

Questioning Women: Ye shes mtsho rgyal and Other Female Disciples in *Zhus lan* Literature¹

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What is a woman's place in the Tibetan Buddhist literary world? Besides relying on the usual sources of Lives (*rnam thar*)² of eminent Buddhist women, mentions of female characters in predominantly male compositions, and, in some rare but fortunate cases, writings by women themselves, how else can we know about their concerns and stories? This article draws from a particular genre of didactic dialogues called "zhus lan" or "dris lan," literally "Questions and Answers." In these conversations, women are not only raising questions to be answered by their teachers, but their questions also reflect the distinct concerns of female practitioners. Furthermore, the narrative framework of these texts also informs us about the roles women played in the Buddhist community.

As the name *zhus lan* or *dris lan* suggests, these texts take the format of a series of questions and subsequent answers. *Zhus lans* contain recorded, actual conversations between a teacher and a disciple, or rehearsed answers to questions raised by an imaginary conversation partner. These question-and-answer works cover a wide range of topics, including detailed explanations of doctrinal points, instructions for practice, or even refutations that form part of an ongoing polemical debate. It is perhaps precisely because of its

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² Here I follow Kurtis Schaeffer and translate the Tibetan literary genre *rnam thar* (or *rnam par thar pa*, literally "accounts of full liberation") as "Life." For a discussion on using European medieval saint's Lives as a heuristic device for Tibetan *rnam thars*, see Schaeffer 2004: 6–7.

eclectic nature that—except for some brief discussions of question-and-answer accounts in association with other texts within the same corpus³—*zhus lan* or *dris lan* as a literary genre has received little scholarly attention.⁴

This article analyzes the literary function of *zhus lan* in the Treasure tradition (*gter ma*) and argues that these question-and-answer texts provide a rich venue for a discussion about women's status and participation in Buddhist communities. In the context of Treasure literature, these texts are created with a scriptural model in mind and serve as a literary response from the Rnying ma pas, representative of the older tradition, to the influx of newly transmitted teachings and texts from India.⁵ This creation is done by modeling *zhus lan* after the classic dialogical framework of Mahāyāna sutras (and subsequent tantras). Question-and-answer works which include women are also characterized by a customary acknowledgment of female inferiority. This literary trope does the double duty of revealing real concerns about women's status in society and of justifying the need to teach women by highlighting their unfortunate position.

1. *Zhus lan in the Rnying ma Treasure Tradition*

Zhus lan texts are among the many genres found in cycles of Treasure teachings. This genre is not special to the Treasure tradition, but Treasure *zhus lans* present a particular narrative framework that is more stylized than other question-and-answer texts outside the corpus of Treasure literature. These dialogues take place in 8th-century Tibet between the legendary tantric master Padmasambhava and his female disciples, foremost among them Ye shes mtsho rgyal (777–817). She recorded their conversations, encoded them into a secret language, and concealed them all over Tibet. From the time of

³ Kragh 2015: 301. Kragh considers *zhus lan* an emerging genre in the 12th century that takes its inspiration from canonical texts bearing the word *zhus lan* (**praśnottara*) in their titles. For a study of early canonical texts from Dunhuang that have *zhus lan* in their title, for example, the *Rdo rje sems dpa' zhus lan* ("Questions and Answers with Vajrasattva"), see Takahashi 2009: 90–96 and Takahashi 2010. Rheingans 2011 presents a case study of a single *dris lan* text by the 8th Karmapa Mi bskyod rdo rje (1507–1554) and argues that the genre provides the opportunity for authors to offer concise doctrinal points within a limited space.

⁴ The first systematic study of Tibetan literary genres, *Tibetan Literature: Studies in Genre* (Lhundup Sopa, Cabezón, and Jackson 1996), does not include a separate treatment of *zhus lan* or *dris lan* literature.

⁵ For a discussion on the rise of Treasure revelation and its historical developments, see Davidson 2005: 210–243.

the Tibetan Buddhist renaissance in the 10th and 11th centuries of the later consolidation development (*phyi dar*), and further creation of Buddhist canons in the 14th and 15th centuries, these conversation-style accounts remain one of the most popular genres in the Treasure literature.

The *zhus lan* texts consulted here are selected from the Treasure cycles discovered between the 12th and 14th centuries, a time when Treasure revealers weaved together an origin narrative about their unique form of revelatory practice.⁶ It is also during this time that the Rnying ma Buddhists responded to new challenges: the impressive growth of literature in its rival New Translation (Gsar ma) Schools; the burgeoning prestige of mass institutional monasticism; and the ongoing criticism of their own practice of scriptural revelation. Relying on its “double system of apocryphal attribution”⁷—both the texts being revealed and the persons executing the revelation were attributed to imperial personalities back in the 8th century—these revealed Treasures claimed authenticity and authority for new (or renewed) teachings and practices, connected their lineage back to the “Golden Era” of imperial Tibet ruled by the Dharma kings (Tib. *chos rgyal*), and helped to cement a sense of shared identity among otherwise decentralized Rnying ma communities. In turn, these revelations, especially the narrative materials, played a central role in the apotheosis of Padmasambhava and Ye shes mtsho rgyal.

By imitating the format of Buddhist scriptures, Treasure *zhus lans* make an implicit claim for their authenticity as words of the Buddha (Skt. *buddhavaacana*, Tib. *sangs rgyas kyi bka'*), thus elevating the status of Padmasambhava to “the second Buddha.”⁸ This literary strategy serves a few purposes. It authenticates teachings transmitted in *zhus lan* texts and provides support for the expanding Rnying ma canon. By bridging the temporal gap between Treasure texts and imperial

⁶ Doney 2018 examines the flourishing of the Lives of Padmasambhava, in particular those revealed by Ö rgyan gling pa (1323–c.1360). He also discusses how Treasure revealers (*gter ston*) channel the Tibetan imperial past through narratives of scriptural revelation. By personally inhabiting imperial personalities in current time and space and by recovering imperial teachings in the form of Treasure revelations, they speak to an audience of their day and address the concern of a Treasure’s legitimacy.

