

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Title: Giving Birth to Reality: Experiences of Motherhood in the Stories of Eminent Tibetan Buddhist Practitioners

Abstract approved:

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Tibetan Buddhism has offered two distinct, seemingly dichotomous perspectives about motherhood as it relates to traversing the spiritual path. In the first, mothering is the antithesis to spiritual development and realization, as it tethers a practitioner to the mundane duties of *saṃsāra*, the cycle of rebirth and suffering, propelling her deeper into it. In the second, mothering is a role that can lead to the acquisition of tremendous spiritual merit, as a practitioner shepherds her offspring into a life of virtue. As Tibetan Buddhism's global presence has grown significantly since the Tibetan diaspora of 1959, it has taken root in new places and social landscapes. In light of this, a third perspective has emerged: the inquiry and hope that the *practice of motherhood*, informed by Buddhist wisdom, could indeed be a soteriological path.

By researching the stories of mothers, I came to the following conclusions: in Tibetan Buddhism, narratives of “mother-practitioners” suggest that mothering has much more in common with the path of awakening than simply generating merit, but that as household-practitioners, such women are burdened by the care of dependent children, which is associated with the attachment, suffering, and grief of worldly life. However, as evidenced by the doctrines and stories explored in this thesis, it is not in spite of this predicament and this suffering and grief, but *because of it* that experiences of mothering can be considered as brimming with spiritual potential in the Tibetan Buddhist context. It is also evident that the most sophisticated psychological dimensions of the virtue of *particular* love, or relational love, that is portrayed as both instrument and obstacle to spiritual development, demands a discernment and wisdom idealized by a contemplative path of practice. A synthetic work such as this, perhaps the first of its kind as focusing on the experiences of *human* as opposed to idealized mothers in Tibetan Buddhism, gives timely audibility to a chorus of voices often heard only as soloists.

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Giving Birth to Reality:
Experiences of Motherhood in the Stories of Eminent Tibetan Buddhist Practitioners

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Kate Gallagher

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

Kate Gallagher, Author

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For my Mother, in this life and all others

Chapter 1: Project Overview

Historically, Tibetan Buddhism has offered two distinct, seemingly dichotomous perspectives about motherhood as it relates to traversing the spiritual path. In the first, mothering is the antithesis to spiritual development and realization, as it tethers a practitioner to the mundane duties of *samsāra*, the cycle of rebirth and suffering, propelling her deeper into it (Gallagher and Nevin; Ohnuma, 4). In the second, mothering is a role that can lead to the acquisition of tremendous spiritual merit, as a practitioner shepherds her offspring into a life of virtue (Gallagher and Nevin; Englemajer, 89-90). These views are in tension with one another, yet both frame the limitations of motherhood in Tibetan Buddhist thought, as at worst an impediment and at most a preparation for the soteriological path. However, these representations of motherhood are paradoxical to prominent symbolic conceptions of “mother” found in traditional religious doctrine and philosophical literature. Countless forms of maternal metaphor and simile cast facets of the role of mother as representative of the most significant philosophical themes espoused by the tradition (such as the goddess Prajñāpāramitā, the “Perfection of Wisdom,” who is the “Mother of All the Buddhas”), and as exemplifying a *bodhisattva*’s - an accomplished spiritual practitioner’s - kindness and compassion. As Tibetan Buddhism’s global presence has grown significantly since the Tibetan diaspora of 1959, it has taken root in new places and social landscapes. In light of this, I could add a third emerging perspective concerning the intersection of motherhood and Buddhism, undoubtedly influenced by feminist insights and movements of Europe and North America: the inquiry and hope that the *practice of motherhood*, informed by Buddhist wisdom, could indeed be a soteriological path (Allione, *Women of Wisdom* 98).

Compelled by the paradox within the juxtaposition of doctrinal symbolism of motherhood as perfection and traditional social views of motherhood as imperfection, and intrigued by the stories of mother-practitioners who worked their way to notoriety as religious virtuosos, I am brought to my research by the following questions: First, beyond generalizations, what is the nature of the relationship between motherhood and spiritual awakening or enlightenment within Tibetan Buddhist practices, both traditional and contemporary? Second, what do the unique stories of accomplished mother-practitioners in Tibetan Buddhist history reveal to us about this relationship? Third, how have conceptions and perceptions of this relationship changed as the *extended* lineages of Tibetan Buddhism met new social conditions and cultures throughout its twenty-five-hundred-year history? Lastly, how have the voices of

mothers-practitioners contributed to the larger Buddhist community, and how will they do so in the future?

To explore these questions, I employ a philosophical analysis of literature imparting the stories of mothers. My methods for literature selection and philosophical analysis are described in chapter two. In chapter three, I describe my use of terms such as “Tibetan Buddhism” and “mother” in addition to sketching sociological, anthropological, and historical backdrops which serve as vital contexts for understanding religion and gender dynamics in the locales of Tibetan Buddhism’s extended lineage. Chapter four prefaces the central project by reviewing dominant themes in Buddhist philosophy, organized by the three-*yāna*, or “Three Vehicle,” perspective of Vajrayāna, “Diamond Vehicle,” Buddhism with attention to use of maternal metaphor and simile in religious doctrine. Chapter five contains the heart of the project, a close examination of the stories of religious exemplars found in Tibetan Buddhist doctrinal texts, hagiographical literature, and in contemporary biographies and digital media, focusing specifically on “maternal” themes and patterns. This examination will reflect back on the relevant social, religious, and cultural dimensions that inform the authors’ and subjects’ experiences, providing proper context. I include aspects of these dimensions throughout the literary analysis, as cultural “signposts,” although they are not necessarily my primary focus. My primary concern is with examining the stories and their patterns for reflections of Buddhist praxis, philosophical insight, and “religious experience” as opposed to other dimensions of religion, or with the religion itself, per se. Central to Tibetan Buddhist philosophy are two primary, interrelated domains: ethics and wisdom. Tibetan Buddhist ethics, in its preeminent form, is synthesized as *bodhicitta* which could be momentarily simplified to mean universalized compassion, or love. Tibetan Buddhist wisdom could be summarized as direct metaphysical insight into the nature of the self and all phenomena. This analysis centers on these two domains of Buddhist philosophy but also crosses several disciplinary boundaries including religious studies, sociology, anthropology, and occasionally psychology.

In performing this research, I came to the following conclusions: in Tibetan Buddhism, narratives of “mother-practitioners” suggest that mothering has much more in common with the path of awakening than simply generating merit, but that as household-practitioners, such women are burdened by the care of dependent children, and the attachment, suffering, and grief associated with worldly life. However, as evidenced by the stories explored in this thesis, it is not in spite of this predicament and this suffering and grief, but *because of it* that experiences of mothering can be considered as brimming with spiritual potential in the Tibetan Buddhist context. It is also evident that sophisticated psychological dimensions of the virtue of *particular* love, or relational love, that is portrayed as both instrument and obstacle to

spiritual development, demands the cultivation of discernment and wisdom (*prajñā*), so idealized by a contemplative path of practice. This wisdom-insight is virtually inseparable from the ethical domain and the cultivation of spiritual virtue.

We are at a critical point of emergence in which the topic of motherhood and Buddhism is opening up to new perspectives, as more women are asking questions and seeking models for Tibetan Buddhist practice within the context of motherhood. Discussions of mothering in the context of practice and practicing in the context of mothering are becoming more specific, complex, and nuanced, as the tradition of Tibetan Buddhism is adapted to fit contemporary, and often cosmopolitan, life. Presently, exemplars of the tradition are addressing the practicalities and experiences of motherhood in their discourses on Buddhist practice in new and creative ways. A synthetic work such as this gives timely audibility to a chorus of ancient, historical, and contemporary voices often heard only as soloists.

Chapter 2: Research Methods

The nature of my question in this thesis is not simply “can mothers get enlightened (also referred to as “awakened”) in Tibetan Buddhism?” I am not personally qualified to know the spiritual or soteriological status of another individual. If we rely on Tibetan literature and traditional institutional authority to answer this question the answer would be yes, albeit *much* more rarely than men or fathers. There is evidence mother-practitioners have been held in high regard as awakened teachers, on par with the status of the Buddha, such as Machig Labdrön, a religious virtuoso we will meet in chapter five. Overall, however, this is not a productive question because of the closed, dualistic, and definitive nature of such an inquiry. My role as a philosopher is not necessarily to locate definitive answers to the questions I do pose, rather, it is to articulate the complexity that is revealed when these questions are held openly and systematically researched. Mark Siderits writes regarding the “point” of philosophy and the question, “does it ever figure anything out?” stating “one response to this question is that indeed philosophy has established something quite significant - that the truth turns out to be very complicated.” He continues, “So perhaps philosophy has established something after all - that under the surface of seemingly simple matters lurks surprising complexity” (2). In the act of asking open, unresolvable questions and seeking necessarily incomplete answers, something that more closely resembles truth can be revealed. This is my aim, and this approach of wading in the inconclusive waters between and beyond *is* and *is not* is an approximation of The Middle Way philosophy described by the Buddhist Mahāyāna.

This paper is, indivisibly, a philosophical analysis and women’s studies project centering on revealing the philosophical insights and spiritual experiences of mothers, pertaining to their mothering, and as conveyed through doctrinal, biographical and sometimes autobiographical narratives. To gain insight into contemporary perspectives, I also utilize resources such as blogs, mother-practitioner authored books and web-sourced interviews. Although the locus of interest is the intersection between the role of mothering and spiritual development in the Tibetan Buddhist context, I consider how *both* religious/spiritual *and* mundane experiences make contributions to this narrative. The stories are drawn from women of different eras and places linked by the threads of religious lineage. Therefore, I attempt to locate each woman in her social, cultural and historical context, then I examine the works for

distinctive places of resonance with key tenets of Tibetan Buddhist philosophy and for patterns and themes across narratives.

Literary Selection

To study the experiences of mother-practitioners, I've utilized a purposeful sampling method intended to obtain the most information-rich narratives in my purview (Palinkas, et. al.). My selections were based on several criteria including my own interest and unpredictable research pathway, but more specifically on: availability (described further below), notoriety of subjects (in hopes to glean insight and understanding from accomplished "exemplars"), diversity of subjects (a range from different eras and milieus), and specificity of contribution or vocality pertaining to the intersection of motherhood and Tibetan Buddhism. I have also examined materials outside of the criteria of "specificity of contribution" - noting both those biographical contents that pertain to my topic of interest, and sometimes more importantly, *the lack thereof* as an equally valuable contribution to some of my research questions.

Hagiography, a distinct genre of Tibetan literature referred to as *namtar* in Tibetan, records the lives of religious exemplars for the benefit of their students and for future adherents who might then become compelled to join their local religious community or draw inspiration from their life story (Jacoby, 8). This genre is readily influenced by Indian Buddhist hagiography, the life story and previous life stories of Gautama Buddha and other Buddhist saints, which chronicles the life of a religious exemplar from suffering to spiritual awakening. In addition to placing a strong emphasis on teacher-student relationships, I might note that Mahāyāna Buddhism is a tradition of practice guided much by example. Accounts of female spiritual biographies, and therefore records of such exemplars, are extremely rare; Jacoby notes that *namtars* with female subjects comprise just one percent of the thousands of surviving works of this genre (13). One reason for this is the predominance of illiteracy in lay persons and especially females for much of Tibet's history; monasteries were the primary educational institutions of Tibet, and so monks were privileged in establishing records such as these (Jacoby, 13). Paired with Buddhism's long-standing and prominent tradition of the renunciation of conventional family life, we can imagine that the incidence of biographies documenting the life stories of mother-practitioners is even rarer yet, thus a window into the life of a Tibetan religious virtuosa who is also a mother is, in general, rare and limited. Fortunately, there are a handful of works to draw from. Thus, the basis for selection of pre-twentieth century biographies and of contemporary subjects of Tibetan heritage was primarily a matter of availability.

As for the more contemporary North American subjects, there was a slightly different set of criteria, which included availability, my own interest, the subject's notoriety, and a subject's vocality and contribution to the topic at hand. As there are very few contemporary mothers with robust biographies available, I have sourced descriptions of their experiences from books, blogs, and video interviews, which has allowed for a departure from the idealized hagiographic model and has revealed dimensions of experience that are not readily available in that rhetorical style. For example, Jessica Peterson is not a teacher nor a prominent figure in the contemporary North American Buddhist scene, yet she has a public blog filled with detailed and intimate autobiographical writings of her experiences as a mother-practitioner. This fills a major gap in the research as it supplies narrative content with less "filter" and "agenda."

I utilize a lens of critical sympathy in my approach to recounting and analyzing the poems, biographies, and narratives of mothers. I found little value in questioning the validity or accuracy of the experiences of these women, even when the hagiographies offer paragraphs of supernatural mysticism. Whether we view such accounts as imagined, literal, or symbolic, there is often little difference in the rational, philosophical analysis they inspire. Nevertheless, situating the experiences in their sociological, cultural, religious, and literary contexts and investigating their application to a broader audience is an essential aspect of this project as an academic undertaking.

Philosophical Analysis

My primary framework of analysis is Tibetan Buddhism's own philosophical system, which I describe in the literature review. I utilize Buddhism, therefore, as both subject and philosophical methodology. While Buddhism, with its soteriological aims and entanglement with cultural and religious customs and aesthetics, could be thought of as and is considered a religion, the philosophical rationality by which it approaches those aims and even customs could, perhaps, better be categorized as a philosophy and as suitable for the task of philosophical analysis (Siderits, 6-7).

My secondary tool of analysis, however, is ceaseless inquiry, proceeding by what is uncertain, a process which the Buddha himself is well-known for encouraging in the *Kalama Sutta* and others,

"It is proper for you, Kalamas, to doubt, to be uncertain; uncertainty has arisen in you about what is doubtful. Come, Kalamas. Do not go upon what has been acquired by repeated hearing; nor upon tradition; nor upon rumor; nor upon what is in a scripture."
(AN 3.65, V 9)

Therefore, at times, I cross disciplines to utilize insights from feminist philosophy, care ethics, and even psychology when they complexify, reveal, refute or contribute to the inquiry in a meaningful way.

Reflecting and building upon the works of a number of contemporary scholars researching and writing about Buddhist women and mothers, including Reiko Ohnuma, Rita Gross, Pascale Engelmajer, Sarah Jacoby and others, this work is a synthesis and analysis of the stories of mother-practitioners in the extended lineage of Mahāyāna and Indo-Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism. In order to synthesize and analyze a large quantity of stories over a long period of time, a project of great breadth, I have necessarily sacrificed some detail. For example, I have generally omitted the nuanced particularities of the various schools of Tibetan Buddhism. This project is regrettably limited by my own language competence, necessitating that all source material was constrained to that which has been translated into or already in the English language. While this work is by no means comprehensive and is necessarily incomplete, it is a beginning to revealing the complex themes and nuanced experiences of mother-practitioners, a subject that has not received the degree of focus it deserves, given its relevance to contemporary Buddhist practice.

As the researcher and author of this work, I am situated at the intersection of several domains. I am both a scholar and a Buddhist practitioner. This is a scholarly work that concerns not only religion and philosophy, but also Buddhist praxis, and thus may inform scholars and practitioners alike. Furthermore, I am an American scholar and practitioner, and so have been influenced by social and religious themes relevant to the contemporary North American world, a world met by Tibetan Buddhism in just the last seventy years. Finally, as a scholar and female practitioner, specifically, I am intrigued equally by Buddhist paths of world-engagement, in the form of parenthood and family life, and world-renunciation, in the form of long-term retreat practice. In approaching this topic, I took as my task an analysis based on the situatedness of my subjects. Given my own situatedness, I inspect these stories quite naturally from the intersectional domains I occupy. However I also attempt to inspect the stories without a particular agenda and from perspectives unlike those that occur naturally to me, in other words, from as many relevant angles as I had time to consider. I was not interested in confirming my suspicions or devising an explicitly tidy claim, but I was more interested in complicating the whole matter in the hopes to reveal a naturally more complex and diverse reality and relationship between motherhood and awakening. My authorial views could be considered fluid, dynamic and diverse, versus particular and inert. I view this topic and the issues contained within, therefore, as those that keep opening as opposed to becoming fixed and stable through this research and written record.

Chapter 3: Tibetan Buddhism(s), Women, and Mothers in Context

What is Tibetan Buddhism?

The study of Tibetan Buddhism is necessarily a multi-cultural endeavor, with distinct turning points in history contributing to its breadth in a global landscape. The Buddhist tradition originated with the teachings of Siddhārtha Gautama in the Brahmanical period of late Vedic civilization in what is now Northeast India and Nepal around the fifth or sixth centuries BCE. This time was an exciting and dynamic period of economic, social, and religious change. Religiously speaking, the status quo of a Brahmanical tradition centered in Vedic worldview (with its emphasis on gaining worldly satisfaction and heavenly immortality through ritual performance of its priestly class) was challenged by the growing trend of spiritual seekers (*śramaṇa*) engaging renunciant, yogic practices directly. They were concerned with questions about morality and freedom that undermined Vedic authority and the “worldly,” or non-renunciant, sacrifice-oriented and acutely class-based society it upheld (Doniger, 166-172; Siderits, 15; Harvey, 9).

Siddhārtha Gautama was one such *śramaṇa* who, like Mahāvīra of Jainism, engaged deeply in renunciant life, taught based upon his insights, and subsequently developed a large community of lay and monastic adherents. In the years between 300 or 400 BCE and 100 CE, after Gautama Buddha’s death, a split occurred in the *saṃgha*, the community of monastics that recorded and upheld the teachings. Patterns of interpretation, intellectual developments, and conceptual emphases emerged, distinctive of that accepted as canon by some more conservative or traditional Buddhists. This development became known as the “second turning” of the Dharma wheel, and the Mahāyāna or the “Great Vehicle” of Buddhism, to those who ascribed to it. Most Buddhists have a shared textual heritage recorded in Pāli; for the Mahāyāna this shared documentation and body of teachings comprise only the “first turning” of the wheel of Dharma. The new movement contentiously emphasized the imperative of developing a compassionate motivation (*bodhicitta*) and the Bodhisattva path to complete Buddhahood, worship and visualization practices of glorified Buddha and Bodhisattva images, and expanded explanations and conceptions of the Buddha’s teachings on dependent origination and emptiness (*śūnyatā*). Particular emphasis was placed on the spiritual goal of becoming a perfectly enlightened, omniscient Buddha instead of merely an *arhat*, or

self-liberated saint. New philosophical works appeared which were accepted by some as authoritative “word of the Buddha” (*buddhavacana*), while others remained committed only to the Buddhist record of the Pāli Canon (Harvey, 108-109). As a result of invaders to the Indian subcontinent, including the Muslim Turks, and the prominence of Hinduism in certain regions, Buddhism became increasingly and eventually obsolete in India between the tenth and fifteenth centuries CE. The Buddhist teachings, however, had long since spread and taken root in other places through its passage on trade routes with traveling merchants, the displacement of Indian Buddhists, and through the preferences of political leaders in neighboring lands. Among these new Buddhist locales were what are now known as Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos in the Southeast and Nepal, Tibet, China, and Japan to the Northeast. In general, the lineages of those who ascribed to the progressive developments in Buddhism, or the Mahāyāna, spread to the North, whereas the lineages of the “traditionalists,” or Theravāda, spread to the South.

There were several attempts to establish Buddhism in Tibet; one of the most successful attempts is attributed to Indian Buddhist monk Śāntarakṣita and the Indian Tantric Master, Padmasambhava, in the eighth century CE. He is said to have converted the local land spirits to Buddhism so they would protect the Buddhist teachings (Dharma) in Tibet. However, due to competition from the local, shamanistic, spirit-cults (later part of the Bön religion), it wasn’t until the eleventh century that the Mahāyāna and the later developed Vajrayāna lineages of Indian Buddhism became solidly established in Tibet (Harvey, 194-206). Mahāyāna Buddhism developed a Tibetan identity and diversification into several distinct schools as it flourished in Tibet, blending with the indigenous folk traditions. To speak of a Tibetan Buddhism, even within the context of what was once politically Tibetan geography is, in a sense, a misnomer. There was much religious diversity even within Tibet because of isolation of and influence by local subcultures. Thus, *Tibetan Buddhism* is a more appropriate label (Khandro; Cozort, 136). The distinctive features of Tibet’s Buddhism, compared to other forms of Buddhism include its adoption of both the Indian Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna elaborations of philosophy and practice, the latter as a subset of the former. Along with these philosophies came a greater open-mindedness than was typically afforded in some earlier forms of Buddhism regarding the potential for lay people and women to attain enlightenment. That said, as I will discuss extensively in the following pages, the male monastic tradition remained paradigmatic and, despite the empowering language found in some Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna texts, female practitioners never fully achieved equality with their male counterparts (Cozort, 136). Shamanistic features of Tibet’s native Bön religion were integrated into the Buddhist paradigm; such features include chanting, visualization, and ritual engagement with the spirit world. Lastly, an emphasis

on the importance of the teacher-student relationship became a central tenet in Tibetan Buddhism, being viewed as pivotal for correct and efficient practice. In this paradigm, a student relies on the teacher not only for philosophical and practical instructions, but also views them as a model or *exemplar* of spiritually developed qualities. In the Vajrayāna approach, this relationship is believed to be utterly essential, and is viewed as being charged with a power that can facilitate rapid spiritual development (Cozort, 136).

After thriving as a centralized tradition in the Himalayan region for approximately one thousand years, Tibetan Buddhism met a dramatic and painful turning point with the violent Chinese occupation of Tibet in 1959. Following a climactic Tibetan resistance against the Chinese, the Dalai Lama estimates that one million Tibetans perished at the hands of Chinese military or due to the 1959-1961 famine that occurred in relation to implementation of Chinese-enforced agricultural policies. In what has been deemed by the Tibetan leader in exile and others as a “cultural genocide” that continues today, the Chinese initiated an extensive demolition of monasteries, libraries and most landmarks important to Tibetan culture (Harvey, 414; Eimer). Military violence forced many thousands of Tibetans into exile, and among them, significantly, were elite Tibetan *lamas*, including the fourteenth Dalai Lama, viewed by the Chinese as the greatest threats to their sovereignty. While, over time, monasteries were rebuilt by the Tibetan exile community in India, an ironic return of Tibetan Buddhism to its land of origin, this marked a time of geographic decentralization of Tibetan Buddhism and a diaspora of Tibetans, especially monastics and esteemed lineage teachers (Harvey, 415-416). One effect of this tragic period was the spread of Tibet’s religious teachings to Europe, North America, and other parts of the globe.

Due to greater accessibility and growing interest, Asian religions and philosophies have enjoyed an expanding following and popular fascination in North America since the mid-twentieth century. The influence of what was a remote and isolated Tibetan Buddhism was somewhat late in spreading to North America, compared to the Japanese Zen Buddhist, Southeast Theravada Buddhist, or Indian Yoga traditions, for example (Cozort, 132). However, the tumultuous political climate in Tibet changed this, and the first Tibetan *lama* to arrive to the United States, Geshe Ngawang Wangyal (1955), was followed by several others who taught, established Dharma centers, and translated religious texts for English audiences, all contributing to the establishment and proliferation of Tibetan Buddhism in North America. Among the Tibetan *lamas* (all male) who had a significant and popular influence on Europeans and North Americans are: Lama Thubten Yeshe, Lama Zopa Rinpoche, Geshe Lhundhub Sopa, Sogyal Rinpoche, Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, Kalu Rinpoche, and His Holiness, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama. It has been noted that large numbers of North American Buddhist adherents, most especially Tibetan Buddhist

adherents, are not comprised, necessarily, of Buddhist immigrants or those that have an ethnic relationship to a Buddhist country, rather they are distinctively white, middle class, and well educated (Cozort, 132). In essence, convert Tibetan Buddhism predominates in North America. It is difficult to estimate the reach of Buddhism in North America due to a number of factors, such as the possibility for more casual engagement with the religion. Alternatively, defining one's self as Buddhist could be quite a contemplative and invisible endeavor in contrast with official participation in an organization. A survey performed by Wuthnow and Cadge, however, indicates that one in eight people in the United States attribute Buddhist teachings as having had an important influence on his or her religion or spirituality (Wuthnow and Cadge, 363). Despite the fact that this data does not break down Buddhist influence by sect, it is perhaps one meaningful way to imagine some semblance of the engagement of Tibetan Buddhism in North America, which is otherwise difficult to quantify (Cozort, 132).

Timeless and Placeless Questions

I include this brief history because it is essential for framing the project that follows as a necessarily multi-cultural study of Tibetan Buddhism. Buddhism, after all, was an import even to Tibet. Therefore, suffice it to say this project studies the stories of women linked by the lineage of a multicultural phenomenon which is referred to as Tibetan Buddhism and which extended from India to Tibet, and now to a global audience. Given the multicultural nature of Tibet's religious tradition from its inception to current day, I will do my best to provide a social context for the women's stories I study and present, situating them in the time and place of their occurrence. However, this is not a study of cultural comparison, per se. The restriction to the study of women linked by the Tibetan transmission of Buddhism offers a way to narrow the scope of research from that of Buddhism in general, while choosing a scope broad enough to encompass Buddhism's three distinct intellectual developments and perspectives (*yāna*). Beyond the cultural entanglement of religion there is something more fundamental and, perhaps, universal that relates to basic questions of human suffering and human awakening that the Buddha first addressed. Elizabeth Mattis Namgyel, an American woman who is also a seven-year retreatant, mother, author, wife of a Tibetan Rinpoche (a type of highly esteemed teacher or *lama*), and contemporary dharma teacher, a person clearly embodying the intersectionality which this paper addresses, tells a brief and compelling story of pith advice given to her by her Tibetan mother-in-law, also an accomplished retreatant and mother of five, Mayum Tsewang Palden. She writes:

“Many years ago, in Nepal, when I was a new bride fumbling around trying to fit into my new Tibetan family, my mother-in-law gave me some advice that changed my view of

spiritual practice. But before I tell you what she said, I must explain that Kongtrul Rinpoche's mother, Mayum Tsewang Palden, was not an ordinary woman but a seasoned Dharma practitioner, a true yogini. She wasn't casually tossing out some words. Her words came from experience, and this is what she said: 'You don't have to become a Tibetan. You don't have to be an Ingie. Just know your own mind.'" (Namgyel, *Open Question 77*)

The term "Ingie" in this context is a Tibetan word for foreigners, Western people in particular. Namgyel goes on to frame the Buddha's quest and awakening, and thus the Buddhist teachings such that they seek not to answer Buddhist questions, or Tibetan questions, or Indian questions, but human questions that are beyond culture and time (Namgyel, *Open Question 78*).

Even His Holiness, the fourteenth Dalai Lama is famous for regularly making such humanistic statements as "My religion is kindness" (qtd. in Cozort, 133). On the one hand, cultural, sociological and situational contexts are essential to making sense of human experience. On the other hand, experiences of kindness and compassion are universal. These quips suggest the possibility that all human beings, in a great many diverse environments, have access to a natural virtue and a natural wisdom which can be perceived through self-study. Self-study may reveal a reality beyond the conventional mind's grasp of inherent existence, a reality beyond clinging and aversion, and beyond autonomous, independent notions of self and other. This is the wisdom of awe, wonderment, ambiguity, curiosity, interdependence, relationship, and non-duality.

My research is centered on mother-practitioners committed to knowing their own minds, and cultivating the mind that is available to wisdom, through the lineage of Tibetan Buddhist frameworks, teachings, and paths of practice. These women span several eras, countries, and cultures, but share a thread or lineage of religious practice. As such, we can consider this not a cross-cultural study but rather a multi-cultural or transcultural study. In hopes to reveal the extent that religious *experience, practice,* and *insight* transcend geographical, cultural, and generational delineation, this is as much a religious inquiry as it is also a philosophical and spiritual inquiry. At the core of this research is learning about the relationship between motherhood and the timeless and placeless questions set forth by the Buddha.

What is Woman and Mother?

In this section, I craft a broad sketch of historians' insights about gender, specifically what it was to be a woman, in the places along Tibetan Buddhism's extended lineage. This is done with the understanding that all discussions of gender and culture are highly contingent upon specific moments in time, places, and people, many of which cannot be addressed here. Buddhism was born into a place and

time of considerable gender inequality, at least by contemporary standards. Historically, the relationship between Buddhism and its inclusion and exclusion of women is long, complex, ambivalent, in part uncertain, and heavily debated. The following is a summary of key features of this relationship. I focus this discussion on three geographical and temporal categories: women in ancient India before and near the time of the Buddha, women in Tibet from about the turn of the first millennium through present day, and women in North America over the last seventy or so years. These categories do not fully represent the reach of Tibetan Buddhism's extended lineage over the last twenty-five hundred years, but it does follow an arc of history relevant to the forthcoming analysis, and the biographical works in my purview for this project. This glimpse will focus mostly on normative gender expectations and women in religion, but I will also mention sociological and anthropological factors as they relate to law, politics, marriage practices, financial prospects, and healthcare when these dimensions are evident and relevant.

This discussion highlights a notion that prevailing religious and social views about women and mothers are largely consonant in historical India and Tibet. In both, femaleness, womanhood, and motherhood are conflated and we could say that the two predominant Tibetan views about motherhood (and therefore womanhood) on which this project's larger inquiry centers could be seen as imported from India. However, it is also apparent that Tibet selectively adopted particular Indian Buddhist views toward women and not those of very early Buddhism that more generously appraised their spiritual capacity (Jacoby, 133). This is an ironic twist to its simultaneous adoption of the Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna philosophies which propose theories of emptiness and endorse more open-mindedness to the spiritual capacity of women and the spiritual opportunities of lay life. It is evident that there is one impetus underlying Tibet's gender discrimination which may not be an Indian import, and this impetus involves taboo and superstition associated with the biological, physical female form itself and its function in reproduction: in other words, specifically its capacity for motherhood. In Tibet, women and mothers are considered inferior to the task of spiritual awakening, not only because they are expected to be wives and mothers, but also because their bodies are categorically inferior. But, like in India, they cannot be excluded from the entire Buddhist project. Therefore, their work as mothers is considered in a positive light- as meritorious (i.e. karma or action that plants the seeds for future happiness), a point, which I argue also serves (consciously or not) to exclude women and mothers from the sphere of contemplative, experiential praxis considered crucial to spiritual attainment.

