with her fourth child (second son) in the *ma khyim* 'mother's home', that is, the house or the courtyard in which her husband's family has

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<sup>5</sup> See Roche's (2006) review of a thirty-five minute documentary (*Tibetan Woman's Life*) by Puhua Dongzhi (Phag pa don grub) filmed in Xunhua County 循化 that focuses on daily life, including fetching water, feeding livestock, milking, cleaning stables, cooking, household religious activity, weeding fields, transporting manure to fields, and fetching wood for fuel, and commentary by Sgrolmamtsho (Sgrol ma mtsho) on her life and family.

<sup>6</sup> 'Phags mo is the first author's mother.

<sup>7</sup> We have chosen to use Tibetan and Chinese terms based on villagers' usage.



lived for generations. 'Dod rtse is an administrative village with three natural villages, approximately one hundred households, and 600 residents who cultivate wheat, highland barley, canola, potatoes, and vegetables and own a few *mdzo mo* 'yak-cow hybrids' and pigs. Younger people spend much of the year outside the village engaged in earning cash income through road and construction work.

### 'PHAGS MO'S LIFE ACCOUNT

I was born in Dmag dpon Village, about two hours' walk from my husband's (1930–1989) village – 'Dod rtse. My mother (b. 1890s) delivered ten children of whom five survived to adulthood. I was the youngest and had a happy childhood with plenty of food. We farmed with three other families who were our relatives. Adults carried manure to the fields, harvested, and celebrated festivals and holidays together. These collective endeavors were much fun for children because they gave opportunities to play together.

I was married and sent at the age of eighteen to my husband's home. He was the same age as me and lived in nearby 'Dod rtse Village. Our marriage was arranged by our families. He was from a relatively well-off family with a large amount of fields. However, although his family was considered wealthy by locals because of the amount of land they owned, the quality of life in terms of food and clothes was not as good as my family's. We had plenty of butter and milk, and often ate meat. In contrast, his family had limited amounts of butter, milk, and meat, although they had no shortage of barley and wheat flour. Maybe it was because my family had more livestock; it was also because of better management. His family was a big declining family. My family made about a dozen sets of clothes, including different kinds of robes with and without lambskin, shirts, shoes, and boots for me as gifts when I married. Those were my main clothes for a long time at his home.

My first child came when I was twenty but he lived no longer than half a year because of illness. I gave birth to a daughter when I was twenty-three at my parents' home because my parents thought that they could give me better care than I would receive at my husband's home. This daughter was lucky to enjoy the old good days for a few years. When I gave birth to my second daughter four years later the situation had changed and, by the time she was two to five years old, life was drastically different.

In 1958, there were the People's Commune and Great Leap Forward (1958–1960) movements. The government launched the land reform policy.

Land and other property owned by individual households were collected and became commune property. The nation-wide famine followed in 1959 (–1961). People were provided very little food, which was usually a thin wheat flour porridge cooked in the communal kitchen. Starvation was real: about twelve people starved to death in my village.

Socialist education was a main theme of the time, despite the famine. People were educated to “have socialist grass rather than capitalist food”. I never forgot one event: villagers were called to see a comparative display of “old society” and “new society”. Old clothes, old cooking utensils, old farming tools, and so on were displayed on one side, representing “old backward society” and on the other side were nicer, newer clothes, cooking utensils, farming tools, and so on representing the “new socialist society”. The irony was that the items on both sides were from the so-called “old society”.

During those years of famine, stealing anything edible was something only capable people could do. I was by no means “capable” during these years, but I did do things that were against what I thought was right. During a few dark nights, I went to potato fields in the mountains in front of the village to collect a sack of potatoes for my hungry family members. I was not afraid of wolves or ghosts, but was very afraid that village leaders would catch me. One day during the communal work in spring, I stole about one bowl of wheat from the seed that was being sown and was discovered by village leaders. They summoned me and criticized me, calling me a class enemy. Another time, I collected beans from a communal field, boiled them, and fed them to my family members. For the next couple of days I was afraid to send my two daughters to the communal nursery in fear bits of the beans would be noticed in their feces.