⁷ Davidson 2005: 225.

⁸ In another article tentatively titled “The Context of the Form: *Zhus lan* as Scripture in Tibetan Treasure Literature,” I discuss in detail the formal parallelism between Treasure *zhus lan* texts and exoteric as well as esoteric Buddhist scriptures. In short, by including the five elements or “perfect conditions” (*phun sum tshogs pa lnga*) in which a Buddha-voiced teaching takes place—the teacher, the time, the location, the audience or retinue, and the teaching—these question-and-answer texts adopt the formulaic sutric style and declare themselves to be authentic Buddhist scriptures.

personalities, it addresses external criticisms of these revelations as fraudulent. In terms of actual content, these question-and-answer texts also speak to the unique theological concerns of their time.

The texts used for this study include a series of conversation-style teachings (both question-and-answer texts and first-person instructions) with the collective title “Collected Teachings of the Great Master, the Emanation Body Padmasambhava” (Slob dpon chen po sprul sku padma ’byung gnas kyi bka’ ’bum), attributed to Nyang ral nyi ma ’od zer (1124–1192),⁹ and *The Heart Essence of the Dākinīs* (*Mkha’ ’gro snying thig*), a Treasure cycle discovered by Tshul khrim rdo rje (1291–1315), alias Padma las ’brel tshal.¹⁰ Another collection of *zhus lan* texts I consulted can be found in a later Great Perfection (Rdzogs chen) cycle discovered by Rigs ’dzin rgod ldem (1337–1408) with the title “Unimpeded Realization” (Dgongs pa zang thal).¹¹ This cycle contains five volumes. The fifth volume, titled the “Self-Emergent, Self-Arisen Primordial Purity” (Ka dag rang byung rang shar), contains primarily sacred conversations between various enlightened figures. The majority of these question-and-answer sessions take place between Padmasambhava and his disciples. Among the three questioners—Khri Srong lde btsan (742–796), Nam mkha’i snying po (8th century), and Ye shes mtsho rgyal—Ye shes mtsho rgyal is the disciple asking the questions in most *zhus lan* accounts; these accounts are also usually the longest ones. Lastly, I made use of two Treasure *zhus lans* between Padmasambhava and

⁹ This collection is found in volume 92 of the *Rin chen gter mdzod chen mo* (’Jam mgon Kong sprul blo gros mtha’ yas 1976–1980). Although the collection as a whole does not pre-date the *Rin chen gter mdzod chen mo*, individual texts within it are found in earlier writings not long after Nyang ral’s time. For example, a *zhus lan* titled “Rgan mo mdzub btsugs kyi gdams pa” (The Pointing-out Instruction to the Old Woman) is listed among the teachings requested by Ko brag pa Bsod nams rgyal mtshan (1170–1249) to the teachers and masters of Bla skor. See Stearns 2000: 34–35. The Buddhist Digital Resource Center (BDRC) has recently acquired another undated collection titled “Gter mdzod nyang gi bla ma dmar khrid zhus lan sogs” (A Treasury of Questions and Answers and Direct Teachings from the Nyang Master) from the Asian Classics Input Project’s (ACIP) Mongolian Collection. If these two collections overlap, it could shed further light on the transmission history of these teachings.

¹⁰ This collection is commonly found in a fourfold Snying thig cycle called “Snying thig ya bzhi.” For example, Dri med ’od zer 2009 vols. 1–12.

¹¹ Two notable editions of this Treasure cycle are available. One is a reproduction of blockprints prepared by A ’dzoms ’Brug pa rin po che (1842–1924) in his own monastery in the early 1900s (Rig ’dzin rgod ldem 1973); the other is a reproduction of blockprints prepared by the 11th Gnas chung Sku rten Shākya yar ’phel (19th century, Rig ’dzin rgod ldem 1979). Since the Gnas chung version does not have the fifth volume, which is the main topic of our discussion, I mainly cite from the A ’dzoms version. Turpeinen 2015 (27–30) examines in detail these two editions and their respective textual history.

his female disciples Padma gsal and Khrom pa rgyan, found in Padma gling pa's (1450–1521) *Lama Jewel Ocean* (*Bla ma nor bu rgya mtsho*).¹²

I also included excerpts from two Lives of Ye shes mtsho rgyal that are stylistically similar to *zhus lan* accounts. These two Lives predate her better-known Life, revealed by Stag sham Nus ldan rdo rje (1655–1708),¹³ and form the earlier stratum of her hagiographical tradition. The first is a corpus of the earliest full-length Life of Ye shes mtsho rgyal and is attributed to Dri med kun dga' (b.1347?) and Padma gling pa respectively.¹⁴ The third chapter of this Life, “The Princess Requests O rgyan for Songs of Instruction” (Lha lcam gyis o rgyan la gdams pa glu'i tshigs su bca'd pa zhus pa), is structured in the format of a *zhus lan*. Another Life of Ye shes mtsho rgyal, entitled the “Extensive Life and Liberation Story of Ḍākinī Ye shes mtsho rgyal” (Mkha' 'gro ye shes mtsho rgyal gyi skyes rabs rnam thar rgyas pa, hereafter *The Extensive Life*) is also of potential antiquity.¹⁵

¹² For example, Padma gling pa 1975–1976 vol.1: 289–370.

¹³ For example, Nus ldan rdo rje 1989.