In preparation for my discussion of gender in Buddhist history, I will provide my criteria for the term "mother." Mother is a mere label into which many objects, situations, philosophical concepts, literary figures, and ordinary people might be validly placed. While I will delve into the metaphorical

uses of the term in the next chapter, my research is focused on the experiences of *human* mothers, as clearly as these experiences might be inferred through doctrinal, biographical, and digital works. As I am focused on human mothers, the second criteria for the use of this term and inclusion in this study is they are female-sexed and enter into a mothering relationship either by giving birth or through adoption. This isn't to say that male-sexed persons are not primary caregivers or don't embody the qualities that might readily be ascribed to the term "mother," however, they are simply situated differently in each of these social environments. In the history of Tibetan Buddhism, it was never as contentious to be a man or a father and a religious adept as it was to be a woman or a mother and a religious adept. Female and male sexed persons have rarely, if ever, enjoyed an equal playing field in the history of Buddhism, therefore, it wouldn't be justified to attend to them under the same umbrella, especially concerning a role that is conventionally female. Although I mention one commentarial anecdote of a male-sexed character turned mother in the coming paragraphs to illustrate normative gender views in ancient India, I limit the scope of my research only to female-sexed subjects for the sake of clarity and specificity. Pāli Buddhism gives language to the difference between sex and gender¹ and Mahāyāna Buddhist discourse philosophically refutes the innate characteristics of gender as they are often posited on persons of either sex (Gross, *Patriarchy* 176). However, I will generally refer to female-sexed persons as "women," yet when it is pertinent to delineate sex and gender I will utilize the term "female-sexed." This assumption is made in favor of practical efficiency and with the knowledge that my subjects are mothers, female-sexed, and presumably "woman-identifying" in the relative domain. Assumptions are not made, however, to conflate sex and gender indiscriminately. Finally, although I have identified and selected the stories of these women because of their status as mothers, conventionally speaking, I do not intend to imply that mother is their only role, nor that they do not have other primary roles of importance.

Women in Vedic and Brahmanical India: A Setting Ripe for Change

Circa 1940, Dr. Indra, an early Indian women's studies scholar, wrote that we cannot be precise about our understanding of the status of women in ancient India for a number of reasons, including the distance of time, the corruption of reference material, and the contradictory information contained within that material (Indra, 2). With that in mind, in the early Vedic age (roughly 1500-1000 BCE) there is an

¹ "Furthermore, the *Nikāyas* appear to differentiate implicitly between sex and gender when a different term is employed to refer to women. The term *itthi* is the most common and appears to designate mostly the physical being as female as opposed to male. When referring to women as a category defined and enforced by the social conventions that attribute qualities, attitudes, behaviours, roles, and functions to each sex, the *Nikāyas* use *mātugāma*, a much less common term than *itthi*." (Engelmajer, 11)

indication that women enjoyed approximately equal rights and status as men relationally, socially, educationally, and in the performance of religious ritual (Indra, 147, 158-169). However, there is also evidence in early Vedic texts indicating general mistrust of women, belief in women's lack of moral integrity and intellectual capacity, in addition to legal texts referring to women as property (Indra, 4-12).

Dr. Indra writes,

“It appears that the deterioration of the status of women did not begin from any specific point of time. The traces of such degeneration can be found in all periods of Indian history, though in the later ages, degradation is much more marked and still more rapid.”
(10)

The degradation Dr. Indra refers to likely occurred in the late Vedic period or Brahmanical period (roughly 1000 BCE to 500 BCE) and is evidenced by religious scripture, as well as legal and literary movements (in particular the *Dharmaśāstra*² and the *Laws of Manu*, contained within) which valued women merely for their capacity to produce male pleasure and satisfaction and as “property” under their closest male relative. Over time, it was not particularly uncommon for women in general, as an assumed homogeneous group, to be villainously portrayed as morally low seductresses. Adherence to the Laws of Manu offered a particularly catastrophic blow to any semblance of gender equality in ancient India. Not only did these laws justify the stratified caste system; of great concern to women's welfare and social position was their encouragement of prepubescent marriage (Manu, IX -4, IX-94). Furthermore, the responsibility of bearing viable sons was attributed to women only, as a barren woman, a woman who bore only daughters, or those whose children died could be superseded by another wife (Manu, IX-81). The Laws of Manu limited women's participation in religious duties, naming a wife's primary duty as deference to her husband, with whom she was considered unified (Manu, IX-18, IX-29, IX-30). Such laws and attitudes created a vast chasm of inequality between the sexes that precluded the female half of the population from obtaining education, performing Vedic religious ritual or having any religious or social power, attitudes which, according to Dr. Indra, continued to deteriorate in the post-Vedic Epic texts and in the Brahmanical period, from which Buddhism emerged (Indra, 13-20, 53-57, 151-152, 170).

One manifestation of ancient India's discrimination of females was the long-standing, persistent and widespread preference for sons instead of daughters at birth (Indra, 21-23; Doniger, 178-179). This

² It is difficult to pinpoint the emergence of such literary works as the *Dharmaśāstra*, because they draw authority from elder Vedic scripture and due, generally, to the “fog of early Indian history” (Olivelle, 56) which echoes Dr. Indra's sentiments above. Patrick Olivelle, believes the *Dharmaśāstra* in particular emerged *at least by* the third century BCE, and possibly as a result of the competition Buddhism and other ascetic traditions posed to Brahmanical theologians (57). Nevertheless, the trend of women's diminished social, educational, and religious status sets the likely stage for the state of gender affairs at the point of Buddhism's introduction to Indian culture (Horner, 1).

attitude is present in Vedic texts and continues even to present day, for varying reasons. In ancient India, sons were considered more valuable than daughters because they remained with and provided support for their family and aging parents after marriage. Sons could make religious offerings and so were believed to confer spiritual benefit upon the family in life and after death. Sons had the opportunity, also, for social achievement and to confer nobility to the family lineage. The marriage of a daughter, on the other hand, required a sizable dowry and her assistance was lost to her in-laws upon the event of marriage (Indra, 21-22). The cultural norm of rejoicing the birth of a son and regretting the birth of a daughter is communicated to us even in Buddhist texts, through the recorded encounters and advices of Gautama Buddha himself. In one story about King Pasenadi of Kosala found in the Samyutta Nikāya of the Pāli Canon, the Buddha is quoted consoling the king's laments about the birth of a daughter and not a son:

“A woman, O lord of the people,
 May turn out better than a man:
 She may be wise and virtuous,
 A devoted wife, revering her mother-in-law.
 The son to whom she gives birth
 May become a hero, O lord of the land.
 The son of such a blessed woman
 May even rule the realm.” (SN I.408-409, Translated by Bodhi, *Discourses* 179)

Pascale Engelmaier notes that this passage has on several occasions been utilized as evidence for the Buddha's favorable opinion of women, but she encourages us to look at the entire *gāthā* which is not necessarily favorable to women by modern standards. She writes, “It does tell us, however, what worth can be found in a daughter, a female offspring- mostly as a wife and the mother of a son.” (1) Womanhood and motherhood were essentially conflated, and this was deeply rooted in a religiously-influenced, cultural worldview which drastically limited options for the female sex. Engelmaier also comments that whether we find the Buddha's consolation as positive or reductive is dependent upon how closely we consider the milieu in which the story is situated versus the milieu in which it is currently studied. As such, its sentiments, like other opportunities Buddhism afforded women of late Vedic Indian society, could be deemed a remarkable leap toward gender equality, although this passage obviously conflates sex with an idealized gender role, yielding an oppressive, essentialist view by most contemporary feminist standards. Whether a step or a leap, Engelmaier correctly claims that the taxonomy of value which was adopted by the Buddhist tradition should and must be examined (2).

While early Buddhism maintained a complicated relationship to women by today's standards, the social and religious status of women in India improved under Buddhist influence (Horner, 2; Indra, 215).

It was, perhaps, a timely refuge for women at a point in Indian history when their domestic lives were particularly unpleasant and their religious and spiritual lives were largely neglected by the dominant Brahmanical religion. Engelmajer claims, pointing to these tensions, that a study of women's roles in the Pāli Canon reveals early Buddhism largely asserted women's spiritual equality *while acknowledging and working within* the context of their social inferiority (Engelmajer, 9). In any case, the rise of Buddhist rationalism, the rejection of Brahmin ritual, and Buddhism's refutation of Vedic dogma concerning a son's role in ensuring his parent's passage to heaven likely diminished pressure upon women to marry and produce sons (Indra, 220). Thus, both men and women, were at least marginally liberated from the burden to pair and procreate in traditional fashion. This, complemented by the Buddhist emphasis on renunciation and celibacy, and the eventual establishment of the order of nuns, provided women an independent, socially acceptable trajectory external to the Vedic worldview and Brahmanical authority. In addition, the Buddha himself, over the course of his lifetime, appears to have evolved to have an increasingly liberal and inclusive view of women, at least as he is represented in Buddhist literature (Horner, 117; Indra, 217).

To householders, the Buddha taught an ethics of marital relations based on mutual respect and faithfulness (*Sigalovada Sutta*, V-30). The Buddhist emphasis on morality eschewed the practice of pre-pubescent marriages (Indra, 227-228). Widows were not outcast as they were in mainstream Indian society; like other householders, they played a significant role in Buddhist religious life as laity by offering alms and charity to the *saṃgha*, and they eventually could ordain as nuns (Indra, 244-245, 281). Certainly, however, the social position of women did not change instantaneously, completely, nor irrevocably, as early Buddhist texts convey some accounts of child brides, wives turned slaves due to infertility, subordination of wives to their in-laws, women's general immorality and stupidity, and harsh references to the female sex as the epitome of the obstacle to renunciant religious life (Indra, 221-253, 284-286). As such, monks were encouraged to avoid the seductive and morally unstable company of woman; Engelmajer contentiously emphasizes, however, that *both* sexes were viewed mutually as impediments to one another's spiritual path, and the focus on women as spiritual impediment is due to the religious record being composed largely *by* and *for* monastic men, not because of an ontological basis of spiritual inequality in the Buddhist system (19-20).

Although the Buddha was famously hesitant to establish an order of nuns, he eventually did so after several requests by his adoptive mother, Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī; it was a revolutionary moment for women's religious liberty in this era. Given the domestic oppression Indian women faced, it is not surprising that an austere religious life of a monastic was more attractive to many than the confinement of

a woman's household existence (Indra, 287). The poems of early Buddhist nuns in the *Therīgāthā*, who had renounced family and lay life, proclaim the spiritual attainment of several women as *arhats*, despite widespread belief of women's spiritual inferiority. The nuns' order remains to this day, however, subordinate to male monasticism by way of the eight special commitments almswomen are required to undertake (Engelmajer, 9; Indra 262-263).

Reiko Ohnuma notes that Indian social ideology was often oppressive to women yet idealized the roles of wives and mothers (3). The passage describing the Buddha's consolation of King Pasenadi offers insight into the intersection of Buddhism and society, as the Buddha readily conveys a normative ideology in his expression of a female's religious potential: to be a dutiful wife and daughter-in-law and to bear a son. However, early Buddhism departs from the Indian norm of venerating the idealized human mother, in favor of a paradigm of strict, monastic renunciation as the pinnacle of religious practice (Ohnuma, 3). Not only is such renunciation from sex and money, but from even the love and affection of close kin, and perhaps most especially, family. The Buddha's teaching as recorded in the *Dhammapada* is this:

“Never associate with those who are dear or with those who are not dear. Not seeing dear ones is painful, and so is seeing those not dear. So don't hold anything dear, For losing what's dear is an evil: There are no ties for those to whom nothing is dear or not dear. From the dear comes grief; From the dear comes fear. If you're freed from the dear you'll have no grief, let alone fear.” (Roebuck, 42)

In this passage, we can detect the value and precedence for a cool detachment in the early Buddhist pursuit. Reflecting on this precedence, Ohnuma writes,

“Even when mothers acted as pious laywomen who were praised for giving alms (and, sometimes, their children) to the Saṅgha, motherhood itself remained wholly profane in nature and had no part in salvation or immortality. Motherhood was an essential component of samsara and samsara was to be vanquished and overcome.” (4)

Such cultural idealization *and* minimization of motherhood in early Buddhism is reflected in a supernatural narrative from the *Dhammapada* in which Soreyya, a father of two sons, is changed into a woman, Soreyyā, out of admiration and desire for the Arhat Kaccāyana. Embarrassed, Soreyyā travels to a neighboring town, marries and becomes a mother to two sons. Soreyyā later confesses his desire to the Arhat, is changed back to a man and ordains as a monk. When asked which set of sons he loved more, Soreyya replies that he loved the sons he mothered more than he loved the sons he fathered, but after attaining the status of an *arhat*, he feels no attachment for any being (Roebuck, 128-129). On the one hand, this story highlights the idealized virtue and supremacy of motherly love endemic in Indian society, but on the other hand, it is also demonstrated to be inferior to the cool detachment of awakening.

Again, Engelmajer offers a distinctive perspective of women's and mothers' opportunities for liberation in the context of this period. Instead of focusing on the diminishment of familial ties in Buddhist discourse, sentiments which were clearly focused on instilling renunciation in monastics, Engelmajer focuses on the remarkable opportunity given to mothers at a time when such opportunities were uncommon. In contrast to the Vedic emphasis on mundane and spiritual rewards obtained through ritual performance, which was heavily sex and class-dependent, Buddhism offered a path of morality and merit, open to participation by persons of any sex, circumstance, or caste. Lay persons were necessary for the monastic system to thrive, regardless of whether they were women or men. The merit derived from bearing and nurturing children, encouraging children to join the *saṃgha*, and through generosity to the *saṃgha* - in other words, by transcending the *particular* mothering relationship to her child and nurturing the whole *saṃgha* - a mother could vigorously participate in the path of accumulation of merit and was repaid when her children returned to educate her in the way of the Buddha, the path to liberation (Engelmajer, 71-90). Engelmajer's assessment is a compelling argument for the value of such an ideology of "motherhood as meritorious" at this moment in history. However, it also requires an acceptance of a mother's soteriological road as being indeterminately long and likely beyond the present birth, and a recognition that the religious tradition operated within an oppressive social framework, as opposed to outside of it. For this time and place, I think we can fairly say that, at a minimum, this ideology was expedient.

Given the social and cultural setting in which Buddhism emerged, it seems significant to note, in general, the important and improved social, religious, and spiritual acknowledgment, freedoms, and possibilities it afforded women of India. It is also important to recognize that these changes and attitudes were still quite far from what might be deemed as gender equality in both the religious and social spheres and that deep gender prejudices remained and grew more degenerate in the later centuries of Buddhism's stay in India (Gross, *Patriarchy* 57). Motherhood was a particularly complicated and ambivalent topic of religious dialogue and doctrine (Ohnuma, 4); it was, furthermore, often overlooked yet utterly essential to the whole early Buddhist project (Engelmajer, 89-90). Prevailing views about motherhood (as profane, on the one hand, and meritorious on the other) in the early Buddhist context had significant influence on views developed later in the Tibetan Buddhist context.

Women in Tibet: "Born Low"

It has been expressed by Barbara Aziz, Janet Gyatso and Sarah Jacoby that long-standing Western assumptions of egalitarian gender relationships in Tibet are unsubstantiated, and likely

misleading to the task of understanding the social realities of Tibetan women. Such assumptions have likely been based upon the presumed egalitarian influence of Buddhism, its sacred female deities and *ḍākinīs*, or the comparison of Tibetan women's freedoms with women's positions in neighboring countries (Aziz, 77; J. Gyatso, *Women in Tibet* 1; Jacoby, 133). They may also be based on the narratives of exemplars, whose stories achieve acclaim and notoriety, but are rare exceptions rather than a sociological basis (Aziz, 85). Even as recently as 2005, Janet Gyatso and Hanna Havnevik note that the academic domain is quite poor in its understanding of the experiences and sociology of Tibetan women, in part due to insufficient historical data on the topic (J. Gyatso, *Women in Tibet* 1-8). However, there are now a handful of volumes of scholarly works concerning Tibetan women, from which we can begin to patch together a cultural, sociological, and religious ground for understanding their experiences. This ground doesn't fit well into a particularly linear historical description of women in Tibet, but comes in the form of linguistic references, anthropological inferences, thematic observations, and consensus-driven claims made since Tibetan women have been taken up as a serious topic of academic study in the very late twentieth century and early twenty-first century.

Barbara Aziz begins to dismantle the aforementioned "Western" assumptions and ignorances by looking first to Tibetan language. She writes:

"In Tibet now and among Tibetans living in exile, the common term for woman is *skye-dman*. It is not a new word; and it is not slang or a localized term. The word appears in early texts as well as modern documents...Now the meaning. Literally this word translates "born low" (Aziz, 79)."

Aziz indicates that there is no such word for males or men and the connotation of *skye-dman* is this: women are physically inferior and less capable than men intellectually, professionally, and spiritually. A woman's place is in the home, and religiously speaking, she is unlikely to become a *bodhisattva* until she takes rebirth in a male form. Like Tibet's religious ancestors in India, the birth of a daughter has traditionally been a cause for disdain among Tibetan people, whereas a son, a cause for joy (Aziz, 81; Gross, *Patriarchy* 82). Ritual and superstitious efforts are made, in this vein, to attempt to ensure the birth of sons. Karma Lekshe Tsomo reports having spoken with Tibetan women themselves "who have not gained confidence enough to pray for a female rebirth" ("Tibetan Nuns and Nunneries" 123). They articulate such disadvantages as enforced dependence on their husbands and in-laws, vulnerability due to pregnancy, as well as fewer freedoms (like social and parental expectations to fulfill the role of wife and mother) and greater need for protection - making the female form less desirable both from the worldly and religious points of view (Tsomo, "Tibetan Nuns and Nunneries" 122-123).

Gyatso and Havnevik indicate that the term “low birth” has been used at least since the eleventh century and refers to a popular conception of Buddhist ideology - namely, that it is due to bad karma, an unfavorable event, and thus low and inferior to be born as a woman. They write,

“This robust conception in Tibetan society is not ameliorated by the occasional (if equally Buddhist) trumping of such pejorative association with the default assertion that all constructions, including the ‘low birth woman’, are ‘empty’ -- at least in terms of social reality.” (J. Gyatso, *Women in Tibet* 9)

In other words, despite Buddhism’s subtler philosophy of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) which denies the inherent qualities of all things (such as the notion that one’s sex carries an essential and immutable attribute), *one interpretation of a particular Buddhist view of women* prevails as the more influential view. Jacoby writes, “Tibetans imported misogynist attitudes toward women and nuns inscribed in Indian Buddhist scriptures into their own conceptions of gender categories” (133). Given the inextricable entwinement of Buddhism with Tibetan culture, it is difficult to discern what other influences (religious or not) may have contributed to this predominant view, although Tibetan medicine may be one source. In the Tibetan medical system, females were thought to be afflicted with an additional thirty-two illnesses that do not afflict males, and so their physical form was considered as inferior and a source of suffering and misfortune (J. Gyatso, *Women in Tibet* 9). Related to medical, somatic, and biological considerations, the female’s role in procreation (menstruation, pregnancy, and childbirth), in addition to her assumed role in child-rearing, also makes her physical form a source of pain, suffering and misfortune, and thus ill-suited for the work of awakening (Gross, *Patriarchy* 83; Tsomo, “Tibetan Nuns and Nunneries” 122-123).

“Women’s maternal role and responsibility are used frequently by Buddhist teachers both to explain and to justify women’s frequent limited participation in Buddhist spiritual and philosophical disciplines... The contemporary Tibetan women who are still somewhat negative about their femaleness cited vulnerability to pregnancy as a liability of being female. In the views of both women and men, motherhood is regarded as the inevitable fate of women, a fate that both limits and defines them.” (Gross, *Patriarchy* 83)

In the passage above Rita Gross explains that, like in Buddhism’s Indian milieu, being female in Tibet was also conflated with being a mother. Furthermore, this expectation was at odds with the serious pursuit of participation in Tibet’s rich religious tradition.

The linguistic and cultural inculcation of gender discrimination in Tibetan Buddhism is not merely a distant historical concern, nor one limited to men, nor limited to women of a certain social or spiritual standing. While distant historically, the biography of Tibet’s most celebrated and accomplished female saint - Yeshe Tsogyel (8th century) - describes her difficulties with being born in an inferior body as she beseeches her Guru for a teaching:

“Inadequate women like me with little energy and an inferior birth incur the whole world’s hostility. When we go begging the dogs are hostile. If we possess food or wealth then thieves molest us. If we are attractive we are bothered by fornicators. If we work hard the country people are hostile. Even if we do nothing at all the tongues of malicious gossips turn against us. If our attitude is improper the whole world is hostile. Whatever we do, the lot of a woman on the path is a miserable one. To maintain our practice is virtually impossible, and even to stay alive is very difficult.” (Dowman, 89)

A similar view was not considered outdated and is overwhelmingly available in the 20th century autobiography of religious virtuosa Sera Khandro (1892 -1940) in which she refers to her female body and female birth as inferior (*skye lus dman*, *skye dman*) over fifty times (Jacoby, 133). Sera Khandro laments:

“This inferior female body (*skye lus dman pa*) cannot get free from the mouth of my husband; when I wander about this country, it can’t get free from the mouths of dogs. Whatever I do doesn’t appeal to people. When things like these occur, I feel I should abandon this body.

Even though there is no difference between men’s and women’s altruistic intention to become enlightened, in the perspective of disciples, my body is inferior. I think that if I were to transform into a [male] hero with a supreme body, I would certainly accomplish great benefit for all beings who have been my mother.” (qtd. in Jacoby, 131)

There is a basic irony in the passage above. Sera Khandro, despite her virtuous aspirations and religious attainments cannot gain worldly freedom nor favor in her community. She cannot gain favor because she is a woman, and as I’ve demonstrated in the previous paragraphs, implicitly, if not explicitly, because of her capacity for motherhood. In an ironic twist, her aspirations to become enlightened are, according to tradition, dedicated to the benefit of all beings *who have been her mother*, those who have graciously shown her motherly sacrifice and kindness in her current and previous lives.³ This echoes Reiko Ohnuma’s observations of Indian culture, namely that social ideology was, paradoxically, oppressive to women yet idealized the roles of mothers (3). As such, women in general are revered in a narrowly prescribed capacity related to a gender-essentialized role that serves the patriarchal structure yet limits their choices, agency, and spiritual and social opportunity.

It is worth repeating here the rarity of an autobiography like Sera Khandro’s throughout Tibet’s one thousand-or-so year relationship to Buddhism. Tibetan social life was constructed with male monasticism at the center and of primary importance. Male children were routinely encouraged, with pride, to take up a monastic life, while it was not commonplace for female children to receive such

³ This is a stock phrase and intention regularly invoked by both male and female Tibetan Buddhist practitioners.

encouragement (Tsono, “Tibetan Nuns and Nunneries” 122). Funding was largely allocated and education privileged primarily to male monastics, while lay people and females, especially, remained illiterate and unable to record their life stories (Jacoby, 13, 133).

Related, and possibly affected by gender discrimination, lies the issue of unnecessarily high infant and maternal mortality in the Tibetan Autonomous Region well into the twenty-first century (Craig, 102-106). Medical ethnographer Sienna Craig writes of the role politics and culture play in attempts to implement healthcare programs towards the end of reducing these mortalities, and she notes several unique characteristics of Tibetan births. Unlike most other traditional cultures, it is *not* common practice for Tibetan women to be accompanied by a skilled birth attendant during the childbirth process. Rural women especially often given birth at home, alone or with the assistance of a female relative, and even in animal pens to avoid offending household deities or contaminating the hearth (Craig, 106). Childbirth is an event steeped in a superstition of impurity, referred to as *sgrib* in Tibetan, which literally means “obscuration” and indicates it is an event to avoid for concern of becoming polluted or defiled by merely being present (Nevin). As such, Craig writes:

“In practice, though, Tibetan doctors rarely participate in births. Taboos around menstrual blood and the polluting effects of childbirth are realities I have encountered first-hand and have been documented elsewhere.” (105)

Taboo, superstition, illiteracy, lack of knowledge and understanding about infant needs and pregnancy complications, economic factors, geographic access, and the necessity of returning to hard, physical work soon after birth all play a role in the biomedically insufficient maternal realities of Tibet. However, Craig urges modesty regarding the attribution of the high infant and maternal mortality to cultural beliefs, or to them alone and cites a cascade of structural and political inequalities that contribute to the problem (106, 108). Needless to say, though the issue is complex, it is highly relevant to a discussion of Tibetan women and the experiences of Tibetan mothers. Loss and death are inevitably woven into the experience of birth and motherhood. Furthermore, notions of menstruation and childbirth, in other words, women’s reproductive biological processes, as *sgrib*, or polluted, undoubtedly contribute to or mingle with conceptions of female inferiority.

What is most significant to draw from this discussion, for the purposes of this paper, is the prominent folk belief that permeates Tibetan culture, in which the female practitioner is ill-equipped for the work of enlightenment, at least implicitly because of her physical potential as a mother. Female embodiment is synonymous with suffering, and yet, ironically, women are widely characterized as more readily embodying Buddhist virtues of compassion and patience than men (Aziz, 82). Such stereotypes pervade Tibetan society and “operate actively to restrict women’s liberty and opportunities” (J. Gyatso,

Women in Tibet 10). These views have had long-range impact on Tibetan women's education, religious opportunity, and perhaps even complicate their chances for survival through childbirth. Furthermore, despite women's lowliness, as was the case in Pāli Buddhism, they were essential to the Buddhist enterprise of bearing and raising sons for monastic work, and for supporting the monasteries so central to Tibetan life. We can imagine that the image of mothering as meritorious is, while not untrue, *inclusive enough* to maintain the status quo of gender discrimination in the religious sphere despite a philosophy that rejects gender essentialism. This religious opportunity afforded to mothers is simultaneously a stereotypical "ceiling" by which woman and mothers can anticipate and orient to their religious capacity, and this "ceiling" is below the experiential, contemplative domain of religious experience. While the notion of generating merit in a motherly role is a seemingly positive one, as a social and religious ideology it is also incredibly limiting. What makes this more disenchanting than the analysis of Indian Buddhism is that in Indian Buddhism there was an ideological momentum that supported creating a place for women in the upper echelons of religious life. There is no evidence that the import of Buddhism to Tibet had such an impact. Additionally, the Mahāyāna teachings offer a clear ontological and existential basis for rejecting such heavy discrimination (if not all discrimination outright). Nevertheless, the causes of and conditions for deeply ingrained and widespread cultural bias are many, and have thick and persistent roots; surely religion is not solely "to blame."

In *Buddhism After Patriarchy*, Rita Gross very generously suggests that such discriminatory beliefs are not the result of misogyny, but of pity and "compassion" for females occupying spaces in a patriarchal society entrenched in androcentric values (Gross, 60-61). At this locus of time and place, there was not yet the vision to change the cultural paradigm (instead of their views about women), and so emphasis was placed on how women *could* participate in religious life within the existing restrictions (Gross, 66). It might furthermore be suggested that lack of education and widespread illiteracy may contribute to the continuance of deep-seated and "structural" gender-discrimination in Tibetan culture (Nevin).

Although rare, the record of women who have come into spiritual and religious prominence in Tibetan Buddhism indicates that despite Tibet's pervasive and heavy discrimination toward women, there are exceptions to the dominant paradigm. There are instances when a Tibetan woman's status was more flexible, due to achievements within Tibetan sub-cultures or through liaisons with prominent people, serving as a consort, or performance in a specific profession, such as doctor or oracle (J. Gyatso, *Women in Tibet* 10-14). The female icon shines in Māhayāna and Vajrayāna literature as a device to subvert or transgress beliefs and norms about purity and impurity (J. Gyatso, *Women in Tibet* 20). Similarly, the

feminine is sacralized in Vajrayāna forms of Tibetan Buddhism, though there is little indication that literary tropes or religious ideals translate into a social reality in which women are held in equal regard as men (J. Gyatso, *Women in Tibet* 12; Jacoby, 135). Although the negative portrayal of women appears to be largely pervasive and held even by women, it doesn't represent the views of all Tibetans.

Contemporary elite Tibetan *lamas* are, in some cases, represented as having abandoned culturally-based, discriminatory views as a result of their advanced spiritual development (Nevin; Miller). Furthermore, Gyatso and Havnevik indicate that it would be unsurprising to find proto-feminists among Tibetan yoginis and nuns (J. Gyatso, *Women in Tibet* 15). In terms of contemporary scholarship, women currently living in the Tibetan Autonomous Region and in exile have been given insufficient attention (J. Gyatso, *Women in Tibet* 2); this is a topic that is deserving of future exploration.

In the present, Tibet's foremost political and religious leader, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, is outspoken in his public support of female leadership in Tibetan religion and society, praising qualities of women and mothers, demonstrating reverence for his own mother as instilling compassion in him from a young age, and he has even suggested that his future reincarnation may be female (*The Power of Women*)⁴. At the 2009 Vancouver Peace Summit, he famously remarked that the world will be saved by Western women (qtd. by Victor Chan). While the popular version of this remark perhaps has been taken out of context (his celebration of several accomplished, female peace activists with whom he shared the stage), it echoed loudly across the international web as a call for a distinctive paradigm shift in the way we think about women and gender in religion (Lowen).

Cross-Cultural Interlude

In terms of geography, industrialization, and gender relations, the import of Buddhism from Tibet to North America is of a much greater physical and ideological distance than that from India to Tibet. While this study is not centered on cross-cultural comparison, it is relevant to remark on the disparity of life conditions when women in an affluent, industrialized country are examined beside those in a national economy dominated by subsistence agriculture. The Inequality-Adjusted Human Development Index (IHDI), a statistical tool which utilizes data on life expectancy, education, and income, is used by the United Nations as one efficient way to make such comparisons. The United States, Canada, and most European countries are deemed as having "very high human development" and can be found in the top

⁴ A follow-up comment to this possibility of a female Dalai Lama included His Holiness' stipulation that she would need to be "very, very attractive" in order to be effective, which ruffled the feathers of women's equality activists (qtd. By Damien Gayle).

fifty countries listed. The Tibetan Autonomous Region has not been given its own index in any reports since the invention of this measure (1990), but we can imagine that it would be ranked as similar to Bhutan or Nepal, given the proximity of location and their similar economies. This *does not* take into account for the impacts of Chinese governance over the last sixty years. By contrast to the United States and Canada (tied for tenth position), Bhutan ranks as 132nd and Nepal as 144th on the list, very close to the bottom of the category of “medium human development” (United Nations Development Programme).

Another metric to consider is the “Gender Gap Score” generated by the World Economic Forum. This set of statistics is one way of efficiently measuring and comparing gender equality and disparity across nations based on the dimensions of economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment by both sexes in each nation. Both of these metrics (the IHDI and the GGS) could be scrutinized for omitting values of more traditional cultures and weighing those of industrialized cultures quite heavily, but I use them “for what they are worth,” i.e. to give a mere sense of sameness or difference in these societies as they exist today. Like the IHDI, the Tibetan Autonomous Region is encompassed within China, so I will refer to the scores in neighboring Nepal and Bhutan as more likely accurate reference points. In 2016, Canada was ranked 35th of 144 countries for gender equality, with a 0.731 parity score (1.0 indicating the genders as equal). The United States ranked 45th and scored 0.722. So, according to this metric, women in North America have currently about three-quarters of the opportunity, economic freedom, and resources than men. In 2016, Nepal was ranked 110th of 144 countries, with a 0.66 parity score, and Bhutan ranked 121st with a 0.64 parity score (World Economic Forum).

Thus, based on both of these metrics, we can keep in our consciousness the significant differences in life expectancy, access to education, and standard of living in North America and rural Himalayan Asia. Also, we can keep in mind what those differences mean compounded by greater gender inequality, however significant (or not) we might read those statistical differences as being. In this vein, a recurrent theme in Tibetan literature, especially in passages describing rural life, is that the maintenance of life is hard work, requiring significant physical labor. While the notion that motherhood is (merely) meritorious is rooted in an unequal social ideology of gender, one in which the load of childcare is automatically and exclusively designated to females, it is also reflective of an economy in which survival demands intensive labor, and care of children intensifies this load. It is not surprising, then, that Tibetan women who did gain notoriety were usually born to wealthy families with the “leisure and fortune” to permit spiritual and

religious pursuits by women, if even reluctantly.⁵ With this in mind, we'll turn our attention to gender relations in North America, where a significant number of people - burdened not by the demands of an agricultural society but by the influence of materialism - are compelled by the rich religious and contemplative traditions held for the last millennium in Himalayan Asia.

