

Article

Revisiting the “Secret Consort” (*gsang yum*) in Tibetan Buddhism

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Abstract: This article revisits the question, first introduced by feminist scholars in the mid-1990s, about whether sexual practices within Buddhist tantra (heterosexually conceived) are empowering or exploitative to women. The purpose here is to complicate this question, given the different geographic settings and cultural contexts in which consort relationships have been embedded—from eastern Tibet to North America—and to nuance our understanding of the potential and pitfalls of sexuality in tantric contexts. To do so, I query the dynamics of secrecy and sexuality in tantric practice, examining twentieth century examples of female practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism who have participated in such relationships and thereby highlighting the localized ways that the “secret consort” (*gsang yum*) has been invoked as a social role. This issue is especially relevant today in light of the global #MeToo movement and recent disclosures of sexual improprieties and alleged abuse involving Tibetan teachers at the head of Buddhist communities in Europe and North America. For this reason, to conclude, I discuss shifting perspectives on sexuality as Buddhist tantra has spread beyond Asia and draw attention to current voices calling for greater transparency and community accountability.

Keywords: Buddhism; gender; sexuality; tantra; consort relationship; women in religion

Let me begin with a cautionary tale from Tibet regarding the judgment pronounced by Yama, the Lord of Death, to a woman who refused to serve as the consort for a Buddhist teacher or *lama* (Skt: *guru*, Tib: *bla ma*).¹ The young lady from a well-to-do family, named Chödrön, had sought out Buddhist teachings from numerous esteemed lamas. One of them, the itinerant Zhönu Gyaltzen, asked her to be his “secret consort,” but she refused. The request caused her to lose faith in the lama and leave the gathering before receiving the complete instructions. Later, she told girlfriends about the incident. In Yama’s assessment, since Zhönu Gyaltzen was a master of esoteric teachings, Chödrön had breached her tantric commitments (Skt: *samaya*, Tib: *dam tshig*) on several counts: not complying with the lama’s request, not completing the training in his teachings and (worst of all, it seems) speaking about the incident with other women. When Chödrön protests that if the lama was realized, it was inappropriate for him to take a sexual interest in her, Yama counters that when Zhönu Gyaltzen died, numerous relics and miraculous signs occurred, attesting to his high degree of realization. Positioning her as a gossip, he avers that she caused numerous others to lose faith, thereby harming the lama and his disciples. He concludes, “it is a greater sin to denigrate and slander lamas and teachers than it is to murder a thousand living beings,” and condemns her to suffer the torments of the hell realms.²

This tale comes from the visionary account of a Tibetan revenant or *delok* (Tib: *’das log*), said to journey to the realms beyond death and return to tell stories of the deceased, at times recommending

¹ This tale comes from the biography of Lingza Chökyi, a female revenant, as translated and discussed by Bryan Cuevas in *Tales of the Netherworlds* (Cuevas 2008, pp. 48–50). Yama is the figure believed to weigh one’s positive and negative deeds and pronounce judgment in the *bardo* or “intermediate state” (*bar do*) between death and rebirth.

² (Cuevas 2008, p. 50).

rituals for their living relatives to perform in order to ameliorate their suffering.³ As Bryan Cuevas has pointed out, these tales can involve the dramatic scene involving the “trials of the damned,” which seek to educate the living about Buddhist ethics. Cuevas states: “Always in the end the message is clear: have faith in the monks and lamas, practice religion with great devotion, and avoid committing sinful acts; otherwise, a horrible destiny awaits.”⁴ As a literary representation of normative ethics, we should read Chödrön’s disturbing tale as prescriptive (rather than descriptive): **conveying how women should or should not act regarding the sexual advances of Buddhist lamas.**⁵ Therein is a potent message that capitulation to the teacher’s wishes is virtuous and defiance has dire consequences as **does breaching the secrecy that typically surrounds such encounters.** Nowhere is it questioned (and the tale is attributed to a female delok from the sixteenth century, Lingza Chökyi) **whether a realized master could act unethically or whether his sexual advances may have harmed Chödrön.**⁶ Her tale raises questions about religious authority, misconduct, and secrecy that remain salient as ever today.

As the #MeToo movement continues to reverberate around the world,⁷ it is timely to revisit the consort relationship in Tibetan Buddhism. This is especially the case given recent disclosures of sexual improprieties and alleged abuse in Tibetan Buddhist communities in North America and Europe. In **July 2017, just months before the #MeToo movement began, a group of former leaders and longtime members of the international Buddhist organization Rigpa (based in France) wrote a public letter to their teacher and then head of Rigpa, Sogyal Rinpoche, supporting longstanding allegations of abusive behavior.**⁸ The letter broke the silence on what had been a wall of secrecy within the organization, reporting numerous instances of sexual and other forms of abuse.⁹ As the letter makes clear, complaints were routinely dismissed or interpreted as teachings, employing **Buddhist language such as “skillful means” (Skt: *upāya*; Tib: *thabs*) and the neologism “crazy wisdom” (Tib: *ye shes ’chol ba*),**¹⁰ referencing the sometimes unconventional methods used by tantric masters to guide their disciples along the path to enlightenment. This is not an isolated case.¹¹ In April the same year, six women stepped forward with disclosures of inappropriate sexual relations pursued by Lama Norlha, head of Thubten Chöling Monastery in upstate New York, prompting a formal apology and his retirement as the monastery head before he passed away in February 2018.¹²

³ On the gendered dimensions of deloks, see Alyson Prude (2014).

⁴ (Cuevas 2008, p. 51).

⁵ For an overview of sexuality in normative Buddhist ethics, see Amy Langenberg (2018).

⁶ Cuevas states that the author of Lingza Chökyi’s biography is unknown, though the level of personal detail in it makes it credible to think that the author heard accounts of the delok’s visionary sojourns directly from her (Cuevas 2008, p. 54).

⁷ The first days of “#MeToo” in social media around the world are chronicled in “The #MeToo shockwave: how the movement has reverberated around the world” by Louise Burke in *The Telegraph*, published 9 March 2018 (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/world/metoo-shockwave/>).

⁸ The authors of the letter included a former Rigpa U.S. Board Member, the Head of Household in the U.S. for Sogyal Rinpoche, Director and Co-Director of Rigpa educational and technology units, and several monastics and personal attendants of Sogyal Rinpoche. A link to a PDF of the letter was published on the Buddhist blog, *Lion’s Roar*, on 20 July 2017 (<https://www.lionsroar.com/letter-to-sogyal-rinpoche-from-current-and-ex-rigpa-members-details-abuse-allegations/>).

⁹ Prior to that, there had been online accusations, news reports, and even a documentary attempting to bring Sogyal Rinpoche’s behavior to light, but no official response from the Rigpa organization acknowledging and addressing the issue head on until after the publication of this letter. An early example is the *Guardian* article by Mary Finnigan, “Lama Sex Abuse Claims Call Buddhist Taboos into Question,” published on 1 July 2011 (<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2011/jul/01/lama-sex-abuse-sogyal-rinpoche-buddhist>). The documentary, *In the Name of Enlightenment—Sex Scandal in Religion*, aired on Canadian television in 2011 was later posted to YouTube on 21 September 2012; it had received 215,920 views by the time of finalizing this article (<https://youtu.be/yWhlivvmMnk>).

¹⁰ This term was coined by Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche and appears in the title of the book, *Crazy Wisdom* (Trungpa 1991), containing talks he gave on the eight manifestations of Padmasambhava in 1972 at two different “Crazy Wisdom Seminars,” one in Jackson Hole, Wyoming and the other at Karne Chöling in Vermont. See (DiValerio 2015, pp. 237–42).

¹¹ See Ann Gleig, “The Shadow of the Roshi: Sex, Scandal and Secrecy in American Zen Buddhism,” for an overview of sex scandals in American Zen Buddhism, published on 14 September 2015, on *Sweeping Zen* (<http://sweepingzen.com/the-shadow-of-the-roshi-sex-scandal-and-secrecy-in-american-zen-buddhism/>).

¹² This was reported on *Tricycle Magazine’s* blog on 27 July 2017 (<https://tricycle.org/trikedaily/kagyuthubtencholing-monastery-working-sex-impropriety/>).

These recent disclosures, and the delok tale recounted above, reanimate a question raised by feminist scholars in the mid-1990s: **is the consort relationship (most often between a male tantric master and a young woman recognized for her special qualities) exploitative or liberative?** At stake are interpretations and appropriations of esoteric practices outside the monastic domain, in tantric circles, that involve sexuality as a ritualized means to liberation. Positioned at opposite ends of the spectrum, in *Traveller in Space* (Campbell 1996), June Campbell made cautionary remarks about the androcentric bias of Buddhist tantra and surfaced allegations of abuse by Tibetan lamas in North America while, in *Passionate Enlightenment* (Shaw 1994), Miranda Shaw drew on medieval Indian sources to claim that the ritual and symbolic elevation of the feminine in Buddhist tantra indicated its gynocentric origins and correlated to the empowerment of women.¹³ Even if it is not possible to decide this question once and for all, given the different geographic settings and cultural contexts in which this practice has been embedded, it is worthwhile revisiting in light of recent studies and **a small but growing body of materials by and about Tibetan women who were Buddhist masters in their own right and also participated in tantric partnerships.** This will allow us to recognize the localized ways that the “secret consort” has been invoked as a social role and experienced by women at specific times and places. Their perspectives and other examples of consort relationships from twentieth century Tibetan contexts can help nuance our understanding of the potential and pitfalls of sexuality in tantric contexts.

In particular, I am interested in the dynamics between secrecy and sexuality. Secrecy can serve the interests of the powerful, by compartmentalizing public accomplishments and private indiscretions, or it can be used as **“hidden transcripts,”** to employ James Scott’s evocative term, **for subverting existing modes of authority and norms, thereby incubating the seeds of social transformation.**¹⁴ The antinomian nature of Buddhist tantra and its early surreptitious networks in medieval India provides a poignant example of such a transformation, indelibly reshaping Buddhist teachings, practices, and institutions prior to their transmission into Tibet. Yet, as José Cabezón points out, sexuality in Buddhist tantra existed in a dialectic “push-and-pull” with the renunciatory ideal embodied in monastic celibacy and expounded in scholastic hermeneutics.¹⁵ That meant **an ongoing negotiation of Buddhist norms and structures over the course of Tibetan history.** By historicizing sexuality in this way,¹⁶ **it becomes possible to recognize significant shifts in how secrecy and sexuality have been practiced among Buddhist tantric communities across temporal and spatial distances.** For this reason, there are moments of congruence and dissonance between the centuries-old parameters of secrecy surrounding tantric practice, its public dimensions among Tibetan communities, and the current trend of scandals and disclosures in Europe and North America. Given the danger of secrecy when combined with sexuality, it is important to explore the ways in which women have experienced benefit or harm within a tantric framework, including specific ritual practices involving sexuality and teacher-student relationships. My hope is that this exploration can help inform outside observers as well as those in Buddhist communities who today find themselves in the midst of **reevaluating their own histories and addressing issues of power and privilege in light** of the #MeToo movement and broader concerns with respect to social justice.