¹⁴ This corpus is first made known by Gyatso 2006, where she referred to three manuscripts she found in Lhasa in the 1990s. I was able to locate further exemplars from *Garland of White Lotuses: Liberation Stories of Great Female Lives in Tibet* (*'Phags bod kyi skyes chen ma dag gi rnam par thar ba padma dkar po'i phreng ba*) in *Bla rung aryatāre'i dpe tshogs rtsom sgrig khang* 2013, a sixteen-volume collection of life stories of Buddhist women edited by the Āryatare publishing house at Bla rung Buddhist Academy, manuscripts digitized by the Endangered Archives Programme (EAP) at British Library, and from other extant block prints. For a complete, descriptive list of texts in this corpus, see Angowski 2019: 127–136. In the following discussion, I cite the two reproductions in *Bla rung aryatāre'i dpe tshogs rtsom sgrig khang* 2013, as they are the most easily accessible.

¹⁵ *The Extensive Life* is also included in *Bla rung aryatāre'i dpe tshogs rtsom sgrig khang* 2013 vol. 7: 5–179. Its colophon contains a prophecy of its place, time, and person of discovery, disclosing that the Treasure scroll (*gter shog*) shall encounter a person named Rdo rje drag po rtsal in a bird month and be revealed later in a dog month (*bsgrub pa'i ming ni rdo rje drag po rtsal/ bya'i zla ba'i dus tshod gter shog phrad/ [...] khyi'i zla ba'i dus su gter shog zheng sor bzhil/ dkyil mtho gsum la zhal bshus so//*, see Mkha' 'gro ye shes mtsho rgyal gyi skyes rabs rnam thar rgyas pa: 189b). However, there is no further information on the year of its revelation; I have not been able to locate a Rdo rje drag po rtsal associated with the composition of this Life. The name “Rdo rje gling gi phab” (lit. “descendent of Rdo rje gling [pa]”?) also came up later in the colophon. BDRRC lists this text as the revelation of Gter ston Rdo rje gling pa (1346–1405). However, it is not found in other literary works attributed to him. In this Life, Ye shes mtsho rgyal is not one of the queens of Khri Srong lde btsan (a narrative element usually found in the later stratum of her literary tradition). Rather, her karmic connection with Padmasambhava was directly established without the middle link of Khri Srong lde btsan. Judging from its content and the format of a combination of narrative and nonnarrative elements, I suggest that *The Extensive Life* could represent the initial stage of efforts to weave together the many literary representations of Ye shes mtsho

The Extensive Life is not structured by chapters or sections. Rather, the majority of this work is dedicated to Ye shes mtsho rgyal's conversation with Padmasambhava on various topics.¹⁶

The disciple who most frequently addresses Padmasambhava in these question-and-answer texts is Ye shes mtsho rgyal. Since these questions are usually posed to a male master by a female disciple or a group of women, and since many of the questions include special considerations particular to women, they provide a venue in which we can explore the richness of Tibetan Buddhist conceptualization of gender, especially in the Rnying ma Treasure context.

Borrowing from the notion of "metacommunication" from folklore studies, I consider these *zhus lan* accounts to be conventionalized, performative accounts. "Metacommunication" refers to

any element of communication which calls attention to the speech event as performance and to the relationship which obtains between the narrator and his audience vis-à-vis the narrative message.¹⁷

The focus on metacommunication provides the understanding of the frame, or "an interpretative context or alternative point of view," in which the story is situated.¹⁸ While the dialogical accounts themselves are traditionally understood to be vehicles of teachings,¹⁹ the metacommunication aspect or the narrative framing of these texts reveals the theological logic of its composition, structure, intended audience, and social context.

Reading these dialogues as stylized, performative accounts rather than actual conversations, I look at what these dialogues *do*, not what they *say*. Indeed, being born as a woman is depicted in decidedly unfavorable terms in these texts. However, if we read them as a part of the customary context in which women could receive instructions from Padmasambhava, or a literary gesture that has to be made before moving on to the teaching proper, these remarks on the inferiority of the female gender tell us more about women's situation and their access to teachings and practices. The rhetoric of female

rgyal and elevate her status to that of an enlightened master, a status that had not yet been securely established.

¹⁶ For more details on the literary format of *The Extensive Life*, see Liang forthcoming.

¹⁷ Babcock in Bauman 1978: 66.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Three collections of English translation of Treasure *zhus lan* accounts are called *Advice from the Lotus-Born*, *Dakini Teachings*, *Treasure from the Juniper Ridge* respectively (Padmasambhava 1994, 1999, and 2008). All of these titles emphasize the *content* ("advice," "teaching," and "Treasure"), rather than the dialogical narrative *format* (for example, a collective title like "Conversations between Padmasambhava and Disciples"), of the texts being translated.

inferiority does not simply function as an obstacle barring women from accessing teachings and practices, but consists of a necessary step on their way to become Buddhist practitioners.

2. *Lamenting Women's Inferior Birth*

One of the most common sentiments among female disciples of Padmasambhava is lamenting the unfortunate destiny of being born a woman, a sentiment shared by many other Tibetan Buddhist women. For example, watching a mare suffer from giving birth, O rgyan Chos skyid (1675–1729) sings the following song of lament:

When I ponder our female bodies
I am sorrowful; impermanence rings clear.
When men and women couple—creating more life—
Happiness is rare, but suffering is felt for a long time.
May I not be born again in a female body.
May the mare not be born as a mare.²⁰

Se ra mkha' 'gro (1892–1940) also laments her unfortunate destiny:

Because of my inferior female body (*lus dman*), it is difficult for me to benefit beings in the world. Hence, having abandoned this body, if I try to attain a man's body, I wonder if I will benefit beings?²¹

In a dialogue titled “The Pointing-out Instruction to the Old Woman” (Rgan mo mdzub btsugs kyi gdams pa),²² an old lady from Ston asks Padmasambhava for an instruction that “requires little effort, is easily intelligible and applicable, but profound in meaning.”²³ She makes this request because she is, first of all, born with the lower status of a woman. Even though she had accumulated some good merit, she does not have the acumen to recall the teaching. Moreover, she has an inferior intellect in general, and her mind is no longer clear due to old age. In response, Padmasambhava praises her as having greater faith than King Khri Srong lde btsan. He then teaches her how to reflect on the nature of one's mind and how to be fearless at the time of death, reassuring her that the causes for buddhahood are not

²⁰ Schaeffer 2004: 142.