Women in North America: Feminism in our Blood

North America is technologically advanced, with a diversified labor force, and maintains elaborate infrastructures to facilitate all aspects of life - from education to healthcare, provisions to transportation. There is much that could be said about the circumstance of being a woman, and the status of women in North America over the last seventy or so years. However, I will highlight just a few points that will ground the forthcoming narratives. Buddhism's introduction to North America in the 1950s coincided with a period of rapidly improving yet continually necessary efforts toward gender de-essentialism and equality. Education, birth control, female employment and the efforts of feminist movements all contributed to these gains. Social expectations for women to marry and become mothers or housewives have declined, allowing women to enter a range of occupations that had been the exclusive domain of men. Women in North America have experienced economic, reproductive, and social freedoms unparalleled by most in the world, and in history. Significant areas of feminist activism in the contemporary context include increasing women's political representation, equalizing professional opportunities and compensation, and bringing consciousness to power dynamics and the sexual mistreatment of women in professional settings.

The prominence of feminism in our social, academic, and political backdrop - defined as "the broad movement that recognizes injustices to women due to androcentric or misogynist bias, is critical of those injustices, and would foster modes of action and experience that have hitherto been discouraged by such biases" (J. Gyatso, *Women in Tibet* 3) undoubtedly has shaped the experiences, views, and opportunities of women inside and outside of the religious context. As a woman born on the heels of feminism's second wave in North America, it is my observation that the efforts of those in decades past crafted a society in which the sexes are indelibly more equal. For a great number of people of my generation, elements of feminist ideology are in our blood, whether we are aware of it or not. I can't imagine, for example, any female acquaintance of mine who wouldn't be appalled by the suggestion that she couldn't do something or be something based upon her sex. In fact, it may take conscious effort and

⁵ The expression "leisure and fortune" is commonly used in Tibetan Buddhism to indicate the understanding that access to religious teachings is a product of fruition of merit from previous lives.

diligence to remember that things were not always this way. It's been noted previously that those predominantly attracted to Tibetan Buddhism in North America are overwhelmingly white, well-educated, and middle-class, and therefore women with significant exposure to feminist ideals. Buddhism is attractive to such a group due to its pragmatism and experiential and psychological dimensions, perhaps, in part, as an outgrowth of engagement and dissatisfaction with Judeo-Christian faith traditions and our culture's ever-growing value of rationality (Tsomo, *American Women's Eyes* 9).

As women influenced by feminist movements became entrenched in the exotic, yet ironically and distinctly, patriarchal Buddhism of Tibet, clashes and questions undoubtedly arose about the place of women in these systems and the patriarchal, if not misogynistic, attitudes they've inherited (Tsomo, *American Women's Eyes* 10-11). In her book *Women of Wisdom*, first published in 1984, former Buddhist nun, scholar, mother, and American, Tsultrim Allione writes:

“These [patriarchal] values have infiltrated the spiritual path as well, and the tremendous spiritual potential of motherhood as a soteriological path has not been given enough appreciation and support.” (98)

Undoubtedly, such simultaneous Buddhist and feminist influence is what has brought me to my own research questions. On the one hand, perhaps this reveals more about me, and even women in my milieu, than it reveals about a Buddhism that is distinctly “Tibetan.” I've already defined my analysis as transcultural versus cross-cultural, and my emphasis as philosophical and experiential as opposed to explicitly religious. However, this point is worth continual reflection and I will add this consideration: that there is value to utilizing etic perspectives for the purpose of revealing information that perhaps wouldn't readily be sought utilizing traditional Tibetan views (J. Gyatso, *Women in Tibet* 3).

More than once, Buddhism met cultures in which females were openly and pervasively considered as inferior; in Europe and North America, Buddhism meets women situated much differently than in these other contexts. As a woman of this milieu, it is easy, nearly instinctual even, for me to dismiss *any* Buddhist notion that the body of a given person is inferior for the task of awakening based on her sex or gender. Similarly, American female scholars and practitioners are quite quick to deconstruct and contest these biases using the Buddhist philosophical system itself (Gross, *Patriarchy* 176; J. Gyatso, *Women in Tibet* 9; Allione, “Women, Buddhism”). In both India and Tibet, women were involved in the religious enterprise through delivering their sons into monastic life and supporting the *samgha*. Monasteries are few and far between outside Asia, nor are they central to social life in North America like they were in India and Tibet. Thus, if expanding one's motherly care to include the monastic community through patronage is a mother's soteriological potential, such a model doesn't fit here.

Chapter 4: Literature Review

This chapter provides a concise overview of Tibetan Buddhist philosophy. The overview is limited to addressing central tenets of the philosophy, those that have direct relevance to my biographical analysis, and those that are of particular interest to women's studies or utilize maternal metaphor or simile in their traditional, doctrinal explication. Ohnuma summarizes the complex presence of maternal symbolism in early Indian and Mahāyāna Buddhism:

“In fact, Buddhism had a complex and ambivalent relationship with mothers and motherhood-- symbolically, affectively, and institutionally. Symbolically, motherhood was a double-edged sword, sometimes extolled as the most appropriate symbol for buddhahood itself, and sometimes denigrated as the most paradigmatic manifestation possible of the attachment to the world that keeps all benighted beings trapped within the realm of rebirth.” (4)

This section is organized by the Three Vehicle (*yāna*) heuristic model as it is framed by Vajrayāna Buddhists. Within this framework I also describe the doctrine of the “Three Turnings of the Wheel of Dharma” in which each “turning” describes an intellectual development in Buddhist thought which is related to, but should not be conflated with, the development of the Buddhist vehicles per se. In fact, the order of and philosophical content of such “turnings” is contested and debated, so suffice it to say that my use of the “three turning” philosophical framework within the context of the Three Vehicle model is pragmatic and not intended to be representative of an agreed-upon framework for all Buddhists. The first vehicle, the Śrāvakayāna, is also known as the path of individual liberation and is consonant with the teachings attributed to early Indian Buddhism and Gautama Buddha's teaching career (Blumenthal, 18). The Mahāyāna, or the Great Vehicle, is associated with both the Middle Way philosophical school (Mādhyamika) and the Mind-Only (Yogācāra) school, although for efficiency and clarity I will principally focus upon Mādhyamika in the Mahāyāna section. The Vajrayāna, or Diamond Vehicle, is associated with both Mādhyamika and Yogācāra (though the boundary between Vajrayāna and Mahāyāna is not always clear) and I will highlight Yogācāra philosophy in this section. In the passage above, Ohnuma has begun to reveal the nature of the relationship between motherhood and the doctrinal resources that influence the first two, if not all three, vehicles and anticipates the intellectual developments that are examined in this chapter. This threefold model--of Śrāvakayāna, Mahāyāna, and

Vajrayāna--provides a background of and framework for analyzing the biographical experiences of Buddhist mothers.

It is important to acknowledge the critical undertone associated with the three *yāna* approach, imputing the first vehicle as inferior (sometimes referred to as Hīnayāna, which literally means “small-” or “lesser-” vehicle) and the latter two as superior. From a perspective of a critic of the Mahāyāna, it is a polemically-driven, pejorative term (Roebuck, xxiv). From a perspective more sympathetic with the Mahāyāna, the vehicles are considered teachings appropriate for adherents of varying capacities or stages of practice, and so a form of the Buddha’s “skillful means” (*upāya kauśalya*) (Harvey, 111; Blumenthal, 18). Despite any spirit of criticism imputed by the Hīnayāna-Mahāyāna model and its associated terminology, the teachings of the first turning and the first vehicle are undoubtedly relevant to the experiences of mothers and to adherents of the latter two vehicles as well as the first. The tendency to leap to perceived “superior” methods and ideologies, instead of *including* foundational methods and ideologies in understandings of the Buddhist path has incited contemporary academics (Garfield, *Three Turnings*) and Tibetan lineage holders (Trungpa, 8-11; P. Gyatso, 96) to urge scholars and practitioners not to overlook nor subtly disparage the foundational teachings and the first vehicle, despite the common practice of articulating them in terms of inferior and superior methods (Rinchen, P. Gyatso).

This chapter utilizes translations of the Indian texts upon which much of Tibetan Buddhist doctrine is based, in addition to translations of Tibetan commentarial literature. Ohnuma poignantly articulates that such texts have been recorded not by mothers, not by women, but by the *sons of mothers* and therefore are written from the perspective of sons (8). I therefore integrate women’s views into this discussion through engaged feminist reflection and the application of concepts from women’s studies scholarship in addition to the integration of contemporary religious commentaries that give life to the philosophies in contemporary practice. Since I’m more interested in meaning, experience, and application than in sectarian polemics, I’ve occasionally drawn from teachers in non-Tibetan Buddhist lineages when it was particularly compelling and relevant to do so.

The Śrāvakayāna: The Vehicle of Individual Liberation

The First Buddhist Biography

In preparation for my analysis of hagiographic works, I will begin with a reflection on the biographical record of Siddhārtha Gautama, the historical Buddha whose teachings upon which all Buddhists rely. By reflecting on the biographical record, in addition to important features of the

Buddha's life, we can also start to track key philosophical tenets of the First Turning of the Wheel of Dharma and associated Śrāvakayāna, the Vehicle of Individual Liberation.

There are any number of versions of Gautama Buddha's life story. Most contain, at a minimum, this simple summarized structure: his birth as a prince of the Śākya clan near the border between Nepal and India, a pleasurable and sheltered life of wealth and luxury in his youth, the renunciation of hedonic palace life, a period of spiritual asceticism common among the movement of spiritual seekers (*śramaṇa*) at the time, his enlightenment at the age of thirty-five, and a long period of teaching until his death around the age of eighty. The exact dates of Siddhārtha Gautama's life are uncertain, but historians place him in approximately the fifth century BCE. Kurtis Schaeffer comments on the numerous version of the Buddha's biography which are all based on the decidedly major acts of his life:

“The power of this biographical framework lies in the flexibility it allows individual authors: As long as these twelve major acts are treated, a writer is free to include more or less detail depending on one's intentions, be they primarily literary, didactic, historical, polemic, or otherwise.” (Schaeffer, xi)

Like in Christian hagiography, Buddhist spiritual biography tends to emphasize that which generates awe, faith and reverence over historical realism (Jacoby, 10). Many such popular versions emphasize, for example, miraculous details of the Buddha's non-sexual conception, a painless birth, and his “side-exit” from the womb, as well as a walking, talking newborn prophesizing his own spiritual accomplishments. Some emphasize the life of great wealth, power, and royalty the Buddha was heir to, some write of the miraculous outward signs that marked significant events in his life story. Of the common practice of biographical embellishment, Mark Siderits comments with concern for mistaking creative elaboration with historical accuracy:

“But this [more elaborate] version of the story only emerges several centuries after the Buddha's death. And it clearly reflects the common process whereby the life of a sect's founder comes to be draped in legend. We know, for instance, that Gautama cannot have been a prince nor his father a king, since Kapilavastu was not a monarchy in his day. Likewise the Buddha was quite insistent on the point that he was no more than an ordinary human being.” (17)

As if in response, Valerie Roebuck writes:

“But modern attempts to find historical truth behind the legends have to reckon with the fact that even the canonical accounts include miraculous events such as prophecies and encounters with deities. The compilers of these ancient texts naturally saw and expressed the world in mythical and symbolic terms, not in modern rationalistic ones.” (xvi)

Despite the variability and mystique of the first Buddhist biography, hagiographic features in the Buddha's story, initially written after the 1st century BCE, became the pattern upon which forthcoming spiritual biographies were based (J. Gyatso, *Mandarava* 2). While Siderits appears to be concerned primarily with historicism and pragmatism in the cited work, and Roebuck turns our attention to differences in ancient and modern worldview, my own interests are closest to Schaeffer's. The variability and uncertainty point us to a certain historical discernment in taking hagiography as a subject of research, but also to a vivid curiosity about the author's choices and their effects, specifically: why does an author choose to include certain features and dimensions of a biography? As Schaeffer articulates, there may be any number of reasons; to his list I will add: psychological and inspirational (faith-based) reasons. Furthermore, what features and dimensions of a life story does an author exclude and why? Are these means effective? Do they produce the theoretically desired result or have unintended consequences? What are the limits to learning and practice based on hagiographic example? Finally, how might adherents effectively utilize and reflect upon this genre of literature?

Two facets of Siddhārtha Gautama's life story that have particular relevance to this project are those involving his two maternal figures and his own role as a parent. The Pāli Canon indicates Gautama's biological mother, Māyā, died seven days after his birth and ascended to a heavenly realm. While the religious record emphasizes Māyā, and presumably the baby, felt no pain in the birth process, it however neglects to expand upon the realities of maternal mortality. He is said to have been nursed and raised by his step-mother and aunt, Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī, who later persistently requested the establishment of an order of nuns and became the first ordained Buddhist nun. In some accounts of Gautama's story, he had both a wife, Yasodharā, and newborn child, Rāhula, at the point of his departure from palace life into the life of a homeless ascetic. As such, renouncing the social fetters of family and children is a significant feature in the Buddhist liberation story from the tradition's inception. Some are quick to point out that Rāhula is the Pāli term for "fetter" (Winston, 11). At the outset, the parental role is situated as antithetical to the pursuit of enlightenment. This presupposes that, as Rita Gross remarks, "[a]ll opinions and stories about women in this period of Buddhist history are embedded in the social and spiritual phenomenon of world renunciation." (*Patriarchy* 31)

The Four Noble Truths

Siddhārtha Gautama's renunciation is a good place to resume the philosophical discussion. He is said to have been spurred to depart from the palace having experienced what is referred to as the "four sights" observed by Gautama during travel outside his palace: an old man, a sick man, a corpse, and a

wandering renunciant. Upon his recognition of the inevitably impermanent and difficult nature of life, and convinced that the luxury and comfort of his palace life was no ultimate refuge, Gautama left his family and set off to seek a truth that would lead to freedom from suffering. In this context, renunciation can be thought of as the embodied refusal to participate in certain aspects of worldly life, due to recognition of its unsatisfactoriness. Through recognition that conventional happiness as sought through conventional lifestyles is not the source of existential freedom, a person with the spiritual goal of *nirvāṇa*, or liberation, rejects such conventional activities in favor of fervent and undistracted pursuit of spiritual activities that lead to lasting peace and freedom (Gross, *Patriarchy* 31).

After a subsequent period of extreme asceticism and rejection of this radical approach, Gautama traveled to Gaya where he determinedly sat under a tree and experienced a profound awakening. The first teaching he gave after this experience is the Four Noble Truths; it was delivered in Deer Park near Varanasi and its record is located in the Pāli *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*, which means “The Discourse That Sets the Vehicle of Teaching in Motion.” This teaching serves as an organizational structure for early Buddhism’s principal themes.

“Suffering, as a noble truth, is this: Birth is suffering, aging is suffering, sickness is suffering, death is suffering, sorrow and lamentation, pain, grief and despair are suffering; association with the loathed is suffering, dissociation from the loved is suffering, not to get what one wants is suffering — in short, suffering is the five categories of clinging objects.” (SN 56.11, Translated by Ñānamoli Thera)

The First Noble Truth is the quite sobering realization that within *samsāra*, there is suffering (*duḥkha*). *Samsāra* refers to the cyclic existence of rebirth, a closed loop system which will involve a great variety of experiences but has the money-back guarantee to be difficult and painful, not only because of the repetitious cycle of birth and death, but also due to pain, due to change, and due to other conditions (Siderits, 19). Looking around the world, or reflecting on one’s own life, this is usually not such a surprisingly or particularly revolutionary “truth.” People fall in and out of love, daily life is frustrating, catastrophes and violence litter the news, inevitably we become ill or eventually realize we will one day die and lose all our material resources and social connections. Siderits writes, “But this raises the question why the Buddha should have thought it necessary to point it out. In fact, Buddhists claim this truth, properly understood, is among the hardest for most people to acknowledge” (19). Of the topics to cover in the context of early Buddhism, this first noble truth is one of the most prominent that will resurface in the later biographical analysis. Ajahn Sumedho, a contemporary American monastic in the Thai Forest tradition of Theravada Buddhism, articulates this Noble Truth simply but clearly to present-

day practitioners, in a manner that is resonant with the prominent stories of the earliest mother-practitioners:

“For the First Noble Truth, “There is suffering” is the first insight. What is that insight? We don’t need to make it into anything grand; it is just the recognition ‘There is suffering.’ That is a basic insight. The ignorant person says ‘I’m suffering. I don’t want to suffer. I meditate and go on retreats to get out of suffering but I’m still suffering and I don’t want to suffer.... How can I get out of suffering? What can I do to get rid of it?’ But that is not the First Noble Truth. It is not ‘I am suffering and I want to end it.’ The insight is ‘There is suffering.’” (9)

While Sumedho writes that this insight isn’t grand, I would argue it is nonetheless highly significant, which I estimate he would agree with. The bold and unconditioned act of turning toward the sober reality of suffering instead of denying it or trying to escape it, the staying open to it and then subsequently recognizing suffering as a universal phenomenon, in my estimation, makes all the difference to a path of waking up to “reality.” Furthermore, it is likely to engender a vast and widespread compassion for shared human or embodied experience. I think this is what the “Buddhists” Siderits refers to might have meant. The shift from “I am suffering” to “there is suffering,” from the personal to the universal, from self-identified suffering to that which is non-self, or from the subtle denial of suffering to acceptance of it requires a somewhat radical persistence and wakefulness in the face of one’s own psychological discomfort. This may be the subtle and significant undercurrent of the First Noble Truth that is not readily or easily identified.

In a traditional text describing step-by-step instructions on the path of enlightenment, titled *Liberation in Our Hands*, the early twentieth century Tibetan Gelug monk and master, Pabongka Rinpoche, echoes this early Buddhist teaching by describing seven facets of the suffering of humans including birth, old age, sickness, death, being separated from desirable things, encountering undesirable things, and seeking but not acquiring what we desire (P. Gyatso, 20). He further elaborates the suffering of birth by quoting the Indian master Chandragomin’s *Letter to a Disciple* which states:

“Having entered that hellish abode of the womb--
Foul smelling, packed with great quantities of filth,
Exceedingly narrow, and cloaked in thick darkness--
One endures great suffering, with limbs all curled up.” (qtd. in P. Gyatso, 21)

This is a clear doctrinal maternal reference, to the womb, that which symbolizes literal life-giving potential, and the womb is described as hellacious. Moreover, the notion of the womb as filthy is at least qualitatively consonant with the Tibetan association with menses and childbirth as *sgrib*, although Chandragomin was Indian. In Gross’ feminist reflection of such maternal references of this genre, she is

concerned with both the derogatory language and the androcentric assumptions embedded in the literature such as a tendency to identify with the fetus instead of the mother (Gross, *Patriarchy*, 84). In context, however, this particular section focuses on the contemplation of suffering and is meant to cultivate distaste for the unsatisfactory nature of *samsāra* and its process of rebirth, it is meant to inspire renunciation, and through renunciation, the urgent motivation to practice so as to relieve the suffering condition. Renunciation involves two sides of one coin: giving up impediments to awakening and urgently taking on the task of awakening. With the sobering recognition of mortality and disdain for human rebirth, something humankind might conventionally have an affinity for, an urgency to practice can develop. Nevertheless, at a minimum, we can sense not only the profanity of but also the distaste for the womb in this passage. Symbolically, the womb here represents *samsāra*, the antithesis to *nirvāṇa*.

Since renunciation is such an important feature of early Buddhism and a prominent theme in the stories of mothers, I will further illuminate the topic in terms expressed to contemporary European and North American lay practitioners. Renunciation is the act of casting off impediments to spiritual development and to the elimination of suffering. Such impediments might be family ties or wealth. Outward, or world renunciation, however has a subtle counterpart, which is inner renunciation. Subtler impediments manifest through unconscious psychological or perceptive grasping to one's desires and aversions, the results of which are conveyed secularly by the habitual pleasure-attraction, pain-aversion principle (Sumedho, 16). In this sense, a non-religious life may be characterized by an unmediated relationship to pleasure and an avoidance of discomfort, whereas the religious life is characterized by both foregoing pleasures and undertaking austerities for a greater aim. Contemporary Theravada teacher Gil Fronsdal poignantly relates renunciation-in-practice to the word *sacrifice*, which means "to make holy or sacred," but naturally has a connotation of discomfort, difficulty or austerity (Fronsdal). Undermining the instinctual and reactive patterns of mind and body requires the hard work of tolerating the discomforts of being without more superficial pleasures and staying open and present to painful experiences all for the greater intention of eliminating suffering altogether. Transcending the impulse to habitually react to pleasure and pain, furthermore, reflexively leads to and requires the stable attention, mindfulness, and wisdom (*prajñā*) acquired through diligent, undistracted, and dedicated meditation practice, hence the value of a detached ascetic lifestyle gained through world renunciation.

Before shifting to the Second Noble Truth, I will briefly address one more point pertaining to the final phrase of the Buddha's expression of the First Noble Truth: "in short, suffering is the five categories of clinging objects." By this statement the Buddha refers to the five *skandhas*, or aggregates, that he asserts comprise the human entity and give way to suffering. The five aggregates are one, physical form,

two, feelings like pain, pleasure and indifference, three, perceptions, four, volition or the force that compels us to activity, and five, consciousness, which is an awareness of both physical and mental states (Siderits, 36). This model of five component parts is eventually used to negate a self that is real, this is the Buddha's famous assertion of *anātman* or non-self.

“The origin of suffering, as a Noble Truth, is this: It is the craving that produces renewal of being accompanied by enjoyment and lust, and enjoying this and that; in other words, craving for sensual desires, craving for being, craving for non-being.” (SN 56.11)

The Second Noble Truth states that there is a cause to suffering. Suffering arises due to a chain of interdependent causation (*pratītyasamutpāda*) initiated by ignorance that leads to craving. The Buddha described three marks of existence: impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and non-self. Ignorance, by contrast, grasps to three mistaken ontological assumptions, the first of which perceives existence and phenomena as permanent or steady. The second assumption perceives and seeks satisfaction in what cannot lend itself to lasting or long-term satisfaction. The third assumption perceives the self as fundamentally real and autonomous which gives rise to mistaken imputations of “I,” “me” and “mine.” As a result of this three-fold ignorance the person perpetuates suffering through three types of associated craving: craving for sense pleasures that are perpetually unfulfilled, craving for neutral conditions to remain, and craving to be separated from what is uncomfortable or painful (P. Gyatso, 77). It is an ongoing condition of resisting reality and grasping to a mistaken, imagined fantasy of the way things are or should be. These three mistakes thrust forth what is known as the twelve-link chain of dependently originated cyclic existence, of which birth, ignorance, craving, cause, effect, suffering, and death are all a part (P. Gyatso, 74; Siderits 22-25).

The contemporary Theravāda teacher Bhikkhu Bodhi remarks that dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) shows up in “double form” in Pāli texts. It is both the schema by which suffering is generated, as well as a natural law describing the conditioned genesis of phenomena (Bodhi, “Dependent Arising”). Dependent origination as natural law is described by the Buddha's teaching: “This being, that exists; through the arising of this that arises. This not being, that does not exist; through the ceasing of this that ceases” (MN 79; qtd. by Bodhi, “Dependent Arising”). Elizabeth Mattis Namgyel, conveys the notion of dependent origination as “the dynamic play of infinite elements -- the activity of the great web of contingency” (Namgyel, *Faith* 19). What the Buddha and Namgyel point to is the manner in which cause and effect is perpetually taking place in the world. However, there is not one cause for every result, but an infinite number of causes and conditions, varying in their significance, that must come together for something to occur (or must not come to together for something to not occur). This implies many things.

First, it implies that although things may appear independent and autonomous (*I* may appear independent, for example), my very existence is dependent on a myriad of external factors, such as oxygen in the environment, the labor of farmers for sustenance, and my parents having procreated. Second, because causes and conditions naturally change, it implies that reality is dynamic and in flux, hence the emphasis on change and impermanence. Third, this also implies that because the genesis of a thing is dependent upon other factors, i.e. causes and conditions, while a person does influence the complex interplay of dependent arising, one is not as in control of themselves nor their reality as may appear to be the case.

The notion of non-self (*anātman*) rests on this basis. Because the five aforementioned *skandhas* (body, feelings, perceptions, volition, and awareness) are dynamic and changing, because they are not under our dictatorial control (each *skandha* does not exert sole executive function over itself), and because “I” or “self” is merely a convenient label imputed upon a collection of interdependent parts, any notion of “I,” “self,” “me” or “mine” is purely imaginary and not real (Siderits, 38-39, 46, 51-54). The Oxford English Dictionary offers a philosophical definition of real as “Designating whatever is regarded as having an existence in fact, and not merely in appearance, thought, or language: having an absolute, in contrast to a merely contingent existence” (Oxford). The principle of *anātman* asserts that the self is dynamic, contingent and imagined, but is easily mistaken as something enduring, objectively fixed, autonomous, and by this definition, *real*. As such, perceptive clinging and attachment to a real “I,” or “me” or something that is inherently “mine” is the root source of affliction, immorality, suffering and suffering rebirth. Of the afflictive consequence of these mistaken perceptions, Walpola Rāhula comments:

"According to the teaching of the Buddha, the idea of a self is an imaginary, false belief which has no corresponding reality, and it produces harmful thoughts of 'me' and 'mine', selfish desire, craving, attachment, hatred, ill-will, conceit, pride, egoism, and other defilements, impurities and problems." (Rahula, 51)

The natural law of contingent or dependent arising furthermore implies that actions have consequences, or exert influence upon phenomenal reality, hence the Buddhist emphasis on morality and concern with uprooting self-defeating tendencies to unconsciously and habitually seek worldly pleasure and avoid discomfort, activities which seem to produce happiness but instead produce an unsatisfactory cycle of hedonism, avoidance, distraction, and suffering. By participating in activities and practices that support clear perception (*prajñā*), a possibility for a new way of being and seeing can emerge - one that ceases to perpetuate suffering through ignorance and repetitious cycles of attachment and aversion. This also brings a person to a more subtle and discerning ethic of living. These implications are echoed by the Third and Fourth Noble Truths: a notion that there is an end to suffering and a manner of conduct

(morality), practice (concentration or meditation), and wisdom (insight into the nature of dependent arising and non-self - *prajñā*) that leads to that end:

“Cessation of suffering, as a noble truth, is this: It is remainderless fading and ceasing, giving up, relinquishing, letting go and rejecting, of that same craving.”

“The way leading to cessation of suffering, as a Noble Truth, is this: It is simply the Noble Eightfold Path, that is to say, right view, right intention; right speech, right action, right livelihood; right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration.” (SN 56.11)

Having established that lasting happiness, or liberation cannot occur through reliance on mundane satisfaction, the principle of “refuge” becomes significant for serious practitioners of Buddhism traversing the Noble Eightfold Path. Instead of habitually seeking happiness through clinging to pleasures and preferences and avoiding struggle, a practitioner places faith in and seeks solace, protection, or inspiration instead in the Three Jewels: the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Saṃgha. Through the awakening of the Buddha, his subsequent teachings, and the community that upholds the teachings, a practitioner has support, in a sense, for facing suffering and difficulty and for the pursuit of awakening. The wisdom of interdependence and non-self, connoted by the Three Jewels, however, is the superior refuge and the one thing that soothes all suffering indefinitely. Early Buddhism, from which this philosophy and vehicle draw inspiration, emphasized the renunciation of worldly life and connections, namely wealth, sex, and family, in favor of an unhindered and focused path of monasticism so conducive to meditative stillness and the goal and supreme refuge of wisdom-insight (*prajñā*). Through the model of Gautama Buddha himself, such measures were viewed as a prerequisite for the attainment of *nirvāṇa*, the cessation of suffering and suffering rebirths (Ohnuma, 3).

Maternal Depiction and Metaphor

Despite the supreme value of untethered monastic pursuit, mothers and parents, in general, do come up in early Buddhist literature. Significantly, parents are regarded as people of reverence and veneration to whom one is deeply indebted and therefore must repay through service, kindness, care, and religious instruction (*dharma*). Mothers are often given special status, however, over fathers (Ohnuma, 11-12). This special status can be attributed to depictions of “mother-love” so readily available in early Buddhist doctrine. Mothers and motherly-care are characterized and praised as tender, compassionate, selfless, affectionate, nurturing, generous, protective and loving. Ohnuma notes that perhaps nowhere is this as obvious than in the *Sonanda Jātaka* (a narrative of one of the Buddha’s past lives, in which he has taken birth as the Bodhisattva Sona). In the narrative the Bodhisattva educates his brother about the

virtues of filial piety. In an exhaustive section, only a portion of which is copied below, “Sona depicts maternal love in a highly idealized and emotional manner as the purest, most compassionate, and most self-sacrificing type of love possible-- while saying nothing about the love of the father.” (Ohnuma, 13)

“Kind, pitiful, our refuge she that fed us at her breast,
A mother is the way to heaven, and thee she loveth best.
She nursed and fostered us with care; graced with good gifts is she,
A mother is the way to heaven, and best she loveth thee.

Craving a child in prayer she kneels each holy shrine before
The changing seasons closely scans and studies astral lore.

Pregnant in course of time she feels her tender longings grow,
And soon the unconscious babe begins a loving friend to know.

Her treasure for a year or less she guards with utmost care,
Then brings it forth and from that day a mother’s name will bear.