1. Tantra and Sexual Union

The term *tantra* describes a heterogeneous body of Indian texts, which espoused esoteric and often antinomian practices promising expedient means to liberation.¹⁷ Tantric materials and associated

¹³ For assessments of the respective arguments in these works, see Adelheid Herrmann-Pfandt’s review of *Traveller in Space* in *Numen* 45/3 (1998): 329–30 and Liz Wilson’s review of *Passionate Enlightenment* in *History of Religions* 36/1 (1996): 60–4. (Scott 1992).

¹⁴ (Cabezón 2017, pp. 292–96).

¹⁵ Cabezón invokes the work of Michel Foucault (Foucault [1978] 1990) in discussing this dialectic around sexuality in Buddhism. See also Bernard Faure (1998).

¹⁷ See Hugh Urban (2003), especially Chapter 5, for a genealogy of how the term *tantra* emerged in scholarly literature. Christian K. Wedemeyer (2013) provides a salient typology of scholarly tropes used in characterizing the history of Buddhism and its culmination in “Tantric Buddhism.”

practices involving sexuality emerged in India circa the seventh century CE within both Śaivite and Buddhist circles.¹⁸ In this article, I limit my discussion to Buddhist tantric materials, the practices based on them, and the communities that formed around such practices with specific attention to Nyingma traditions from eastern Tibet in recent history. The terms “secret mantra” (Skt: *guhyanmantra*; Tib: *gsang sngags*) and “adamantine vehicle” (Skt: *Vajrayāna*; Tib: *rdo rje theg pa*) refer to the teachings and practices deriving from the tantras, and their esoteric “secret” nature distinguish them from exoteric teachings of the so-called Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna found in the sūtras and their commentaries.¹⁹ To enter into the Vajrayāna requires the completion of a rigorous set of preliminaries, followed by initiation from a vajra master, and the pledge to adhere to a set of commitments grouped in the samaya vow. The samaya vow includes stipulations to respect the vajra master as well as those who have taken initiation with the same teacher, and indeed all women.²⁰ **Included is a pledge of secrecy, not to reveal tantric methods to the uninitiated, understood to not yet be spiritually mature or ready for Vajrayāna teachings and practices.**²¹

The issue of secrecy is central to the interpretation of the tantras, regarding whether their language should be taken literally or as “coded language” (Skt: *sandhyā-bhāṣā*).²² Tantric codes may have initially functioned as a means to communicate along secretive networks in ways that only the initiated could understand.²³ However, **Ronald Davidson** has argued that late medieval Indian exegetes used the idea of coded language to “explain away” the antinomian aspects of Buddhist tantra that offended social conventions of their own day, such as drinking liquor or engaging in sex among the *mahāsiddhas* or “great accomplished ones” who served as founding figures of Buddhist tantric lineages.²⁴ This was also a point of contention in Tibet where rituals of “union” and “liberation” (Tib: *sbyor grol*) were condemned by reformers in the late tenth century.²⁵ Buddhism had first entered Tibet under imperial patronage and supervision during the seventh to ninth centuries. With the collapse of empire in 842 CE, monastic institutions went into decline, while localized tantric lineages continued to flourish. Reformers who galvanized a Buddhist renaissance regarded the previous period as a dark age of perversion due to the literal practice of the tantras.²⁶ As monasticism became reestablished, the sexuality of early tantra was, for the most part, sublimated into visualized imagery for meditation practice rather than literally performed, particularly by monastics.²⁷ Male and female deities in union, representing the conjoining of skillful means and wisdom (Tib: *thabs shes*), were invoked through

¹⁸ David Gordon White (2003, p. 7) and Ronald Davidson (2002, pp. 116–18).

¹⁹ Together these make up the Buddhist canon in Tibet, which is divided into two main sections. The sūtras and tantras constitute the *Kangyur* (Tib: *bka' 'gyur*) or sermons considered to be the words of the Buddha or equivalent, translated into Tibetan, while the translated commentaries are found in the *Tengyur* (Tib: *bstan 'gyur*).

²⁰ In references to the samaya vow, throughout this article, I draw on “three vows” (Tib: *sdom gsum*) literature, primarily as found in Book V of Jamgön Kongtrul’s *Treasury of Knowledge* (*Shes bya mdzod*), published as *Buddhist Ethics* (Kongtrul 1998a). As a magnum opus from nineteenth-century Kham, this would be one of the relevant sources for Kagyu and Nyingma circles from eastern Tibet in recent history. According to Kongtrul, the first root downfall is to disrespect one’s vajra master, including harming him or her through body, speech, or mind (i.e., striking, criticizing, or harboring contemptuous thoughts). The third is, out of anger, to harm one’s spiritual siblings through body, speech, or mind, referring especially to those who have received initiation from the same master. The fourteenth root downfall is to disrespect women, especially to speak about them disparagingly. See (Kongtrul 1998a, pp. 256–64; Sparham 2018).

²¹ This relates to the seventh root downfall: “to disclose secrets to immature persons” which include worldly people, non-Buddhists, as well as the *śrāvakas* and *pratyekabuddhas* of the so-called Hīnayāna. This is reiterated in a list of secondary downfalls and includes showing secret articles such as images of tantric deities, ritual implements, hand gestures, and tantric texts to the uninitiated. See (Kongtrul 1998a, pp. 261, 266, 486, n. 197).

²² Per Kvaerne reviews translations of this term in (Kvaerne 1977, pp. 37–38).

²³ These could function, for example, as a way for tantric initiates to identify each other for a feast gathering (Skt: *gaṇacakra*). See Ronald Davidson (2002, pp. 262–69).

²⁴ (Davidson 2002, p. 261).

²⁵ While “union” (Tib: *sbyor ba*) in this compound refers to ritual practices involving sexuality, the term “liberation” (Tib: *grol ba*) here describe exorcism rites that seek to destroy harmful spirits or adversaries of various kinds and “liberate” them into a pure land. On violence in Tibetan ritual, see Jacob Dalton (2011).

²⁶ See “The Ordinance of IHa bla-ma Ye-Shes-’Od” in (Karmay 1998) and also (Cabezón 2017, pp. 294–95).

²⁷ See (Davidson 2005, pp. 360–67).

visualization and the repetition of mantras in order to cultivate their enlightened qualities or harness their power in ritual action.²⁸

While the tantric rite of sexual union had been integral to initiations in medieval India,²⁹ it became a more rarefied practice among Buddhists in Tibet, the exclusive purview of advanced tantric adepts who operated beyond the monastic establishment.³⁰ Sarah Jacoby provides an elegant threefold typology of the rationale for engaging in sexuality within tantric contexts: (1) the soteriological goal of enlightenment; (2) the hermeneutical goal of revealing teachings through visionary means; and (3) the pragmatic goal of promoting longevity and healing illness.³¹ With respect to the soteriological goal, sexuality is employed as a method to manipulate elements of the subtle body in order to produce states of bliss conducive to realization, culminating in “spontaneously-arisen bliss” (Skt: *sahajānanda*; Tib: *lhan skyes kyi dga’ ba*).³² This provides an expedient method for liberation, ideally benefitting both partners in the process. For visionaries in the Nyingma tradition, the tantric rite of sexual union has also been instrumental in the distinctively Tibetan process of revealing *terma* or “treasures” (Tib: *gter ma*), teachings traced to the advent of Buddhism in Tibet. This corresponds to the hermeneutical goal, the production of hitherto unknown teachings attributed to authoritative masters of the past, particularly the eighth-century Indian tantric master, Padmasambhava, a key figure in the mythology of Buddhism’s founding moments on the plateau. Padmasambhava and his Tibetan consort Yeshe Tsogyal purportedly hid away teachings for future times of decline and strife throughout the Tibetan and Himalayan landscape and in the minds of specifically appointed disciples, male and female, who in subsequent lifetimes would reveal them with the help of a consort.³³ Finally, the pragmatic goal of promoting longevity and healing illness has served as a crucial intervention in the lives of numerous great masters. Take for example, Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche (1910–1991), who was responsible for training many of the current generation of Nyingma masters in exile. At the age of twenty-five, he disrobed and found a consort after almost dying from a fever.³⁴ Even though he did so for the purpose of healing, as a result of their union, he began to reveal treasures.

In this way, sexuality was gradually contained in Buddhist tantric contexts in Tibet by circumscribing who engaged in it as a literal practice and to what end it was performed. According to José Cabezón, a process of domestication that treated antinomian practices “allegorically as symbols of abstract philosophical ideals, or as practices that were only to be visualized” was not the sole approach; there were also attempts to further delineate its literal practice by proscribing attachment to pleasure in tantric contexts or to supersede it altogether with claims to more advanced gnostic practices.³⁵ Over time the antinomian dimensions of tantra become routinized, thereby eroding its transgressive qualities and allowing it to enter the public domain and become a mainstream part of Tibetan culture.

2. The Secret Consort

Though secrecy is central to the rhetoric of Buddhist tantra, especially with regards to sexuality, many of its ritual forms and iconography have long been on display in murals at Buddhist monasteries

²⁸ Traditionally there are four types of ritual acts (Tib: *las bzhi*) in Buddhist tantra: pacification (Tib: *zhi*) for healing illness or pacifying obstacles, enrichment (Tib: *rgyas*) for promoting longevity, protecting crops and livestock, and the like; influence (Tib: *dbang*) for extending dominion, and subjugation (Tib: *drag*) for exorcising evil spirits and forces.

²⁹ (White 2003, chps. 3–4; Davidson 2005, pp. 34–44).

³⁰ (Cabezón 2017, pp. 292–96). As he points out, this was also the case in the late Indian traditions of Buddhist tantra. See also (Wedemeyer 2013, p. 152).

³¹ Jacoby provides a thorough description of each of these three goals and the associated practice in (Jacoby 2014, pp. 196–222).