For a couple of years, all parents were forced to send their children to a village nursery in order to increase parents’ work efficiency. The children were kept in a house in the village and were allowed to see their parents only once every few days. Mothers would go near the house after communal work in order to have a glimpse of their children and hear their voices, just like a mother cow goes near her calf when it is separated from her. Our biggest fear was the rumor that the children would be taken to a Chinese area to be educated in Chinese. Fortunately, that proved only a rumor. The most sinful thing I did – I still feel awful guilt – was to steal a goat with a few others, kill it, and eat it during the time of terrible starvation.

Time passed and I gave birth to more children – four boys. The first two were born in 1963 and 1967. A woman’s youth should be full of dreams, joy,

pretty clothes, and fun; but my twenties and thirties were spent in sorrow and hardship, working hard for the commune without enough food to feed my children. I should have been happy with a precious human life, which is very rare in the endless circle of life, but I felt sorry for myself because I had to live during such a terrible time.

The period of starvation was followed by the Cultural Revolution.<sup>8</sup> People had lost all their property in the late 1950s. They worked in commune teams and received points for labor. A household received payment late in the year, usually in grain, according to the number of points family members had earned. I was the only major labor force in my home and I had to care for the children consequently, I had few points and had to feed many mouths. While people in general were on the verge of starvation, my family suffered more than many others.

My husband had learned written Tibetan from monk scholars in his youth and thus became the village accountant in the 1960s. In the 1970s, he started working for the township government that, at that time, was called the people's commune. He could do little to help the family because he was paid so little. His public employment was in some way an obstacle – while others could steal food from the community without much worry, I had to be very careful because I was a public employee's wife. Each time I brought something to cook, such as potatoes and barley from the communal fields secretly, my family members were very anxious.

Our family had another major worry because my monk uncle (husband's father's brother), had been labeled a class enemy. He was forced to abandon his life as a monk and work for the commune under the commune leaders' close observation. This meant we had to be even more careful about what we did.

My monk uncle's unusual death was a major tragedy for our family and the community. He was a highly regarded local religious practitioner and protected the 'Dod rtse Village monastery's sacred images and manuscripts by hiding them in the mountains in the 1958 disasters, but most did not survive the second period of destruction in 1962. It was in this year that people were promised freedom in religious practice. After they brought out the hidden religious items that had survived the first period of destruction, the second strike came.

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8 1966–1976.

Nevertheless, my monk uncle and my family managed to hide the most precious image – a bronze statue of Dpal ldan lha mo,<sup>9</sup> the village’s revered protector. Uncle hid it on different mountain cliffs for a while and then secretly brought it to our home. We dug a hole in the floor of a storage room over the course of several nights and then buried it. We were very worried that sounds of digging and signs of newly dug earth would arouse suspicion but, fortunately, nothing happened. Meanwhile, the so-called “class struggle” continued. Unable to stand constant humiliation and torture by commune leaders, my monk uncle killed himself by jumping off a mountain cliff.

As a government employee, my husband was expected to play a leading role in banning religious practice and destroying and confiscating religious items. However, he had profound faith in Buddhism and helped households hide religious items when deployed in other villages. Our family also secretly invited religious personalities from time to time to chant at our home during the Cultural Revolution.

The overall political climate changed in 1979 and people began to have more freedom in religious practice. My family unearthed the A ma lha mo image in the family shrine. Venerating her became the most important part of religious practice for my family. In 1989, my family returned this precious image to the village monastery where she belongs, to receive offerings from all the villagers. In our home, we put a small *thang ka* of the same deity where the image had been kept. We continue making offerings to her as though she were still here. My family thus has a special faith in this Buddhist protector. I believe that the peaceful lives we enjoy now are a result of her protection.

In the early 1980s, my husband and I wished one of our four sons would become a monk in memory of our monk uncle and to continue the family tradition of having a monk among our men. My husband took the youngest son to Lama Tshe tan zhabs drung (1910–1985)<sup>10</sup> for a consultation during one of his visits to our village and our home. The lama suggested that our son finish school first. He then continued school through university, got a job, and established his family instead of becoming a monk.

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9 Whom villagers refer to as A ma lha mo ‘Mother Lha mo’.

10 He was a professor at Northwest Nationalities Institute in Lanzhou 兰州, Gansu Province when he visited 'Dod rtse Village in the 1980s.