With milky breast and lullaby she soothes the fretting child,
Wrapped in his comforter’s warm arms his woes are soon beguiled.” (Francis, Jā V 173-174)

Mother-love is, moreover, utilized as religious simile to convey the compassion a *buddha* or *bodhisattva* has for all beings, “just as a mother loves her only son” (Ohnuma, 15). Similarly, a mother’s love is represented as the most fitting example of *maitrī* (loving-kindness), an essential virtue to be cultivated on the Buddhist path (Ohnuma 14-15; P. Gyatso 125). The *Karaniya Metta Sutta* conveys this as such:

“Even as a mother protects with her life
Her child, her only child,
So with a boundless heart
Should one cherish all living beings;
Radiating kindness over the entire world.” (Sn 1.8, translated by The Amaravati Sangha)

In her significant study of the depiction of mother-love in early Buddhist texts, Ohnuma poignantly remarks, that “mother-love, when used in this way, is really a double-edged symbol that simultaneously succeeds and fails” (Ohnuma, 15). It succeeds in the sense that the cultural consensus about the intensity of the sentiment made it a fitting and evocative symbol for the spiritual virtues of compassion and loving-kindness. However, the intensity of the sentiment and the way it is logistically situated in life circumstance are such that mother-love is *particular* or *exclusive* to one’s own children. In contrast, the cultivated virtues of compassion and loving-kindness are intended to be not particular, but universal, being extended toward all living beings. Of this paradox, Ohnuma claims:

“Mother-love may serve positively as a metaphor for the Buddha’s love, but mother-love, as an actual entity is ultimately undercut and devalued. Particularistic love for one’s own child is, in fact, wholly incompatible with the Buddhist ideal of universal love,

since it obviously leads the mother to favor her own child over everyone else. The particular, from this perspective, is *not* highly valued; in fact, the particular must be overcome and abolished in order for the universal to occur.” (Ohnuma, 15-16)

Ohnuma’s point is well demonstrated by the story of Sorreya and Soreyyā discussed in chapter three. Recall, for example, Sorreya’s claim that he loved the sons he mothered more than he loved the sons he fathered, but after becoming an *arhat*, he feels no attachment for any being (Roebuck, 128-129). A narrative in the *Majjhima Nikāya* involving the Buddha’s aunt and step-mother Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī furthers the notion. In the narrative Mahāprajāpatī wishes to make an offering of robes to the Buddha. The Buddha refuses three times and requests that she make the offering to the entire *saṃgha*. The central lesson of this narrative concerns karmic fruit, in this case, the effects of virtuous giving. The Buddha proclaims that a gift to an individual person is never as fruitful as one given to the entire *saṃgha*, which relates directly to Ohnuma’s claim that particular love (a form of virtuous giving) is never as fruitful, nor as highly valued, as impartial, universal love (Engelmajer, 78-80). Naturally, that the Buddha refuses his own “milk-mother’s” gift and perhaps even leverages the incident to reduce particular love and/or generosity in order to extol universal generosity is provocative, especially given contrary notions of filial indebtedness. Ohnuma views the narrative as one way in which the “spiritual father” upstages notions of the “worldly mother” considering the robes inherited by the *saṃgha* were eventually, and ironically, re-gifted by the Buddha to a male disciple as a prediction of his future spiritual attainment (Ohnuma 107). Conversely, Engelmajer interprets the story in a more generous fashion, as a description of the manner in which a mother may embark upon a soteriological path. Through a mother’s inclination for caring, she extends this care to support the *saṃgha* with sons and wealth and generates merit toward her own spiritual advancement. Nevertheless, Engelmajer acknowledges “the text is much more concerned with shifting the relationship [between the Buddha and Mahāprajāpatī] from a mother-son relationship - a strongly personal and secular relationship, which Diana Paul has defined as ‘a never ending cycle of attachment’ - to a lay follower-Sangha relationship - an impersonal and strictly religious relationship” (Engelmajer, 82).

Synthesizing the philosophical with the ideological, the particular, relational love associated with mothering is paradoxically considered virtuous and meritorious, yet it also epitomizes the ignorance and grasping characteristic of secular life. It does so by contrast to the Buddha’s universal and impartial love and because personal and specific love relationships, from the early Buddhist perspective, are characterized as a result of selfish attachment. Expressed succinctly, “The mother’s love for her own child alone is just a reflection of her constant grasping after “I,” “me” and “mine”- the same delusional belief in a permanent self that keeps us bound within the realm of birth and death” (Ohnuma, 16).

The Mahāyāna

Upon the foundation of the Four Noble Truths, and its associated path of practice, adherents to the Great Vehicle (Mahāyāna), grow more concerned with establishing and maintaining a compassionate and inclusive motivation and aspiration for spiritual development. Whereas the Śrāvakayāna heavily focuses on the task of eliminating worldly connections in order to establish individual liberation, which is to say become an *arhat* through the attainment of *nirvāṇa* (the cessation of mental afflictions), the Mahāyāna aspiration focuses on the task of achieving total, omniscient buddhahood. The Mahāyāna path is that of the *bodhisattva* who takes on the aspiration of complete spiritual development as the highest form of kindness for other beings, in which one's own spiritual advancement creates an influence by which others can also be liberated (P. Gyatso, 100). Mahāyāna practitioners furthermore elaborate the Buddhist teachings of dependent origination in what are known as the Middle Way or Mādhyamika philosophical school and the Yogācāra or "Mind-Only" school, the latter which will be described in the section on Vajrayāna, considered an advanced form of Mahāyāna.

Mādhyamika

Elizabeth Mattis Namgyel frames a classical teaching known as the "Four Ends of Composed Things" (P. Gyatso, 17) as a Mādhyamika, or Middle Way, quandary pertaining to the First Noble Truth "there is suffering." She writes, "How do we live a life we can't hold on to? How do we live with the fact that the moment we're born we move closer to death; when we fall in love we sign up for grief? How do we reconcile that gain always ends in loss; gathering, in separation?" (*Open Question 7*) In doing so, she points to the paradox of life, the tension of *is* and *is not*. The Middle Way philosophy embodies such a tension, and it rests upon a further implication of *pratītyasamutpāda*; the implication itself is referred to as emptiness (*śūnyatā*). The founder of the Middle Way school, 2nd century scholar Nāgārjuna, writes:

"Whatever is dependently co-arisen
That is explained to be emptiness
That, being a dependent designation
Is itself the middle way." (Nāgārjuna, 304)

The principle of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) points to a lack of inherent existence, or realness, as described of the "self" in the previous section. Whereas the first turning teachings emphasize the emptiness of a self, the

second turning teachings expand this principle to all dependently arisen phenomena, which is to say, everything, including emptiness itself. Furthermore, the second turning focuses on the dependently arising nature of perception, thoughts, and mind, thus establishing phenomena as empty due to their dependence on the perceiving mind and mind as empty due to its dependence on countless factors. Mādhyamika philosophy suggests that the qualities of things could never be inherent to or arise innately within the object of perception; rather the qualities of things arise in the mind of the perceiver as a result of their subject-object relationship. This philosophy negates an inherent quality, or nature, of anything – people, objects, situations, *genders, roles* and self. All things, in this sense, are *empty of* inherent qualities, or an innate nature – and they come into existence and are perceived in a certain way by a complex of causes and conditions. This influential Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy thus establishes a strong non-essentialist sentiment. Given this fact, it is ironic that long-standing gender discrimination has persisted within the tradition and the cultures so thoroughly influenced by it (Gross, *Patriarchy* 72-73).

Emptiness, Gender, & Mythic Female Protagonists

Near the period when the traditionalists and the Mahāyānists diverged, doctrinal attitudes toward women's spiritual capacities degrade considerably (Gross, *Patriarchy* 57-60). For example, prolific Mahāyāna scholar Asaṅga writes in the *Bodhisattvabhūmi* that women are not *buddhas* because *bodhisattvas* abandon female rebirth well before the birth in which they achieve complete enlightenment. This is so, he claims, because women are defiled and unintelligent (Willis, 69).⁶ While there is evidence of this type of discrimination and degradation in the literature of both the traditionalists and Mahāyāna, females (and laity), paradoxically, become outspoken mythic protagonists in Mahāyāna literature (Gross, *Patriarchy* 58). For example, in the passage below the pious monk, Śāriputra, is depicted as conversing with a Goddess. The feat of magical sex change was associated with high spiritual attainment, and since being female was viewed as spiritually inferior, Śāriputra inquires as to why the Goddess has not changed her sex to a superior male form.

“Śāriputra: ‘Why don’t you change your female sex?’

Goddess: ‘I have been here for twelve years and have looked for the innate characteristics of the female sex and haven’t been able to find them.’” (*Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra* translated by Paul, 230)

The female protagonist in this story outwits the close-minded monk by calling attention to and undermining his reified perception of gender. This narrative also gives a nod to the “feminine principle,”

⁶ Master Asaṅga is an exponent of the Yogācāra philosophical school, but is affiliated with the Mahāyāna versus the Vajrayāna. As such, this reference is situated here instead of in the next section.

the subversion of dogmatism and fundamentalism, a tactic that grows more prevalent in Vajrayāna literature.

Mādhyamika philosophy deconstructs all dependent phenomena into emptiness, but it also recognizes the necessity for philosophy to acknowledge the relative, phenomenal world as it appears. In other words, just because all things lack inherent existence, it doesn't mean they don't also have apparent qualities that function, materialize, or are made manifest through systems of socialization, mental construction, habit, agreement, belief and other causes and conditions. Indeed, this is how these qualities arise, although they are not independent nor inherent nor do they exist in a manner that is philosophically *real*. Qualities are constructed, they arise in dependence upon other things such as the mind that perceives it or in comparison to other apparent qualities. However, the mind of wisdom knows such qualities or functions without ascribing an ultimate reality to them, they are known for what they are: appearances, or mutable, relative truths. In this philosophical system the ultimate truth is emptiness, or a lack of an ultimate essence. This could be framed in terms of the ultimate truth being that there is no ultimate truth. Nevertheless, the activity of interdependent genesis, the basis on which emptiness rests, gives way to the world of relative appearances, which exist in name, form, and function, but not in any ultimate way. Thus, Mādhyamika is the “middle way” between eternalism and nihilism, or the assertion of what absolutely *is* and *is not*. Labels, agreements, cultural contexts, roles, genders, and life situations may exhibit patterns and qualities, but these are not ultimately real. A person's gender may indicate spiritual inferiority, but this is merely dependent upon her social world. Being a mother may be a profane role ill-suited to the task of spiritual insight, but this designation is dependent upon other factors, like cultural and sociological dynamics, education, economics, the logistics of a unique life situation, the presence or lack of a support system, motivation for religious pursuit, and perhaps most importantly of all -- the mind that perceives it as such.

Prajñāpāramitā: The Perfection of Wisdom

There is perhaps no better phrase that conveys the Middle Way view than the infamous line of the Heart Sutra: “Form is empty. Emptiness is form. Emptiness is not other than form and form is not other than emptiness” (Tekchog, 5). Here we see that the Middle Way doesn't mean that it is “half way” between eternalism and nihilism, but rather it *simultaneously* validates and negates that things exist in very specific ways. It suggests that phenomenon, “form,” only truly exists as emptiness, which is to say it is dependent on external causes and conditions including but not limited to the perceiving mind. But emptiness is not inert nothingness, it is dynamism that can't be conceptually or discretely captured. The

dependently originated dance of emptiness gives way to genesis, form or phenomena. Another way to put this is, it is because things don't *truly* or *really* exist that they exist at all (in appearance). This argument is called the "heart" or the essence of the perfection of wisdom (*prajñāpāramitā*).

Prajñāpāramitā itself could be said to be the heart of the Mahāyāna tradition. Interestingly, the principle of *prajñāpāramitā* is emphatically conveyed through feminine, maternal metaphor. *Prajñāpāramitā*, personified, is called the Great Mother or the Mother of all Buddhas (P. Gyatso, 122). Here we see a very positive maternal symbolism, but to reconcile this symbolism with worldly mothering would be more than an overstatement. However, the metaphor does draw from the intensity and focus of particularistic love and relationship and reflects how the diligent study and focus upon the wisdom teachings and emptiness insight gives birth to buddhahood. The Great Mother is a personification of transcendent wisdom itself and this personification inspires a dedicated adherent to dote upon and dedicate himself to wisdom just as a son would urgently and thoroughly dote on his ill mother (Gross, *Patriarchy* 76). Such intensive and particular focus is the gateway to and genesis of a complete awakening. The *Prajñāpāramitā* text states:

"If a mother with many sons had fallen ill, They all, sad in mind, would busy themselves about her: Just so also the Buddhas in the world-systems in the ten directions Bring to mind this perfection of wisdom as their mother.

The Saviours of the world who were in the past, and also those that are [just now] in the ten directions, Have issued from her, and so will the future ones be. She is the one who shows the world [for what it is], she is the genetrix, the mother of the Jinās, And she reveals the thoughts and actions of other beings." (Edward Conze, Chapter XII)

Bodhicitta: Compassionate Aspiration

Bodhicitta is the crucial dimension of practice and philosophy that distinguishes Mahāyāna from Śrāvākayāna Buddhism and it concerns the technique of cultivating compassionate motivation and aspiration for enlightenment. The literal translation of *bodhicitta* means awakened mind, but it is referenced in terms of "relative *bodhicitta*" and "absolute *bodhicitta*." Relative *bodhicitta* refers to engaging practice and the wish for enlightenment from a compassionate intention whereas absolute or ultimate *bodhicitta* refers to the awakened, non-dual mind itself that sees clearly the indistinguishable interdependence of all things. Thus, *bodhicitta* is both virtuous motivation *and* the supreme ethic of an awakened being. To incite relative *bodhicitta*, it is common practice for adherents to evoke the particularistic love and indebtedness they feel for their own mother, but they do so in order to extend such love impartially, to all sentient beings (P. Gyatso, 124). This is evident in the stock phrase in which an adherent dedicates the efforts of practice "to all sentient beings who have been my mother" which draws

from notions of the debt a son or daughter acquires from their mother's care and kindness, a debt that can only be repaid through a "Dharmic" relationship. The inclination to motivate spiritual efforts through remembrance of one's countless mothers of both current and infinite past lives draws upon the principles of compassion and universal love, or equanimity. Some scholars suggest that this practice is premised upon a notion of mother as selfless sufferer who painstakingly and tirelessly works for the welfare of her child at the expense of seeking liberation through an ascetic, spiritual life (Paul, 65). Similarly, Ohnuma points out that unlike the utilization of mother as exemplar in the generation of loving-kindness, when it comes to generation of *bodhicitta*, the mother becomes not a model for care and compassion, but the recipient of it, because of her generosity but also her status as "sufferer" (Ohnuma, 34). This is indeed reflected in a passage written by Candragomin in his *Letter to a Disciple*:

"Who on earth, even the lowest of the low,
 Could force himself to abandon
 Those beings who were once his mother,
 Whose milk, joined with their affectionate love,
 He drank as a helpless infant on their lap,
 And who sustained their tender love,
 Although they received from him in return
 Nothing but his many naughty pranks?"

Who on earth, even an enemy,
 Could possibly bear to go away and leave behind
 those suffering, unprotected, miserable beings
 In whose womb he found an occasion to stay,
 And who bore him when he was weak,
 Their hearts overcome with love?" (Candragomin translated by Michael Hahn, verse 97-98)

However, it is not evident that "mother as sufferer" is necessarily highlighted in Tibetan commentaries in this context specifically. In general, repayment of indebtedness due to maternal kindness, affection and generosity, leveraging the emotional intensity of relational love, and the general suffering of sentient beings are given more emphasis than a notion of mother as sufferer due to her mothering, specifically (P. Gyatso, 143). What seems more significant, is the manner in which this sentiment serves to remind an adherent of the countless interdependent relationships that are inferred by sentient existence, such that "self" cannot be limited to the autonomous boundaries of a single human form and such that awakening is necessarily a "group project" so to speak. This is the connection between relative and ultimate *bodhicitta*. I will posit that it may be that mother is such a potent object of compassion not because of some specialized status as sufferer, but because of the reciprocity of generosity insinuated by the relationship as well as the powerfully implicit interdependent aspect of the mother-child relationship that occurs through conception, gestation, birth, breastfeeding, infancy, and childhood. Like a mother literally expands and

gives from her body to support and nurture her child, the *bodhisattva* expands her conception of and gives up her “self” to support and nurture all sentient beings.

The Vajrayāna

The Vajrayāna shares these Mahāyāna principles, but builds upon and adds to them. Rita Gross writes,

“The world of Vajrayana practice is built on an intuition of the primordial purity and sacredness of the phenomenal world, which brings with it an intuition of the inherent workability and transmutability of all human emotions and experiences. This insight is the conclusion, put to extremely practical use, of the Mahayana view that all phenomena are empty of inherent existence and defining characteristics.” (*Patriarchy*, 80)

The Vajrayāna perspective can be thought of as the other side of the coin of emptiness. It suggests, in brief, that because things are empty, they can also be full: full of potential, full of possibility (Trungpa, 28). This wisdom perspective is not one of voidness, but one of effulgence as a function of its emptiness; it is also referred to as “suchness” (Gross *Patriarchy* 185). In the Diamond Vehicle, the result of the path is taken as the path. A practitioner utilizes or approximates the non-dual view of a Buddha to incorporate all aspects of life and reality into the process of spiritual development. Vajrayāna view ceases to discern the religious from the secular, or *samsāra* from *nirvāṇa*, and instead utilizes the wisdom of *śūnyatā* to view all phenomena as equally empty of inherent characteristics, and so equally capable of informing spiritual awakening and insight experience through *bodhicitta*. This equality or equanimity is described by Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche: “Everything is seen as equal. In terms of sense perceptions, what you are perceiving is never regarded as being on a higher level or a lower level. Everything is on just the basic phenomenal level that takes place constantly. The nature of vajrayana is to see that quality of evenness” (Trungpa, 29).

Taking the result as the path in the Vajrayāna is dependent upon the notion that an adherent already has an enlightened nature. Because she is empty she is also full. And so, the path of practice offered by the Vajrayāna, based on the foundation of morality, concentration, wisdom and *bodhicitta*, has much to do with disrupting the habitual mind and engaging the uncontrived, already enlightened mind’s capacity for clear seeing, non-grasping, and creative possibility. Disruption may be cultivated through transgressive, subversive, and antinomian approaches and practices, it can also be cultivated through non-rejection of the unfolding of life as it is and mind, emotions as they are. The emphasis in Vajrayāna is less on philosophy and more on practice, especially ritual. Philosophical comprehension is used as a

basis for application, as a mere gateway to the transformative dimension of experience, what Australian Buddhist nun Venerable Robina Courtin calls “tasting the chocolate” of Buddhist practice (Courtin, 7). Meditative and experiential practice is so essential because, she continues, “you should know that the principal concern of Buddhism is the mind. The mind is the nucleus of samsara and nirvana. Whatever experiences we are having in our lives manifest from our minds, remember?” (Courtin, 9) Courtin points to the importance of both subjectivity and practice in Vajrayāna, as it was influenced by the Yogācāra school of philosophy.

Yogācāra

The Yogācāra, “Practice of Yoga,” school of philosophy (also called Cittamātra, which means “Mind Only”) is, on the one hand, considered a Mahāyāna philosophy, but it also contributes significantly to Vajrayāna worldview, technique, ritual, and method of practice. Depending on its doctrinal context, Yogācāra may be considered the second or the Third Turning of the Wheel of Dharma and therefore inferior or superior to Mādhyamika. Traleg Kyabgon Rinpoche, a prominent Tibetan Lama responsible for bringing Vajrayāna teachings to Australia in the twentieth century, explains that the Yogācāra school arose as a reaction against excessive philosophical theorizing and eventually inspired some of the most important facets of the Vajrayāna. Yogācāra, which means “practice of [meditative] yoga,” emphasized meditative discipline over intellectual discipline. Furthermore, Kyabgon suggests, the definitive Vajrayāna meditative practice of transforming afflictive mind-states originated in Yogācāra literature. Based upon the experiential dimension of Buddhist practice, the concept of emptiness is framed as having a positive connotation in Yogācāra, unlike the negative “absence” or “voidness” connoted by the intellectually and philosophically rigorous approach of Mādhyamika. This positive connotation develops into Vajrayāna expressions of wisdom-perception such as the notion of the “clear light” or “unshakable vajra” which represents the brimming potential or possibility of emptiness, a sacredness or compassion that is the foundation or ground of all reality. In relation, the essence of a person in both Yogācāra and Vajrayāna, is conceived not merely as void, but as “Buddha Nature” (*tathāgatagarbha*) itself, which is to say fundamentally enlightened (Kyabgon). Finally, as alluded by Venerable Courtin, both Yogācāra and Vajrayāna place primacy on the mind. “Yogacarins and Tantrikas do not speculate about the world. They reduce both subject and object to the workings of the mind” (Kyabgon). This malleability of mind is the point from which the workability and transformability of all things originates.

In the 4th century text *Treatise on the Three Natures*, Yogācāra founder, Vasubandhu, describes the foundation of Yogācāra philosophy.

“The imagined, the other-dependent and
The consummate.
These are the Three Natures
Which should be deeply understood.

Arising through dependence on conditions and
Existing through being imagined,
It is therefore called other-dependent
And is said to be merely imaginary.

The eternal nonexistence
Of what appears in the way it appears,
Since it is never otherwise,
Is known as the nature of the consummate.

If anything appears, it is imagined.
The way it appears is as duality.
What is the consequence of its nonexistence?
The fact of nonduality!” (Garfield and Vasubandhu, 131)

Vasubandhu’s poetics suggest that all phenomena exist as having three natures: an imagined nature (*parikalpita svabhāva*), an “other-dependent” nature (*paratantra svabhāva*) and a consummate nature (*pariniṣpanna svabhāva*) (Garfield and Vasubandhu, 131-135). Phenomena are perceived through a unique process of mental construction; this is the imagined nature. To the unawakened mind, the imagined nature is conflated with the other-dependent nature, which is the nature of the object that arises from other, contingent factors, as per the process of *pratītyasamutpāda*. This conflation is accompanied by the appearance of subject-object duality. Yogācāra asserts, however, that the appearance generated by constructed perception exists only in dependence upon the mind. Said another way, that something exists as a discrete and knowable “object” depends upon the mind. Vasubandhu’s explication of the consummate nature, suggests that from the view of totality or from wisdom, this appearance is actually non-existent (it is *mind only*, not ontologically real separate from perception). This consummate nature, thus, also indicates an object of perception’s non-existent duality, which is its non-duality. This suggests, effectively, that unenlightened beings exist perpetually in a non-lucid, dream or dream-like experience. The ignorant dreamer engages with objects that appear as their referents and as “other” than the dreamer’s mind. This non-lucid dream is *saṃsāra*. The view of wisdom, on the other hand, is akin to knowing the dream images as dream images (not having fidelity with the phenomenal world), and although they appear as “other” than the mind, they are not and never could be. Of non-duality, Gross writes: “‘Non-duality’ means overcoming the subject-object duality in which an independent object is posited by the

perceiving ego. Rather, there is just the continuity and flux of experience without dualistic overlay” (*Patriarchy* 196).

There is disagreement among Buddhist scholars and thinkers as to whether Yogācāra’s claims are metaphysically idealist or merely phenomenological (Butler, 34-38). In other words, there is disagreement as to whether “Mind Only” and its philosophical explication denies the existence of an external reality or if it simply places special emphasis on mentally constructed reality. In the latter case, which is perhaps more practical, it would mean that Yogācāra proposes a “mainly mental” conception of reality. The “mainly mental” approach suggests that what one experiences as reality is none other than a complex of mental impressions that don’t *automatically or inherently* apply to an external referent (McCullough, Garfield “Three Turnings”). The source of these impressions, or appearances, in either case, is the changing, yet foundational and functionally real karmic storehouse consciousness (*ālayavijñāna*) located in the heart. In essence, Yogācāra philosophy suggests that all perceptions, or one’s unique reality, springs forth from karmic seeds stored in the heart. Of the mainly mental approach, Jay Garfield, speaking in the capacities of scholar, practitioner and teacher of Buddhist philosophy, says:

“We can also think of the phrase “Mind Only” as saying the mind is the only thing you need to worry about, or the mind is the only thing you can actually work on, or the actual nature of your experience is only the experience of the mind; and if we think about it this way we suddenly discover a very profound teaching about the nature of our own subjectivity.” (Garfield, “Three Turnings”)

Vasubandhu's explication of the “three natures” offers a profound contemplation for an adherent of Buddhist philosophy. The articulation of an imagined and other-dependent nature, invites the adherent to grapple with the intellectually reasonable, yet practically obscure notion that one’s version (i.e. perception) of reality does not necessarily represent an objective reality with high (or any) fidelity. In other words, this philosophy points out that a perception is not the same as its referent, or the objective object that a mental perception represents. Of the tendency to believe the imagined nature to be truly existent, contemporary Tibetan Lama Dzigar Kongtrul Rinpoche advises, “Don’t let the appearance of things outshine their nature” (qtd. By Namgyel, *Faith* 29). Through this insight, an adherent acknowledges the *highly subjective, variable, selective, and causal nature of perception*. This has important practical implications in the sense that it leads the adherent to recognize his or her capacity to construct and influence reality. Furthermore, this philosophy encourages more creative and open-minded perspective taking, toward the end of consciously assuming a reality that beckons the dimensions of religious experience that foster growth, namely ethical conduct, presence, discernment, compassion, and wisdom. The profound implication of Yogācāra philosophy is that by perceiving the dream-like nature of

perception an adherent can, in an instant, know the delusion that leads to clinging, aversion and suffering. When the adherent knows a mental image as a mental image, the delusion as delusion, the grasping to painful or pleasurable objects as *existent* and *other*, and the suffering that accompanies this delusion, can dissolve. Yogācāra offers immediate practical if not soteriological benefit.

Vajrayāna utilizes the teachings of all three turnings and the first two vehicles and builds upon them. There are several dimensions of the Vajrayāna, however, that distinguish it from the Śrāvakayāna and the Mahāyāna. One such aspect of Vajrayāna is its concern with the primacy of mind or subject in practice and therefore the transformative dimension of all experience. For example, suffering and *samsāra* are to be avoided and transcended in the Śrāvakayāna, but in the Vajrayāna even suffering is food and fuel for insight. Suffering may *appear* to be antithetical to liberation, but it could also be the very thing that drives a practitioner toward it. Suffering, furthermore, may inspire profound and wide-reaching compassion, the ethical prerequisite for the Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna pursuits. Therefore, even suffering is not problematic per se. In Vajrayāna one is less concerned with transcending suffering or emotion and more concerned with leveraging it to transcend dichotomies of good and bad, desire and aversion, right and wrong, *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, *self* and *other* - those dualistic approximations of mind that lead to grasping, reification and rigid ideology and are the basis for unnecessary suffering and harmful behavior toward other beings.

Because of the Vajrayāna emphasis on the primacy of mind, it is furthermore a path of creativity, discernment, and skillful and expedient means (*upāya*) that utilizes all experiences and *all domains* of experience for swift realization, especially those that have been previously denied by the religious institution. What becomes important is not *what* one does but *how* one does it, which is to say, with wisdom and compassion. Among the expedient tools explicitly utilized in formal Vajrayāna practice are Guru Yoga, mantras, deity visualization, consort practice or sexual yoga, ritual consumption of alcohol or meat and other forms of engagement with so-called transgressive activities that disrupt the mind's habitual and unconscious mode of knowing or understanding reality as *real* and *other*. Because Vajrayāna utilizes activities, substances, and emotions shunned by the other two paths as fuel and fodder for religious transformation, it considers itself a potentially risky and dangerous method appropriate only for those who have established themselves in ethical conduct, concentration, compassion and wisdom and who are initiated and practice under the guidance of a Vajra Master (Gross, *Patriarchy* 80).

Tathāgatagarbha & Sacred View

By virtue of the Yogācāra emphasis on praxis, emptiness is not described as voidness, but experientially as a fullness. Moreover, a practitioner, from this view, does not become enlightened merely because she lacks intrinsic qualities as described by the Mādhyamika, but because she is already, fundamentally enlightened. With enlightenment, or basic goodness, as the basis of every human being, “ignorance or confusion is totally incidental or contingent” (Kyabgon). Spiritual awakening then is simply the unveiling or un-obscuring of what already is. This notion is expressed through the concept of *tathāgatagarbha* and it is unique to Yogācāra and Vajrayāna worldviews. Gross notes the term *tathāgatagarbha* is usually translated as “buddha-nature,” but the more literal translation is “buddha-womb” or “buddha-embryo.” She continues: “These translations also acknowledge that, in this case, the Buddhist tradition has explicitly compared the process of developing enlightened qualities with the processes of pregnancy and gestation, which are especially drawn from women’s experience” (Gross, *Patriarchy* 187). In this Vajrayāna use of the term “womb,” it is the birthplace of possibility, potentiality, buddhahood itself. It is not a dank, foul void but a place from which wisdom and compassion emerge.

Like the buddha-womb of all sentient beings, all phenomena, from the Vajrayāna perspective, exist as fundamentally pure and sacred in dependence upon the cultivated or practicing mind. Therefore, nothing is profane, and in fact, what is traditionally avoided or outwardly renounced such as emotions, passions, sense pleasures, sexuality, and the body are reintegrated into religious experience and utilized for their immense energy and potential (Gross, *Patriarchy* 192). Gross remarks: “Because these primal experiences have so often been evaluated so negatively in spiritual disciplines, and then have been projected as experiences especially connected with or aroused by women, these alternative evaluations found in Vajrayana Buddhism are important” (*Patriarchy*, 193). Perhaps it is the transgressive aspect and sacred view of the Vajrayāna that has allowed for women to stake a claim to religious experience more readily than in the context of the other two vehicles.

Female Masters, The Feminine Principle & Dākinīs

Although the androcentric values and patriarchal influence and power present in the other two vehicles persists in Vajrayāna Buddhism, it is also marked by increasingly favorable views toward women, the exaltation of the feminine, and its inclusion and celebration of female adepts like Princess Mandāravā, Lady Niguma, Yeshe Tsogyel, Machig Labdrön, and the mothers whom we will meet in the next chapter (Gross, *Patriarchy* 80). The biographies of these adepts offer a window into the unique

religious lives and experiences of advanced female adherents. Notably, Yeshe Tsogyel's biography highlights relationality as a significant feature of her spiritual awakening. Gross writes:

“What Tsogyel's relational biography shows is that relationships carried out in the context of a spiritual discipline can dissolve clinging, grasping, and fixation and need not involve the anxiety, neurotic passion and jealousy of conventional relationships. So often in conventional relationships, expectations, needs, and neurotic passions cause the relationship to increase rather than ease suffering. The only way out of this situation is to dissolve the unrealistic expectations surrounding the relationship. These ego-fixations and ego-orientations dissolve through spiritual discipline. Tsogyel's “vision quest” all her life was to dissolve the confusion and clinging in her mind, not to find a relationship that would make her feel better. Her biography demonstrates a proper balance or prioritization of relationship and spiritual practice. She seeks enlightenment and gains both enlightenment and enlightened relationships.” (Gross, “Tsogyel” 26)

Yeshe Tsogyel's poignant utilization of relationship in her spiritual practice, while maintaining full renunciation and an autonomy of refuge in her spiritual activities, highlights the Vajrayāna approach as one that is potentially inclusive of and consonant with the human dimension of relationality. It also suggests this inclusion may include sexuality, as several of her spiritual relationships were those with consorts. It is also notable that Tsogyel's guru and consort, Padmasambhava, who is credited for helping convert Tibet to Vajrayāna Buddhism advises Tsogyel:

“The human body is the basis of the accomplishment of wisdom
And the gross bodies of men and women are equally suited
But if a woman has strong aspiration, she has the higher potential.” (Dowman, 86)

In this passage, not only is the human form appraised as an essential religious tool, but the female form is considered superior, an attitude that greatly contrasts with a strong majority of Buddhist textual reference and persistent social perspectives.

Machig Labdrön's prominent story and practice lineage of *Chöd* instructs practitioners to wander in charnel grounds and cemeteries, notably places that inspire fear, to ritually offer their bodies as food for deities, and to utilize other psychologically disruptive methods as a means to cut through even subtle self-grasping. While their narratives bear similarities and differences, both women are remarkable for the manner in which they evoke principles of clarity, tenacity, discipline, compassion, and wisdom to confront and transform tenuous, uncomfortable and conventionally samsaric territory.