³² For a discussion of the specifics of this practice, see (Gyatso 1998, pp. 190–97; Jacoby 2014, pp. 196–204).

³³ An overview of treasure revelation can be found in (Gyatso 1986; Thondup 1997; Doctor 2005; Gayley 2008). The role of sexuality in the revelatory process is discussed in (Thondup 1997, pp. 82–84, 106–7).

³⁴ See (Khyentse 2008, pp. 95–101), and “Dilgo Khyentse Tashi Peljor” by Alexander Gardner, published on the *Treasury of Lives* in December 2009 (<https://treasuryoflives.org/biographies/view/Dilgo-Khyentse-Tashi-Peljor/8825>). His consort’s name was Khandro Lhamo and they had two daughters together.

³⁵ (Cabezón 2017, pp. 292–96). On this point, see also (Jacoby 2014, p. 223).

and temples throughout Tibet and on public ritual occasions. Tantric deities in union, heterosexually conceived as *yabyum* (male and female, Tib: *yab yum*), are a mainstay feature of Tibetan Buddhist art,³⁶ while ritual implements, gestures, mantras, and iconography (in the form of miniature *tsakali* cards) are displayed in public initiations (Tib: *khrom dbang*) given by Tibetan lamas as a blessing to large gatherings with thousands in attendance.³⁷ That said, the oral transmission that gives permission to practice a specific liturgy and explains its meaning remains restricted to those who have completed the preliminaries.³⁸ In addition, the antinomian practices of the “holy madmen” (Tib: *smyon pa*) discussed by David DiValerio sometimes entailed a **public performance of behavior defying ordinary social conventions as a test of the practitioner’s ability to transcend worldly concerns.**³⁹ Transgression also features prominently in often repeated stories of the Indian *mahāsiddhas* and the exploits of later tantric masters in Tibetan and Himalayan areas who emulated them as found in hagiographies and oral tradition.⁴⁰

Along similar lines, it turns out that the “secret consort” or *sangyum* (Tib: *gsang yum*) in Tibetan Buddhism is not so secret after all. **In practice, the term is used as a title before the names of the publically acknowledged and esteemed consorts of great Buddhist masters, who function in the role of wife or companion.** This stands in contrast to the ideal consort of Indian tantric literature, which was the *parakīyā*, or “one who belongs to another,” connoting an illicit affair.⁴¹ **In the Nyingma tradition, lamas routinely marry and pass their lineages of teachings through the family, so the sangyum (sometimes shortened as *yum*, an honorific term for “consort,” “wife,” and “mother”) holds a place of honor in her local community and in wider networks of religious affiliation.** Eminent nineteenth and twentieth century examples include **Dudjom Rinpoche Jigdral Yeshe Dorje (1904–1987), the first head of the Nyingma lineage in exile, who had two consorts—Sangyum Kusho Tseten Yudrön and Sangyum Kusho Rigzin Wangmo—mothers of his five sons and six daughters,**⁴² and his predecessor, the visionary **Dudjom Lingpa (1835–1904) in eastern Tibet, who had three consorts—Traza Sönam Tso, Keza Sanggye Tso, and Akyabza Kalzang Drönma—mothers to his eight sons and four daughters.**⁴³ A number of their children were recognized as reincarnate lamas, became influential teachers and visionaries, and served as lineage holders.⁴⁴

As testimony to their elevated public stature, **consorts remain revered figures in Tibetan communities well beyond the passing of their partners.** This is important especially when consorts serve as companions to esteemed Buddhist lamas in their final years since, as mentioned before, one of the benefits ascribed to the tantric rite of sexual union is longevity.⁴⁵ A case in point is Khandro Tsering

³⁶ The only room that is typically off-limits to pilgrims (especially to women) is the shrine dedicated to protector deities, featuring wrathful and violent imagery.

³⁷ See examples of *tsakali* cards for various ritual cycles on Himalayan Art Resources: <https://www.himalayanart.org/search/set.cfm?setID=668>.

³⁸ These correlate to the reading transmission (Tib: *lung*) and explanation (Tib: *khrid*) in the three-fold transmission process that begins with initiation or empowerment (Skt: *abhiṣeka*, Tib: *dbang*). Traditionally all three must occur for the transmission of a set of esoteric teachings to be complete.

³⁹ See David DiValerio (2015), especially Chapters 2 and 3.

⁴⁰ See Robinson (1979) for a translation of a prominent collection of mahāsiddha tales and DiValerio (2015) on sources for “holy madmen” in Tibet and Himalayan areas who emulated the mahāsiddhas.

⁴¹ See Charlotte Vaudeville (1962) and Lee Siegel (1978). Their views are anchored in non-Buddhist sources but seek to characterize tantra in general. For counterexamples among late medieval Indian tantric sources, see (Biernacki 2007, chp. 3).

⁴² The Rigpa Shedra has published a helpful online genealogy, “Dudjom Rinpoche’s Family Lineage” (http://www.rigpawiki.org/index.php?title=Dudjom_Rinpoche%27s_Family_Lineage). See also Dongyal (2008) and Norbu (2014).

⁴³ While his sons were renowned Buddhist masters, his daughters are lost to the historical record according to family genealogy found in (Pad ma ‘od gsal mtha’ yas 2003). The prefix to his consorts’ names indicates their clan, so Traza is the lady of the Tra clan (Khra bza’), Keza is the lady of the Ke clan (Ske bza’), and Akyabza is the lady of the Akyab clan (A skyabs bza’).

⁴⁴ Among Dudjom Lingpa’s children, the most famous were Jigme Tenpai Nyima (1865–1926), the third in the eminent Dodrupchen line of reincarnations, affiliated with Dodrupchen Monastery in Golok, and Drime Özer (1881–1924), a visionary in his own right to be discussed below. Prominent among Dudjom Rinpoche’s children was Thinley Norbu Rinpoche (1931–2011) who settled in New York and Shenphen Dawa Rinpoche (1950–2018) who taught internationally.

⁴⁵ With respect to Khandro Tsering Chödrön, Alak Zenkar stated, “Without Khandro-la, Jamyang Khyentse Chökyi Lodrö’s life would have been much shorter. If his life had been shorter then not so many high lamas would have received these

Chödrön (1929–2011) who served as the Sangyum of Jamyang Khyentse Chökyi Lodrö (1893–1959), one of the great ecumenical masters of the early twentieth century.⁴⁶ Coming together in 1948, after he had been seriously ill for several years, Tsering Chödrön spent eleven years as his companion and outlived him by another fifty-two years.⁴⁷ For the most part, she lived out her days at the Tsuklakhang in the royal palace compound on the hilltop above Gangtok, Sikkim where Chökyi Lodrö had stayed after leaving Tibet in 1956 and where his reliquary remained. Eulogies to her after her passing in 2011 include praises of her unassuming character and profound realization. One Sikkim official extolled the “tender wisdom of her presence” as a Buddhist adept “honoured by all, even though she herself has tried as far as possible to remain in the background, in the hidden and austere life of an ancient contemplative.”⁴⁸ Tsering Chödrön is said to have passed away in *thukdam* (Tib: *thugs dam*), a state of meditative concentration in which the body reportedly does not decay for a number of days after death. Indicating the high-degree of realization attributed to her, prominent Buddhist masters performed rituals on her behalf, issued public statements eulogizing her, and attended the consecration of a sizeable *stūpa* in her honor at Lerab Ling in France.⁴⁹

Tantric texts that detail the qualities of a consort almost invariably take a heteronormative male perspective by detailing the attributes of suitable women according to various typologies.⁵⁰ However, this does not exclude the possibility of female adepts having male consorts. While the term *sangyum* is gendered female, the terminology for “consort” has gender-neutral expressions and applications as well.⁵¹ Notably, in the best-known account of her life,⁵² revealed by the seventeenth-century visionary Taksham Nuden Dorje, Yeshe Tsogyal served not only as consort to Padmasambhava, but also took on a consort, Atsara Sale, a Nepali man whom she ransomed from slavery and brought home to Tibet. In this account, the practice of sexual union is even presented from a female vantage point as instructions given to Yeshe Tsogyal by her guru.⁵³ Otherwise, it is more typical for a male lama or adept to take on a younger female consort. Despite the structural imbalance, the equality of realization between tantric partners is sometimes asserted.⁵⁴

extraordinary teachings, in particular the Damngak Dzö.” Posted on 11 June 2011 on the blog “In Memory of Khandro Tsering Chödrön” (<https://khandrotseringchodron.org/2011/06/11/alak-zenkar-rinpoche/>).

⁴⁶ His biography can be found in (Khyentse 2017) and on the *Treasury of Lives*, published by Alexander Gardner in December 2009 (<https://treasuryoflives.org/biographies/view/Jamyang-Khyentse-Chokyi-Lodro/P733>).

⁴⁷ A brief account of her life can be found in Chapter 12 of *Dakini Power: Twelve Extraordinary Women Shaping the Transmission of Tibetan Buddhism in the West* (Haas 2013).

⁴⁸ “Thoughts from Sikkim,” posted 6 July 2011 on the blog “In Memory of Khandro Tsering Chödrön” (<https://khandrotseringchodron.org/2011/07/06/thoughts-from-sikkim/>).

⁴⁹ An assortment of public eulogies can be found on the blog “In Memory of Khandro Tsering Chödrön” (<https://khandrotseringchodron.org/>). Sakya Trizin presided over the consecration in July 2014. This event is described in (Haas 2013, pp. 272–74). Note that Tsering Chödrön is the aunt of Sogyal Rinpoche and spent the final years of her life at Lerab Ling.

⁵⁰ See Judith Simmer-Brown (2001, pp. 223–31).

⁵¹ Several Tibetan terms for “consort” use a feminine ending (such as Tib: *rig ma* and *shes rab ma*, literally “awareness lady” and “knowledge lady” respectively), echoing the association of the feminine with transcendent knowledge (Skt: *prajñā*, Tib: *shes rab*) in Buddhism. A gender neutral term is “friend” (Tib: *grogs*), which can connote a “lover” in ordinary contexts and also “companion” or “consort” in tantric ones; it can take a masculine or feminine ending. In addition, “spiritual consort” (Tib: *thugs kyi gzungs ma*) is gendered female, but there is also a corresponding gender-neutral term, “spiritual support” (Tib: *sems kyi rten*); see (Gayley 2016, p. 142). In Indian tantric literature, the relevant term is *karmamudrā*, which literally means “ritual seal” (Tib: *las kyi phyag rgya*). It can refer to a female consort or consort practice more generally.