²¹ Jacoby 2009: 132

²² 'Jam mgon Kong sprul blo gros mtha' yas 1976–1980 vol. 92: 467–474. This text is translated into English by Erik Pema Kunsang in Padmasambhava 2008: 21–26.

²³ *tshegs chung ba go sla ba/ nyams su blang sla la don che ba/* ('Jam mgon Kong sprul blo gros mtha' yas 1976–1980 vol. 92: 468).

deficient in women.²⁴

This description of women as possessing an inferior body is echoed in another conversation between Padmasambhava and seven of his female disciples, led by Ye shes mtsho rgyal. This untitled text (hereafter *Dialogue with Seven Female Disciples*) is attributed to Nyang ral Nyi ma 'od zer.²⁵ Having paid homage and offered golden *maṅdalas* to Padmasambhava, each disciple asks him for an instruction specifically catered to her limited capacities as a woman:

[Ye shes mtsho rgyal]: A disciple like me, who is a woman with little wisdom and a dull mind, has limited understanding and is narrow-minded. I request an oral instruction on enlightenment in this lifetime with a female body, a teaching that is easy to know, to grasp, to understand, and to realize!²⁶

[Shel dkar bza' Rdo rje 'tsho]: A disciple like me, who is a woman with inferior motivation and lacking diligence, requests an oral instruction on enlightenment through indolence!²⁷

[Cog ro bza' Dpal gyi mchod gnas]: A disciple like me, who is a woman dominated by the five poisonous emotions, requests an oral instruction on enlightenment that does not require ridding oneself of these emotions!²⁸

['Bro bza' ma pad ma]: A disciple like me, who is a woman and has much to do and is easily distracted, requests an oral instruction on enlightenment that does not require abandoning worldly activities!²⁹

[Mar gong bza' Rin chen tshul]: A disciple like me, who is a woman and has bad karma, requests an oral instruction on enlightenment so that I will not take on another life as a woman in the future!³⁰

[Mchims bza' Sa le 'od]: A disciple like me, who is a woman with a

²⁴ 'Jam mgon Kong sprul blo gros mtha' yas 1976–1980 vol. 92: 468–470.

²⁵ 'Jam mgon Kong sprul blo gros mtha' yas 1976–1980 vol. 92: 474–494. This text is translated into English by Erik Pema Kunsang in Padmasambhava 2008: 111–120.

²⁶ *bdag bud med 'dra ba shes rab chung la blo brtul/ go ba chung la sems rgya chung ba/ shes sla/ bzung sla/ go sla/ rtogs sla ba/ bud med kyi lus 'di la brten nas tshe 'di la sangs rgya ba'i gdams ngag zhig [sic] zhu 'tshal lo//* ('Jam mgon Kong sprul blo gros mtha' yas 1976–1980 vol. 92: 475).

²⁷ *bdag bud med kyi bu 'dra rgyu ngan pas rtsol sgrub mi nus pas nyal nas nyams su blangs pas/ sangs rgyas gdams ngag cig zhu 'tshal/* (Ibid: 477).

²⁸ *bdag bud med kyi bu 'dra ba/ dug lnga shas che bas/ dug lnga spang mi dgos pas sangs rgya ba'i gdams ngag cig zhu 'tshal/* (Ibid: 478–479).

²⁹ *bud med kyi bu 'dra ba/ bya ba mang la g.yeng ba che bas/ bya ba ma spangs par sangs rgya ba'i gdams ngag cig zhu 'tshal/* (Ibid: 481).

³⁰ *bud med kyi bu 'dra ba las ngan par gda' bas phyi ma la bud med kyi tshul 'di blang mi dgos pa zhig zhu 'tshal/* (Ibid: 482).

dull mind, requests an oral instruction on enlightenment in a single word!³¹

[Ru yang bza' Ma ti]: Since I am of little diligence, I request a teaching that is effortless!³²

Instead of a generic statement that “women are inferior,” the questions posed by these female disciples reveal the complex situations that have contributed to the inferior status of women. This feeling of inferiority is shared by other female disciples of Padmasambhava. Padma gling pa's *Lama Jewel Ocean* also includes two other dialogues between Padmasambhava and two princesses, Padma gsal and Khrom pa rgyan.³³ In her dialogue with Padmasambhava, Princess Padma gsal describes her female birth in the following way:

A disciple like me is a woman with an inferior birth and insufficient means, who is dull in speech and cannot recollect the teaching, who has worked as a servant for half of her life, and who has accumulated little merit. Taking me as a disciple, may the lama not cast me away into the swamp of cyclic existence! Having practiced the Dharma, I request the method of becoming enlightened within this life!³⁴

In his reply, Padmasambhava confirms that a female birth is indeed undesirable and unfitting for Buddhist practice, saying that

women are involuntarily thrown into the prison of cyclic existence by their parents and need to take care of various errands. They constantly live in the state of being attached to their egos, working without payment as a housemaid, and wasting their life away. In the end, they will definitely go into bad transmigration.³⁵

³¹ *bdag bud med kyi bu 'dra ba/ blo brtul bas/ gdams pa tshig gcig gis sangs rgya ba zhig zhu 'tshal/* ('Jam mgon Kong sprul blo gros mtha' yas 1976–1980 vol. 92: 484).

³² *bdag rtsol ba chung bas byar med kyi chos zhig zhu 'tshal/* (Ibid: 485).

³³ “Lha lcam padma gsal gyi zhus lan gser gyi yang zhun” and “Lha lcam khrom pa rgyam gyi zhus lan” in Padma gling pa 1975–1976 vol. 1: 289–352, 353–370. These two texts are translated into English by Sara Harding in Padma gling pa 2003: 51–85, 87–98.