## A DAY IN 'PHAGS MO'S LIFE

'Phags mo's house consists of a two-story brick and wood building and a separate living room that adjoins it. She lives with one of her sons, as mentioned earlier. Her other children and grandchildren periodically visit her. The living room is the most important and most frequently used space in the home. It is a kitchen with a platform used for eating, sleeping, chatting, and entertaining guests that is heated from smoke and heat channeled from the cooking fire. 'Phags mo and her niece sleep here.

'Phags mo gets up at around seven every morning. She washes her face and hands very soon afterwards, goes to the family shrine on the second floor, cleans seven bronze offering bowls with a clean towel, lines them up in front of Buddhist images, and fills them with clean water from a small pot.<sup>11</sup> She burns incense and then turns the prayer wheel in the shrine for some minutes while reciting such common mantras as *ma Ni*. While doing this, she also says prayers such as "May all sentient beings be free of hardship and be happy!" that many people say during worship. 'Phags mo also prays to Dpal ldan lha mo to protect her family, particularly members who are far away from her. She prostrates three times in front of the shrine and leaves.

Next, she offers *bsang* 'purification' by adding a spoonful of *rtsam pa* 'roasted barley flour' on a piece of burning yak dung in an old baking pot, places it on a courtyard wall, and sprinkles drops of water on it with a juniper branch. This is an offering for the mountain deity, Gung ye. Before breakfast, she burns *tsha bsur*, which is burning *rtsam pa* for *yi dwags* 'hungry ghosts'. The only difference between this and *bsang* is that no water is offered on this smoldering offering. When the milk tea is ready, she offers the first cup of tea at the small family shrine built in a wall of the living room. She believes that deities should be treated in the manner of respecting a person by offering them the best food and serving them first. This is all done in about one hour before breakfast.

Then her family has breakfast of usually steamed bread buns and milk tea, and sometimes *rtsam pa* 'roasted barley flour' with yak butter. The work for the day is then planned, such as farming and caring for the family's livestock. Her family owns a few *mdzo mo* (yak-cow cross) and about forty goats. Her family annually raised one pig for meat but this stopped in 2010 based on religious concerns about the bad effects of slaughtering swine. Historically, local households raise

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11 Her family formerly got this offering water from clean springs. Before the village had piped running water, drinking water was fetched water from springs and, sometimes, from nearby irrigation canals if there was water. 'Phags mo always went to a spring for offering water. She now uses water from the tap in the courtyard.



*Figure 1* 'Phags mo offers milk tea in a wood cup in front of her home shrine.

a pig as a main source of meat; however, as family finances improve, several households are wealthy enough to have abandoned this practice in the past five years and, instead, purchase mutton and beef from Muslims in the local market. In the past, it was mainly 'Phags mo who cooked meals, cared for the children, and tended the livestock. Now that her daughter-in-law does these tasks, she has more time to devote to religious practice. 'Phags mo continues to feel guilty that she had to assume such masculine duties as annually asking a few male relatives to slaughter her family's pig and be in charge of selling an animal to a butcher. Her husband was a government employee and did few daily family chores.

After breakfast, she helps sweep the courtyard and engages in such other cleaning work as washing bowls. At about 9 a.m. she makes about a ten-minute walk to the village *ma Ni khang* 'prayer wheel temple' in the village center to turn two prayer wheels with other elderly villagers. This *ma Ni khang* has two, approximately three-meter tall and two-meter diameter *ma Ni* wheels side by side, fixed from the ceiling to the floor. Ropes are attached to the spindles, which are turned by several people pulling the ropes while seated on the floor. The village temple is also a center for village elders to socialize. Five to eight village elders, who are most often women, are usually there. While turning the prayer

wheels, elders chat about people's family lineage, comment on various individuals, and share news about their own and neighboring villages.

'Phags mo returns home for a meal whenever she feels like it. She has milk tea or black tea, and steamed bread by herself during busy farming seasons. Then she makes a ten-minute stroll to a *stūpa* that was built in 2006 with villagers' contributions. The *stūpa* is about five meters tall and the base is approximately five meters by five meters. The inside of the *stūpa* holds tens of thousands of *tsha tsha*, which are clay impressions of deities, stupas, and prayers made from a metal mould. She makes about one hundred circumambulations. Many villagers, including young men and women, circumambulate the *stūpa* in the belief that doing so allows them to accumulate good merit.