⁵² This has been translated in (Padmakara Translation Group 2002). See (Gyatso 2006) on the historicity of Yeshe Tsogyal. The source that Janet Gyatso introduces in her article, a biography of Yeshe Tsogyal revealed in the fourteenth century by Drime Kunga, has recently been translated by Chönyi Drolma in *The Life and Visions of Yeshe Tsogyal: The Autobiography of the Great Wisdom Queen* (Drolma 2017).

⁵³ This description can be found in (Padmakara Translation Group 2002, chp. 4).

⁵⁴ For example, with respect to Yeshe Tsogyal, the contemporary author Pema Ösal Thaye boldly states:

Her emanation *body* was the equal to that of Padmasambhava, the second Buddha, having attained mastery over all apparent phenomena. Equal to his *speech*, she overflowed with dharma teachings on sūtra and tantra. Equal to his *mind*, she benefited beings through wisdom and method. Equal in discernable *qualities*, she accomplished great benefit for dharma and beings. Equal in performing *actions*, she spontaneously adhered to the actions of pacifying, enriching, magnetizing and destroying (Gayley forthcoming)

As with Tsering Chödrön, consorts may also hold the exalted title, Khandro. This is the Tibetan translation of the Sanskrit term *ḍākinī*, referring to a class of female tantric deities prominent in Tibetan Buddhist iconography, ritual, and visionary experience.⁵⁵ The *ḍākinī* is invoked in rituals as the embodiment of wisdom and enlightened passion, either alone or in union with a male *heruka*, and she can appear in the visionary experience of tantric masters, both male and female, to advise, cajole, rebuke, and teach them.⁵⁶ The title Khandro is given to Tibetan women in public recognition of their special qualities and realization as either consorts or teachers in their own right. Contemporary examples of renown female teachers bearing this title include the monastic Jetsün Khandro Rinpoche (b. 1967), daughter of Mindrolling Trichen Rinpoche and heir to the Mindrolling tradition in exile,⁵⁷ and the non-monastic Khandro Tāre Lhamo (1938–2002), daughter of the visionary Apang Terchen and a significant figure in the revitalization of Buddhism in the Tibetan region of Golok after the Cultural Revolution.⁵⁸ As daughters of esteemed lamas, both received an esoteric training in youth, preparing them to serve as teachers and holders of family lineages. In such cases, the *ḍākinī* provides an authoritative tantric model through which the realization and accomplishments of actual Tibetan women become culturally legible and publically acknowledged.



The *ḍākinī* has also been appropriated as an empowering symbol among American converts to Tibetan Buddhism.⁵⁹ In a recent anthology, *Dakini Power: Twelve Extraordinary Women Shaping the Transmission of Tibetan Buddhism in the West* (2013), Micheala Haas showcases the spiritual journeys of three Tibetan, one British, and eight American women who are Buddhist tantric practitioners, including lamas, nuns, and consorts. Those Americans who married lamas, such as Elizabeth Mattis-Namgyel (wife of Dzigar Kongtrul Rinpoche) and Chagdud Khadro (widow of Chagdud Tulku), have now become teachers in their own right.⁶⁰ In some sense, this is a step forward into the limelight beyond figures like Tsering Chödrön (also included in the anthology), since Tibetan consorts often remained in the background and refused to teach, a gesture of humility, as well as adherence to social convention. That said, the role of the consort beyond Tibetan communities remains shrouded (with certain exceptions). As Elizabeth Mattis-Namgyel has wryly remarked, “there is not a sangyum club or a website one can go to and ask for advice.”⁶¹ In North America, Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche (1939–1987) was unique in naming seven women as sangyum, who served as his companions and personal representatives toward the end of his life.⁶² They remain respected members of the Shambhala community, given prominent seats at events and addressed with the title Sangyum before their names. In addition, Diana Mukpo, whom Trungpa Rinpoche married in England after disrobing

In comparable terms, with reference to Tsering Chödrön, Khandro Rinpoche asserts that “the wives of these great lamas are not just called sangyums . . . but they embody everything you see in the teachers themselves, they are equal in their practice, their realization, capability, and love” (Haas 2013, p. 287).

⁵⁵ In medieval India, the *ḍākinī* was elevated from her status as a flesh-eating demoness who haunted the charnel grounds to a semi-wrathful enlightened deity, symbolizing wisdom. In Tibetan Buddhist art, she is both fierce and seductive, dancing naked in open space, wearing bone ornaments from the dismantling of ego, and carrying a hooked knife in one hand and a trident with freshly severed heads in the other. See Janice Willis (1989), Janet Gyatso (1998), and Judith Simmer-Brown (2001) for insights into various dimensions of the *ḍākinī*.

⁵⁶ On this point, see (Gyatso 1998, chp. 6; Jacoby 2014, chp. 3).

⁵⁷ Jetsün Khandro Rinpoche presides over an international Buddhist community with retreat centers in India and North America. A biographical sketch can be found in Chapter 1 of (Haas 2013), and her official website is: <https://www.khandrorinpoche.org/>. Note that Jacoby (2015) discusses a different Khandro Rinpoche in eastern Tibet.

⁵⁸ See (Gayley 2016) for a study of her life and correspondence with Namtrul Rinpoche (1944–2011). My translation of the source material for this study is forthcoming from Shambhala Publications.

⁵⁹ See (Willis 1989; Shaw 1994; Simmer-Brown 2001; Klein 2008; Allione 2018).

⁶⁰ Haas (2013) dedicates Chapters 6 and 7 to these figures. Sangye Khandro (Nancy Gustafson), who served as the consort of Gyatrul Rinpoche, is also included in the anthology (Chapter 4), but she has decided to remain primarily focused on translating rather than teaching. Note that Chagdud Rinpoche’s wife spells the second part of her name “Khadro” rather than “Khandro” as I do throughout the rest of this article. Her given name is Jane Dedman.

⁶¹ (Haas 2013, p. 159).

⁶² The sangyum were empowered in 1985, just two years before Trungpa Rinpoche passed away. Their names and a description of the ceremony to empower them can be found in an article by Valerie Lorig (Sangyum Drukmo Tinkar), “Sangyum Anniversary Recollection” on the *Shambhala Times*, 14 May 2010 (<https://shambhalatimes.org/2010/05/14/sangyum-anniversary-recollection/>). See also (Midal 2012, pp. 448–51).

in 1970, received the title Sakyong Wangmo, a royal designation from eastern Tibet. Still today, she and several of the sangyum teach advanced trainings in the Shambhala teachings based on terma that Trungpa Rinpoche revealed in the late 1970s. The public nature of these contemporary women's roles—from Tsering Chödrön to Diana Mukpo—has given them a stature that illicit trysts, tantric or otherwise, do not. Nonetheless, by their own accounts, the role is not an easy one to navigate.⁶³

3. Tantric Partnerships

Recent studies have shed light on sexuality in Buddhist tantra from the vantage point of Tibetan women who were considered realized masters in their own right and also participated in tantric partnerships. Here I focus on the visionaries, Sera Khandro (1892–1940) and Khandro Tāre Lhamo (1938–2002),⁶⁴ prominent in the Nyingma tradition of Golok and linked through a line of emanations going back to Yeshe Tsogyal. Despite the continuities in region and emanation status, their lives were radically different due to the specific ways each was embedded in the social context of nomadic Golok and their contrasting historical moments. Sera Khandro lived in the first half of the twentieth century before the Chinese Communist invasion, whereas Tāre Lhamo came of age during the socialist transformation of Tibetan regions, survived the Cultural Revolution, and became a leader in the post-Mao era revitalization of Buddhism. For my discussion of Sera Khandro, I rely on Sarah Jacoby's ground-breaking study, *Love and Liberation: Autobiographical Writings of the Tibetan Buddhist Visionary Sera Khandro* (2014), which explores the consort relationship in Buddhist tantra through the first-person account of a female visionary. For my discussion of Tāre Lhamo, I draw on my own research and monograph, *Love Letters from Golok: A Tantric Couple in Modern Tibet* (2016), which examines the gendered dimensions of a tantric partnership in letters she exchanged at the cusp of the post-Mao era with Namtrul Rinpoche and their collaboration in restoring Buddhist teachings, practices, and institutions in Golok during the 1980s and 1990s.⁶⁵ The perspectives found in the lives and writings of Sera Khandro and Tāre Lhamo offer notable touchstones on issues of secrecy, female agency, and the potential and pitfalls of a tantric partnership for women.

Sera Khandro was born into an aristocratic Lhasa family but as a teenager fled eastward to the nomadic region of Golok to follow her destined partner, the visionary Drime Özer (1881–1924). Upon arrival, she faced considerable hardship due, in large part, to rivalries with other women. After a fraught decade-long marriage to another lama, Garra Gyalse of Banak Monastery, she enjoyed a few short years with Drime Özer before his untimely death at the age of 43. After that, Sera Khandro went to live at Sera Monastery in Serta, at the invitation of Sötrul Natsok Rangdrol, and used that as her base for the rest of her life. On a number of occasions, Sera Khandro was summoned to extend the lives of Buddhist lamas, monastic and non-monastic alike, through the tantric rite of sexual union. Secrecy was paramount in her liaisons with monastic hierarchs, like Gotrul Rinpoche of Payul Tarthang Monastery, who technically-speaking should have remained celibate. Some invitations came from renowned (non-monastic) visionaries, such as Adzom Drukpa (1842–1924), and her liaison in this case augmented her stature.

Given the vagaries of such encounters, Sarah Jacoby cautions that tantric consorts should not be viewed as either “agents” or “objects,” since the picture is usually more complicated.⁶⁶ In Sera Khandro's case, she portrays herself as passively complying with the wishes of senior lamas while worrying that she would ruin their reputations (not to mention her own). This was especially the case when a liaison took place with a monastic, though she sometimes did refuse such encounters.

⁶³ See (Mukpo and Gimian 2006; Haas 2013, chp. 6–7).

⁶⁴ Note that their dates do not easy align into an emanation sequence, since Tāre Lhamo was born in 1938 and Sera Khandro passed away in 1940.

⁶⁵ My translation of their life stories and love letters, *Inseparable across Lifetimes: The Lives and Letters of the Tibetan Visionaries Namtrul Rinpoche and Khandro Tāre Lhamo* is in press with Shambhala Publications.

⁶⁶ (Jacoby 2014, pp. 246–48).