³⁴ *bdag bud med kyi bu 'dra ba/ skye ba dma' ba/ 'khos kha chung ba/ khas nyen pa/ chos mi dran pa/ mi lus phyed la mi'i bran byed pa/ tshogs ma bsags pa bdag 'dra ba la/ rje gu rus thugs rjes bzung nas kyang/ 'khor ba'i 'dam du mi gtong zhing/ bdag gis chos shig byas nas kyang/ tshe 'di la sangs rgyas pa'i thabs shig zhu/* (Padma gling pa 1975–1976 vol. 1: 290).

³⁵ *dbang med pha mas 'khor ba'i btson dong du bskyr zhing/ gyes rgyug gi kha ngo blta dgos/ mi tshe bdag 'dzin gyi ngang la gnas shing/ mi g.yog gla med byed dgos/ mi tshe stong zad kyi ngang la bsdas nas/ mthar ngan song du 'gro'ol* (Ibid: 291).

Another princess named Khrom pa rgyan³⁶ provides an even more detailed account of her plight as a woman in her dialogue with Padmasambhava. Having made her offering to Padmasambhava in exchange for his teaching, she opens her request by listing the difficulties in the life of a woman, starting with her own life story:

Women like me have accumulated particularly bad karma in previous lives and are born with an inferior female body.

With an unwholesome body like this,
I have no place of hope but my father—
But he does not hold me dearly.
I have no source of compassion but my mother—
But mothers and daughters must part ways.
I care for no one but my brother—
But my brother auctions me off like merchandise.
The machinations of my father, mother, and brother
Throw this woman into cyclic existence.
Please hold me with compassion and love,
I beseech you from the bottom of my heart!

My mind goes to the pure Dharma,
But as a woman, I cannot come and go at will.
In fear of legal disputes,
I have to stay with an evil spouse.
Trying to fend off slander,
I sank into the swamp of cyclic existence.
O rgyan Padmasambhava,
Please hold me with compassion and love,
I beseech you from the bottom of my heart!

In my youth, I did not recall the teaching,
But engaged in bad deeds as a householder.
In old age, even though I recall the teaching,
My bodily functions have deteriorated.
O rgyan Padmasambhava,
Please hold me with compassion and love,
I beseech you from the bottom of my heart!³⁷

³⁶ In O rgyan gling pa's *Chronicle of the Queens* (*Btsun mo'i bka' thang yig*), Khrom pa rgyan is praised as the exemplary faithful woman and is married to Padmasambhava.

³⁷ *sgos bu mo nga ni tshes ngon las ngan bsags pas/ skye dman 'dra ba'i lus blangs/ lus ngan 'di 'dra thob dus/ re sa pha las med kyang/ bu mo snying du ma sdug/ byams pa ma las med kyang/ ma smad gson bral byas byung/ bsam pa ming po yin kyang/ sring po zong du btsons byung/ pha ma ming po gros byas/ bu mo 'khor bar bskyur rol/ thugs rje brtse bas zungs dang/ snying nas gsol ba 'debs so/ rang sems chos la dkar kyang/ bu mo 'gro dbang ma byung/ kha mchu byung gis dogs nas/ gtan grogs ngan kyang bsdad dol/ mi kha gtam la 'dzems pas/ 'khor ba'i 'dam du tshud dol/ o rgyan padma 'byung gnas/*

Khrom pa rgyan then recounts the general challenges she and other women encounter:

Being deceived by demons,
I made mistakes wherever I went.
Being driven by the wind of bad karma,
I sank into the swamp of cyclic existence.
O rgyan Padmasambhava,
Please hold me with compassion and love,
I beseech you from the bottom of my heart!

As a woman, my mental perception is limited,
And so, I must ask others for counsel.
Rare are heroic, righteous companions,
So, no one could guide me to the teaching.
Powerful is the evil that causes one's downfall,
So, I take everyone's ill advice to heart.
O rgyan Padmasambhava,
Please hold me with compassion and love,
I beseech you from the bottom of my heart!

I have to leave my happy homeland,
And stray into the remote region of my husband.
Although I have accumulated some wealth,
It is left to be enjoyed by his new wife.
O rgyan Padmasambhava,
Please hold me with compassion and love,
I beseech you from the bottom of my heart!

Even when I am desperate and weary of cyclic existence,
No one could teach or inspire me.
Even when I am crying helplessly,
People say I am faking it.
O rgyan Padmasambhava,
Please hold me with compassion and love,
I beseech you from the bottom of my heart!

Even though I am deeply disillusioned with the world,
No one shows me any kindness.
Even though I am determined to go and practice,
Doubts sneak their way into my mind—
There is no way for me to access the teaching!
O rgyan Padmasambhava,

thugs rje brtse bas zungs dang/ snying nas gsol ba 'debs so// gzhon dus lha chos ma dran/ las ngan khyim thabs byas pas/ rgas dus lha chos dran kyang/ 'byung ba'i dbang po nyams so// o rgyan padma 'byung gnas/ thugs rje brtse bas zungs dang/ snying nas gsol ba 'debs so// (Padma gling pa 1975–1976 vol.1: 354–356).

Please hold me with compassion and love,
I beseech you from the bottom of my heart!

Because I am immensely ignorant as a woman,
I cannot come to an understanding of the teaching.
Because I harbor much rage as a woman,
My mind is preoccupied with deceit, hypocrisy, and pretenses.
O rgyan Padmasambhava,
Please hold me with compassion and love,
I beseech you from the bottom of my heart!

Distracted by secular obligations,
I did not get to meet a lama.
Even if I stay with my lama,
His wife will slander and scorn me.
O rgyan Padmasambhava,
Please hold me with compassion and love,
I beseech you from the bottom of my heart!