She returns home in the late afternoon, cleans the family shrine, collects the daily offering water from the seven offering bowls, and prepares a butter lamp that is lit in the evening. She then sits on the heated platform in the living room, turns her hand prayer wheel, recites *mantras*, and counts her prayer beads, waiting for dinner. In about 1991, 'Phags mo vowed before a lama to complete chanting 100,000 Sgrol ma nyer gcig (twenty-one Tārā) mantras; 100,000 for Sgrol ma and 100,000,000 for *ma Ni* are set numbers of chanting that local people particularly prefer to complete. 'Phags mo says, "Taking a vow gives me courage to complete the task. I want to achieve this goal before I die. Chanting Sgrol ma, *ma Ni*, or other prayers – the merit is the same as long as you have faith."

At around 8 p.m. the family has a meal of, typically, noodle soup containing beef, mutton or pork, and onion and cabbage. Next, she recites more prayers, usually Sgrol ma mantras and *ma Ni*. Her day always concludes with three prostrations before the family shrine and prayers for all sentient beings and for the wellbeing of the family. Until the age of seventy, she prostrated 108 times each evening – the number of beads on a string of prayer beads.

## OTHER PRACTICES

In 2006, 'Phags mo took a vow of *dge bsnyen ma* (a laywoman who has vowed not to kill, lie, engage in sexual misconduct, steal, and take intoxicants) from a well-known lama in India during the lama's teaching. During such a teaching, the lama informs the audience that he will offer such a vow to those who wish to take it. Then he says the vow line by line, "I will never engage in killing for the rest of my life ... I will never ..." Those who wish to do so repeat after him. Some people take such a vow at a much younger age while others never take such a vow. 'Phags mo explains:



Taking a vow gives me courage to behave well. Some people take vows but then do not follow them seriously. I was reluctant to take this vow but people who were with me during the trip encouraged me to take it. So I did. It was a great honor to take this vow from such a special lama.

She fasts on the fifteenth and the twenty-ninth or thirtieth days of each lunar month, according to the Chinese lunar calendar, which elders commonly do. There are two fasts practiced locally. One dictates no eating, drinking, and speaking; the other allows speaking, but forbids eating and drinking. Previously, when it was practical, 'Phags mo practiced the former form of fasting. At present, she practices the latter. While fasting, she goes about her usual daily routine.

Villagers commonly ask a lama for advice when there is illness and the lama often gives a list of prayers to chant. The family then invites monks to complete the task, which ranges from one or two monks chanting for one to several days. Besides this, 'Phags mo's family invites two local monks to recite scriptures one day a month on a regular basis. The family keeps 'Phags pa shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa, Gser 'od, Skal bzang, Gzung bsdus, Lam rim chen mo, Sngags rim chen mo, Pad ma bka' thang, and other scriptures. The monks read one scripture each time. These wood-block printed scriptures were purchased by 'Phags mo's husband from printing houses in Sku 'bum and other monasteries in the 1980s. He invited monks to recite them. 'Phags mo continued the family tradition of inviting monks once a month after his death in 1989.

Villagers are enthusiastic about attending lamas' teachings. In 1994, the sixth Gung thang tshang 'Jigs med bstan pa'i dbang phyug (1926–2000) gave his tenth Kālacakra near Bla brang, his home monastery in Gansu Province. Many Tibetans from Sichuan 四川, Gansu, and Mtsho sngon attended the teaching, including 'Phags mo and many others from her village.<sup>12</sup> In 2007, Lama G.yar ka (b. 1930s) from neighboring Hualong Hui 化隆回 Autonomous County gave the same teaching in Rdo sbis and in 2010, Shar tshang, the abbot of Rong bo Monastery in Reb gong, gave the same teaching in Smad pa. 'Phags mo also attended both gatherings.

The Kālacakra is rooted in complex Tibetan Buddhist theology, about which most Tibetans who attend understand very little. However, the lama officiating at the teaching also gives plain-spoken teachings to those who have gathered that stress basic morality such as not killing and stealing, and respecting elders before beginning the more formal, three-day teaching. Kālacakra gatherings are

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12 See Tsering Bum (2007: 20–26) for a Tibetan's recollection of attending the same event as a child.