Deflecting agency to male authority allowed Sera Khandro to fashion an autobiographic portrait of herself as both virtuous by ordinary social norms (reluctant to engage in sexuality, yet devoted in complying with the wishes of the lama) and, at the same time, a tantric virtuoso skilled at extending the lives of esteemed masters.⁶⁷ Jacoby makes a point to emphasize the benefits Sera Khandro derived from sexual practices. Not only were her own illnesses, including chronic arthritis, alleviated in such encounters, but she also engaged sexuality to reveal her own treasures alongside Drime Özer.⁶⁸ In her autobiography, Sera Khandro depicts her final years with Drime Özer in glowing terms, including their union as “the two, method and insight, actually merging into one taste.” Jacoby refers to this as “collective enlightenment in which the energetic knots at all five *cakras* within the subtle body of *yab* and *yum* were liberated together.”⁶⁹

Yet the challenges were also enormous. Sera Khandro faced jealousy from others, especially Akyongza, the influential consort of Drime Özer. As a result, not only was Sera Khandro blocked from living with him when she first arrived as a teenager in Golok, but more than a decade later, after spending three years with Drime Özer, Sera Khandro was thrown out soon after he passed away. Despite being of Lhasa aristocratic stock, she had little way to protect herself in the clan-based social structure of nomadic Golok, where family ties meant everything. Sera Khandro lived precariously at the edge of social life, moving from place to place except when sheltered by male lamas, first Garra Gyalse, then Drime Özer, and finally Sötrul Rinpoche at Sera Monastery. Moreover, in the role of consort, she faced the constant threat of gossip for her unconventional religious calling on top of other forms of gender discrimination. Jacoby concludes that “Sera Khandro’s accounts of consort practices casts a pall on arguments that claim Buddhist Tantra is pro-woman or sex-positive, given the many indignities she suffered and the endless talk against her, but they simultaneously speak volumes about women’s potential for liberation through Vajrayāna Buddhist methods.”⁷⁰

By contrast, Khandro Tāre Lhamo was born into her religious vocation as the daughter of the visionary, Apang Terchen (1895–1945), and recognized in infancy as the reincarnation of two local religious figures, Sera Khandro and the monk Tra Gelong (1866–1937). As part of the Nyingma elite, she trained with the great masters of her day, including Rigdzin Jalu Dorje, the fourth in the eminent Dordrupchen incarnation line, and Dzungter Kunzang Nyima, the grandson of Dudjom Lingpa. She married into the Dudjom line to the son of Kunzang Nyima, Mingyur Dorje (1934–1959), and the two joined his inner circle receiving esoteric teachings at his encampment. Tragically, her marriage and training were cut short by the socialist transformation of Tibetan areas, by then under Chinese Communist rule. In the late 1950s, her three brothers, all reincarnate lamas, and husband were imprisoned as “class enemies” and died in prison.⁷¹ Tāre Lhamo was likely spared imprisonment as a woman, and instead was consigned to manual labor herding livestock and doing construction work. The years leading up to and including the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) was a time of tremendous upheaval on the Tibetan plateau with monasteries destroyed, texts burned, monastics forced to defrock, and religious practice by and large forbidden.⁷² Within this chaos and devastation, Tāre Lhamo served as a beacon of hope, performing minor miracles for her local community. During the famine between 1959 and 1961, coinciding with the Great Leap Forward, she is credited with multiplying a measure of rice to feed her entire work unit and bringing back blessed and nourishing substances from her

⁶⁷ Jacoby makes this argument in Chapter 4 of her book; see especially (Jacoby 2014, pp. 222–36).

⁶⁸ Sera Khandro’s treasure corpus (*gter chos*) survives in four volumes, whereas the corpus of Drime Özer’s revelations, which she compiled has yet to be recovered as far as I know.

⁶⁹ (Jacoby 2014, pp. 296–97).

⁷⁰ (Jacoby 2014, p. 248).

⁷¹ Her two main teachers died around this time as well, Rigdzin Jalu Dorje (1927–1961) in prison and Dzungter Kunzang Nyima (1904–1958) of natural causes.

⁷² Monasteries in Golok were closed for nearly twenty years, but a group of eight were permitted to reopen between 1962 and 1966. (Don grub dbang rgyal and Nor sde 1992, p. 106).

visionary sojourns to other realms.⁷³ In *dākinī* fashion, she also appeared in the visions of imprisoned lamas to offer consolation, and her prophecies and letters are credited with effecting the release of at least two of them. The extreme hardship of this period continued until the death of Mao in 1976, followed by a gradual process of economic and cultural liberalization across China that reached Tibetan areas by the early 1980s.

Reversing the typical pattern, in 1978, in her early 40s, Tāre Lhamo initiated a courtship and correspondence with Namtrul Rinpoche (1944–2011), a lama six years her junior. Namtrul Rinpoche was young enough to be spared imprisonment in the late 1950s and served as a secretary for his work unit based on his early scholastic training. At the age of eight, he had been enthroned as the Fourth Namkhai Nyingpo incarnation of Zhuchen Monastery and, at thirteen, received monastic ordination though he later disrobed in accordance with the times. Initially, secrecy played a role in their courtship since they were separated by province borders, her in Padma County of Qinghai Province and he in Serta County of Sichuan Province, at a time when travel was highly restricted. Even so, they exchanged fifty-six letters over more than a year, sent in batches by secret messenger across the rugged terrain dividing them.⁷⁴ Almost entirely in verse, their letters contain a blend of prophetic passages related to their destiny as a couple to reveal treasures, veiled references to the tantric rite of sexual union, recollections of their past lives together as a couple, naturalistic images suggesting their mutual compatibility, and effusive declarations of personal affection in a variety of folk song styles. Eventually their courtship and correspondence led to a lifelong partnership after Tāre Lhamo left her homeland in 1980 to join Namtrul Rinpoche in Serta.

As they engaged in the “sport of attraction” (Tib: *’dod pa’i sgyu rtsal*) across their correspondence, rather than speak of sexuality directly, they used tantric code to generate tantalizing innuendos and flirtatious moments. For example, at one point, Tāre Lhamo invited Namtrul Rinpoche as a bee to enjoy the nectar of the lotus, whereby the lotus stands for the female sexual organ. Coyly, she conveyed, “Lotus juice, when longing to enjoy the nectar: / Hey you, the bee! Oh, if you circle, bliss! / In my mind, the etchings become clearer. / Do you recall? Oh, talk straight—no secrets!”⁷⁵ Of course, the metaphor of bee and lotus does not require much imagination to decode, and otherwise she encourages directness in their communication. Still she chose to playfully mask her reference to sexuality and how it is understood to activate visionary modes of memory in the treasure tradition. This may indicate a cultural taboo against directly referencing sexuality as much a tantric proclivity for secrecy. Overall, they refer to tantric practices involving sexuality in euphemistic terms as methods to invoke “bliss-emptiness” (Tib: *bde stong*) as when Namtrul Rinpoche wrote: “In the cool domain of Tibet, the land of snow mountains, / We came together across seven lifetimes. / We practiced the profound path of secret mantra, / Engaging in the four joys, means to bliss-emptiness.”⁷⁶

Nonetheless, Tāre Lhamo and Namtrul Rinpoche had little hesitation openly proclaiming their affection for one another. In decidedly human terms, she professed in one letter to missing him continually: “One hundred times a day, pining away for the spiritual support, / My congenial friend comes to mind. / The sketch of past lives becomes clearer; / Mind yearning, my loving affection

⁷³ The information in this sentence and the next comes from oral sources and her life story, *Spiraling Vine of Faith: The Liberation of Khandro Tāre Lhamo* (Mkha’ *’gro tā re lha mo’i rnam thar dad pa’i ’khri shing*) in (*Pad ma ’od gsal mtha’ yas* 1997).

⁷⁴ Their letters are divided by author into two collections: *Adamantine Garland: The Collected Letters by the Lord of Refuge, Namtrul Jigme Phuntsok, to the Supreme Khandro Tāre Lhamo* (*Skyabs rje rin po che nam sprul ’jigs med phun tshogs kyis mkha’ ’gro rin po che tā re de vi mchog la phul ba’i zhu ’phrin phyag yig rnam phyogs bsdus rdo rje’i phreng ba*; Mkha’ *’gro Tā re lha mo. ca* (2003)) and *Garland of Lotus: The Collected Letters by the Mantra-Born One, Khandro Tāre Lhamo, to the Supreme Namtrul Jigme Phuntsok* (*Sngags skyes mkha’ ’gro rin po che tā re de vis nam sprul rin po che ’jigs med phun tshogs mchog la phul ba’i zhu ’phrin phyag yig rnam phyogs bsdus padma’i phreng ba*; Nam sprul *’Jigs med phun tshogs. ca* (2003)). For this reason, here and elsewhere, I refer to individual letters by their sequence in each collection, so their initial letters would be KTL 1 (hers) and NJP 1 (his) respectively. Page numbers come from the facsimile edition to their treasure corpus. See note 83 below regarding the published versions of their correspondence.

⁷⁵ KTL 8: 84.6–85.2. Note that Khandro Tāre Lhamo used a scribe. Having received an esoteric training in youth but not a scholastic one, she could read but not write Tibetan.

⁷⁶ NJP 11: 34.3–4.

increases.⁷⁷ In turn, in a love song toward the middle of the correspondence, Namtrul Rinpoche confessed to being caught on the “iron hook” (Tib: *lcags kyu*) of her “loving affection” (Tib: *byams brtse*) and cherishing Tāre Lhamo more than his own eyes and heart, thereby suggesting that he could not live without her.⁷⁸ As they imagined themselves as inseparable across lifetimes, karmically bound and mutually compatible like a snow lion and mountain peak, they established a strong personal bond and sense of commitment as the context for their future practice of tantric techniques involving sexuality.