Even when wandering in isolated, rocky regions,
I encounter enemies of heinous form.
Even when I take the teaching into my experience,
Calamities and obstacles befall me.
O rgyan Padmasambhava,
Please hold me with compassion and love,
I beseech you from the bottom of my heart!

Because of the ripening of previously accumulated karma,
I am trapped in this inferior body.
Please, Great Father O rgyan Padma,
Close the door to rebirth as a woman!
O rgyan Padmasambhava,
Please hold me with compassion and love,
I beseech you from the bottom of my heart!

Having obtained a male body in my next life,
I will become my own master.
I will exert myself in the teaching,
And attain the resultant enlightenment!
O rgyan Padmasambhava,
Please hold me with compassion and love,
I beseech you from the bottom of my heart!

Please consider what I have said,
And hold me with your compassion!
May I escape from suffering and afflictions,
And be emancipated from the swamp of cyclic existence!
O rgyan Padmasambhava,

Please hold me with compassion and love,
I beseech you from the bottom of my heart!³⁸

As seen above, the voices of women in these dialogues generally agree that they are born with a less desirable karmic lot. Women possess an inferior body, their mind is not sharp, their intellect also limited. While later Buddhist women like O rgyan Chos skyid and Se ra mkha' 'gro connect the female body to worldly suffering and thus argue they have a unique perspective on the first noble truth, effectively transforming the female body "from a vice to a virtue,"³⁹ most female disciples of Padmasambhava do not seek to directly counter the negative gender stereotype themselves.

What are we to make of these depictions of women being inferior? And exactly *how* are women considered inferior? In the next two sections, I will investigate the two sides of female inferiority as

³⁸ 'gro sa bdud kyis bslus pas/ bu mo'i gom pa nor rol/ las ngan rlung gis bdas nas/ 'khor ba'i 'dam su tshud byung/ o rgyan padma 'byung gnas/ thugs rje brtse bas zungs dang/ snying nas gsol ba 'debs so/ bu mo blo rtsal chung bas/ gros phug mi la dris soll/ yar 'gro'i dpa' grogs dkon pas/ chos la khrid mkhan ma byung/ mar 'gro bdud dbang che bas/ kun gyi 'khrul gtam bslab nyan/ o rgyan padma 'byung gnas/ thugs rje brtse bas zungs dang/ snying nas gsol ba 'debs so/ pha yul skyid po bzhag nas/ mi yul sa mtha' bskor dgos/ nor rdzas rang gi bsags kyang/ shul du gna' mas spyod do/ o rgyan padma 'byung gnas/ thugs rje brtse bas zungs dang/ snying nas gsol ba 'debs so/ yi mug skyo shas byung kyang/ gtam 'dun bslab mkhan ma byung/ mchi ma dbang med shor yang/ bu mo'i khram dus yin zer/ o rgyan padma 'byung gnas/ thugs rje brtse bas zungs dang/ snying nas gsol ba 'debs so/ skyo shas snying nas skye kyang/ snying rje byed mkhan ma byung/ chos la 'gro sems byas kyang/ the tshom sems la zhugs pas/ chos la 'gro sa ma 'byung/ o rgyan padma 'byung gnas/ thugs rje brtse bas zungs dang/ snying nas gsol ba 'debs so/ skye dman gti mug che bas/ chos la go rtog ma rnyed/ bu mo zhe sdang che bas/ g.yo sgyu khram gsum dran gda'/ o rgyan padma 'byung gnas/ thugs rje brtse bas zungs dang/ snying nas gsol ba 'debs so/ 'jig rten bya bas g.yengs nas/ bla ma mjal rgyu ma byung/ bla ma'i drung du bsdad na/ jo mos mi kha sdang 'ong/ o rgyan padma 'byung gnas/ thugs rje brtse bas zungs dang/ snying nas gsol ba 'debs so/ gnyan sa ri khrod 'grim kyang/ lus ngan dgra dang 'phrad do/ nyams len chos la byas kyang/ rkyen ngan bar chad 'jug gis/ o rgyan padma 'byung gnas/ thugs rje brtse bas zungs dang/ snying nas gsol ba 'debs so/ sngon bsags rnam smin de yis/ da lta'i lus ngan blangs zin/ pha mchog o rgyan padmas/ skye dman skye sgo chod mdzod/ o rgyan padma 'byung gnas/ thugs rje brtse bas zungs dang/ snying nas gsol ba 'debs so/ phyi ma pho lus thob nas/ rang la dbang yod byas nas/ chos la 'bad pa byed cing/ sangs rgyas 'bras bu thob mdzod/ o rgyan padma 'byung gnas/ thugs rje brtse bas zungs dang/ snying nas gsol ba 'debs so/ don de thugs la dgongs la/ bdag la thugs rjes zungs shig/ nyon mongs sdug bsngal 'dzom la/ 'khor ba'i 'dam las drong shig/ o rgyan padma 'byung gnas/ thugs rje brtse bas zungs dang/ snying nas gsol ba 'debs so/ (Padma gling pa 1975–1976 vol.1: 356–358).

³⁹ Schaeffer 2004: 103 and Jacoby 2009: 145. Jacoby provides an illuminating discussion on Se ra mkha' 'gro's consistent self-description as an inferior woman. Jacoby argues that this description should be understood as both a "literal internalization of misogynist views" and at the same time "a rhetorical device that enabled her [Se ra mkha' 'gro] to make extraordinary claims about herself" as a religious authority (Jacoby 2009: 144).

presented in these dialogues. On the one hand, the extremely detailed list of female woes points not only to superficial misogyny, but also to a genuine reckoning of women's unfortunate lot in life. The fact that most (if not all) of this literature is attributed to male teachers or Treasure revealers also means that these men are at least aware of (if not sympathetic to) women's daily struggles. On the other hand, the sequence in which these dialogues take place also suggests that the lamentation about or denunciation of women could, in some cases, be a rhetoric device, a necessary step to take before continuing with the ultimately more important task of giving women teachings.