Figures 2–3 Villagers turn *ma Ni* wheels at the village temple.

particularly attractive to Tibetans because they are infrequent. “Receiving such a precious initiation from a high lama makes me very content”, 'Phags mo said.

## PARTICIPATION IN ORGANIZED RELIGIOUS ACTIVITIES

'Phags mo participates in organized religious activities both in and outside the village, including *ma Ni 'bum sgrub*, village prayer gatherings on winter evenings, and pilgrimages.

### **Ma Ni 'bum sgrub**

From the fourth to sixth lunar months, each village in Rdo sbis Township organizes a village-wide prayer ritual of about five days duration. Other than one or two people who stay in each home watching the house, milking and caring for livestock, most other villagers participate. 'Dod rtse Village holds this ritual from the first to the fifth days of the sixth lunar month. One day before the gathering, participants gather near the village monastery with blankets, bowls, and cups. Hundreds sleep on the ground in a single large white cloth tent prepared for the ritual. Each local Tibetan village has a large tent made by skilled villagers for such events. This administrative village consists of three natural villages and each sponsors the ritual in turn. Such vegetarian food as steamed and fried bread, steamed dumplings stuffed with minced cabbage, *rtsam pa*, butter, yogurt, milk tea, and fruit are provided by the organizing community.

During the five days, each participant recites *ma Ni* with their own prayer beads 20,000 to 60,000 times at their own pace. The assembly breaks up early in the afternoon on the final day with all villagers celebrating the completion of the ritual. Villagers who did not participate come to the ritual site to meet their family members. The organizing community provides the last meal, which is usually rice cooked with butter, to all villagers. 'Phags mo has participated in this rite almost every year since it restarted in the early 1980s. The ritual is also seen as a good time to rest in the busy summer season.

### **Winter evening village prayer meetings**

Since the early 1980s, 'Dod rtse Village restarted the practice of winter evening prayer meetings. During winter, villagers have less work than in other seasons and most who have left home for seasonal work return home. For about three months, households take turns hosting the village prayer gatherings. Villagers go to the host household after dinner to chant prayers. The main prayer is the

eighty-seven line prayer for Sgrol ma, which is why the gathering is also called the Sgrol ma Prayer Gathering. This prayer is chanted twenty-one times loudly in unison by participants. At the end of the approximately one hour chanting session, the host household typically offers baked bread and milk tea to participants. The gathering is seen as an opportunity to accumulate good karma for individuals, households, and the entire community; it is a major *rim gro*.<sup>13</sup> Although attendance is not mandatory, villagers are encouraged to attend. There are equal numbers of male and female attendees. 'Phags mo was an active participant, but stopped going to other households to attend about ten years ago because of her physical condition.

### Pilgrimage

Pilgrimage is increasingly popular. The Potala Palace and monasteries in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR),<sup>14</sup> including the Jo khang, Ra mo che, Nor bu gling ka, Dga' ldan, 'Bras spung, Se ra, Bkra shis lhun po, Sa skya, Rgyang rtse, and Bsam yas monasteries are common destinations. 'Phags mo first visited Lhasa when she was sixty-six, and has since been four additional times, facilitated by the fact that she has a son living in Lhasa City.

Pilgrimage to Nepal and India is also increasingly popular, given the improved financial means of villagers. Frequent destinations include Bodhgayā, Vāranāsi, and monasteries such as Dga' ldan, 'Bras spung, and Se ra constructed by Tibetans, equivalent to those in the TAR. Attending religious teachings and receiving initiations from prestigious reincarnate lamas are major attractions. After 'Phags mo visited India, she viewed this experience as one of the most meaningful moments of her life. In her village, ten people, six of whom are women born before 1960, visited India from 2006 to 2011.

Beginning in about 2005, hiring a small van operated by a local Tibetan and making a one- to two-day pilgrimage to several holy sites has become popular among villagers, particularly women. Destinations include Sku 'bum, Bya khyung, Rdi tsa, Chu bzang, Dgon lung, Gser khog, and Gcan tsha ma Ni, which are all in eastern Mtsho sngon. As household incomes increase and women have more financial support from their family members, such pilgrimages become ever more possible. Competing with each other is also an unspoken force that stimulates local people to follow others' examples. 'Phags mo has been on such pilgrimages about five times over the last half-decade. Circumambulating

<sup>13</sup> A religious service for the well-being and prosperity of the entire community.