Thus, unlike the illicit trysts of medieval India or the discretion observed by Sera Khandro to avoid gossip, Tāre Lhamo and Namtrul Rinpoche envisioned their union as a lifelong and socially-recognized partnership to reveal treasures as part of their broader aim to restore Buddhist teachings, practices, and institutions in the post-Mao era. Through the metaphor of healing, they affirmed their union as a potent means to activate their visionary propensities and thereby “heal the damage of the degenerate times,” a veiled reference to previous two decades of the Maoist period.⁷⁹ Once united, they traveled and taught together during the 1980s and 1990s, side by side on elevated thrones, as they discovered and disseminated their treasures throughout Golok and beyond. This kind of public display of a tantric partnership, in which both partners lead large-scale ritual gatherings together, is rare despite the ubiquity of images of tantric deities in union in Tibetan art.⁸⁰ During their lifetime, and even after Tāre Lhamo’s passing in 2002, their partnership was visibly emphasized in publications of their biographies, revelations, and audio-visual materials under the auspices of their main seat, Nyenlung Monastery,⁸¹ and in one instance a Serta government office.⁸² Even their correspondence, initially exchanged in secret, was eventually published as an addendum to their treasure corpus.⁸³

Whereas other contemporary *khandromas* that I encountered in eastern Tibet, if they teach at all, tend to do so in a circumspect way within their own locale, Tāre Lhamo’s partnership with Namtrul Rinpoche gave her a much wider sphere of influence. At the same time, her stature as a visionary was not dependent on him. Tāre Lhamo had revealed treasures in her youth and, at the outset of their partnership, she had greater renown as the daughter of Apang Terchen. Indeed the couple served as the main lineage holders of her father’s treasure teachings, since she was his only surviving descendent. Moreover, their first large-scale teaching took place in 1985 at Tsimda Gompa, the monastery her father founded in the Mar valley of Padma County, and on that occasion the couple transmitted the entirety of his treasures corpus to lamas and monastics throughout the region. In some sense, Tāre Lhamo’s rise to prominence was an accident of history since her older brothers, had they survived, would have more likely stepped forward as lineage heirs. Even so, she was never simply a “secret consort” and instead served as a genuine partner in her revelatory and teaching activities with Namtrul Rinpoche.⁸⁴

These examples, in this section and the previous one, show the diversity of Tibetan women’s experiences as consorts, the stature accorded to them when tantric partnerships are public in nature,

⁷⁷ KTL 7: 83.4–5.

⁷⁸ This is an Amdo love song (Tib: *la gzhas*) from NJP 9: 26.4–28.6. The lines mentioned here can be found on 27.5 and 27.6–28.2.

⁷⁹ On the metaphor of healing in their correspondence, see (Gayley 2016, pp. 176–82).

⁸⁰ For another salient example, the Bön couple, Dechen Chökyi Wangmo (b. 1868) and Sang-ngag Lingpa (b. 1864), also traveled, revealed treasures, and gave teachings together according to a study of her biography by Donatella Rossi (2008).

⁸¹ These include their jointly-attributed corpus of treasure teachings (Tib: *gter chos*), the compilations of their biographies into a single volume, and audio-visual representations of them together in posters, photographs, and video footage used in VCDs (video compact discs) featuring devotional songs. For more details, see the introduction and epilogue to (Gayley 2016).

⁸² His life story, *Jewel Garland: The Liberation of Namtrul Jigme Phuntsok* (Nam sprul ‘jigs med phun tshogs kyi rnam thar nor bu’i do shal) and hers, *Spiraling Vine of Faith: The Liberation of Khandro Tāre Lhamo* (Mkha’ ‘gro tā re lha mo mchog gi rnam thar dad pa’i ‘khri shing) were published together in a single paperback volume in Padma ‘od gsal mtha’ yas 1997, commissioned by the couple and published in cooperation with the County Office of the Bureau for Cultural Research.

⁸³ When I visited Nyenlung for the first time in 2004, Namtrul Rinpoche gave me a facsimile edition of their correspondence (a limited edition published by Nyenlung Monastery ca. 2003) that served as an addendum to their treasure corpus. It was more fully integrated in the paperback version published in vol. 12 of (Nam sprul ‘Jigs med phun tshogs and Mkha’ ‘gro Tā re lha mo 2013).

⁸⁴ On the different ways Tāre Lhamo’s life has been framed in the available biographies of her, see my article, “Gendered Hagiography in Tibet: Comparing Clerical Representations of the Female Visionary, Khandro Tāre Lhamo,” in a forthcoming anthology edited by Karma Lekshe Tsomo, *Buddhist Feminisms and Femininities*.

and the various ways that sexuality can be harnessed in tantric contexts. When we find access to women's own voices in exchange with their tantric partners, whether through the autobiography of Sera Khandro or the love letters between Tāre Lhamo and Namtrul Rinpoche, it becomes clear that consort relationships, as they have existed in recent history among Tibetan communities, can benefit women and also include enduring bonds of affection. Yet still there are considerable challenges due to social and historical circumstances, like Sera Khandro twice being forced to leave Drime Özer's residence or Tāre Lhamo losing her first husband in the turbulence of socialist transformation and later in life forging ahead, against gender norms, to initiate a new partnership. It is interesting, in both these cases, that secrecy seems important initially but eventually relaxes over time. What were once secret liaisons Sera Khandro chose to include in her autobiography for posterity, and the letters exchanged secretly between Tāre Lhamo and Namtrul Rinpoche were later published as an addendum to their treasure corpus. There is something healthy in this impulse to disclose what was once hidden, a kind of reckoning in order to set the record straight and provide a more multifaceted picture of human relationships than public facades tend to, especially for religious figures. The voices of women, here and elsewhere, complicate any facile conclusions about sexuality in tantric contexts, showing a broad range of experiences as well as changes in how relationships are viewed over time.

4. Gurus and Secrecy

Cabezón's dialectic framework accounts for the ongoing negotiation around secrecy and sexuality in Tibet and also helps to illuminate how tantra has taken on new contours beyond Asia. The first wave of neo-Tantrists were self-made Americans and Europeans like Pierre Bernard (1875–1955) and Aleister Crowley (1875–1947) who, as Hugh Urban suggests, helped to transform tantra in the western popular imagination from "a religion of black magic and occult power" to "the pursuit of sensual pleasure and erotic bliss."⁸⁵ In this transformation, tantra became the "ideal wedding of sexuality and spirituality" providing "a much needed corrective to the prudish, repressive, modern West."⁸⁶ Though plagued by scandal, Pierre Bernard's Tantrik Order in America (founded ca. 1906–1907) attracted wealthy socialites and businessmen to his country club and tantric clinics for secret practices "centered around full enjoyment of the physical body and complete liberation of sexual pleasure."⁸⁷ In a similar vein, Aleister Crowley gained notoriety for promoting "sex magick" as a member of the occult movement, Ordo Templi Orientis. Urban credits these two controversial figures with the sensationalization of tantra, its reinterpretation in primarily sexual terms, and its synthesis with Western occultism in a way that was both transgressive and tantalizing in the early decades of the twentieth century. All this contributed to the favorable reception of tantra during the era of sexual liberation in the 1960s and 1970s, but also led to confusion and paved the way for the improprieties coming to light today.

In the early 1970s, in the founding era of Tibetan Buddhism in North America, Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche was quite open about his behavior, sipping beer or sake during public talks and having affairs with students in full view.⁸⁸ His behavior may not have fit well with the western image of a saintly person but it suited the times. His teachings captured the imagination of the hippie generation, many of whom became devoted students of Tibetan Buddhism, trained rigorously in a delineated path of practice and study, and built a worldwide network of dharma centers, all the while never tiring of telling stories of their teacher. In *Cutting through Spiritual Materialism* (Trungpa [1973] 1987), Trungpa Rinpoche goes to great lengths to describe the problem of fetishizing gurus and putting them on pedestals, seeing them as "perfect beings" and rationalizing everything they do as "an act of wisdom

⁸⁵ See Chapter 6 in (Urban 2003); quotations are taken from p. 208.

⁸⁶ (Urban 2003, pp. 208, 204, respectively).

⁸⁷ (Urban 2003, p. 213).

⁸⁸ Trungpa Rinpoche had already disrobed and married in 1970 before coming to North America later the same year. His widow and students do not seem concerned with white-washing his legacy regarding his affairs; see (Mukpo and Gimian 2006), (Midal 2012), and also the film, *Crazy Wisdom: The Life and Times of Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche*, directed by Johanna Demetrakas (2011).

on the part of the guru.⁸⁹ Instead, he emphasized giving up expectation and fascination, experiencing disappointment, and sharpening one's own intelligence through an eye-level relationship and mutual communication with the teacher beyond pretense or deception.⁹⁰ Perhaps the most unconventional thing that Trungpa Rinpoche did, for his day, was to ask the hippies to shave and cut their hair, wear suits and dresses, and develop decorum in order to properly host His Holiness the Sixteenth Karmapa right after the heady first summer of the Naropa Institute in 1974. Against the grain of "turn on, tune in, and drop out" of the counterculture era,⁹¹ eventually Trungpa Rinpoche encouraged his students to marry, settle down, get jobs, and become part of society, envisioning a householder path of spiritual cultivation in order to transform society from the inside out.⁹²

But times change and so do social views and norms regarding sexuality.⁹³ Already by 1993, when a group of twenty-two western Buddhist teachers from various traditions (Tibetan, Zen, Theravāda) gathered to meet with His Holiness the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala, the topic of misconduct among Buddhist teachers was a significant issue. Under the rubric of "Teachers and Ethics," questions were raised about the issue of secrecy if students witnessed or experienced misconduct by Buddhist teachers. The Dalai Lama responded by suggesting that it is "worthwhile to publicize these things" in order to make "a clear distinction [between] what is true Buddhist teachings [and] this individual's behavior;" otherwise it is "very harmful to the Buddhadharmā."⁹⁴ Yet he admitted that the samaya vow complicates how to handle this since, according to its commitments, one should never disparage the teacher. Still, in publication soon thereafter, he reiterated the importance of open communication: "If students sincerely point out the faults of the guru and explain any contradictory behavior, this will, in fact, help the guru to correct that behavior and adjust any wrong actions."⁹⁵

A legal case against Sogyal Rinpoche was filed just a year later in 1994 and settled out of court, but allegations of sexual abuse continued to surface online and in news reports.⁹⁶ The group of former leaders and longtime members of Rigpa, who released an open letter in July 2017, began by invoking statements by the Dalai Lama at the 1993 conference, and then proceeded to describe physical and psychological abuse they witnessed and experienced, citing an incident in the summer of 2016 when

⁸⁹ (Trungpa [1973] 1987, p. 25). In her autobiography, his widow Diana Mukpo recounts, "Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism was published in 1973, and sales of the book were taking off. It came onto the spiritual scene in America at just the right time to spark tremendous interest. It sold more than a hundred thousand copies in the first two years, which was a lot of books for that time. It spoke to the counterculture of that era in a direct, intimate way" (Mukpo and Gimian 2006, p. 160).

⁹⁰ See (Trungpa [1973] 1987), chapters on "Surrender" and "The Guru." Diana Mukpo elaborates, "When Rinpoche first came to America, he was careful not to create a barrier between himself and others. He wanted to experience fully the world he was entering and meet people at eye level. He gave up his robes because he did not want to create an exotic impression where people would indulge their fantasies about him. He wanted them to see him not as a mystery man from Tibet but as a human being" (Mukpo and Gimian 2006, p. 177).