3. *Female Inferiority as a Real Concern*

Many aspects of a woman's life are examined in these self-deprecatory remarks by Padmasambhava's disciples or by the criticism by Padmasambhava himself. In the aforementioned *Dialogue with Seven Female Disciples*, each disciple requested an oral instruction that is particularly suited to their inferior capacities. Padmasambhava responded to their request with appropriate teachings.⁴⁰ At the end of each response, he added an admonition to each woman (such admonitions are not found in his instructions to male disciples like Khri Srong lde btsan), reminding them that women are still encumbered by their karmic conditions and their chances of success are slim:

[In response to Ye shes mtsho rgyal,] this difficult teaching hardly works for women, so do not deceive yourself, but practice with strict attention!⁴¹

[In response to Shel dkar bza' Rdo rje 'tsho,] I have never seen a woman who has perfected the teachings. If you want to persevere, you should still exert yourself in practice!⁴²

⁴⁰ For example, to Ye shes mtsho rgyal, who asked for a teaching that is "easy to know, to grasp, to understand, and to realize," Padmasambhava taught the realization of the true nature of suchness that is beyond conceptualization. To Cog ro bza' Dpal gyi mchod gnas, who asked for an instruction that does not rid oneself of poisonous emotions, he taught the empty nature of these emotions and how to properly recognize them ('Jam mgon Kong sprul blo gros mtha' yas 1976–1980 vol. 92: 475, 479).

⁴¹ *bud med kyi chos 'di dka' bar gda' bas/ rang gis rang la rdzun ma byed par/ nyams len bag drag tu mdzod cig/* (Ibid: 477).

⁴² *ngas bud med kyi chos la mthar phyin pa tsam ma mthong na/ rem la da rung chos la nan tan skyed cig/* (Ibid: 478).

[In response to Cog ro bza' Dpal gyi mchod gnas,] still, women like you, in whom the five emotional poisons are burning like fire and whose evil dispositions flow like water, indulge in adultery. Due to dualistic conceptions, their desire for husbands is like the turbulent wind. Their understanding is flimsy and obscured, like a pile of dust. Not thinking about the Teaching, but only themselves, they deceive. Because the five poisons run the risk of running wild, rely on your practice!⁴³

[In response to 'Bro bza' ma pad ma,] still, women like you have limited mental capacity due to your inferior birth. Your body works against you so that you cannot approach the Dharma, and so you lead a householder's life. Because of your evil karma, you have a lot of work and cannot recall the Teaching. Indeed, for women, there is little Teaching, so let your determination grow!⁴⁴

[In response to Mar gong bza' Rin chen tshul,] still, women like you have little Teaching because of your mental capacity. You fail to accomplish much because you are not armed with diligence. You are narrow-minded, so it is difficult to teach you the essence of the Teaching. You are weak in determination, so you cannot accomplish much. Because the Teaching indeed rarely appears to women, increase your perseverance, and rely on your practice!⁴⁵

[In response to Mchims bza' Sa le 'od] still, women like you have an incorrigible mind filled with doubt. You cannot heed the master's instructions. You are difficult to discipline because you are dominated by afflictions. Few of you can perfect the Teaching. If you practice, honor the instructions from your teacher and be ready to overcome some difficulty!⁴⁶

[In response to Ru yang bza' Ma ti,] still, women like you are completely senseless. No matter how I teach, you will not understand.

⁴³ *lar khyed bud med kyi bu 'dra ba/ nyon mongs pa dug lnga rang gi rgyud la me ltar 'bar/ bag chags ngan pa chu ltar 'bru ba nas 'dod pa la g.yem/ gzung 'dzin gnyis kyiis khyo'i 'dod pa rlung ltar 'tshub/ spog sgrib gnyis po khrol sogs byas nas sa ltar gsog/ chos la mi sems bdag 'dzin sems zhing g.yod pas khyer/ dug lnga rmu r'god du 'chor nyen yod pas/ nyams len rgyud la khol mdzod dang gsungs/ ('Jam mgon Kong sprul blo gros mtha' yas 1976–1980 vol. 92: 480).*

⁴⁴ *lar khyed bud med kyi bu 'dra ba/ skye ba dman pas snying rtsal chung/ lus la dgra yong pas chos la mi 'gro khyim thabs byed/ las ngan pas bya ba mang bas chos mi dran/ bud med la chos 'ong ba nyung bar gda' bas snying rus skyed mdzod gsungs/ (Ibid: 482).*

⁴⁵ *lar khyed bud med kyi bu 'dra ba shes rab kyi rtsal gyis chos mi 'ong/ brtson 'grus kyi go cha med pas sgrub mi nus/ blo chung bas chos nyid kyi don bstan dka'/ snying stobs chung bas sgrub mi nus/ bud med kyiis chos 'byung ba nyung bar 'dug na/ brtson 'grus skyed la nyams lan rgyud la khol mdzod gsungs/ (Ibid: 483–484).*

⁴⁶ *lar khyed bud med kyi bu 'dra ba blo sra ba la the tshom za/ bla ma'i gdams pa mi thub/ nyon mongs pa shas che bas gdul ba dka'/ chos mthar phyin pa nyung/ chos byed na bla ma'i gdams ngag gtsigs su gyis la/ dka' thub bag re gyis dang gsungs/ (Ibid: 484–485).*

Even if I point out the Dharma Body, you will not recognize it. Even if I introduce you to enlightenment, you cannot see it. Even if I teach the single stroke of nonaction, it will be difficult for you to realize. The Dharma of women is crooked, so arm yourself and do not be carried away by the demon that is your husband! Do not give birth to children. Although it is difficult, remain in solitary practice!⁴⁷

While Padmasambhava's attitude toward women's ability to understand his teachings and perform Buddhist practices remained largely negative, he nonetheless encourages them to practice in the end. He also recognizes that women are bound to a householder's life in his reply to 'Bro bza' ma pad ma and identifies the major difficulties women encounter in their lives, such as the confinement of domestic labor exemplified by marriage and motherhood. In the last conversation with Ru yang bza' Ma ti, he even suggested that women should not be seduced by their husbands—the demon—and should not give birth to children, lest the burden of raising them becomes obstacles on the path to liberation.