In both Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna doctrine, we see females and the feminine as a startling and sometimes subversive force that operates to dismantle reified, fundamentalist religious perspectives and delusional views of self, other, object or experience. In this sense, the feminine is associated with transcendent wisdom itself. Depictions of the feminine and mother, like those found in the so-called “Mother” Anuttarayoga Tantras for example, are portrayed as the personification of clear-light-bliss

perceiving emptiness (Berzin). In the Vajrayāna, this complements the masculine principles of skillful means, method, and compassion. Feminine wisdom is further personified in the form of *ḍākinīs* - sometimes other-worldly, sometimes human enlightened female figures who support the Tantric practitioner in transcending delusion. *Dākinīs* “permeate the boundary between divine and human” and appear in a range of depictions: as celestial goddesses, naked sprites, beautiful maidens, wrinkled hags, human consorts, and female masters (Jacoby, 135). At times, the *ḍākinī* serves as a metaphor for non-dual wisdom itself. When asked about these elusive figures, Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche cleverly responds:

“Question: What are *ḍākinīs*?

Ven. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche: One never knows.” (qtd in Simmer-Brown, 43)

In this sense, perhaps the esoteric *ḍākinī* cannot be pinned down, or known conventionally or conceptually, yet is the very ground of reality or the “unborn primordial wisdom dimension” of the mind and all things (Klein, 172). In describing a period of long-term solitary retreat, Elizabeth Mattis Namgyel consults her teacher Dzigar Kongtrul Rinpoche about a deep and long-term depression to which her husband, and teacher, responds “Depression is dakini’s bliss” (qtd by Namgyel, “Machig Labdrön”). In this sense, *ḍākinī* is the non-dual wisdom of Yogācāra and Vajrayāna, the emptiness of samsaric suffering that may be experienced as the fullness of bliss, should one have the trained mind to perceive it.

With the exception of the rare stories of women and mothers found in the early Buddhist record of the *Therīgāthā*, it is within the Vajrayāna context that records and stories of female masters and mother-practitioners can be found. It is interesting to note that, whether a female master was a biological mother or not, she was often referred to as Mother, her female form symbolic of the wisdom that gives birth to *buddhas* (Jacoby, 147). Yeshe Tsogyel, who is not known to be a biological mother but is referred to as Great Mother, Mother of the Victorious Ones, and Bliss Queen among other titles, is the first and most significant Tibetan example of this. Nevertheless, the occurrence of biological mothers achieving notable religious status was quite rare (Jacoby, 177). Even in the 20th century biography of Sera Khandro, Jacoby indicates that her status as a religious exemplar was often confounded by her status as a woman and a mother. When Sera Khandro meets a high Lama (Gotrül Rinpoche) and he recognizes her as a *ḍākinī* and invites her to teach, it was “shocking that a monastic hierarch would receive religious teachings from a young mother” (Jacoby, 158). Thus, although the Vajrayāna opened up opportunities for women and mothers, and for a progressive and rigorous lay alternative to the traditional religious monasticism, social and logistical obstacles to their pursuits remained.

Chapter 5: The Stories of Mothers

In this chapter, I summarize and analyze selected poems, biographies, and narratives of prominent Buddhist mothers in India, Tibet, and North America, focusing on the transmission of Indian Buddhism into Tibet and globally through the Tibetan diaspora. In my research process I reviewed well over a dozen biographies of mother-practitioners, among these, the ten stories of the women profiled below stood out to me as conveying particularly significant philosophical or practical aspects of the Buddhist tradition as it relates to their role as mothers. These selected profiles are arranged in chronological order by period and, when available, birth year, ranging from approximately the 6th century BCE to the present day. I have transposed the order of just two of the narratives, those of Nangsa Obum (12th c. CE) and Machig Labdrön (11th c. CE), in order to craft a clearer arc in the development of my philosophical argument. The three periods that I focus on are those of the narratives of the early Indian *samgha*, the second propagation of Buddhism in Tibet, and the Tibetan Buddhist diaspora of the 20th century. There is a gap in narratives between the time of the Buddha and the period of Buddhist invigoration in Tibet just after the turn-of-the-millennium, and a second gap following this renaissance until the twentieth-century Tibetan diaspora. The first gap is likely present due to the degeneration of opinion of women in Buddhism around the turn of the 1st century CE, and therefore an absence of accounts of women and mother practitioners in the latter portion of Buddhism's tenure in India. The second gap may be present for a number of reasons, one being the limited availability of reliable textual sources from this period. It may also be that the production of especially esteemed or popular narratives tended to occur during dynamic periods of significant religious activity, growth, and change such as the years of Gautama Buddha's teaching career, the era in which Buddhism was established in Tibet, and when Tibetan Buddhism gained a global audience in the late 20th century.

Attention is deserved to the profiles and biographies that may be notably "missing" from the collection below, including those of 14th century commoner and mystic Sönam Peldren and the 20th century treasure revealer Sera Khandro. In the instances of both Sönam Peldren's and Sera Khandro's narratives, it was not efficacious to profile them in full because of how little their biographical narrative communicated about their lives as mothers, which in and of itself communicates something about the relationship between motherhood and spiritual or religious pursuit or ideology. What this communicates precisely, I can only hypothesize. Suzanne Bessenger's analysis of Sönam Peldren's biography suggests

that her four children (and her role as a mother) are only mentioned as they “play roles in stories revealing Sönam Peldren’s generosity and miracles” (Bessenger, 34). She continues, “Rather than recording these worldly aspects of Sönam Peldren’s adult life, the text focuses instead on events that demonstrate her otherworldly status” (Bessenger, 35). Similarly, of her analysis of Sera Khandro’s biography, which is steeped in emotional language and maintains strong relational themes throughout, Sarah Jacoby writes:

“Ironically, as effusive as Sera Khandro’s writing is in describing deities’ love for humans or lamas’ love for disciples using parental metaphors, there are very few references to actual instances of love between parents and children in her writing beyond the example of Dūjom Lingpa and Drimé Özer, for whom religious and parental love blended.” (Jacoby, 265)

The absence of significant reference to secular, maternal love, or affection for parents and children, Jacoby concludes, is not an indication that these affections weren’t present, but that “love for her biological family did not figure prominently in the context of her story of spiritual realization” (Jacoby, 266).

Among my hypotheses for this trend, are first, these women may have considered their spiritual or religious pursuits as a dimension of their lives that was set apart from motherhood. Similarly, it could be that these particular biographical records functioned in a manner that was irrelevant to their concerns as parents. However, given Sera Khandro and Sönam Peldren both lived in a period when Buddhism assumed a heavy cloak of religious and cultural identity, their social environments and both common cultural conceptions about and demands of women and mothers may have influenced their views of parenting and the choices made about their biographical record. There were hardly any role models and little to no social vision which supported these women in simultaneously embodying their roles as preeminent religious virtuosos and worldly mothers. Alternatively, seeking to understand an explicit relationship between motherhood and spiritual practice may be a somewhat novel and contemporary endeavor in instances when it was implicit or simply not a relevant consideration. Finally, my last hypothesis entertains that active mothering and rigorous spiritual pursuit are, in part, incongruent and so ignored in religious literature which may be unsavory from a perspective sympathetic to mothers and egalitarian values, but worth keeping in consideration given how consistently this theme surfaces in Buddhist history. On that note, I turn to the stories through which spiritual development and insight *is* conveyed in and through the role of mothering.

Mothers of the Therīgāthā: Mahāprajāpatī, Kisā Gotamī, & Paṭācārā

The earliest stories of mother-practitioners can be found in the *Therīgāthā*, which translates as “Songs of the Elder Nuns,” and has been preserved as part of the earliest stratum of the Pāli Canon (Murcott, 17). These three stories occur within the eighty-year period of the Buddha’s life, roughly in the fifth or sixth century BCE. The poems themselves are “liberation songs,” expressing women’s experiences of *nirvāṇa*; they are written in a technical and patterned form and were chanted for centuries prior to being documented alongside oral renditions of each woman’s narrative. Thus, these poems and stories are far removed from the voices of the women themselves and they often contained stock phrases common to religious literature during this period (Murcott, 17). Nevertheless, the themes of these lyrics can be considered to be likely based upon lived women’s experience, although to what extent we will never know. These issues and questions are also especially relevant to the aged hagiographies analyzed below. This genre of songs found in the *Therīgāthā* are perhaps the best window we have into the religious experiences of the first Buddhist women. The principal version of the *Therīgāthā* I worked with is Susan Murcott’s updated translation, which is based upon Indian scholar, Dhammapāla’s, 5th century *Therīgāthā* commentary. Murcott notes that while it could be considered that a handful of mothers in the *Therīgāthā* gained peace “‘through the means of motherhood,’ it should be understood that almost no Buddhist women Arhats were actively engaged in mothering. From the evidence of the stories and poems, the two roles seem to have been mutually exclusive” (Murcott, 93). The inquiry of my project, in response, is one that delves more deeply into the “means of motherhood” and calls into question the accuracy of the analysis that motherhood and liberation are “mutually exclusive” by questioning the assumptions it relies on, without denying the social or logistical realities that formed the backdrop of the lives of Buddhist mothers.

Mahāprajāpatī

Story

Mahāprajāpatī, as mentioned in previous chapters, was the Buddha’s aunt and adoptive mother. When her sister and co-wife, Māyā, died a week after giving birth to Siddhārtha, Mahāprajāpatī assumed care of the child and raised him as her own. She later gave birth to two more children. Many years after Siddhārtha left the palace on his spiritual quest for liberation, he returned as an awakened teacher. Mahāprajāpatī was among his first disciples and may have become a religious leader in her own right, offering advice, support, and direction to women who had lost children or husbands or who sought affiliation with other women through joining a religious “family.” After her husband died, Mahāprajāpatī

requested admittance into the Buddha's religious order. The Buddha denied her request several times, but she persisted, shaving her head, and walking over one hundred miles barefoot in an act of austerity and sincerity to make her final request, which was finally granted, but on the condition that nuns accept eight special rules subordinating them to monks. Thus, Mahāprajāpatī became the first Buddhist nun, and a leader of women in the early *saṃgha* (Murcott, 25-31). Her liberation poem follows.

“Homage to you Buddha,
Best of all creatures,
Who set me and many others
Free from pain.

All pain is understood,
The cause, the craving is dried up,
The Noble Eightfold Way unfolds,
I have reached the state where everything stops.

I have been
Mother,
Son,
Father,
Brother,
Grandmother;
Knowing nothing of the truth
I journeyed on.

But I have seen the Blessed One;
This is my last body,
And I will not go
From birth to birth again.

Look at the disciples all together,
Their energy,
Their sincere effort.
This is homage to the buddhas.

Maya gave birth to Gautama
For the sake of us all.
She has driven back the pain of the sick and the dying” (Murcott, 30-31)

Analysis

Relational Awakening

The recorded stories of Mahāprajāpatī's life and her liberation poem offer a few implicit insights into the intersection between mothering and the spiritual path. We can recall the story of her gifting robes to the Buddha and being requested to make the offering to the entire *saṃgha*. What I find quite compelling about the dynamic between her and the Buddha is the manner in which their parent-child relationship transitions into a dynamic student-teacher relationship. We might say this was a natural choice given the Buddha's realizations and his role as a religious teacher. It appears, however, that Mahāprajāpatī was among the first to welcome the Buddha when he returned from his leave, in what was otherwise a somewhat strained situation. Undoubtedly there is a very unique dimension to their relationship given his status as a religious figure, but there is evidence she demonstrated a balance of humility and discernment in her relational life with him - *both* of which contributed to her developing understanding of the Dharma and to her liberation as an ordained nun.

This is illustrated in her persistence in offering the robes and in requesting ordination on behalf of herself and her female followers. On the one hand, she allowed herself to be taught and informed by her adopted son. For example, she learned to expand her particular love through offering the robes to the entire *saṃgha*. On the other hand, she made demands of him as she discerned was appropriate and necessary, which resulted in her ordination, liberation, and the establishment of a formal religious position for women at a critical point in history. This dynamic of relating with open-minded deference matched with discernment and insight seems applicable to and spiritually advantageous in any relationship if the goal is liberation from the binds of a reified, autonomous, and static notion of self and the mind's limited and habitual ideologies.

Mother: An Empty Concept

Mahāprajāpatī's story also invites an examination of the use of the term "mother" as it relates to assumptions made about the spiritual potential of people in such a role. The distinctively religious phase of Mahāprajāpatī's life occurred in her elder years. At this time, she was indeed still a mother, but not one of dependent children. Having raised her children and become widowed, she entered a phase of life in which she had no dependent social connections and she could focus exclusively on her religious development. At no point did she cease becoming a mother in the conventional sense of the term. While generalities can be useful, it seems problematic and oppressive to categorize mothers as explicitly "tethered to *saṃsāra*" or as merely meritorious, for a human life is bigger and more vast than the role of

mother, and mothers are multi-dimensional, much too complex and dynamic for them to be considered inherently limited in their spiritual and religious lives. Having reached the “state where everything stops,” (Murcott, 30) which is a reference to *nirodha* and subsequent *nirvāṇa*, Mahāprajāpatī is an example of the undefinability and open-dimensionality of a woman and a mother.

A Mother’s Merit

The first and final stanzas of Mahāprajāpatī’s song, together, are worth additional analysis.

“Homage to you Buddha,
Best of all creatures,
Who set me and many others
Free from pain” (Murcott, 30)

“Maya gave birth to Gautama
For the sake of us all.
She has driven back the pain of the sick and the dying” (Murcott, 31)

Contained within the poem, the Buddha is acknowledged as the source of her liberation, but interestingly, his birth mother, Māyā, is also given the same credit. This dual acknowledgement brings up questions and echoes of dependent origination and non-duality. Since a mother provides the material cause for a child’s birth, the child’s existence and deeds are dependent, in part, upon her. Could we say that mother and child are not two, but one? And if so, does that provide a metaphysical basis to say the deeds of the child are also the mother’s? In the interdependent web of contingent causation, there is no autonomously existent thing, and thus the effect of a mother, a father, and all supporting conditions is infinite and all causes, conditions and their effects, inseparable. In this sense, the project of mothering seems an extraordinary task, with significant spiritual stakes and potential for limitless generativity, a topic I’ll return to.

Kisā Gotamī & Paṭācārā

Kisā Gotamī and Paṭācārā shared a heartbreaking fate common in religious literature, and common in the poems of mothers in the *Therīgāthā*: the deaths of their children. Their stories are, therefore, representative of a number of related stories and the recurring theme of child mortality and mothers’ grief. Of this theme Murcott writes, “In a culture that taught women to lose and find themselves in mothering, infertility or the death of a child was a cause for terrible despair” (Murcott, 92). The poem attributed to Kisā Gotamī in the *Therīgāthā* contains themes similar to Paṭācārā’s story. This may be due

to mis-attribution or due to a conversational element of the poem in which Kisā Gotamī relates her suffering to Paṭācārā's. I summarize both stories and include just the one poem as representation here.

The Stories

Kisā Gotamī was a cousin of the Buddha, but was born into a considerably poorer family. She married a banker's son, but after customarily moving in with her in-laws, she was mistreated until she gave birth to a son. This earned her honor and respect among her husband's family. However, her son died as a small child and, having never seen death, Kisā Gotamī is said to have gone "mad," carrying the corpse of her child from house to house, begging for medicine. She came upon the Buddha who, seeing her wrought with grief, told her he would bring the child back to life if she could procure a white mustard seed, presumably a common household spice in ancient India, from a home where no one had ever died. Kisā Gotamī went house to house in search of the item, but returned empty handed. Having realized the universality of death, loss, and grief, Kisā Gotamī ordained as a nun and worked tirelessly to attain *nirvāṇa* (Murcott, 98).

Paṭācārā was arranged to be married to a man of similar status, but instead she took a family servant as her lover and ran away with him. She bore one son and became pregnant with her second. When she was near to the second birth she set off to travel to her parent's home, as was protocol. During the journey a massive storm came. As her husband was scrambling to fashion a hut for shelter, he was bitten by a poisonous snake and died. That night Paṭācārā gave birth alone and used her body to shelter her children. The following morning, she discovered her husband, dead, and was paralyzed with grief. With nothing else to do, she continued on the journey to her parent's home with two children in tow. The rains had filled the rivers; coming upon one such river she decided to cross with one child at a time. She carried the newborn across first and nestled him in a pile of leaves, looking back again and again as she returned for the second child. When she was mid-stream, a hawk swooped down and seized the newborn, carrying him off into the sky. In a panic, Paṭācārā screamed and waved her arms to try to get the hawk to release her little child. Thinking his mother was calling him, the older child stepped up to the river bank, fell in and drowned.

Helpless and utterly distraught, Paṭācārā did the only thing she could: continue on her journey home. Once she arrived to her hometown, she asked a local man if he knew of her family. In reply, he said, "Don't ask me about them. Ask about anything else" (Murcott, 45). She asked again saying that they were the only thing she had left. Reluctantly, he shared the news that the storm had collapsed her family home, killing everyone inside. At that very moment, her brother, mother, and father were burning

on a single funeral pyre. Paṭācārā “lost her mind” due to grief and wandered in circles until her clothes fell off and the townspeople chased her away. Paṭācārā eventually wandered to a grove where the Buddha was teaching. Gautama approached her and, having recovered her sanity through his presence, she shared her grief. The Buddha told her that in her many lives, she had shed more tears of grief than there were drops in all the oceans. He told her that, in death, even family cannot help, just as when she had died in other lives, her family could not help. Paṭācārā’s grief was soothed; she ordained, awakened and became a leader among nuns (Murcott, 44).

“[Kisā Gotamī:]
 The Guide of a restless,
 passionate humanity has said--
 to be a woman is to suffer.
 To live with co-wives is suffering.
 Women can give birth
 and, becoming depressed,
 cut their throats.
 Beautiful young women eat poison,
 but both will suffer in hell
 when the mother-murdering fetus
 comes not to life.⁷

[Paṭācārā:]
 On a journey, near to childbirth
 I found my husband dead
 and gave birth on the road;
 I hadn’t reached my family’s home.

I lost both sons
 and my husband dead on the road,
 then mother, father, brother
 burning on one pyre.

[Buddha or an enlightened nun:]
 Miserable woman,
 your family is destroyed,
 this pain can’t be measured,
 and your tears have been falling
 for thousands of lives.

[Paṭācārā:]

⁷ This stanza is vague and seems to discuss the suffering of women in general, which is due to postpartum depression, due to life with co-wives, possibly due to abortion or due to malicious acts done by co-wives including the poisoning of a younger, pregnant co-wife motivated by jealousy (Murcott, 104).

I have seen the jackals
 eating the flesh of my sons
 in the cemetery.
 My family destroyed,
 my husband dead,
 despised by everyone,
 I found what does not die.

[Kisā Gotamī:]
 I have practiced the Great
 Eightfold Way
 straight to the undying.
 I have come to the great peace
 I have looked into the mirror
 of the Dharma.

The arrow is out.
 I have put my burden down.
 What had to be done has been done

Sister Kisā Gotamī
 with a free mind
 has said this” (Murcott, 30-31)

Analysis

The First Noble Truth: There is Suffering

Kisā Gotamī’s story is often told to convey the insight of the First Noble Truth. Perhaps Kisā Gotamī’s story is so popular in conveying this theme because the potency of the mother-child bond is easy for many people to relate to and be moved by. It may also resonate because there were and are many women afflicted by the loss of a child. The insight of the First Noble Truth is “there is suffering” and especially refers to the recognition of universal suffering and the nature of *saṃsāra*. The Buddha’s request for a mustard seed from a home that hadn’t been touched by death helped Kisā Gotamī to realize the shared fate of all beings: the universality of loss, suffering, and death. Similarly, the Buddha guided Paṭācārā to recognize the inevitability of death and one’s helplessness in stopping it. For both women, these insights inspired, or perhaps demanded, “world renunciation,” the vigorous pursuit of eliminating suffering, and refuge in “what does not die.” Susan Murcott is quick to remind that active mothering and becoming an *arhat* were likely incompatible. However, insight into the First Noble Truth, renunciation, and refuge were all seen as prerequisites to this attainment. It seems evident that this insight, for Kisā

Gotamī, came not only as a function of the Buddha’s guidance, but also due to her attachment and love for her child, not necessarily despite of it. Because the love and attachment ran deeply, so too did her grief. This deep grief seemed to contribute the energy that catalyzed such an insight. Echoes of similar deep and transformative grief due to infant death can be found in the biographies of later, prominent Buddhist mothers like Chökyi Drönma (15th century) and Tsultrim Allione (21st century).

Particular and Universal Love and Grief

It is important to remember that early Buddhism’s doctrinal treatment of motherly attachment was not favorable, and it positioned familial attachment as antithetical to awakening. Thus, the early Buddhist perspective might have been more likely to attribute Kisā Gotamī’s insight and pursuit of peace to the Buddha and his universalizing advice, a sentiment Reiko Ohnuma sees as problematic and reminiscent of gendered tensions in the field of moral development pioneered by Lawrence Kohlberg and Carol Gilligan (Ohnuma, 40). In Kohlberg’s attempts to establish patterns of moral development, he concluded that impartiality, universality, and logical moral reasoning were superior to that based on particular interpersonal relationships and emotionality. His assistant, Carol Gilligan, observed that the hierarchy construed by his research privileged and valued the experiences typical of males over females, who tended “to see a world comprised of relationships rather than of people standing alone, a world that coheres through human connection rather than through systems of rules” (Gilligan, 29). In her book *In a Different Voice*, Gilligan argues for developmental models and research based upon a non-competitive moral dialectic of impartial justice and particularistic care instead of those that fail to recognize the experiences of women (Gilligan, 174).

Similarly, Ohnuma poignantly asks “can particularistic grief be accommodated and perhaps even recognized as a legitimate basis for developing valuable Buddhist qualities such as empathy, love, and compassion?” (Ohnuma, 41) While this is an important and relevant question, I don’t think it is prudent to overlook the value of universalizing suffering. Ohnuma seems to be concerned that this approach automatically or inherently diminishes the value of particularistic love and grief. However, it can also be viewed as a form of fostering relationship with all of reality *through* the emotional power of particular love or grief. A Vajrayāna reading of this story would credit both the influence of the Master’s universalizing advices *and* the energetic potency of Kisā Gotamī’s particularistic emotional experience as contributing to the crucial insight that preceded her spiritual attainment. The difference between a Vajrayāna reading and a secular reading concerning the value and power of particularistic love, grief, and emotion relies upon whether the emotion is reified or grasped versus simply experienced or utilized. Ohnuma perceives the early Buddhist approach as “inflicting violence” on motherhood through stories of

maternal grief that convey the First Noble Truth (Ohnuma, 48). However, I think this can only be considered as true if the emotion, role or experiencer she refers to is reified as self-existent, autonomous, permanent, and independent instead of non-self, dynamic, and interdependent, as per the philosophical principles. In other words, the reason why grief inflicts unbearable suffering is due to the grasping to self as “isolated, independent sufferer” instead of “interdependent and related experiencer.” Moreover, the unbearable suffering of grief arises when the emotion appears to be exclusively “mine and particular” instead of “ours and universal.” In both of these examples there is a “closing down” around or projection of impossibly definitive realities, the very mental habit that generates suffering. Nevertheless, the early Buddhist narratives certainly don’t express a sensitivity to grief experience as would be skillful and typical in a psychologically-sensitive setting today. Furthermore, it is not very likely that early Buddhism explicitly tolerated the value and potency of notions of both particular *and* universal suffering that I advocate for here.

Buddhist Refuge

Paṭācārā’s story offers a variance on similar themes, perhaps with a greater emphasis on refuge. I think what is so astounding about this narrative is the enormity of her loss. The fact that she loses absolutely everyone in her life, six deaths in total, confers utter disbelief on behalf of the reader. The enormity of her loss begs the questions “Where do you go and what do you do when everything is gone? When you have no familiar reference points?” While this relates less to her specific experience as a mother, the theme of refuge is common in this genre of stories, so it seems useful to address it here. Buddhist refuge is the principle of seeking solace, inspiration, perhaps “protection,” in that which supports lasting satisfaction as is symbolized by the Buddha, Dharma, and Saṃgha. Buddhist meditation includes rigorous practices dedicated to calling to mind what Paṭācārā experienced, the truth that separation from all loved ones, possessions, even one’s own body is inevitable. Such practices are meant to inspire renunciation and proper refuge, which is to say, to orient the practitioner to a path of activity that leads them “beyond death.” As with Kisā Gotamī’s story, I am compelled to speculate that Paṭācārā’s renunciation and refuge was so complete because of the immensity of her love and therefore her grief. That Paṭācārā encountered these tragedies just a few days postpartum, a time expected to be rich with intimate familial connections and worldly fulfillment, only serves to magnify the necessity for refuge and redemption.

11th Century Tantrikas: Nangsa Obum & Machig Labdrön

Machig Labdrön and Nangsa Obum were contemporaries of one another during a Buddhist renaissance in Tibet; it was a place and time when many Indian texts and teachings became available in Tibet and the Vajrayāna flourished. Their biographies, translated in Tsultrim Allione's *Women of Wisdom*, are liberation stories written in the hagiographic model. They feature auspicious and miraculous signs and prophecies at their births, both women are represented as having worldly beauty and wealth, and their life stories include struggle, renunciation, liberation, and significant teaching legacies. Unlike the great majority of Buddhist hagiographies from this period, what makes these figures' stories unique is that they are first, women, and second, mothers. Their relationships to mothering, however, are notably quite conflicted because there was no paradigm for an enlightened worldly mother and monastic renunciation, or at least long-term solitary retreat, was considered the ultimate religious pursuit. Nevertheless, their stories add complexity to our discussion and perhaps even insight for women today who either choose or find themselves in the circumstance of mothering while pursuing dedicated Dharma practice. The themes of their story echo those found in the more contemporary biographies we will encounter.

Nangsa Obum

Nangsa Obum lived in the 11th or 12th centuries in central Tibet. Her biography is recorded in the form of a dramatic Tibetan opera (*A-che lhamo*) and so the narrative unfolds theatrically, in the form of both song and prose (Allione, *Women of Wisdom* 221). Her biography falls into another Tibetan genre, that of a *delog*, which refers to a person who has died, seen the afterworlds and returned to life. This element of her story is distinct and significant, especially when facets of her world-renunciation are difficult to understand by contemporary standards.

Story

Nangsa was born to parents of average means who performed regular practice dedicated to the Goddess Tārā, a Mahāyāna Bodhisattva who “intercedes in moments of desperation” and is known as the “champion of the downtrodden” and will “help in even the most mundane matters” (Allione, *Women of Wisdom* 221). Whereas the Buddha's compassion may be considered transcendent, impartial, and perhaps too distant or removed to confer comfort, evoking Tārā carries with it an implicit, if not explicit, maternal

quality, which is perhaps to say a particularistic quality of love. In the Vajrayāna, Tārā is often viewed as the female form of the Buddha's compassion, a counterpart to the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, indicating the degree to which she is revered as an exemplar of Buddhist virtue. Nangsa's birth was preceded by a set of auspicious dreams involving the Goddess Tārā, and, like is common in hagiographic record, on the day of her birth she testified that her life mission was to help all sentient beings and proclaimed herself as a descendant or emanation of the Goddess herself. Nangsa was an extraordinary child, beautiful, compassionate, wise, and intelligent and she happily assisted her parents on their family farm.

When she turned of the age to marry, Nangsa had no interest in doing so and wished to stay with her parents and practice Dharma. "She always thought about practicing meditation and had no thoughts of marriage" (Allione, *Women of Wisdom* 225). Her family rejected the many suitors that pursued her. One day, she met a local king and he vigorously pursued her as a wife for his son. After resisting and pleading with her parents to let her practice Dharma, she reluctantly agreed to marry, but only for fear that the powerful king would kill her parents if she refused. Nangsa married the king's son, moved to the palace, and after seven years, gave birth to a son. It is likely that Nangsa was in her mid-teens at the time of the marriage and in her early twenties at the time of the birth. Though Nangsa worked hard and was a virtuous queen, her presence threatened her husband's jealous aunt, Ani Nyemo, who grew increasingly cruel toward her. The mistreatment she experienced inspired even greater renunciation of *samsāra* which is evidenced by a song she sings while nursing her son:

"This woman wishes to become accomplished in Dharma!
 My son, children are like a rope that pulls a woman into *samsāra*.
 Lhau Darpo, you make it impossible to leave,
 And I cannot take you with me as this would create obstacles in my practice.
 I wanted to practice the Dharma but I got married instead.
 I tried to help my husband, but I made Ani Nyemo jealous.
 I cannot return to my parents, because I am married.
 "Woe is me," she cried sadly.
 My beautiful form, you, my son and the rest of my relatives are big obstacles for my Dharma practice.
 But Ani Nyemo is like my guru because she had made me turn to the Dharma.
 When you can get along by yourself, If I am still alive,
 Nangsa will go to the Dharma.
 Obum will not stay here.
 She will stay in a simple retreat place" (Allione, *Women of Wisdom* 232-233)

The relationship between Nangsa and Ani Nyemo grew more tense as time went on. When wandering yogis came to the palace begging for food, Nangsa was inclined to support them in their dharma practice, whereas Ani Nyemo viewed Nangsa as flirting with charlatans. Not wanting to cause conflict among family members, Nangsa didn't defend herself against these accusations and received

several beatings from her in-laws. Between the false accusations, the beatings, and finally, having her son taken from her, Nangsa is said to have died of a broken heart. After death, Nangsa meets the Lord of Death and sees for herself the afterworlds, the heavens and hell realms. Through her prayers, merit, and under the pretense that she is a *ḍākinī* and not an ordinary woman, the Lord of Death sends her back to her body to help others as a *delog*. Upon returning to her body, Nangsa is bathed in rainbow light and flowers fall from the sky; her renunciation was as strong as ever, having experienced, directly, the impermanence of life and the hell realms that may follow. In a song she expresses her renunciation of her wealth, her husband, her beauty, her body, and even her son:

“When my mother’s daughter, Nangsa Obum, was alive,
I worked hard for my son.
But when I died he could not help me,
He was like a rope pulling me into *samsāra*.
Problems arise from worldly children.
I have no attachment to you Lhau Darpo!” (Allione, *Women of Wisdom* 250)

In reply, her wailing son begs her to stay, comparing himself to a monk without a guru, a bird without wings, grass with no water, and a leper without friends. The dialogue between Nangsa and her young son is a particularly intense, prolonged, and emotional section of the drama. Nangsa cries and feels sorry for him but reminds him that death is inevitable, and attachment is futile. To this her son begs her to wait to study the Dharma until he is old enough to accompany her, and he suggests traditional long-life practices to protect them in the meantime. His excruciating lament is over ten verses, all of which implore her to consider the role she plays in his well-being and the related ethic of Buddhist compassion. He does this through various use of simile like the following:

“If I, who am like an eagle,
Staying on a high rocky mountain,
Am not connected to the mountain,
Even if I am not killed,
I will not grow my big wings.
So please wait until I am big enough to fly,
Then we will fly high in the sky and practice the Dharma.
Until then we will not be exploded by lightning
Because we will get a powerful guru to protect us.” (Allione, *Women of Wisdom* 253-254)

He continues:

“Remember compassion is the most important thing in
Dharma, and do not be angry.
Your friendly little boy is crying, and if you do not have
Compassion and do not listen to me,
That is not Dharma, mother!