⁹¹ Timothy Leary's famous phrase became somewhat of a mantra for the drug culture of the late 1960s and into the 1970s, whereas early on Trungpa Rinpoche dissuaded his students from smoking marijuana, casting it as a form of self-deception. See interview with Christie Cashman in (Demetrakas 2011, 34:44–35:51).

⁹² This approach crystallized through the development of Shambhala Training and publication of *Shambhala: Sacred Path of the Warrior* (Trungpa 1984).

⁹³ The AIDS crisis in the late 1980s was an important factor in changing attitudes and behaviors around sexuality. In a scandal from this period, Trungpa Rinpoche's regent Ösel Tendzin (Thomas Rich) infected at least one of his students with the HIV virus through unprotected sex before passing away on 25 August 1990. See article in the *LA Times* by John Dart, "Buddhist Sect Alarmed by Reports That Leader Kept His AIDS a Secret" published on 3 May 1989 (http://articles.latimes.com/1989-03-03/news/mn-245_1_american-buddhist).

⁹⁴ These quotations are transcribed from the first in a series of eight videos from the conference found on the Meridian Trust website (<http://meridian-trust.org/category/conference/?sub-categories=the-western-buddhist-teachers-conference>); see 12:40–14:55. The Dalai Lama discusses the complications that arise with the samaya vow at 20:30–21:56, suggesting students distance themselves from the teacher if abuse occurs.

⁹⁵ (Dalai Lama 1995, p. 153).

⁹⁶ For example, Mary Finnigan, "Lama sex abuse claims call Buddhist taboos into question" published in *The Guardian* on 1 July 2011 (<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2011/jul/01/lama-sex-abuse-sogyal-rinpoche-buddhist>). See also a timeline in *The Telegraph* article below (note 97) and "A Brief History of Abuse Allegations in Rigpa" on the blog, *How Did It Happen? Understanding and Healing Abuse in Buddhist Communities* by Sandra Pawula, published on 17 September 2017 (<http://howdidithappen.org/history-abuse-allegations-rigpa/>).

Sogyal Rinpoche apparently punched a nun in front of a thousand students during a teaching at Lerab Ling.⁹⁷ It is worth quoting from the twelve-page letter at length:

We have received directly from you, and witnessed others receiving, many different forms of physical abuse. You have punched and kicked us, pulled hair, torn ears, as well as hit us and others with various objects such as your back-scratcher, wooden hangers, phones, cups, and any other objects that happened to be close at hand. We trusted for many years that this physical and emotional treatment of students—what you assert to be your “skillful means” of “wrathful compassion” in the tradition of “crazy wisdom”—was done with our best interest at heart in order to free us from our “habitual patterns”. We no longer believe this to be so. We feel that we and others have been harmed because your actions were not compassionate; rather they demonstrated your lack of discipline and your own frustration. Your physical abuse—which constitutes a crime under the laws of the lands where you have done these acts—have left monks, nuns, and lay students of yours with bloody injuries and permanent scars. This is not second hand information; we have experienced and witnessed your behavior for years.⁹⁸

The letter calls attention to the disjuncture between Sogyal Rinpoche’s public face and private actions, the “massive efforts” to hide abuse, and the organizational culture of “absolute secrecy.”⁹⁹

Reference to sexual abuse occurs in a single paragraph, whereas it is the main topic of a documentary, *In the Name of Enlightenment: Sex Scandal in Religion*, aired on Canadian television in 2011 and posted to YouTube in 2012.¹⁰⁰ In the documentary and an interview that followed in a French magazine,¹⁰¹ a young woman Mimi describes being part of the inner circle of “ḍākinīs” who served as personal attendants to Sogyal Rinpoche. After two months in that role, she describes a moment alone together in his room when he told her to undress. Initially, she took this to be “another test of devotion.” According to her account, thereafter Sogyal Rinpoche made her swear to secrecy about their sexual encounters and assured her, as she puts it: “that it is a very beneficial moment for me to have this connection to my master and that anything that I might do against it or if I talk about it would sever this connection.”¹⁰² As a general rule, it is considered an honor and meritorious to serve the guru, deemed to be “the source of blessings” (Tib: *byin rlabs kyi rtsa ba*). However, a sexual liaison is another matter, and women can and do say “no.” Still the question of consent is complicated by the centrality and authority of the guru vis-à-vis a student’s spiritual path in Tibetan Buddhism.¹⁰³ The July 2017 letter gave credence to allegations of abuse based on the insider knowledge of the former leaders and longtime members who signed it. Shortly after the letter circulated publicly, the Rigpa

⁹⁷ The incident is mentioned in a footnote in the letter and described in an article in *The Telegraph* by Mike Brown, “Sexual assaults and violent rages . . . Inside the dark world of Buddhist teacher Sogyal Rinpoche,” published on 21 September 2017 (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/men/thinking-man/sexual-assaults-violent-rages-inside-dark-world-buddhist-teacher/>).

⁹⁸ The public letter to Sogyal Rinpoche from former Rigpa leaders, dated 14 July 2017, was posted as a PDF on *The Lion’s Roar* on 20 July 2017 (<https://www.lionsroar.com/letter-to-sogyal-rinpoche-from-current-and-ex-rigpa-members-details-abuse-allegations/>). The quotation comes from the third page.

⁹⁹ See note 98 above; this quotation comes from the second page.

¹⁰⁰ The documentary was posted to YouTube on 21 September 2012 (<https://youtu.be/yWhlivvmMnk>).

¹⁰¹ An interview by Julia Mourri with Mimi, a young woman in his inner circle, was later published in *le Plus de l’Obs* on 11 June 2016: “Ferme la porte à clés.” J’ai été dévouée à un grand maître bouddhiste, avant de m’enfuir” (<http://leplus.nouvelobs.com/contribution/1577666-ferme-la-porte-a-cles-j-ai-ete-devouee-a-un-grand-maitre-bouddhiste-avant-de-m-enfuir.html>).

¹⁰² Mimi’s testimony in the documentary, *In the Name of Enlightenment: Sex Scandal in Enlightenment* (see note 100 above), begins from 2:28–4:50 and is interspersed throughout.

¹⁰³ See the white paper on “Clergy Sexual Misconduct and the Misuse of Power” by the Olive Branch, founded in 2011 by Rev. Kyoki Roberts of the Pittsburgh Zen Center to offer trainings, mediation, and intervention for spiritual communities and non-profits dealing with situations of conflict and misconduct. The white paper, prepared by Kathryn Wiedman and Leslie Hospodar in December 2017, is available at: <https://an-olive-branch.org/sites/default/files/An%20Olive%20Branch%20White%20Paper%20on%20Clergy%20Misconduct%20and%20the%20Misuse%20of%20Power.pdf>.

organization responded by stating that Sogyal Rinpoche had decided “to step back and to enter a period of retreat and reflection” while the organization seeks professional guidance.¹⁰⁴

In August 2017, Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche published a lengthy response to the situation on Facebook, titled the “Guru and Student in the Vajrayana.”¹⁰⁵ His response did not defend Sogyal Rinpoche as an individual nor his actions, training as a teacher, or level of insight. Instead, it contains a forceful articulation of the samaya vow and the secrecy that should be upheld around the activities of one’s guru or lama, by which he refers explicitly to the master who presides over a tantric initiation. Dzongsar Khyentse asserts that so long as students are properly prepared and informed about the unconventional nature of the Vajrayāna path and the centrality of the guru-disciple relationship within it, and they consciously enter into this relationship by taking initiation, then whatever the guru says and does must be understood as a teaching and viewed with pure perception. Although he concedes that Tibetan lamas do not always give the proper warnings due to a gap in cultural understanding, nevertheless, in his assessment, critical thinking should be applied prior to entering into the Vajrayāna, rather than afterwards, by conducting a thorough examination of the teacher. It is true that Tibetan writings about the guru-disciple relationship emphasize such a prior examination.¹⁰⁶ But what is the recourse for people who witness questionable behavior or experience harm only after joining a tantric community? If secrecy is closely held, there would be no way for them to have prior knowledge. So this is a real dilemma, especially if one admits (as he does) that not all gurus are enlightened. But rather than face that possibility squarely,¹⁰⁷ Dzongsar Khyentse admonishes the students who wrote the public letter about Sogyal Rinpoche’s behavior for breaking their samaya by openly criticizing him. This does not take into account that these very same students may have been trying for years to create change within their own community, discuss matters with their teacher, and only published the letter as a last recourse to prevent further harm.

At stake in this situation, and the concerns of western Buddhist leaders in conversation with His Holiness the Dalai Lama back in 1993, is the question of secrecy when a Buddhist teacher engages in misconduct, especially the vajra master. Does the samaya vow require silence on all matters? What is a teacher’s responsibility to students and what if he or she contravenes it? The nineteenth-century ecumenical master Jamgön Kongtrul includes under a list of qualifications for a vajra master: being knowledgeable about esoteric teachings and ritual forms, being honest without misleading others, and being patient and caring toward students.¹⁰⁸ If teachers go astray, even after forging a connection through initiation, Kongtrul states that students with discernment should distance themselves.¹⁰⁹ Moreover, in Kongtrul’s section on ethics within his magnum opus, *The Treasury of Knowledge*, he makes clear that a breach of samaya has only occurred if certain factors are in place, including that the



¹⁰⁴ The response from the Rigpa organization was posted on *The Lion’s Roar* on 21 July 2017 (<https://www.lionsroar.com/rigpa-press-release-responds-to-allegations-of-abuses-by-sogyal-rinpoche/>).

¹⁰⁵ Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche (b. 1961) is a prominent Nyingma lama, the son of Thinley Norbu Rinpoche and a recognized reincarnation of Jamyang Khyentse Chökyi Lodrö, as well as a Bhutanese film-maker. His response was posted to his Facebook page on 14 August 2017 (<https://www.facebook.com/djkhyentse/posts/2007833325908805>). In the opening of the letter, he asks that it not be edited or pieces excerpted so, out of respect for his wishes, I have not used any quotations here and try to summarize its main argument fairly. For his teachings on the guru-disciple relationship, see also Dzongsar Khyentse (2016).

¹⁰⁶ For two prominent nineteenth-century examples of this approach from eastern Tibet, see (Kongtrul 1998b, Part III: chp. 3; Patrul Rinpoche 1994, Part I: chp. 6).