<sup>14</sup> "Lhasa" refers to all the TAR in the local context.

temples, offering butter lamps and cash, prostrating in front of sacred images, and praying for peace and prosperity are main activities during such pilgrimages.

### 'PHAGS MO'S RELIGIOUS BELIEF

'Phags mo, like most local older Tibetans, is illiterate and thus unable to access written texts. What explains her strong religious faith and what is it that she seeks through religious practice? No one questions Buddhism and Buddhist practices in 'Phags mo's village. Chanting prayers and making offerings to deities are an integral part of her daily life. Fundamental to 'Phags mo's way of thinking is the reality of past and future lives. She is convinced by such simple "facts" as when a child begins speaking, people try to learn the baby's previous life by asking such questions as "Where are you from?" The child may answer with a place name, people's names, or provide even more specific indications about their previous life. When 'Phags mo's second son was about three years old and angry, he would say, "I want to go to my home in the upper village. My home has fruit trees and a dog, and I have new clothes there." This convinced his parents and relatives that he was the rebirth of a deceased old woman in that village because that specific household had fruit trees and a dog. A person's spirit becoming a ghost after death is a common belief, which further substantiates the existence of a future life. Such accounts encourage efforts to seek better future lives.

That an individual's current life is the result of their previous ones and determines the next life is a basic philosophy that ordinary locals like 'Phags mo appreciate. Hoping to attain a better future life is the goal of Buddhist practitioners including saints seeking enlightenment or Buddhahood in order to help all sentient beings and an ordinary person wishing for a better human life so as to experience less hardship and more joy. The latter is 'Phags mo's aim. She said, "Every being will experience death. When a person gets old, they may say, 'I want to die and be reborn', but dying is not as easy as going back home. There is fear. This is why I always pray to be free of fear during my time in *bar do*<sup>15</sup> after I die."

The fate of the Dpal ldan lha mo image and 'Phags mo's own experience during difficult times have created a close association between 'Phags mo and this Buddhist protector, whom 'Phags mo refers to as "Mother". She believes that she is always near and constantly protects her family. She has many dreams to support this belief. For example, just after the village monastery was demolished and the wood from the destroyed monastery was taken away by villagers, she dreamed of Dpal ldan lha mo who appeared as a widow dressed in black. When

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<sup>15</sup> The intermediate state between death and rebirth.

'Phags mo asked where she was going, Mother replied that she was looking for wood. 'Phags mo interpreted this to mean that Mother was there to protect her property even during such challenging times. 'Phags mo further explains that Mother always appears in her dream as a widow, and that time dressed in black, which 'Phags mo interprets to mean that Mother is angry.

On another occasion, when 'Phags mo's son returned from studying abroad, she saw two soldiers escorting him home in her dream. This, she said, was evidence that her family members were protected by Mother.

## CONCLUSION

Buddhist ideals and social reality are often in opposition, with many people keenly interested in mantra recitation, ritual offerings, and pilgrimage, partly because of their tangible nature, as opposed to the more distant, abstract philosophy of the scholastic tradition. This is also true in the case of Tibetan monastic communities where often only a small number of monks pursue scholastic training – the majority are trained in ritual that brings economic benefit to the monasteries. Meanwhile laypeople believe they have a chance to earn merit simply by visiting monasteries and making donations when rituals are held. 'Phags mo is one of these laypeople. Our overview of her life and religious practices describes times of intense hardship that forced her to negotiate between her secretive actions in order to keep her family from starving, her husband's role as a government employee, her uncle's status as a monk, and deeply held moral values.

Buddhism emphasizes impermanence and thus a negative attitude towards materialism. 'Phags mo has experienced an abundance of impermanence, from having a good life with her family in her natal village, to the troubled times in the 1950s, and on into the 1970s that brought the loss of all personal property, terrible hunger, desperate struggle for survival, destruction of religious symbols and sites, the death of loved ones, and then return to a comfortable life. She says that these experiences are living religious teachings on impermanence.

The return of regular public and private religious practice without fear of punishment with much better economic conditions has provided opportunity for locals like 'Phags mo to reflect on the past, present, and future. A constant subject of 'Phags mo's prayers is that past horrors might not happen again.

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