If you have compassion, even if you live in an ordinary house,
 You are practicing the Dharma.
 If you do not have compassion,
 There is no difference between you,
 And the wild animals who live in caves” (Allione, *Women of Wisdom* 254-255)

Through the pleading of her son, her husband, and her husband’s family, Nangsa agrees to return with them to teach them Dharma. At this point, the biography portrays Nangsa as the very emanation of a *buddha*. However, she is saddened when her family members are unable to understand the teachings, and once more she sets her sights on leaving her family, seeking a guru and entering retreat. Yet again her wishes are rejected, and so she asks if she can at least go to visit her parents. Her husband agrees, and he sends Nangsa and Lhau Darpo to her family home. Nangsa shares her story and her longing to practice Dharma with her parents and friends. What is most significant about the songs of this section of the biography is the intensity of her renunciation.

“Life is like a rainbow in the grass,
 Even though it looks nice,
 It has no real worth” (Allione, *Women of Wisdom* 264)

“Life is like the setting sun,
 It looks strong and beautiful,
 But before you know it, it is gone” (Allione, *Women of Wisdom* 265)

Nangsa’s mother challenges her aspirations, however,

“If you really want to practice the Dharma, it is very difficult.
 If you think like this, why did you have a baby?
 Do not try to do what you are not capable of doing:
 Practicing the Dharma.
 Do what you know how to do:
 Be a housewife.” (Allione, *Women of Wisdom* 221)

An argument unfolds between Nangsa and her mother, and her mother locks her out of the house with Lhau Darpo inside. Nangsa sees the hidden blessing in the unfortunate falling out. Her son, again, has been taken from her, so she leaves to find the guru Sakya Gyaltsen and to finally practice Dharma. Sakya Gyaltsen teaches her both the foundational and advanced methods, gives her Vajrayāna initiations, and she dedicates herself to meditation. When her family comes looking for her some years later, their minds are turned to the Dharma through her spiritual power. Ani Nyemo, Nangsa’s husband and her father-in-law give up their worldly lives and remain with her in the mountains, while her son, Lhau Darpo

becomes a virtuous king who influences his subjects to practice Dharma (Allione, *Women of Wisdom* 221-279).

Analysis

The Secular and the Sacred in 11th Century Tibet

Perhaps in no other biography referenced in this chapter is the conflict between the sacred and the secular so pronounced. The tension between universal and particular love, furthermore, permeates the pages of Nangsa Obum's narrative. Taken out of context, it creates a tremendous dichotomy between motherhood and spiritual pursuit, but what seems more salient than this dichotomy is the social oppression and pressure which women like Nangsa were subject to. Nangsa's longing to practice Dharma was a consistent preference since childhood. As such, her family rejected suitors for a period of time. It wasn't until a powerful king persisted in pursuing her, ignoring her expressed wishes, that Nangsa and her family relented. At this turn of events, Nangsa sought to do the conventionally virtuous act which was to protect her family from harm and acquiesce to the king's demands. It is likely that Nangsa was a teenager at this time, as this was the marrying age. If we were to speculate about the maturity of a teenage girl and her place in turn-of-the millennium Tibetan society, we can imagine that while she may have had clear religious instincts to reject social expectations, it would be quite difficult to refuse the persistence of a powerful, elder, male leader. In her father-in-law's house, she was psychologically mistreated and physically abused to the point of death. It is therefore unsurprising that Nangsa Obum desperately wanted to leave. What is conventionally more difficult to understand is her willingness to leave her son, whom she clearly feels love and affection for, on account of her religious pursuit.

Death, Renunciation, Particular Love and Universal Love

On the one hand, that Nangsa found herself in a situation of domestic and familial obligation is largely due to a social structure unsympathetic to the desires and freedoms of women. In such a setting, a woman who is forced into marriage and motherhood despite her wishes is perhaps justified in viewing her child and circumstance as a fetter to her freedom and consistently expressed aims. At this point in the story, however, she is willing to stay with Lhau Darpo until he is old enough to be more independent. It is not until her family beats her to death and she has the direct and profound experience of the hell realms and life's impermanence and uncertainty that she is decidedly willing to give up even her child for liberation, in the service of all sentient beings. However, at this point in the narrative, we also see that she is compelled by the sorrow and longing of her son and implored by his call to compassion "in an ordinary

house.” Given that Nangsa’s son was apparently an infant or small child at the time of her death and return (although timelines are quite vague in this narrative), we might imagine that the heart-wrenching dialogue between them represents her own inner conflict between mother-love and universal-love or the secular and the sacred. Or, it may represent the conflict between her religious instincts and social expectations.

In any case, it is ironic that Nangsa is spiritually affiliated with Tārā, who is depicted as the maternal caregiver of the downtrodden but is merely one of two faces of enlightened Buddha nature. It appears in Nangsa’s narrative that the dualism between particular and universal love is pronounced because of the oppressive social setting in which she lived. However, Nangsa, through circumstance, eventually does leave her family and son to pursue Dharma study and practice. One might consider this outcome as privileging impartial and universal love, but I think it’s also apparent that Nangsa reconciles this duality of particular and universal love with her greater vision to instruct her family members in the Dharma.

One aspect of Nangsa’s story that can’t be neglected, however, is its apparent assertion that active mothering and/or particularistic motherly *attachment* is incongruent with serious Dharma practice. Several times Nangsa sings, “children are like a rope that pulls a woman into *samsāra*” (Allione 232, 250). This, of course, is a principal theme here and elsewhere in Buddhist doctrine and is one that inspired my investigation of this topic. This theme points us to consider the logistical realities of active mothering as they are likely to conflict with the dedication, time, and energy required by serious contemplative pursuit. Furthermore, the entire narrative elicits contemplation of the uncertainty of the time of one’s death and the necessity for urgent, dedicated practice, if one takes the *bodhisattva* (universal love) commitment seriously. Nangsa’s intense renunciation, her expression of the futility of grasping to this life and to familial connections, and her eventual departure to practice Dharma resembles Gautama Buddha’s narrative and exemplifies the incongruity of mothering or parenting (and therefore particular attachment) with the urgent pursuit of spiritual development through meditative practice. But I don’t believe we can say that Nangsa reconciles this with her relational compassion and affection toward her son, given that her separation from him occurs through circumstance and not through her own agency.

Discerning Love from Attachment

At this point, I think it is valuable to discern motherly love from relational attachment. These two dimensions of maternal affective experience have, until now, been conflated, and I believe that they are still largely conflated in this narrative. Motherly love, in this distinction, could be considered the virtuous

and wise aspects of maternal emotion, namely compassion, kindness, and selfless caring. Relational attachment and its consequent suffering, by contrast, arises from the grasping onto a person or relationship as static or lasting or as providing self-identity or satisfaction, an object of critique in the Buddhist interpretation of wisdom. Furthermore, grasping as such could also be said to be rooted in ignorance of the causal factors giving rise to the relationship and the other's self-identity, as per the wisdom of the Second Turning doctrines. Finally, from this viewpoint, grasping is forgetfulness of the relationship or the other person's suchness, effulgence or potentiality despite appearances and their nonexistent non-duality per the wisdom of the Third Turning teachings.

If we take into consideration the Third Turning teachings, which Nangsa theoretically would have had access to as a Vajrayāna practitioner, the apparent conflict between mothering and awakening dissolves. Because mothering, relationships, and attachment are empty, they are also full, and have sprung forth from the ultimate reality, the luminous ground of primordial wisdom and compassion. From this wisdom perspective, there is no problem with mothering, with relationships, even with attachment, from the perspective of ultimate truth. All is "workable" or "transformable." The beauty of this perspective is its synthesis of the secular and sacred; the complexity and caveat, however, is the necessity of establishing a foundation of attentional practice, inner renunciation and refuge and thereby attaining an authentic Vajrayāna view. Nangsa Obum's biography does not yet take us to this place of synthesis, although she is regarded by her disciples as fully enlightened.

An Enduring Message of Renunciation and Refuge

Religious biographies are written with various purposes in mind. They function in different ways, perhaps most importantly as an expression of skillful means, communicating Buddhist lessons and inspiring faith in the teachings. What does Nangsa Obum's biography communicate to female Vajrayāna practitioners in similar situations? Does it compel all female Tantrikas to avoid childbearing, or suggest that mothers who want to be serious Dharma practitioners leave their families? Perhaps. I would suggest, however, a more tenable, yet equally compelling interpretation: for mothers on the Vajrayāna path, at a minimum, *inner* renunciation and refuge are utterly essential. To be a mother *and* a serious Dharma practitioner is to awaken to and accept the impermanence of the mother-child relationship and the futility of ignorant grasping to self- and other-identity, despite the depth of emotional affectivity this relationship confers. Nangsa Obum's biography establishes the superiority of Dharma as a source of refuge in all circumstances of impermanence and suffering. For Nangsa, the *delog*, this wasn't a dogmatic religious idea. Although an absence of female role models and social conventions may have played a role in her

inability to reconcile herself as worldly mother and *buddha* in the biographical context, this insight into uncertainty and impermanence was her reality. In this alternative interpretation, Nangsa's biography invites the reader into an extraordinary dialectic: profound maternal love and profound inner renunciation, or release, as compatible and co-existent realities.

Machig Labdrön

Story

Machig Labdrön (1055-1145) is Tibet's second most celebrated and popular female mystic, after Yeshe Tsogyel, of whom she is said to be a reincarnation. Her biography begins with the prayer "Obeisance to the non-human mother, the Wisdom Dakini!" (Allione, *Women of Wisdom* 172). Ironically, while the historical Machig was female, her narrative is adorned with much supernatural ideation, and declares her mind was actually that of an accomplished male yogi in India, whose consciousness was transferred to Tibet. Machig's mother, Bum Cham, had mystical dreams and supernatural powers (*siddhi*) at the time of her conception. Machig was born to a noble and wealthy family of Dharma practitioners and was recognized as a *ḍākinī* at birth due to many special signs such as spontaneously arising incense, rainbow colored lights, and not least of all, her possession of a third eye. Machig was well educated in religious texts at an early age, a fast learner who quickly surpassed her teachers including Geshe Aton, who had attained the highest degree of monastic education. Around the age of ten, Machig became a professional reader (a person who recites religious texts), and soon after became the most accomplished reader, determined by speed, in the area. A teacher named Lama Drapa gave Machig empowerments to accompany her deep study of the *Prajñāpāramitā* text, after which she gained realization. Machig met a significant teacher named Phadampa Sangye who famously instructed her further:

"Confess all your hidden faults!
 Approach that which you find repulsive!
 Whoever you think you cannot help, help them!
 Anything you are attached to, let go of it!
 Go to places that scare you, like cemeteries!
 Sentient beings are as limitless as the sky,
 Be aware!
 Find the Buddha inside yourself!
 In the future your teaching will be as bright as the sun shining in the sky!" (Allione, *Women of Wisdom* 181)

Upon meeting another teacher, Sonam Drapa, Machig was tested on her realization of *prajñāpāramitā* which was yet incomplete. Sonam pointed Machig beyond the “textbook” conceptions of the teaching and to the natural wisdom available to the non-grasping mind. As such, Machig learned to examine her own mind and realized the emptiness and non-duality of demons, afflictions and all phenomena. Through these insights, Machig’s life took a dramatic turn, reflecting the non-grasping mind in which she dwelled. She began to wear only clothes that beggars cast off, she associated with lepers, and ate food from the garbage. “Pain and pleasure, near and far, passion and aggression all were experienced as ‘one taste’ in the space of things as they really are” (Allione, *Women of Wisdom* 183).

Machig spent a number of years studying with Lama Sonam and Phadampa Sangye and she eventually began to teach what she had learned and realized. *Dākinīs* came to her and told her to join with an accomplished Indian yogi named Topabhadra, suggesting that the union would stabilize her realization and that with him she would create a lineage through which her teachings would help countless sentient beings. Machig was resistant to the idea for some time, even after engaging in a sacred, sexual union with Topabhadra. However, her teachers urged her to marry and start a family and lineage with him. She had her first son at the age of twenty-four, a second son at the age of twenty-five and a *dākinī* daughter at the age of thirty. After Machig’s thirty fifth birthday, “she appeared to be tired of samsara and left her children there with her husband and went to Lab to see her two lamas” (Allione, *Women of Wisdom* 192). Machig spent seven years seeking and offering teachings and meditating in retreat, during which time the Goddess Tārā came to her and offered empowerment and encouragement. Most significantly, the Goddess confirmed Machig of her spiritual status as an incarnation of *Prajñāpāramitā*, the Goddess of the perfection of wisdom, also known as the Great Mother or the Mother of all Buddhas. Upon hearing this Machig asks: “How can I know that we are not the same? Why am I the source of all understanding of the Dharma? Where is the Great Mother now?” (Allione, *Women of Wisdom* 196). The Goddess Tārā responds with an elaborate cosmology of how Machig *is* the Great Mother, which begins, “{t]he Great Mother is the void state of all the Dharmas which we call Mother of all Creation. The Mother is the Mother of the Buddhas of the Three Times, the Dharmata of the Absolute State, beyond all obstructions, the pure essence of egoless voidness-*prajna*...” (Allione, *Women of Wisdom* 196-197). Of Machig’s long-term religious impact as the embodiment of ultimate reality, personified as the Great Mother, the Goddess Tārā said, “Then, through your children, your lineage will continue like a string of pearls, one right after the other” (Allione, *Women of Wisdom* 195).

At the age of forty-two, Machig reunited with her family. Over the years, Topabhadra had instructed the children and they had become well-educated in religious practice. Although the eldest son

did not become a Dharma practitioner, Machig educated the younger son and daughter and she looked after her young son in his years as a remote retreat yogi. The rest of Machig's life was spent teaching, and she was especially renowned as the progenitor of the esoteric practice of *Chöd*, a ritual practice based on the *Prajñāpāramitā* that utilizes and leverages the emotional energy of fear and the wisdom of emptiness to “cut through” subtle self-grasping. Machig Labdrön's *Chöd* is said to be one of a limited number of Vajrayāna practice lineages that originated in Tibet and spread to India, as opposed to originating in India and spreading to Tibet.⁸ Machig's children and close disciples were pivotal in propagating her teachings, which are still thriving today. She passed into the land of the *ḍākinīs* at the age of ninety-nine (Allione, *Women of Wisdom* 165-205).

Analysis

Contributions of Sociological Conditions

The first biographical theme worth noting here is Machig's birth into a family of wealth and her early education and high degree of literacy in religious texts. This theme of wealth, nobility, or royalty and early education occurs in several biographies of women and mothers, including fifteenth century mother-turned-master Chökyi Drönma, who was born as royalty and is considered a reincarnation of Machig Labdrön (Diemberger). Similarly, Sera Khandro, while not wealthy her entire life, was born into an urban, aristocratic family in Lhasa and was taught to read and write in Chinese by a private tutor in her youth (Jacoby, 32-33). Dagmola Sakya, an esteemed contemporary Tibetan teacher, had the rare privilege of a good education early in life, notably at the insistence of an uncle who was a high-ranking monk; Dagmola was the only girl in her town to attend school (Sakya, 6). This pattern implies several things. From the Buddhist perspective, birth into wealth and access to education indicates the accumulation of merit in past lives. This is consonant with the common attribution of a woman's spiritual success as due to her being born as a *ḍākinī*, a being of special status, in contrast with ordinary females. Naturally, we can't know whether the premonitions, dreams, prophecies and mystical events of the narrative births were perceived concurrent with the births or a form of historical revisionism, nor can we confirm or deny the sequence of events that lead to the birth of an individual's consciousness, such as the rebirth process. What is evident is that, at a minimum, access to wealth and education, especially literacy, was likely a valuable support to these women's spiritual pursuits and to the establishment of a legacy through biographical record. We might imagine that a mother with an education and access to wealth is

⁸ The preface identifying her consciousness as a male Indian yogi, however, may have been one literary method of establishing lineage authority.

significantly better positioned to pursue religious practice than an illiterate mother, such as one who tirelessly works on a farm while perpetually pregnant and raising a large family. Such wealthy or educated women had the “leisure and fortune” unavailable to a majority of women in their milieu. By recalling the economic conditions of greater Tibet, Tibetan women’s inferior social status and the likely consequences both had for working mothers, we can better appreciate the advantages - logistically, economically, psychologically, and intellectually - enjoyed by women of an educated and noble demographic and presume that these factors played a critical role in their pursuits and in their written legacy. The further implication of this fact is that both popular and limited conceptions of motherhood in the religious domain depended upon and were upheld by a cultural context and society framed by systematic gender discrimination as well as economically challenging and physically laborious living conditions.

Spiritual Generativity: Activity of Enlightened Mind

The most prominent theme of Machig’s biography with respect to her role as a mother concerns her creation of a family and a spiritual lineage with Tobabhadra. Like many religious exemplars, monastic or not, Machig was uninterested in, and even resistant to, the typically mundane concerns of marriage and children. Machig was an exemplar of renunciation, known to wander and sleep in cemeteries, to wear rags, and eat garbage; she was unaffected in the face of discomfort, pain, disease, and death. It was only at the urging of *dākinīs* that Machig agreed to marry Topabhadra, principally for the sake of stabilizing her realization and producing lineage-children. Thus, as it is explained, we can understand her actions as not driven by passion, desire, or biological impulse, but by what could be described as relative and ultimate *bodhicitta*. At the point when Machig marries Topabhadra and gives birth to her children, we might consider her actions as relative *bodhicitta*, acts of “goodwill,” performed in order to immediately serve sentient beings around her as she simultaneously pursues complete awakening for the sake of relieving the suffering of all sentient beings. When, however, the goddess Tārā empowers her as the incarnation of Prajñāpāramitā, the Mother of Buddhas, and inseparable from the Great Mother that is ultimate reality, we can understand this to mean that she was completely stabilized in realization. After this moment, Machig asks Tārā, “Great Noble Mother, everything that you have said is clear. Tell me, if I spread the Vajrayana teachings you have given me, will that benefit beings and increase?” (Allione, *Women of Wisdom* 197). Thus her support of her children and the establishment of her lineage is perhaps more akin to ultimate *bodhicitta*, and is better described as the compassionate activity of awakened mind or of buddha-nature, or of the Great Mother which is the effulgent, empty state

inseparable from phenomena. What is remarkable for the purposes of this thesis is the portrayal of worldly motherhood as enlightened activity itself! This enlightened activity rests upon Machig's unafflicted motivations and her generative insight that doing so would further propagate the teachings, thus qualifying the activity of childbearing and childrearing as *bodhicitta*.

Biographical Dualities and Non-Dual View

Machig's biography is, in one sense, exciting for anyone sympathetic to the concept of a worldly mother's pursuit of spiritual awakening. As I just described, it offers a vision, or at least an example, in which childbearing and childrearing are both enlightening and enlightened activities. Furthermore, the very practice generated and preserved by Machig's life, insights, family, and lineage is one of cutting through even the most subtle dualistic delusions by means of direct engagement with fear, *samsāra*, repulsion, challenge and difficulty. Perhaps there is no more revolutionary Buddhist teaching to be produced by and for a woman and mother burdened by social discrimination and the demands of her role. Elizabeth Mattis Namgyel remarks that it is notably the female lineage masters of Tibet that tend to encourage confronting difficulty, darkness, and challenge and emphasize the importance of what is conventionally *samsāra* as fodder for spiritual practice. She continues, "with 'the view,' our experiences are ours to own and to make meaning of" (Namgyel, "Machig"). This means, nothing is outside the realm of the sacred; nothing is untransformable. Everything can be used for awakening with a practiced mind; in this approach primacy is given to the mind and to subjectivity.

While the provocative and inspiring nondual wisdom of Machig's legacy and practice lineage might be encouraging, we must still appreciate the hints of the dualistic traditional view that are conveyed in the narrative. Perhaps our first hint of the traditional conception of motherhood as antithetical to spiritual practice is Machig's disinterest in marrying and bearing children. The second, and more prominent hint, comes at the moment when, despite her advanced realizations, Machig "appeared to be tired of samsara" (Allione, *Women of Wisdom* 192), taking leave of family life to pursue studies with her gurus and engage in formal retreat practice. It is somewhat comical that although Machig produced children in a high, holy act of *bodhicitta*, the text makes a traditional reference to mothering as *samsāra*. From another perspective, we might appreciate the apparent mutuality and equality of Machig and Topabhadra's relationship such that their division of the workload was non-traditional, in the sense that the duties of child-rearing were not placed solely on Machig, and they could trade roles as their spiritual needs dictated. Machig's seven-year hiatus from family life may, furthermore, echo a similar sentiment as in Nangsa Obum's biography, one in which an "autonomy of renunciation" is maintained and essential

to enlightened family life. The great paradox to enjoy in analyzing Machig's biography is that she realizes herself as the Great Mother yet her enlightened work as a biological mother remains, paradoxically, mundane. While I think it futile to split hairs over the use of language or overstate the ironies of religious metaphor, I think in some good humor we might appreciate that this paradox is contained in the very first line of this translation of her biography: "Obeisance to the *non-human* mother, the Wisdom Dakini!" (Allione, *Women of Wisdom* 172)

Gyayum Chenmo "Great Mother": Diki Tsering

Story

The mother of His Holiness, the fourteenth Dalai Lama, Diki Tsering, was born to a peasant family in Amdo (rural Tibet) in 1901. She self-describes and is known as a very simple woman with an unexpectedly colorful life. Her biography *Dalai Lama, My Son*, produced from interviews conducted and translated by her grandchildren, describes a joyful early childhood with an exceptionally fond relationship with her grandfather and a handful of auspicious signs indicating that her life would be special, even though she was female, generally viewed as an economic liability for families in farming society (Tsering 9-11). Diki Tsering, born as Sonam Tsomo, never learned to read or write, as was typical of peasant people, and her life vision was humble. She says "We were born without much fanfare, matured into adolescence, were married, had children ourselves, and then were overtaken by death. We lived the entire cycle simply, in the belief that people are ordinary and that existence is natural" (Tsering, 3). Her upbringing was marked by religion and hard work. She describes her religious life as one of great faith and tradition, but not one of deep intellectual understanding (Tsering, 17, 23). Religious activities consisted of daily prayers, mantra recitations, deity offerings, monastic blessings, and oracle readings. She attributes both faith and fate as that which propelled her into "the highest position a mother could hold" (Tsering, 95) and a strong sense of tradition as the source of her perseverance and strength through the many difficulties she encountered (Tsering, 5).

By the age of about six or seven, Sonam, as she was called then, became immersed in learning the tasks of running a household which included cooking, cleaning, keeping the hearth, and sewing clothing. She says, "[t]his was the education for girls in 1907" (Tsering, 17). Life did not become easier for Diki after her betrothal and marriage at the age of sixteen. As was customary, she went to live with her husband and in-laws several hours commute from her family's home. Daughter-in-laws were treated like

servants and were expected to be thoroughly amiable. Diki would wake at one in the morning to begin her household work for the day; she recalls her elderly mother-in-law as harsh, demanding, and not performing any work herself. Diki was required to be subservient to her husband who preferred riding fast horses and gambling to farm work and was rarely at home; she describes him as an honest man but domineering and hot-tempered. For many years Diki survived on only three to four hours of sleep each night. Of this difficult period, she says,

“But I’m a Buddhist by upbringing, and it is our belief that in order to live a full and self-contained life, it is imperative to suffer. Thus you can grow and develop not merely into an adult, but into a being who is fully human. It was this basic creed that saved us women, especially, from despair and hopelessness. This faith saved me from the death of my spirit during the first few hard years of my marriage. Without this strength, I would have succumbed to a bereft existence.” (Tsering, 43)

Diki gave birth to her first child (of sixteen) at the age of nineteen. As she gave birth to her youngest child well into her forties, a significant portion of her eighty-year existence was dedicated exclusively to mothering. In fact, her grandchildren remember her central purpose in life as being quite clear: “the care and guidance of her children and grandchildren...[t]hrough war, hardship, illness, death, and in spite of the inconveniences of politics and national borders, she was the rock to which her family was moored...[s]he was the harbor where safety and love could always be found” (Thondup, x). Diki describes giving birth to all sixteen of her children alone and in the stables. Typically, after a day or two of rest, she would begin working again with the baby on her back, since there was no one else to do her household work. Not only was her birth process and recovery solitary and physically laborious, but emotionally demanding, given that only seven of her sixteen children survived past infancy, although she doesn’t speak to this issue at length in her biography. She does mention at several points in her biography that despite intense suffering, she valued self-containment and preferred to withhold emotional displays due to pride, a desire for privacy, and cultural factors, such as fearing that too much emotion may inhibit a child’s spirit from transmigrating after death (Tsering, 63, 68).

The young reincarnations of the Dalai Lama, and other high lamas, are sought out and selected in early childhood based upon special signs and dreams after a high lama’s death. Raising and tending to the young Dalai Lama was an utterly expected event in the life of a woman who had the “ordinary ambition of being a good housewife and mother.” She continues, speaking of the dramatic changes required as she transitioned from country peasant to the religious and political spotlight, “I feel very tender towards the young girl that I have forced myself to forget” (Tsering, 4). While mothering the Dalai Lama was a source of pride and honor for Diki, after transitioning from rural farm life to the life of luxury

and aristocracy in Lhasa, she longed for the freedom, peace, privacy, and the satisfaction of a hard day's work that she experienced in Amdo. "To succeed with my crops and with my home and family was to me the epitome of a good life" (Tsering, 97). One year after the birth of her youngest child, her husband died at the age of 48. Soon after, Tibet and the Dalai Lama were met with dangerous political turmoil both within the Tibetan government and due to mounting tensions with the Chinese. This time of tension included years of pressures to acquiesce to a Chinese agenda and threats of violence to her family, which climaxed with her covert, dramatic, and arduous escape, along with the Dalai Lama, out of Tibet and into India.

Analysis

Mother to a Buddha: Generative Caregiving

Diki's memoir contains some elements of a spiritual biography, such as the special signs at her birth, but it doesn't make any explicit claims as a liberation story. Generally speaking, her biography, written for a global audience, describes much more the aspects of worldly life than esoteric religious experience, focusing on things such as food, festivals, and culture. However, it does offer some clues as to the inner life and spiritual experiences of a peasant, woman, and mother thrust into a life of religious and political status. Of the religiously experiential themes that pepper her life, one is her warmth, nurturing, and loving kindness to her children and grandchildren. Diki embodies the cultural norm of selfless mother and offers little complaint. Of her large and accomplished family, she is undoubtedly the matriarch. When the Dalai Lama talks about his mother, he describes her dearly and with reverence, as uneducated but his first teacher of loving-kindness and compassion--some of the most valued qualities of Buddhists (qtd. By Rawcliffe). To the Tibetan people, Diki was known as "Gyayum Chenmo" which means Great Mother and has the connotation of the enlightened womb that gives birth to a *buddha* or *bodhisattva*, which the Dalai Lama is considered. What are we to say of the simple woman who gives birth to, feeds, bathes, and protects her children with great love and care, such that her children share this love and care with a great many people, and at least one becomes an icon of compassion for millions? Is the act of feeding and nurturing mundane or enlightened? Neither or both? This theme resembles that of Māyā's, the Buddha's birth mother, whose soteriological status is positively oriented, yet also incomplete, in dependence upon her giving birth to a great teacher.

Faith, Tradition, and Buddha-Nature

A second theme prominent in Diki's story is her devotion to tradition. Diki credits her simple, faithful relationship to religious and cultural traditions with instilling in her personal sensibilities that allowed her to shed old identities and adopt new ones and thus maintain a strong and lively spirit throughout her life as a woman, mother, and religious figure.

“It was both faith and fate that propelled me into the unbelievable life as the mother of the Dalai Lama. When it happened, it seemed as if I lost all my courage and confidence, and I became afraid, like a little child, at the formidable task that lay before me. But once I began to tell myself that I was Diki Tsering, the name given to me on my wedding day and means ‘ocean of luck’, a kind of rebirth kindled all the forces of determination within me. I was no longer afraid, and I willingly challenged fate, determined not to be submerged by the tide. Today I am a tiresome old woman, my body feverish with rheumatism. But however debilitated you become physically, the spirit of youth is constant and alive. It never deserts you, even in the face of the greatest suffering.”
(Tsering, 4)

Her description of shedding an outdated self-identity and stepping into a more courageous version of herself is reminiscent of the notion of non-self, in the sense of not grasping on to a concept of self as real or inherent, and also resembles the principle of Buddha-nature. Through the psychological dimension of Vajrayāna practice, which may or may not have been an explicit part of Diki's religious pursuit, one is “born” into a more courageous, compassionate, wise and awakened version of themselves by virtue of their contemplation of Buddha-nature (*tathāgatagarbha*) and sacred visualization.

Suffering and Fearlessness

Finally, a third relevant theme present in Diki's narrative, related to the first and the second, is her accepting, unconflicted relationship to difficulty and suffering, and the adaptability, resilience and eventual fearlessness it afforded her. As Diki notes in several places above, her life journey, marked especially by equanimity in the face of suffering and by her relationships and her role as mother, transformed her. Though fearful, especially of the demands of life in the higher echelons of society, she grew steadfast and determined. In steadily meeting each challenge as it came, she reports a growing fearlessness. Upon her death at the age of eighty, the Dalai Lama visited her and advised her to meditate on the *thangka* painting on her wall, say her prayers, and to not be afraid. She told him she was not (Thondup, 168). This theme of fearlessness, while not necessarily identical, resonates with that of a seasoned meditator which Diki was not. A seasoned meditator grows to maintain equanimity, or openness of mind in the face of afflictions such as fear. With a steadfast presence and resultant wisdom, a

seasoned meditator does not reify objects, people, or situations, but remains fluid, adaptable, and compassionate in the face of difficulty. Perhaps it is possible that the austerities of hard work, birthing sixteen children and losing nine, and surviving warfare, i.e. with the acceptance of suffering as a way of life, might lead to glimmers of meditative wisdom that offers the strength to walk through anything, even death's door.

Tibetan Princess in Seattle: Dagmola Sakya

Dagmola Sakya's story bridges traditional Tibetan religious values and the interests of contemporary convert-Buddhists in North America. Her narrative also bridges the geographical separation of Tibetan stories and those of North American Buddhist mothers. Some details about her life are drawn from her autobiography *Princess in the Land of Snows* which recounts her life story from her birth in 1934 in a small village in the Kham province of East Tibet, up until her mid-twenties, when her family fled Tibet and found themselves as some of the first Tibetan refugees seeking asylum in the United States. Her autobiography has minor elements of a hagiography, but like Diki Tsering's biography, it is not explicitly a spiritual liberation story. *Princess in the Land of Snows* instead is a political survival story and is more centrally concerned with preserving cultural memories and documenting the political conflict between the Tibetans and Chinese. The details of the latter period of her life are drawn from the book *Dakini Power* by Michaela Haas, a rare resource by which English speakers can become acquainted with the lives and stories of several contemporary Tibetan women.