¹⁰⁷ More recently, he addressed this possibility in a public talk, “Buddhism in the West: The Challenges and Misunderstandings of our Times” at the Rigpa Center in Paris on 8 March 2018, posted to YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mISdoVKO5o8>); in particular, see 106:32–1:11:30. He also clarified the responsibility of the guru toward his or her students, starting at 55:45.

¹⁰⁸ (Kongtrul 1998b, Part III: chp. 3).

¹⁰⁹ The Dalai Lama made a similar point back in the 1993 conference discussed above. Here Kongtrul quotes an earlier authority on this point, the great thirteenth-century scholar Sakya Paṇḍita: “The lamas who cling to enjoyments, are careless, use harsh words, and are endowed with desiring the objects of the sense faculties—those people should be rejected by intelligent disciples, as if rejecting hell as a cause for complete awakening.” This topic is treated in Part III: Chapter 4 of (Kongtrul 1998b) with the quotation on p. 138. Note that I removed a parenthetical providing the Tibetan term for sense faculty (Tib: *dbang po*).

vajra master is an authentic teacher, i.e., possesses the appropriate qualifications.¹¹⁰ However, no adjudicating body exists in Tibetan Buddhism to decide who is an authentic teacher, apart from the court of public opinion and the legitimizing association of other lamas. So there is ample gray area for misunderstanding, but also, as a result, space for new clarifications and practices to create transparency and accountability.

5. Conclusions

Sexuality and secrecy in Buddhist tantra may have always presented the danger of abuse alongside the potential for liberation. Add to that cultural differences as Buddhism enters into new contexts, not to mention the romanticization of all things Tibetan in the western popular imagination, and it can turn into the perfect storm.¹¹¹ When misconduct occurs, it may be partly due to cultural misunderstanding, as Dzongsar Khyentse suggests. After all, the role of consort and what that entails—ritual methods, companionship, a casual affair—are neither transparent, nor consistent outside of Tibet. Moreover, the veil of secrecy around Buddhist tantra makes it difficult for students to gain access to vital information to help them make informed choices. Lama Willa Miller calls secrecy about sexual liaisons “toxic” because it can lead to confusion and distrust in the community surrounding a teacher, not to mention isolation and shame for the female students involved, whether or not they see themselves in the role of a “consort.”¹¹²

Candid conversations within convert Buddhist communities (now into their second and third generations) could clarify the application of samaya, the parameters of the teacher-student relationship, standards for ethical conduct and the dynamics of power and privilege. Jetsün Khandro Rinpoche emphasizes the importance of education and investigating situations with respect to conduct: “There is a lot of goodness in questioning. If it doesn’t make sense, question it! When we find careless ethical conduct, we need to ask, why is this happening?”¹¹³ Though tailored to the individual, her advice could also apply collectively. In North America, Europe and other places where Buddhism has recently taken root, Buddhist communities could go further in examining what attitudes, biases and taboos create the conditions for misconduct and silence around it. In addressing this issue in October 2017, Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche suggests that, if there are serious ethical violations, then “it is in the best interest of the students, the community, and ultimately the teacher, to address the issues,” either internally within the community if teachers are willing to accept responsibility or publicly if they are not.¹¹⁴

¹¹⁰ (Kongtrul 1998a, p. 257). The student’s motivation is also important; it is a samaya breach if criticism is made out of selfish concerns rather than for the benefit of others.

¹¹¹ On the western fascination with Tibet, see Donald Lopez (1998), *Prisoners of Shangri-la*.

¹¹² An American-born lama who completed the traditional three-year retreat (twice) and founded the Natural Dharma Fellowship, Willa Miller initiated the effort to confront sexual misconduct by Lama Norlha and shares her story in the latest issue of *Buddhadharma* (Summer 2018). In the article, she grapples with competing terms and frames of reference for the “painful and disempowering” situation she found herself in during her early twenties as a recently ordained nun. These include “consort” or “partner” in tantric terms and “victim” or “survivor” in the current literature on sexual misconduct. With respect to secrecy, she highlights its effects on the community as follows: “In most sanghas where misconduct is occurring, there is a circle of people in the know, but incredibly they may not be aware of each other. In other words, there is not just a secret; there is a culture of secrecy. Acts of deception, enabling, and dissimulation sometimes become so habitual that they seem perfectly normal, like brushing your teeth. If a community is going to heal from misconduct, it is important not just to address the misconduct but also to unveil the underlying culture that enabled it.” Published online on 15 May 2018 at: <https://www.lionsroar.com/breaking-the-silence-on-sexual-misconduct/>.

¹¹³ Quoted in (Haas 36). Khandro Rinpoche continues, “Apart from the obvious misconduct of using force, taking advantage of your own position and the naïveté of a student is abuse and very painful to see. Abuse is when there is pretense, conceit, or lying. Pretending someone has more realization than they actually have and thus misleading the student is very, very harmful. There is no shortcut to enlightenment . . . and anyone who offers one should be treated with suspicion.” Elizabeth Mattis-Namgyel also emphasizes discernment and questioning in her book, *The Power of an Open Question* (Mattis-Namgyel 2011); see especially Chapters 19 and 20 on devotion and the teacher-student relationship.

¹¹⁴ Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche (b. 1975) is one of Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche’s illustrious sons who teach across the Kagyu and Nyingma traditions and leads the Tergar Meditation Community. His article, “When a Buddhist Teacher Crosses the Line,” was posted to *Lion’s Roar* on 26 October 2017 (<https://www.lionsroar.com/treat-everyone-as-the-buddha/>).

As more disclosures come to light,¹¹⁵ it may be time to go beyond the scandal cycle, which makes it all too easy to scapegoat a specific teacher and feel the problem is fixed if they step down from their role. This approach obviates the need for further inquiry into deep-rooted and systemic issues having to do with power and its potential for abuse.¹¹⁶ In a 2013 interview in *Tricycle Magazine*, titled “Sex in the Sangha . . . Again,”¹¹⁷ a group of four California-based teachers from different Buddhist traditions—Jack Kornfield, Grace Schireson, Lama Palden and Shinzen Young—weighed in on systematic factors contributing to sexual misconduct within Buddhism as it has evolved beyond Asia. Their observations underscore the present confusion about the teacher-student relationship, top-down structures with power held by those closest to the teacher and idealization that elevates the teacher above ordinary rules of conduct. This idealization, Jack Kornfield warns, can be isolating for teachers who lack peer feedback and other safeguards for their behavior. Moreover, it is important to recognize, as Shinzen Young suggests, that a teacher may have great insight and realization that has yet to be fully integrated with their conduct. As Grace Schireson puts it, “We teachers, we’re all going to make mistakes. It’s not a question of *if*. It’s just a question of *when* and *how many* and *how serious*. The real questions are: How approachable are we about our mistakes? How honest is the community about what is going on?” In order to shift systemic factors, and go beyond a black-and-white approach to the problem, an “ethic of transparency” is emerging,¹¹⁸ which goes against the grain of secrecy in Buddhist tantra and introduces a more democratic model of community accountability.¹¹⁹

Needless to say, secrecy may no longer be feasible given the global spread of Tibetan Buddhism in the digital age. Translations of esoteric teachings are being published and available through mainstream booksellers, often under the aegis of Tibetan lamas;¹²⁰ Buddhist art featuring tantric deities and ritual artifacts are routinely on display in museums and other secular venues; digital databases of Tibetan texts and Buddhist art are now searchable on the Internet;¹²¹ while social media and blogs have brought new voices to the fore in shaping the contours of Buddhist discourse. In the process, Buddhist communities in North America, Europe and beyond are being called to face uncomfortable truths regarding discrimination of various kinds (race, gender, class, age, ability and sexual orientation), as well as misconduct, from micro-aggressions to abuse. Depending on one’s perspective, this new openness could be a sign of degeneration, and the eventual demise of Buddhism,¹²² or a healthy development in correcting age-old inequities, regarding the status of women and more.

¹¹⁵ On 12 February 2018, the governing body of Shambhala International, called the Kalapa Council, released a statement on Facebook acknowledging “instances of sexual harm and inappropriate relations between members and between teachers and students” in its history (<https://www.facebook.com/Shambhala.org/posts/1999897840264640>). Different perspectives on this history were presented in a CBC podcast featuring Andrea Winn (Project Sunshine) and Joshua Silberstein (Chair of the Kalapa Council) on 23 May 2018: <http://www.cbc.ca/listen/shows/information-morning-ns/segment/15546103>.

¹¹⁶ The #MeToo movement has shown the pervasiveness of the problem in various institutional arenas: sports organizations, the entertainment industry, college campuses, business and non-profits, as well as religious groups. Within Religious Studies as a discipline, Robert Orsi is pioneering an approach that investigates systemic factors specific to a tradition (in his case Catholicism) that permit and perpetuate abuse. For example, see Chapter 7 in (Orsi 2016).

¹¹⁷ Interview conducted by Andrew Cooper and Emma Varvaloucas, published in the Fall 2013 issue of *Tricycle* and available online at <http://tricycle.org/magazine/sex-sangha-again>. Their choice to select teachers from different traditions acknowledges that the issue of sexual misconduct cuts across Buddhist communities. See also the interview, “Confronting Abuses of Power,” posted to *Lion’s Roar* on 20 November 2104 (<https://www.lionsroar.com/confronting-abuse-power>).

¹¹⁸ I borrow this term from Ann Gleig in her article, “The Shadow of the Roshi: Sex, Scandal and Secrecy in American Zen Buddhism,” published on 14 September 2015 on the blog, *Sweeping Zen* (<http://sweepingzen.com/the-shadow-of-the-roshi-sex-scandal-and-secrecy-in-american-zen-buddhism/>).

¹¹⁹ Specific recommendations in the *Tricycle* interview include: fostering honesty when teachers make mistakes, providing mechanisms for peer feedback, handling cases of misconduct through an independent process outside the institutional hierarchy, creating forums for reconciliation and healing, and taking collective responsibility for the safety, health, and education of the community.

¹²⁰ There is even a newly published set of teachings on karmamudrā that introduce a more outer version of the practice, explicitly dedicated to those who have suffered from sexual abuse, titled *Karmamudra: The Yoga of Bliss* (Chenagtsang 2018) by Dr. Nida Chenagtsang.

¹²¹ For example, the Buddhist Digital Resource Center, formerly the Tibetan Buddhist Resource Center (www.tbrc.org) and Himalayan Art Resources (www.himalayanart.org).

¹²² See Jan Nattier (1991) on Buddhist prophecies of decline.

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