Story

Dagmola was born as Sonam Tshe Dzom in Thalung to a family of moderate means. Her female birth was a disappointment to many in her family, but the special bond she formed with her uncles gave her advantages rarely afforded to girls in her position (Sakya, 16). Her family always had servants, so they were well-off enough to send Dagmola to school when she was eight years old. She was the only girl in her school and she loved to learn. Her educational opportunity, as a female, was a rarity for a young girl in an agricultural town in rural Tibet. Dagmola credits her uncle Dezhung Rinpoche, a *tülku*, which is an esteemed reincarnated lama born into leadership of a lineage, with urging her family to send her to school. Early on, another uncle recognized her as "something special -- not like any other housewife" (Sakya, 9). As all Tibetan educational institutions at the time were monasteries, Dagmola writes of her

early years “[r]eligion was inseparable from much of our daily life and central to our formal learning” (Sakya, 2). This would become important in Dagmola’s adult life, in ways she could have never expected, but sometimes prophetically dreamed about. She remembers, “Several times I dreamed that I was flying through the sky in a small house with wings...[y]ears later, my airplane trips and international travel seemed to make these dreams reality” (Sakya, 8). At that point, Dagmola had never even seen an automobile.

Like Nangsa Obum, from a young age Dagmola’s personal deity was the merciful and compassionate Tārā. She said prayers every morning and enjoyed visiting her uncle at the monastery he oversaw. Young Dagmola went to school by day, but also learned household chores. She loved jewelry, dancing, beauty and refinery. In her mid-teens, her family took a pilgrimage to the headquarters of the Sakya lineage, one of the four major schools of Tibetan Buddhism. Due to her uncle’s status as a *tülku*, her family had more intimate contact with the noble families who maintained the political and religious power of this lineage. While there, Dagmola overheard a conversation between her uncle and the wife of a Sakya leader. The wife, Drolma Dagmo Kusho, shared that she was infertile, and that she permitted her younger sister to also marry her husband in the hopes of producing heirs. Drolma Dagmo Kusho explained that while, as the wife of a Sakya patriarch, she had the privileges of high rank, her root teacher had told her that not producing sons would lead to a lower re-birth in her future life (Sakya, 66).

Dagmola’s family also spent a significant amount of time with the Trichen’s family, the Trichen being a very powerful lama in the Sakya lineage. Soon, the Trichen’s eldest son, Jigdal Rinpoche, first in line as his heir, grew affectionate toward and pursued Dagmola romantically. The match was a complicated one, since she was considered an “ordinary” girl from Kham and he was the heir to the Sakya lineage (Sakya, 79). Jigdal’s family disapproved of his marriage proposal to Dagmola, largely due to his political position and the consequent necessity for him to marry into another family of power, but through his persistence they were able to get married. On their wedding day, Sonam was given the honorific title “Dagchen,” which means something to the effect of “second to the Trichen” (Sakya, 85). She later became affectionately called Dagmola. At age sixteen, she was converted to the status of religious royalty and moved into a palace, but her new life wasn’t without burden, responsibility, distressing family politics, and the pressure to bear sons. However, as a result of her high ranking *tülku* uncle and her new post as religious royalty, Dagmola had privileged access to religious teachings and empowerments rarely given to lay women in Tibet.

The couple’s first child, a daughter, was born in 1951. Dagmola writes of the birth, “Although I still was young and there was plenty of time for male offspring, I felt something of a failure” (Sakya,

113). The baby became ill and died within a few months. Meanwhile, Jigdal's father had passed away and he was preparing to take the position of Trichen. By Dagmola's account, a competing family took advantage of turmoil and discord that arose within her new family, in part because of her mother-in-law's disapproval of their marriage, and the position was taken away from him, although he had trained for it his entire life. The couple's first son was born in 1953, and four more were to follow between 1955 and 1962. 1955 was predicted to be an astrologically inauspicious year for Dagmola. To purify the negative karma, she engaged in a nearly three-month retreat under the guidance of her uncle. Her young children were cared for during her ten hours of daily practice, but they would visit during her breaks (Sakya 184).

Meanwhile, tensions between Tibetans and Chinese grew; eventually, under imminent danger, the family fled Tibet in 1959 and took refuge in Bhutan. There, they met American scholar Dr. Turrell Wylie who was seeking educated Tibetans for an academic and cultural project in Seattle at the University of Washington. Having lost everything and with dismal prospects in the refugee camps in Bhutan, the young family agreed to relocate to the United States for a three-year stint as research subjects. They were one of the first Tibetan families to have emigrated to the U.S., arriving in 1960. Dagmola worked tirelessly at handling the domestic duties and childcare, tasks with which she was accustomed to having the help of servants. After the three-year stint as research subjects, Dagmola found full time work while her husband founded a Dharma center; it was not customary for her husband, a high lama, to perform conventional work. Since she did not speak fluent English, Dagmola sought work as a cleaning lady at a local blood bank. She worked there for thirty years, eventually being promoted to a laboratory assistant, while also raising five sons and handling nearly all household duties. Her life in the United States existed in stark contrast to an anticipated life of religious royalty, yet even after several years, there was no Tibetan home to return to (Haas, 62).

As a religious figure and a hard-working householder, it was this period of Dagmola's life that North Americans are most compelled by, given it resembles some of their own circumstances. She describes this time as difficult, but she made no distinction between her life tasks and her spiritual path. In an interview she says, "[s]piritual practice is everyday life, not just sitting on the cushion, meditating...[e]very move, every word, every thought is practice...[d]harma is in daily life" (Dagmola Sakya qtd by Haas, 44). She describes herself as a "Nangpa" which is the Tibetan word for a Buddhist practitioner. It literally means "insider" and of this she says "this indicates the path is about ourselves, looking inward at our own mind instead of searching for meaning outwardly" (Dagmola Sakya qtd by Haas, 45). American scholar, Dharma teacher and Tibetan translator, B. Alan Wallace met Dagmola some years after their move to the U.S. Of her work at the blood bank that was undertaken on account of

supporting her family, he remembers, “she transmuted the work into Dharma like an alchemist... She was constantly saying mantras and blessing all the blood that was sent out... Clearly here was someone who had experienced the depths of Buddhist practice and set a heart-warming example for others seeking an integration of spiritual and worldly life” (B. Alan Wallace qtd by Haas, 63).

Dagmola’s worldly and religious sensibilities attracted North American students; eventually a chorus of male Rinpoches urged her to begin teaching Dharma, an event her son claims would have never occurred in the context of Tibet’s patriarchal society (Haas, 42-46). However, Dagmola’s greatest, and more traditional, wish has not yet come to fruition. Although all five of her sons have been recognized as reincarnations of Sakya masters, none have taken up their posts. Ironically, she was burdened with the important task of bearing sons, and due to the family’s mandatory move to the United States, none of her sons have fulfilled their religious duty. Dagmola aspires for her family to preserve Tibetan cultural heritage and the lineage of Sakya religious teachings (Haas, 65-67). Unexpected and surprising for Dagmola, through *her* teaching and autobiographical works *she* is doing just that.

Analysis

A Bridge To and From Tradition

The circumstances of Dagmola’s life offer a notable connection between North American Buddhist mothers and traditional Tibetan Buddhism. Her biographical works contain both an expected traditional religious and cultural tone, as a proud Tibetan and the wife of a high-ranking lama, and a clear sense of spiritual adaptation and innovation in her life as a hard-working refugee in the United States. As it relates specifically to her role as a mother, it is evident that her duty to bear a lineage of sons was necessarily her top priority, a priority heavily influenced by the traditional cultural, religious, and political dimensions of Tibetan Buddhism. Coinciding with this, Dagmola’s sense of generativity, in the form of cultural and religious preservation and proliferation, is of note, not unlike that seen in Machig Labdrön’s life story. It is, of course, ironic that her family’s necessary departure from Tibet changed the course of their lives so dramatically that none of her five sons were willing or able to follow through on their religious obligations as lineage holders. It is in an even bigger twist of fate that the humble, but well-educated, farm girl from Kham finds herself in a position of religious leadership, in great part due to these unforeseen circumstances.

Sacred View

Perhaps Dagmola's greatest contribution to the topic at hand is her resolve in blending spiritual activity with her domestic, parental, and professional responsibilities. She modeled a world-engaged Buddhist practice based upon the Vajrayāna principle of pure or sacred view. From this view, all phenomena, activity, and circumstances are equal in emptiness, and therefore equal in their possibility to contribute to awakening. Even her tasks at the blood bank, as cleaning lady and lab assistant, were not considered a mundane means to an end. Rather, she took advantage of the small and simple opportunities available to her to ritualize and sanctify her activity in the world. Based on the response of students who found resonance with her approach, Dagmola's presence, example and teaching in the United States was timely and relevant to lay practitioners and parents who sought a skillful means to practice amidst the demands of life in a fast-paced, materialistic society. What makes Dagmola very different than her North American students, however, are the many years of dedicated religious practice and training she possessed by the time she had children, a household, and a job to contend with. One critique of this approach to spiritual practice is that it can be inspiring to envision, but quite difficult to implement when a firm meditative basis has not been established. From a practical perspective, it is generally advantageous for those who rely on an engaged method to consider how both periods of formal practice *and* the engaged ritualization of daily life are complementary in the task of spiritual development. Dagmola exemplifies this in the rigorous, three-month retreat she takes as a young mother.

Like Diki Tsering, several significant periods of Dagmola's life have been an uphill climb, but she seems almost impervious to hardship, and if not impervious, readily resilient. It may be this shared equanimity, perhaps common especially among Tibetan women as bearers of suffering, that shaped her into the religious figure and teacher she became.

Feminist Matriarch: Tsultrim Allione

Tsultrim Allione, born in 1947 in Maine as Joan Ewing, is a former nun, lama, scholar, mother and feminist whose groundbreaking 1984 book, *Women of Wisdom*, was a significant point of entry for English speakers hungry to learn about women within the very patriarchal Tibetan Buddhist tradition. The book, used as a primary resource for Machig Labdrön and Nangsa Obum's life stories recounted above, offers translations of six biographies of Tibetan female saints, in addition to a narrative about Tsultrim's own spiritual journey. Tsultrim Allione currently acts as the spiritual director of her large retreat center, Tārā Mandala, in Southern Colorado, in addition to writing, publishing, teaching

internationally, and enjoying her three children and three grandchildren. This account of her life story is drawn from the Preface to *Women of Wisdom*, Michaela Haas' more recent profile of her in *Dakini Power*, and web videos in which she speaks explicitly about the intersection of mothering and spiritual life, a topic of central importance in her life, writing, and teaching.

Story

Tsultrim credits her family with instilling in her a sense of adventure and a love of learning. The third in her matrilineal family of highly educated women, she set off to India and Nepal in 1967 with her best friend at the age of twenty. A visit to Kathmandu to volunteer in Tibetan refugee camps and her exposure to Tibetan Buddhist monastic life struck a deep chord in Tsultrim, who then went by Joan. She happily circumambulated the Dalai Lama's residence, participated in fasting and traditional prostration ceremonies, and learned to sit with herself in meditation. In 1970, Joan met the Karmapa, the religious head of the Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism, and asked him for nun's ordination. In Tibet's religious hierarchy, the Karmapa is second only to the Dalai Lama; he bestowed the name Karma Tsultrim Chödrön on her and her life as a monastic began. Tsultrim spent the next two and a half years studying and practicing rigorously in Asia. After her third year as a nun she made the decision to return from her monastic vows. She was, at the time, back in the U.S., in her mid-twenties, having dreams of babies, and growing resistant to the notion of being celibate for the rest of her life, especially without the support of a monastic community. Tsultrim recognized she was committed not to the monastic path but to practicing Dharma (Allione, *Women of Wisdom* 13-23). She writes, "Within a year I went from being a solitary nun to being a [wife and] mother" (Allione, *Women of Wisdom* 23).

She gave birth to her second child nine months after the birth of her first. In the early days of mothering she recognized she could not pursue meditation practice like before, although she and her husband would take shifts with the children to create space and time to practice. During this period, she became very interested in her own spiritual life and process specifically as a mother, and she shared these inquiries with a small community of women near her family home outside of Seattle. Tsultrim describes a range of difficult experiences as a mother and wife. She indicates that it was through her painful experiences that she developed compassion and understanding for many more people that she may not have had the framework to understand and empathize with as a monastic (Allione, *Disrobing and Motherhood*). In a response to an interview question about her choice to disrobe and pursue a worldly life concurrent with the intention for deep practice, Tsultrim says:

“There is something to be learned as a mother... We talk about compassion, we talk about selflessness [in Buddhism] and so on. But, suddenly, the baby is crying in the middle of the night and you’re really tired but you have to practice compassion and get up and be loving and present with that being. And so suddenly all of these things that were theoretical were being tested.” (Allione, *Disrobing and Motherhood*)

After three years she felt she was outgrowing her marriage; the family moved to Boulder so Tsultrim could study with Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche and teach at Naropa University. Tsultrim met her second husband, an Italian filmmaker named Costanzo Allione in Boulder; they married and moved to Rome where she found out she was pregnant with twins. Having left her community and spiritual connections in the United States, heavily pregnant and caring for her two young children, she grew undeniably depressed; she describes this period as a “descent.” She explains, “I could foresee nothing except years of babies, fatigue, and loneliness” (Allione, *Women of Wisdom* 25).

The first two weeks after the twins were born was a time of incredible sadness; her children were put in incubators and she wasn’t allowed to hold, touch, or nurse them. She indicates that the medical practices in Italy were highly paternalistic and antiquated for the time. But, the worst was yet to come. Well after the children returned from the hospital, at two and a half months old, her baby girl, Chiara, died in her crib from Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS). The death of her child was the rock bottom of her descent. She was guilt-ridden and despondent. A Tibetan lama living in Italy, Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche, came to perform rituals for the child’s transmigration. At one point, Tsultrim threw her arms around his neck and cried uncontrollably. She writes,

“Instead of hugging me and comforting me, he just stood there very relaxed... I do not know if it was my surprise at his lack of reaction or what, but I suddenly felt the pain draining out of my tight body and my mind fell into a state of vastness, like a broad, peaceful lake. I simultaneously realized that I was charging myself up and making it worse by clinging to her. I realized that thousands of babies die every day and that I had just been protected from this reality by living in an affluent country.” (Allione, *Women of Wisdom* 27-28)

The death of her daughter was a turning point; it opened up an unexpected dimension to Tsultrim’s spiritual life which she describes as meeting the *dākinī* principle, the unborn and undying primordial essence of reality that is best accessed when she stops “try[ing] to control situations” (Allione, *Women of Wisdom* 28). She says “[g]rief really reminds me a lot of birth, of being in labor. When you’re in labor, you’re subject to something beyond your control, and you have to submit to it” (Tsultrim Allione, qtd by Haas, 267). A year after Chiara’s death, Tsultrim met the *dākinī* through both a formal and esoteric initiation into Machig Labdrön’s *Chöd*, during which she had an unforgettable vision of Machig as an old woman with pendulous breasts that had fed children; Tsultrim describes this vision as

an invitation to engage more deeply with the women of her Tibetan lineage. This resulted in her actively seeking and translating the biographies of women saints and led to her publication of *Women of Wisdom*. It also led her to a persistent inquiry, questioning the personal efficacy and relevancy of a patriarchal religious system, and a process of crafting a spiritual practice relevant to her life as a woman and a mother.

“Anyway, I am still searching and seeking for practices and ideas that can be concretely applied to daily life situations... At the moment I use a combination of daily meditation without the children, occasional practice with them when they request it, occasional retreats and trying to apply the equilibrium, humor, and sense of openness gained by these moments of quiet to the rest of my life... It may be that for the deeper states of spiritual development, unless one is already very advanced, extensive solitude or semi-solitude are necessary... but I still feel that there is a vast untapped resource of female wisdom within so-called worldly life which could enrich our ideas about spirituality tremendously... Probably these resources have remained untapped because those who have defined the spiritual path for the last few thousand years have been men who associated spirituality with a separateness from nature and all that it represents, in terms of birth, death, children, and so on.” (Allione, *Women of Wisdom* 98)

Tsultrim’s investment, inquiry, and innovation was both criticized and praised by religious authorities. Later in her life, she would be recognized by authoritative Tibetan Kagyu lamas as an emanation of Machig Labdrön, which means, in approximation, that Tsultrim’s mind is believed to be blessed by Machig (Haas, 249-253).

Reflecting back on the time of active caregiving, Tsultrim has much to offer. For one, the biographies of Tibetan women didn’t directly address her practical inquiry about utilizing motherhood as the spiritual path. She prefaces *Women of Wisdom* by stating, “All the women in this collection either left their children or didn’t have any. I was at once profoundly inspired by their stories, and yet still felt a lack of role models in an area of my life that was all-consuming for many years” (Allione, *Women of Wisdom* 39). In the early years of mothering, she often felt conflicted and continued to feel longing for deep, solitary practice. Eventually she noticed and embraced the way caregiving revealed and diminished her own self-clinging: “I was constantly interrupted. Through my challenges I saw that had I stayed in the comfort of solitude, I would not have been tested and trained in these ways” (Allione, *Women of Wisdom* 40). Tsultrim summarizes her path of motherhood:

“As I cooked in the cauldron of motherhood, the incredible love I felt for my children opened my heart and brought me a much greater understanding of universal love. It made me understand the suffering of the world much more deeply. This has been an important thread for me, both as a practitioner and as a human being.” (Allione, *Women of Wisdom* 41)

Tsultrim Allione's second marriage dissolved after the death of Chiara. She and her children eventually moved back to the United States; she founded a large and thriving retreat center in Colorado, published more books, and became a highly sought-after Dharma teacher. She met her third husband in 1989, David Petit, who she was married to until his unexpected death from a heart attack in 2010. Tsultrim writes of her still unfolding life story, "Being in relationship is one of the hardest and most compelling experiences we have as humans" (Allione, *Women of Wisdom* 58).

Analysis

Particular Love and Universal Love as "One Taste"

Among the prominent themes in Tsultrim's biography and reflections on motherhood are the tensions between world renunciation and relational engagement and the synthesis of conceptions of universal and particular love and grief. Suffering, self-clinging, and the *ḍākinī* principle also heavily factor in. Like in the earliest stories of Buddhist mothers, Tsultrim experiences a loss of an infant which elicits immense suffering and serves as a turning point in her spiritual life. Tsultrim describes a moment of equanimity amidst her deep grief in which an insight into the First Noble Truth, there is suffering, is catalyzed. In a much later reflection on the death and grief of her third husband, this theme resurfaces for Allione. She describes here the mechanism by which particular and universal love, and suffering, are indistinguishable. Of universalizing her grief, she says,

"The paradox is that it takes the grief away. It is actually impossible to take on the sorrow of everyone if there is a self. To be there you have to let go of self-clinging and realize your true nature is incredibly vast, completely perfect, lucid, compassionate. It can accommodate everything." (Tsultrim Allione qtd by Haas, 268)

As if she was picking up the threads of an earlier discussion in this chapter, Allione articulates the wisdom aspect to and value of universalizing grief. However, by universalizing her grief, she doesn't necessarily do away with her particularistic emotions. Reflecting back on the grief of losing an infant, she asks "[b]ecause of the depth of connection I felt toward my children, I could no longer dismiss these ties so easily...[w]as this attachment or relatedness?" (Allione, *Women of Wisdom* 41). In doing so, she questions the ontology of the complex matrix of human experience, inviting us to consider experience not exclusively in dualistic terms of ignorance (attachment) and wisdom (nonattachment) but from the non-dualistic perspective of relationality. Her inquiry is a compelling one, especially in light of Ohnuma's concern for inflicting violence on motherhood through what she views as a lack of accommodation for

particularistic grief in Buddhist narratives. Perhaps relatedness, in Allione's terms, might be better supported concurrent with the pursuit of wisdom.

Spiritual Maturation Through Relationship

Although the conflict between world renunciation and relational engagement exists for Tsultrim for a number of years, she inevitably perceives her worldly life as having fostered important spiritual qualities. Notably, she describes how her painful relational experiences also conferred on her understanding and empathy, she imagines, as less accessible to someone focused on a detached, monastic path. She credits “the cauldron of motherhood” directly as providing her access to universal love. Furthermore, motherhood, for Tsultrim, becomes a demanding mind training by which self-clinging is mitigated and by which spiritual qualities such as compassion and patience are brought to fruition. Not only did motherhood help her gain access to wisdom through mitigating self-clinging, but it was the gateway by which the *dākinī* principle was revealed and Machig Labdrön's *Chöd*, bestowed. While the motherhood-related spiritual themes in her story resonate with those of many of the prominent Buddhist mothers before her, she acknowledges that the stories of mothers in *Women of Wisdom*, like that of Nangsa Obum and Machig Labdrön, are simultaneously insufficient as role models for contemporary, engaged mothers. Nevertheless, she also acknowledges that the terminal stages of Buddhist practice may require solitary endeavor. Through her institutionally-disruptive inquiry, deep contemplation, relentless pursuit of role models and guidance, and living the life of an engaged Buddhist mother to the best of her ability, Tsultrim Allione herself has become such a role model for younger generations of Buddhist mothers.

The Mother Monk: Elizabeth Mattis Namgyel

Story

“My father told me that the moment I was born he was overtaken by a mixture of amazement, hope, and trepidation. He wondered, “What is to become of her...?” My son is in his twenties and I still feel wonder, excitement, and heartbreak as I watch him grow into his life. Try to find a parent who doesn't feel this way. How curious that love and uncertainty come together.” (Namgyel, *Open Question 5*)

What was to become of her? I have compiled Elizabeth Mattis Namgyel's story from a variety of resources, including her short biography in *Dakini Power*, her book as cited above, her blog, and select web videos. Elizabeth, born in 1962 to a California family who valued art, music, and literature, chose

Nepal as her country of choice for an anthropological field trip in college. While Elizabeth was compelled by the culture and religious activity of the region in her early twenties, she remembers, the words of Buddhist teachers had not yet sunk in. On a return trip to Boudhanath with her mother, who had been studying Tibetan Buddhism for some years, the two participated in a meditation retreat at a small nunnery in Kathmandu Valley. During a break at this retreat, a young Asian man approached her and they talked for a while. Later she learned he was Dzigar Kongtrul Rinpoche, well respected for his status as the reincarnation of a 19th century master. Just a few years younger than her, he was raised as a monastic and he had returned his monk's vows earlier that year. He helped her to understand the teachings they were receiving at the retreat, and shortly after they fell in love. She became his first student and wife nearly simultaneously (Haas, 150-154).

Dzigar Kongtrul Rinpoche credits his mother, Mayum Tsewang Palden, as being his first teacher. She spent thirteen years as a solitary retreat yogi before marrying and becoming a mother of five. Unfortunately, there is little public information currently available about her life. Dzigar Kongtrul's father, Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, was also a very high reincarnated lama, retreat yogi, teacher and leader of the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism. Both of Dzigar Kongtrul's parents would become significant teachers for Elizabeth, but in Mayum Tsewang Palden, she would also find a role model. In the third chapter of this thesis I retell a short story about one memorable interaction they had, in which Mayum Tsewang Palden tells Elizabeth, newly married and awkwardly trying to fit in to her Tibetan family, that she only needed to know her own mind to practice Dharma. This would be valuable advice for Elizabeth.

As newlyweds, Elizabeth became pregnant and gave birth to a son in 1988. Her son, Jampal Norbu Rinpoche, would be the heir to his father's religious lineage. Shortly after, the young family moved to the United States. The couple spent time in Boulder, Colorado, where Dzigar Kongtrul took up a post at Naropa University. Of this time with a young child, Elizabeth describes a strong longing and a tremendous urgency and motivation to do her practice.

“When my son was very young I couldn't do retreat, but I practiced a lot. And I was desperate. Because the minutia of motherhood is hard, and I had a strong longing for meaning. I was so happy to have my son and yet I found it frustrating. So any time he took a nap I was practicing. And I'd wake up early [at 3am] and practice. In fact, somehow I think it's due to my son that I became a really serious practitioner because I started to value my time in a way that I didn't value my time. I felt on fire to do it and not waste it.” (Namgyel, *Motherhood*)

In reflecting back on her time of active mothering, she says: “motherhood is really challenging, but also it wears away a lot of your self-importance” (Namgyel, *Motherhood*). The couple moved to the very small mountain town of Crestone, Colorado. On a remote, wild, vast, and still piece of land given to the couple for their religious activities, they built cabins and Kongtrul Rinpoche directed a three-year meditation retreat for his closest students. Integrating parenthood with spiritual practice looked quite different for Elizabeth than it does in the stories of Dagmola Sakya, and Tsultrim Allione, for example. In fact, you could say her approach became not unlike theirs, but also not unlike that of the female masters in Tibet’s Buddhist renaissance. Elizabeth participated in this three-year retreat, but her stay in near solitude was extended well beyond this time, for seven years in total (Haas, 157).

Elizabeth’s extensive retreat period began when her son was nine years old. By that time the family had the support of a religious community and they did not need to engage conventional work. Close friends stayed for extended periods in the family home to support Elizabeth’s husband with childcare. The family home is on the vast retreat property, a few miles or a one hour walk from her retreat cabin. Jampal Norbu had his own little bed in her cabin and he could come into her retreat whenever he wanted. Elizabeth was attentive during this time, ensuring the logistics of the situation suited her son. Recalling his mother’s retreat, Jampal says “I’m quite independent. And I like that I always knew where she was” (Jampal Norbu Rinpoche qtd by Haas, 157). Elizabeth also reflects that this sort of setup isn’t right for everyone, but it worked well for her family due to the community support they had. Elizabeth would sometimes stay overnight in her cabin, sometimes in the family home. Jampal would visit her, and there would also be extended periods of rigor, silence, and solitude, including a full year and half of silence at one point in time. Dzigar Kongtrul Rinpoche’s approach to guiding retreat has always been accommodating for parents, for his own family and for others (Haas, 158). Creativity was key for Elizabeth to complete seven years of retreat while parenting an adolescent son. She had to be both creative in her conception of retreat and creative in her parenting. Elizabeth maintained the inquiry, “what is the boundary between being in, or out, of retreat?” She determined this boundary to be less a literal line in the sand, but more in the way her mind perceived and responded to her experience. She describes an “inner retreat boundary” which tows the line of neither clinging to or rejecting experience (Haas, 158). Of her learning in her retreat period, Elizabeth says “knowing fear and fearlessness” was central.

“There’s a lot of fear in our wants and not wants. I began to take a keen interest in things that I normally try to avoid. Seeing the nature of things releases us from all the grasping we normally have. So the fruit of the practice is freedom: freedom from fear, freedom from ego’s preferences. It provides you with a very big way of being. Even if the insight

is momentary, you don't forget that possibility." (Elizabeth Mattis Namgyel qtd by Haas, 146)

When counseling practitioner-parents who are attempting to juggle the demands of daily life and a serious Dharma practice, Elizabeth suggests "You need the intention, good scheduling, and you have to be creative. If you don't find the time to practice, one of the three is missing" (Elizabeth Mattis Namgyel qtd by Haas, 146). In a blog post titled "A Parent on Retreat," she continues, "I think when there is a longing we can creatively find ways to practice. Flexibility is key. You can't hold on to fixed ideas of how you think things should be... [You] couldn't just expect an ordinary uninterrupted retreat... There is no fixed way practice should be" (Namgyel, "Parent"). Like in the stories of Dagmola Sakya and Tsultrim Allione, Elizabeth also encourages viewing life as practice, reminding of the "inner retreat boundary" or the boundary between practicing and not is a function of view itself (Haas, 158).

With a now grown son, a thriving retreat center and religious community, and two books published, when Elizabeth is not traveling for her international teaching schedule, she loves to ride her horses and rock climb near her home in Colorado. In the first passage of this section, Elizabeth describes the bittersweet heartache, or heartbreak, of life and love, reminding that meeting must end in parting and love and uncertainty go hand in hand. She continues, "Life is full. In fact, life is so touching, curious, sad, exciting, scary, and bittersweet it's almost unbearable at times" (Namgyel, *Open Question* 5). Her life has given her insight into the uncertain, challenging, and "full" human predicament. Her meditation practice has given her the steadiness of mind to neither cling nor reject this fullness of life. By staying open, instead of clinging or rejecting, by being willing to be "touched by life" she shares that her heart, and her compassion for all beings, continues to grow (Namgyel, "Letting Life Touch You").

Analysis

Many of the same themes that have arisen in the earlier biographies arise again here in Elizabeth's story, but in new and unique combinations. One aspect of her life that is definitely distinct from the earlier stories is that she had a living role model in her mother-in-law, Mayum Tsewang Palden. Although her mother-in-law started her ten years of retreat practice at the age of thirteen and finished before marrying and having children, her advice and example offered a framework for Elizabeth to pursue her longing for rigorous spiritual practice in the context of parenting. Mayum Tsewang Palden's instruction, to know the mind, resounds in Elizabeth's insight into the "inner retreat boundary" which was so pivotal to her retreat experience and practice. Another aspect of Elizabeth's life that is somewhat

distinct is that it seems she rarely grappled with her role as a mother and a serious Dharma practitioner, and her longing and creativity, as well as the conditions of her life, allowed her to pursue both simultaneously with careful attention and intention. Conditions that supported this include having only one child, for example, and her relationship to a religious community of parents and friends eagerly supporting each other in their retreat endeavors.

Middle Way Musing

In chapter four, I utilize Elizabeth's articulation of the First Noble Truth and the "four ends of composed things" as an introduction to Middle Way (Mādhyamika) philosophy. She writes: "How do we live a life we can't hold on to? How do we live with the fact that the moment we're born we move closer to death; when we fall in love we sign up for grief? How do we reconcile that gain always ends in loss; gathering, in separation?" (*Open Question 7*). In the first citation in her narrative above, we can detect that it is through familial relationship, and parenting in particular, that this insight is revealed. Elizabeth describes the flood of diverse emotional experiences that come with parenting and with caring deeply. To reflect upon the situation of relatedness, and caring, in the context of the wisdom of interdependence and impermanence, an unresolvable human predicament is revealed. For Elizabeth, bearing the unresolve of such a predicament is an exercise in, or at least an approximation of, the Middle Way view.

Bodhicitta

Like Tsultrim Allione, Elizabeth describes clear moments when she experiences the role of parent as giving rise to aspects of *bodhicitta*. Bearing the aforementioned predicament of love and the heartbreak it may cause, she indicates, has given her access to more and widespread compassion. Furthermore, she echoes Tsultrim in describing how the minutia and difficulty of parenting wear away at self-importance and enhance selflessness, prerequisites to the high ideal of *bodhicitta*. Finally, Elizabeth articulates how becoming a parent fueled her urgent motivation to practice; she credits her son, and motherhood, for her intense dedication to practice. This notion of intensive and urgent motivation to practice relates certainly to renunciation, but perhaps also to *bodhicitta*, and its aim of accomplishing awakening for the sake of all beings.

Autonomy of Refuge

Based on the similar history of completing seven years of retreat while parenting dependent children, a shared affinity for the *Prajñāpāramitā* teachings, and Elizabeth's engagement with and

teaching of *Chöd* practice, Elizabeth and Machig Labdrön seem to have a relationship across the distance of time and space. Elizabeth's story also bears significant themes reminiscent of other early Buddhist mothers, such as Paṭācārā and Nangsa Obum who, in light of their experiences of death, suffering, and renunciation, became clear about the necessity for Buddhist refuge in the form of dedicated practice. Elizabeth's aforementioned sensitivity to the human predicament was likely a powerful motivator and inspiration in her decision to take on the task of long-term retreat and endure partial separation from her child during his formative years. This theme, and perhaps virtue, of world-renunciation and refuge in the context of active mothering is paradoxical, counter-intuitive and counter-normative. Yet its repetition in this collection of stories invites further consideration.

Renunciation and refuge, as these women have demonstrated, has been inspired by deep suffering, loss, and sensitivity to the nature of reality as impermanent, non-self, and unsatisfactory. In the context of monastic life, one does away with relational attachments and the "implements" of suffering in the interest of vigorous pursuit of awakening. In the context of family life, however, relations maintain intact. What is perhaps most difficult about engaged Buddhist experience is the temptation to "take refuge" in the relations, status, and possessions inherent to worldly life. Is it possible, for example, to be in a relationship without relying on it as a source of ultimate satisfaction or as something ultimately enduring? Rita Gross' analysis of Yeshe Tsogyel's biography in which she writes - "[h]er biography demonstrates a proper balance or prioritization of relationship and spiritual practice. She seeks enlightenment and gains both enlightenment and enlightened relationships" (Gross, "Tsogyel" 26) -- suggests one potential answer to this question.

An "autonomy of refuge" as I'm calling it, is a mental habit of omission, specifically of not placing refuge in things in which ultimate refuge cannot be sought, such as children, partnership, reputation, and wealth, while still maintaining relational engagement. I use the word *autonomy* functionally, to contradict the emotional *co-dependence* that so easily arises in interpersonal relationships, especially between a mother and her family. Instead, emotional *interdependence* remains intact while spiritual refuge is maintained in the elevated objects of the Buddhist jewels, most especially wisdom, the "sword" which cuts through delusion and suffering and provides the only source of lasting peace. By taking refuge in one's contemplative life and practice, however brief, one builds an inner resource of spiritual strength, and wisdom, that can support the practitioner in mothering and when her family disappoints or leaves her, which inevitably, they will. I might suggest that a lesson gleaned from the religious example of Nangsa Obum, Machig Labdrön, and Elizabeth Mattis Namgyel is that this autonomy of religious refuge is essential to those who tread the spiritual path "in the world." It can

perhaps be so strong that a mother would leave her family for the highest aspirational attainment of wisdom, for the sake of her own mind, her family, and all beings, but such physical separation may not be necessary, desired or possible.

Creativity and Skillful Means

Elizabeth's advice to fellow Buddhist parents is to be creative. She also exemplifies such creativity in her own approach to formal retreat practice. For example, her retreat cabin was outfitted with a little bed for her son, who she allowed to visit anytime he wanted. This approach is atypical of strict retreatants, and yet, she acknowledged her current situation, what could be perceived as competing interests in her life, and she found a way to attend to both of them with integrity. In Buddhist literature this is sometimes referred to as the "third way" or the path between two extremes. Elizabeth also advises letting go of fixed ideas of the way things should be or fixating on what is not possible, in favor of open minded curiosity to what *is* possible. Her suggestion to work with the relative conditions of one's life relates directly to the Buddhist, and especially Vajrayāna, concept of skillful means (*upāya kauśalya*).

Middle Way Mothering: Jessica Peterson

Jessica Peterson was born in the U.S. in 1988. As a poetic writer and a mystic, she has studied philosophy, psychology, and Tibetan Buddhism, specifically Vajrayāna in a Gelug lineage, for most of her adult life. Her first pregnancy three years ago inspired in her the intention to take on and explore parenting as a spiritually transformative process and she has documented and published her reflections on Buddhist motherhood on a personal blog called Mamacitta.org. The site is a collection of about twenty reflections that span the period from her son Rowen's birth through the first two years of his life; her posts culminate with the announcement of a second pregnancy, of a son who is now in his infancy. The posts offer a glimpse into her inner life as a mother in Portland, Oregon, dedicated to spiritual development in the Vajrayāna tradition; she writes lucidly of a wide range of experiences, from the idealistic and hopeful to the disillusioned and downtrodden. Of the works profiled in this chapter, Jessica's is the only one that comes directly from "in the trenches" of actively mothering an infant, as opposed to a historical reflection of parenting in the grander scheme of one's life. The record of her two-year journey offers insight into her most unfiltered moments as a parent, and her process of integrating and reconciling them, or not, with her spiritual life as she once saw it. Because of the blog style format, the narratives do not read as a memoir but as distinctive and densely packed contemplative insights, and

so I have integrated her reflections and my analysis as an uninterrupted flow, the alternation of which is signaled by a new paragraph.

Stories & Analyses

Anātman

Jessica's intentions for her life and her writing project's namesake are based upon the concept of *bodhicitta*. She defines the mission of her project "Mamacitta" as:

"I wanted to understand how surrendering to the commitment and holding the explicit intention of fostering a whole, compassionate, integrated, embodied and thriving child could elevate my own sense of wholeness, fulfillment, authenticity, and purpose while fueling an ever increasing capacity to meet the world from a place of love. This turned out to be much harder said than done!" (Peterson, "About")

She describes further her vision of taking the path of parenting as an alchemical, Vajrayāna effort to "take shit and transform it into compost" (Peterson, "About"). An early experience in her journey of mothering fueled the idea. In the seen and unseen experience of pregnancy, Jessica describes going through a "relentless, and often exhilarating, process of watching my identity evaporate. It was a hormone driven spiritual journey beyond my control" (Peterson, "About").

Immediately, there is much to reflect on, both in Jessica's experiences and her vision of parenting as spiritual practice. First, the vision of the project is consonant with themes present in Dagmola, Tsultrim and Elizabeth's stories: an integrated notion of engaging spiritual practice within the mundane tasks of mothering, and seeking a sacred, alchemical dimension in the difficulties of parenting. Jessica's experience in pregnancy of "watching her identity evaporate," in which her body and mind adjusted to the newfound experience of intimately accommodating and prioritizing another human being, resonates with the most essential realization of Buddhist teaching: that of non-self, of realizing the illusory nature of the imagined, independent, autonomous, and static self and the grasping of "I," "me," and "mine" and the suffering it causes. I recall a time when Jessica was eight months pregnant with their second son, and Rowen was relentlessly climbing all over her (probably nervous about having a visitor), her body his jungle gym. With a nearly eight-pound baby in her uterus and a twenty five pound toddler around her neck it was crystal clear, at a minimum, that her body was not her own nor in her control. The logical argument for the doctrine of non-self (*anātman*) is based on the five heaps theory (*skandhas*) of personhood of which the body (*rūpa*) is one part. The body is non-self because it is dynamic and changing, in this case it can even accommodate the presence of other beings. The body can be said to be non-self, in part, because it is not under dictatorial self-control, a point amply demonstrated in Jessica's

case in her condition as a pregnant mother and caregiver. Moreover, she expresses that her pregnancy dissolved other aspects of mistaken self-identity like nothing she had experienced before.

Emptiness and Compassion

Rowen was born on June 4, 2015; Jessica offers a vivid account of the birth experience on her site. Consonant with other stories in this chapter, Rowen's conception and birth was accompanied by vivid and symbolic dreams. Of the compelling and dramatic birth story, perhaps most significant to this analysis, is Jessica's engagement with the physical dimension of labor. She writes:

“You will find that nowhere in the recounting of my birth story do I use the word “pain.” I do not do this to sound transcendent, to pretend it was all rainbows and butterflies, or to negate the fact that I was in a space that could be labeled as painful. I wrote it this way because “pain” was not part of my vocabulary while I was in labor. I broke down the sensations, which were incredibly intense, and found that at the root they were “heat” and “pressure.” This is the sort of language I used while in the trenches of labor and have incorporated here in this narrative for the sake of accuracy.” (Peterson, “Rowen Magnus”)

She continues to describe a moment when a hospital nurse asked her level of pain on a scale of one to ten, although omitting the word “pain” was specifically in her birth plan. Having interrupted the consuming, yet meditative experience of laboring, Jessica writes that the nurse's inquiry was accompanied by the most miserable contraction of her labor which compelled Jessica to remind of her preference to speak in terms of level of “intensity.” Of this moment Jessica reveals, “The mind is powerful, and I really gained a new understanding and respect for the potency of thought and language during the process of giving birth” (Peterson, “Rowen Magnus”). Of becoming a mother and the birth process, in particular, Jessica conveys a sense of a connection with “an ancient grief for the lineage of mothers who have raised humanity” (Peterson, “About”) as well as being filled with compassion for all women who have experienced childbirth, in the many unique forms that takes. Rowen was born under duress, and quickly, with the umbilical cord wrapped around his neck. Once out of the birth canal Jessica describes her son at first glimpse as a crumpled, purple and unresponsive newborn. The situation was dire until he let out a single cry. She describes it as “a hero's birth” (Peterson, “Rowen Magnus”).

What is astounding in this account is the immediacy of Jessica's application and experience of the wisdom teachings on emptiness (*śūnyatā*). The principle of emptiness points to a lack of inherent qualities or existence in self, others, objects, experience or sensation - even, or especially, those qualities like pain that appear to be real, unmalleable, and intolerable. As such, Jessica applied this wisdom to the intensive and conventionally excruciating sensations of giving birth, which she also describes, by the

way, as “so enormous... it felt like I was passing the most tremendous poop of my life” (Peterson, “Rowen Magnus”). Similar to the account given by Tzultrim Allione, in the moments of becoming a mother, Jessica describes gaining access to intense compassion for all mothers, a version or object of compassion that had previously not been known by her. Jessica’s account offers an example of the application and experience of Buddhism’s most preeminent wisdom and preeminent virtue in the very process of giving birth, a process traditionally associated with suffering and *samsāra* in the Tibetan Buddhist context.

Suffering, Self-Compassion, Particular Love and Universal Love

After the birth, Jessica’s entries shift from the transcendent to the depressed, blissful to the downtrodden, and everywhere in between as the realities of constant caregiving, hormonal fluctuations, and sleep deprivation settled in. She writes:

“Sleep deprivation is acting like a parasite in me, causing me to crave all the things that will continue to keep me off balance. I’m lonely but won’t reach out to anyone because I think no one will truly understand. I’m exhausted but my mind races when I close my eyes. Nothing feels like it’s right, nothing seems good enough, I worry that I’m doing it all wrong, and I am jealous of those who are sleeping. I don’t feel seen or heard. I’m isolated in the delirious and dark chatter of my mind. To top it off, the relentless nature of mothering is suffocating me” (Peterson, “The Vortex of Sleep Deprivation”).

Among the foreign struggles she experiences, coinciding with new parenthood, she describes: sleep deprivation, monotony, hypervigilance, anxiety, depression, loss of control, and frustration. As she traverses the uncertain, emotionally turbulent, and tiresome terrain of parenting, what emerges is a recurring theme of a desperate need for self-compassion, not only as it pertained to present hardships, but also in relationship to old psychological wounds and afflictive thought patterns. She writes of unfolding new layers of mental and emotional healing through her deep love for her child, “He has taught me the closest approximation of how to give unconditional love, and so, finally, I was able to turn around and give that to myself” (Peterson, “Unconditional Love”).

Like many well-educated, contemporary convert-Buddhists, Jessica’s psychological reflection figures significantly into the Buddhist experience, not as a replacement for the spiritual endeavor but as its inseparable complement, specifically as a skillful means for cultivating greater personal awareness and subsequently an ever more subtle ethic of care in interpersonal relationships. As described above, a number of her posts contain expressions of incredible heartache and unabashed and often unresolved difficulty associated with the new and unfolding demands of parenting. Despite her robust spiritual and

psychological resources, she discovers she is not immune to desperation and great suffering as a function of her conditions. Notably, she writes,

“I never considered that I would be susceptible to symptoms of postpartum depression... Not getting adequate sleep has a sly way of tainting my perspective and discoloring my reality. I’m filled with self-loathing and pity and my world feels about the size of a walnut, walls closing in.” (Peterson, “The Vortex of Sleep Deprivation”)

So, while yet again we see the theme of the First Noble Truth arise, suffering, it is also evident that her knowledge of Buddhist psychology and her process of self-reflection, writing, and sharing is one way in which she both confronts and transforms her afflictive experience into psycho-spiritual insight. To view all emotional experience with equanimity and reveal its transformative dimension is a natural expression of Vajrayāna training and worldview. That Jessica’s experience and reflections, and her love for her son, pointed her to her desperate need and capacity for self-compassion is also particularly poignant. First, it exemplifies the way in which particular love can shift from being unidirectional to bidirectional, in a sense, particular love can “grow” its sphere of concern. Second, contemporary Buddhist teachers suggest self-compassion promotes, supports, and perhaps is the basis for wide-reaching compassion and altruism (Chödrön, Jinpa, 28). Finally, psychological research points to a corollary between self-compassion and concern for others (Neff and Pommier, 173).⁹ Consequently, this supports a notion that particularistic love and compassion may foster broader, if not universal, love and compassion, or perhaps, they are two faces of the same virtue. Moreover, Buddhist mind-training instruction operates on the basis of leveraging the particular for the universal. For example, the very instruction to establish compassionate motivation for “all sentient beings who have been our mothers” (P. Gyatso, 125) is predicated on love and compassion for one’s biological mother or primary caregiver. Based on the numerous examples of mothering as forming a basis for the development of universal compassion, and on the basis of the argument that particular love and universal love are not mutually exclusive and likely even *related*, it appears that mothering and particular love are compatible with universal compassion and altruism. However, can we, in this light, suggest that this means mothering and particularistic love are compatible with relative *bodhicitta*, the wish to attain enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings? This is a bit more contentious, depending upon whether one considers the path of world-renunciation or the path of

⁹ Per Neff and Pommier, this correlation is stronger for experienced, adult Buddhist meditators than it is for the general public. Follow-up studies refute the strength of this correlation, but it could be in large part due to study design, such as the use of only novice practitioners. In my experience as a Buddhist meditator and a practitioner of the evidence-based self-compassion techniques and principles used or referred to by such studies, the relationship between self-compassion and concern and compassion for others isn’t merely likely, but glaringly obvious.

desire (Vajrayāna) more skillful at any given phase of their life and practice. Critics of the notion that mothering is compatible with relative *bodhicitta* might cite impermanence, particularly the uncertainty of the time of one's death, and the need for attentional stability on the path of desire as reasons for the necessity for extended periods of world-renunciation.

Sacred View, Self-Clinging, and Sacrifice

For Jessica, the Vajrayāna path and her intentions for awakening through parenthood are consistent. Jessica describes her purpose as “to explore the possibility that there is more to parenting than I was led to believe and that it can be a profound path to fuel my own awakening” (Peterson “Thief of Joy”). On this path, Jessica recounts experiencing overwhelming love and tenderness, finding moments of insightful equanimity, and engaging opportunities to foster compassion and wisdom through interpersonal dynamics and ritualized acts of nurturing her family through cooking, breastfeeding, and tending to her domestic life. Of the perceptual equanimity demanded of her through parenting, Jessica writes:

“Over time my understanding of the emotion we call love has become more nuanced and, frankly, more anchored in reality... I'm finding out that to fully dive into love is far more difficult and painful than I ever wanted to believe... It's my son's laughter *and* cleaning smeared shit off the floor. To be *in* love is to release into the whole of our human experience.” (Peterson, “Re-Envisioning Love”)

When experiencing the frustration, helplessness, and loss of control that can bubble up as a result of life with a small child, Jessica turns to the Buddhist wisdom tradition, which reminds that all is interdependent, and she is not in control as she appears or would like to be. Of the intersection of parenting and wisdom, consonant with Tsultrim's and Elizabeth's observations, she writes:

“What is ultimately so frustrating about completing something [a task] with Rowen is that the lack of control is so blatant, my power to manage and control his behavior is completely and utterly non-existent. We are in a relationship and there are inherently two sides to that, it is always collaborative. When I am on my own, however, I can happily maintain my delusion as “Jessica” who easily and quickly moves about checking tasks off her list. I can be the dictator of my own life and no one is there to push back.” (Peterson, “Who's in Control, Anyway?”)

Her intentional parenting style is informed not only by religious training, but also distinctly by research-based practices to foster child psychological and social development. As such, her role as mother, and therefore her life, revolves around the principle of parental attunement as a mode of conscientiously fostering the emotional security, independence, and well-being of her child. She considers her parental diligence an offering to his development, but like for most conscientious parents, it comes at the great

cost of personal comfort: “Rowen asks *everything* of us. And just when we think we’ve given him everything we have to give... he demands more” (Peterson, “Rowan”). Of her struggles she concludes:

“I’m feeling into the truth that nothing really grows in pervasive happiness, and finding that it is affliction and struggle that create the human process and a sense of progress. It is this shadow that I am folding into my understanding of love. Motherhood, as far as I can tell, is wrought with struggle and therefore is full of fodder for transformation.” (Peterson, “Re-Envisioning Love”)

Jessica’s insights are infused with the aforementioned “sacred view” of Vajrayāna, which on the basis of emptiness and perceptual equanimity, whether it is in the meditation hut or urban family life, in laughter or shit, it is the same primordial purity capable of eliciting compassion or wisdom. Domestic ritual and skilled parenting are two expedient means she uses to engage this view directly in her life. Maternal care and attunement is a significant factor in influencing and supporting child psychological, cognitive, and physiological development. Transgenerational epigenetics indicates patterns of maternal care and behavior in laboratory rats are not only reflected by changes in genetic expression and development in their offspring, but are likely to have outcomes for future generations and play a role in evolutionary trends (Ahmed; Champagne, 386-397; Ho, 43-51; Schmauss, et. al.). As such, skilled and attuned maternal care can be theorized as not only impacting child development but producing a cascade by which transgenerational behavior and genetic expression are modeled. In essence, it is difficult to imagine the sort of widespread benefit attentive and skilled caregiving of young children may have. Perhaps this is not traditionally what Buddhists have meant when they have pledged to attain enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings, but it could be considered a contemporary spin on the *bodhisattva*’s generative endeavor. His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama has expressed related sentiments of the importance and impact of maternal care:

“Everywhere we are talking constantly about peaceful humanity, the peaceful world. This comes not from prayer, not from technology, not from money, not from religion, but from mother. This is my fundamental belief. Mother, I consider, our first teacher of compassion... This is the most important part of building a healthy family and this means healthy humanity.” (His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama qtd. by Rawcliffe)

If we allow for a culturally adapted interpretation, we might also perceive an echo of a theme present in Machig Labdrön’s biography, one of generativity, in the sense of fostering the spiritual development of one’s offspring with the intention of widespread benefit, as of yet unseen. This is not to make mention of the tireless efforts made to ensure a child is fed, clean, clothed, let alone emotionally and developmentally supported. In reflecting on Jessica’s experience, I can’t help but be reminded by two earlier philosophical themes: basic Buddhist renunciation and the psychologically disruptive practices of the Vajrayāna,

specifically Machig Labdrön's *Chöd* practice. Renunciation, in the case of monastics and retreat yogis, might be expressed in the form of forsaking the world, which is the relinquishing of worldly engagement for the sake of intensive spiritual practice. However, it is very possible to engage a life of world-renunciation without addressing attachment to personal preferences and the error of grasping upon which such attachment is based. In fact, this subtle renunciation is the point of world-renunciation and is essential to Vajrayāna practice. This is encapsulated in Gil Fronsdale's association of renunciation with *sacrifice*, which means to make holy or sacred, but also connotes discomfort and a giving up of personal preference. It is evident that Jessica's maternal efforts embody a principle of withstanding personal discomfort and easing reified self-preferences towards the end of cultivating and supporting her sacred, familial reality. In that vein, Jessica's comment pertaining to the perpetual experience of giving, even when she feels there is nothing left to give, calls up an image of Machig Labdrön's *Chöd*, which is the ritualized visualization of chopping up one's own body and making offerings of it to feed the wrathful wisdom and compassion deities who can transform perceptive grasping to "self," and its perceived limitations, into insight itself. The unsettling nature of the practice and emotional intensity of fear are used as fuel to disrupt habitual thought patterns, and to invoke the lucidity with which to "cut through" the perception of self as real and unawakened. The demands of parenting, fueled by the intensity of particular love and whatever flavor of emotional distress is present, may be the domestic equivalent of such a Vajrayāna ritual method.

Middle Way Mothering

As the demands of parenting compel Jessica to despair, joy, love, compassion, equanimity, frustration, courage and transformation, she expresses a sometimes broken hearted, sometimes resplendent disillusionment, including in her final entry in which she bids farewell to the published Mamacitta endeavor, but not the ideals behind it.

"I set out to explore an ideal, a theory, around how much was possible through the act of mothering, how much heart growth and spiritual awakening could occur in this time of selfless giving. I was shooting for the stars, magical notions through and through, like I could transcend all the perils of parenting with this goal in my heart. Alas, that was not true, and I fell and I tumbled, I made mistakes and lost control sometimes too. A reality check set in, the enormity of what it meant to parent day in and day out pummeled me to the ground. I rechecked my notions, wiped off my knees and shot off in a new direction - one that was more rooted, honest, authentic and just plain real." (Peterson, "Farewell Mamacitta")

In this entry, Jessica vulnerably shares that mothering has overthrown many of her defenses and revealed the unexpected in her, including an "unimaginable rage" that eventually gave way to sadness, grief,

heartbreak, and tenderness. Through uncovering this rage and experiencing and ultimately embracing her grief, she describes immense sensitivity and an expanded capacity for love and compassion.

“[This capacity] has set me in a place now where the task of taking my life as object - analyzing and dissecting where spirituality and mothering meet - no longer feels relevant to me. Even more so, it feels nearly sacrilegious. Like soiling the temple. I have come to this place where I am no longer trying to merge the dichotomy, to marry the practitioner I once was with the mother I was becoming.” (Peterson, “Farewell Mamacitta”)

This entry, and the writing project, concludes describing a drive near her home along the Columbia River:

“A full rainbow appeared right outside my window, spanning the river but ending right on the road next to me, the refracted colors following me as I went down the road. I literally saw the end of the rainbow. There definitely was no pot of gold sitting there, but what I did find was myself at its edge. It felt clear, there is much to be said about searching for the pot of gold, but when it comes to simply being at the end of the rainbow silence suits it best.” (Peterson, “Farewell Mamacitta”)

I can think of no better way to conclude an analysis of this collection of stories than the theme and insight Jessica writes of here. Elizabeth Mattis Namgyel is impassioned by this same insight and theme. Elizabeth articulates that living in the center of the human “predicament” in its dynamism, impermanence, uncertainty and complexity, being moved by it without needing to solve for or fix it, *is* the Middle Way view, or at least a close approximation to it. In this sense, suffering and freedom, *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa* are just a hair’s breadth apart, or maybe not even. Elizabeth’s words resonate with Jessica’s expression of contented unresolve in her situation as a dedicated mother-practitioner and in her suggestion of the space of silence in which wisdom arises, a pointer also given in traditional Buddhist texts:

“In a way, it’s a really good thing that we can’t fix samsara, because it’s our inability to fix things that lends itself to a knowing that we would never have through an ordinary, problem-solving mind that just wants to fix or manage. This brings us to a very deep way of being, a liberated way of being... There is a knowing you arrive at when you stop trying to say how everything is. When we stop trying to be right. When we stop looking at ourselves in a static way. When we limit everything in our attempt to manage [life] and find security. This ability to not know brings out our deepest intelligence.” (Namgyel, “Open Question - Tricycle”)

And, as in the fashion of traditional Buddhist hagiography, no story of spiritual development is complete without a rainbow or two.

Chapter 6: Conclusions

Traditional Buddhist conceptions of motherhood suggest that mothering is either antithetical to spiritual progress or that it is, at best, a path of merit. Motherhood is never, in traditional accounts, directly associated or identified with the contemplative path of insight. Contemporary convert-Buddhists, on the other hand, have expressed interest in re-envisioning the relationship between motherhood and spiritual development such that it serves as a soteriological path of insight when paired with Buddhist principles. Through philosophical analysis of this selection of works conveying the experiences of Buddhist mothers, I have discovered that motherhood can be all of these things. As a category, it is certainly not exclusive to one of them in particular. The relationship between motherhood and Buddhist practice is much richer and more complex than any platitude.

Sociological conditions, cultural values and beliefs, and philosophical developments have all shaped traditional Buddhist views about motherhood and the accounts of mother-practitioners' religious experiences. In India at the time of the Buddha and in Tibet during most of the second millennium, women had limited personal freedom and were given few, if any, career options other than the roles of wife and mother. Given the early Buddhist model of world-renunciation, views about motherhood in the religious domain, the hardships of mothering in ancient times and in rural Tibet, and the likelihood of early death in these times and places, it is not surprising that spiritually-inclined women either struggled in their maternal roles or sought a monastic or solitary life over a domestic existence. It is also not surprising that the few mothers who became religious virtuosos in Tibet often had the support of wealth and the rare resource of a childhood education. The intersection between motherhood and Buddhist practice in the biographies of these periods is only implied and convergences between these two domains may not have been consciously recognized by religious institutions or by the women whose lives they portray, although we will never know for sure. Tibetan biographies of the 20th and 21st century are more demonstrative of the explicit confluence of mothering and Buddhist practice. It is of note, however, that these narratives more overtly emphasize religious and political dimensions of the tradition versus contemplative dimensions.

As Tibetan Buddhism spread to North America, it met a new culture and set of social and economic conditions, such as women with reproductive, material, and educational freedoms. Highly educated and significantly more financially secure than their Tibetan counterparts, North American

women generally perceive the intersection between motherhood and Dharma practice as more directly than indirectly relevant to their spiritual lives, and as more self-reflective or psychological than traditional or religious. In this new setting, the position of women, and therefore of mothers, in religion was and is ripe for reexamination and revisioning. However, this process is not a seamless nor straightforward one, nor the forged path free of struggle. One critique that remains concerning motherhood as a soteriological path, for example, is that active and engaged mothering doesn't generally support meditative stabilization or stabilization of insight through meditative concentration in a timely manner. However, as discussed in the last chapter, clean and clear resolution of struggle is not necessarily the task of a Middle Way Mahāyāna or Vajrayāna Buddhist practice.

In my analysis, I found ample evidence that Buddhist mothers, in their role as mother, directly apply, practice, and glean insight into all of the major philosophical themes of Tibetan Buddhism, including its interrelated wisdom and ethics, encapsulated by emptiness (or suchness) and *bodhicitta* (universal love). Kisā Gotamī and Paṭācārā's narratives evoke clear themes of insight into the universality of suffering, the circumstances and sentiment of which are explicitly repeated in Diki Tsering and Tsultrim Allione's biographies. Nangsa Obum, Machig Labdrön, and Elizabeth Mattis Namgyel's stories incite serious consideration of renunciation and refuge in the context of active mothering. They call for examination of the notion of forsaking care of a dependent child for dedicated spiritual pursuit and for creative contemplation of the relevance of the themes in their life stories in present day. Maintaining a psychological "autonomy of refuge" is one way I propose interpreting this relevance, drawing on the common intentionality of their spiritual lives without denying the value and appeal of their respective choices. I also see Elizabeth's integrated and flexible approach to retreat and practice in the context of parenting as, furthermore, an example of skillful means (*upāya kauśalya*). This is a theme that also resonates with the Vajrayāna wisdom of "sacred view" in Dagmola Sakya, Tsultrim Allione, and Jessica Peterson's narratives, as they describe ritualizing and sanctifying apparently mundane parental, professional, and domestic tasks. The theme of non-self (*anātman*), arises significantly within the context of maternal experience in Diki Tsering's growth into a role far beyond the reaches of her familiar reference points, in the biographies of Tsultrim Allione and Elizabeth Mattis Namgyel as they describe the wearing away of self-cherishing through the demands of motherhood, and in Jessica Peterson's blog as she conveys a dissolution of identity through pregnancy. Jessica's revealing entries furthermore relate how wisdom insight and maternal experience are not mutually exclusive in her description of the intense, versus painful, sense experience of laboring.

Ethically, Buddhist mothers indicate an expanded sense of compassion for not only their children, but also for themselves, and the great lineage of mothers and parents that have come before them and will follow. The theme of relative *bodhicitta* surfaced as Elizabeth Mattis Namgyel described her sense of urgency to practice as a result of her new role as mother and themes of ultimate *bodhicitta*, in the form of enlightened activity as biological and spiritual generativity, may be implied by Machig Labdrön's legacy. Not too dissimilarly, Dagmola Sakya found significance in her role giving birth to religious heirs and preserving a spiritual lineage, and Jessica Peterson utilizes contemporary developmental research to foster well-being in her own child, a task that may have unquantifiable effects. Finally, maternal relationality as relevant to the process of spiritual awakening is evident in many of the narratives, and even in the story of the very first mother-practitioner, Mahāprajāpatī.

Suffering and hardship related to mothering remains a prominent theme in the stories of these women. Early Buddhists eschewed family life and particular love because of its close association with a form of relational "attachment" that is fostered by ignorance and leads to suffering. However, in many stories of women along the extended lineage of Tibetan Buddhism, it is evident that the suffering of relational attachment may have fueled the process of insight, and that particular, relational love formed a basis for more universal love, as if they were two facets of the same principle. As wisdom and compassion offer a lens through which to transform suffering, maternal attachment is the source of suffering that confers powerful transformative energy. Particularistic maternal love is, furthermore, a vehicle through which universal love and service may be accessed. Therefore, it is not in spite of the maternal predicament, which lends itself to suffering and grief, but *because of it* that experiences of mothering can be considered as brimming with spiritual potential in the Tibetan Buddhist context.

It is also evident that the sophisticated psychological dimensions of the virtue of *particular* love, or relational love, that is portrayed as both instrument and obstacle to spiritual development, demands the development of discernment and the wisdom of non-self, idealized by a contemplative path of practice. This notion reveals great ironies between both particularistic and universal love and ignorant attachment and wisdom. From an early Buddhist perspective, worldly relationships are sought due to the ignorance of self-clinging and are associated with the heavy burden of suffering. The narratives in this thesis generally do not refute this. However, they also reveal a fuller, richer and more complex picture. Relational suffering, paired with the emotional energy of particular love and the lens of Buddhist wisdom, can reveal self-clinging and its *incompatibility* with the intention for harmonious relationship. Instead, skillful relationships are based on love free of ignorant attachment or self-clinging. Driven by relational satisfaction, longing for freedom, and particular love, self-clinging is worn away in the process of

relating. The dissolution of self-clinging is the gateway through which expanded or universal love grows and particular, emotional love is refined into something other than self-centered attachment; one could say it becomes an “ethic of love” or a “virtue of love.” In an attempt to grow content in relationship, love therefore becomes a *practice* of letting go of “I,” “me,” and “mine.” Love that is free of ignorance, attachment, and aversion can be both particular and universal, it is not bound by an either-or dichotomy because it is not a reified, definable experience aimed at self-gratification. The overarching theme that can be gleaned especially from the biographies of the North American Buddhist women discussed here is that the suffering these women faced in their relational lives brought them to a new way of loving, a love that is complex, bittersweet, full, inclusive and quite literally asked *everything* of them. It asked them to give up their “selves.” In theory, this sort of motherly love can liberate; it seems almost perfectly designed to do so given the right conditions, and it is a model upon which other, non-parental relationships might be fruitfully based. It stands to reason that maternal relationship was such a fitting metaphor and simile for Buddhist ethics and wisdom in traditional texts. The stories of these mothers animate such metaphor and perhaps lend inspiration as to how they might be lived.

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