Princess Khrom pa rgyan's lamentation provides an even more detailed account of how women are disadvantaged in all aspects of life. Her account differs from the conversation between Padmasambhava and his seven female disciples in that it discusses women's difficulties less in terms of innate abilities (or the lack thereof), but of external circumstances. A woman has no place in her birth home: her father does not care much about her, her mother is powerless, and her brother only views her as a commodity. In her marriage, she also lacks independence and cannot move about freely. She does not have any external help—no one provides guidance for her or supports her practice. Even when she finds a teacher, she still suffers from his scornful wife. The only free time she has is when she is old, but by then, her body will have already become frail. Even when Khrom pa rgyan talks about her own deficiencies (she is "trapped in this inferior body," is "immensely ignorant," and "harbor much rage"), she still frames them in the context of karmic retribution. She was born in this female body, and faces these struggles because of past negative deeds. She says that if she can become a man in the next life, she will become her own master, exert herself in the teaching, and attain the resultant enlightenment.

The expressions of female inferiority in these dialogues indicate a

⁴⁷ *lar bud med kyi bu 'dra ba 'di gti mug shas che bas ji skad bstan kyang go ba med/ chos sku ngos 'dzin bstan kyang 'dzin mi shes/ sangs rgyas ngo sprod bstan kyang nthong ba med/ byar med chig chod bstan kyang rtogs pa dka' bud med kyi chos 'di 'khyogs mang bar gda' na/ go cha cher mdzod la khyo ga'i bdud kyi ma khyer bar gyis/ lus la bu ma skyes par nyams len gcig pur sdod la gyis dang ste dka' bar 'dra na gsungs/ ('Jam mgon Kong sprul blo gros mtha' yas 1976–1980 vol. 92: 485–486).*

complexity that goes beyond a blanket statement of “women are inferior and cannot practice Buddhism.” In addition to the recognition of adverse circumstances contributing to the female plight, women’s inherent inferiority is explained as karmically determined—the reason one is born as a woman is due to past negative actions. That is, female inferiority at its root should be understood as karmic inferiority manifesting in the form of gender.⁴⁸ Even though this disparages women, the misfortunes that befall them are still considered to be adventitious and do not determine their soteriological destiny. To a certain degree, this description of female inferiority differentiates between a woman’s agency and the constraints put upon her by society and (an albeit sexist description of) her biology. Therefore, being a woman does not mean that they are absolutely incapable of practice. It is just that there are more obstacles—both external and internal—for women to engage with Buddhist teachings. As seen above, from the perspective of Padmasambhava, while these faithful disciples may have obstacles in their potential for enlightenment, these obstacles do not bespeak the entirety of their capacity. After the admonition, he invariably grants teaching to these female disciples. He emphasizes, at the end of every conversation, that these women should exert themselves and strive to practice to the best of their ability.

Moreover, when we look at the individual components that have made women “inferior,” they are quite varied, ranging from physical (being endowed with an inferior body with extra illnesses and the burden of childbirth) and psychological (limited intellect, tendency to get angry, or possessing emotional afflictions, just to name a few), to social factors (low regard from others or lack of support for her religious life). For the most part, a woman herself is blamed for her inadequacy, but the family, husband, people, and adverse external conditions surrounding her are understood as contributing factors. While it might be a stretch to count these remarks as social criticism, the detailed description of women’s disadvantages certainly acknowledges the problematic status of women. Women are not categorically denied access to Buddhist teachings from Padmasambhava in these dialogues, although they might need to make (or accept) a public commentary of their inferior status before receiving teachings. It is this required admission of inferiority I now turn to.

⁴⁸ There are also other forms in which karmic inferiority is manifested, including being born in other forms of lower birth, such as animals, hungry ghosts, and hell beings. Physical deformities and diseases (especially those that are more visible on the outside, leprosy is one example, see Vargas-O’bryan 2001: 170–171) are also considered to be the result of past bad karma.

4. Female Inferiority as a Narrative Performance

Even with the many deficiencies in women's psycho-physical composition and the many obstacles in their social surroundings, as recorded in the dialogues above, female disciples are still given teachings by Padmasambhava. In this section, I present a reading of these dialogues as performative accounts and argue that their narrative framework sets up a favorable condition for Buddhist women to gain access to teachings and practices.

Despite severe warnings about their own shortcomings and the difficulties they would encounter, women in these texts were not discouraged from or denied access to any teachings or practice. One *zhus lan* text, the *Ten Steps of the Profound Key Points* (*Zhus lan gnad kyi thems bcu*) discovered by Rig 'dzin rgod ldem, depicts Ye shes mtsho rgyal's extraordinary visionary journey with step-by-step guidance from Padmasambhava.⁴⁹ The ten steps outline a series of Great Perfection teachings, generally considered the most advanced system of practice in the Rnying ma curriculum. It is not uncommon for *zhus lan* texts to list several titles transmitted during the teaching. The fourth chapter of the *Dri med Kun dga' / Padma gling pa Life*, titled "The Princess Requesting Teaching Transmissions of the Nine Vehicles from O rgyan" (*Lha lcam gyis o rgyan gyi drung du theg pa rim pa dgu'i chos lung zhus pa*), also provides a detailed list of texts and teachings received by Ye shes mtsho rgyal. She alone is entrusted with all of his teachings.⁵⁰ *The Extensive Life* also enumerates teachings and practices received by Ye shes mtsho rgyal. These include practices on yogic channels and winds (*rtsa rlung*),⁵¹ mantras on subjugating wrathful demons along with the detailed explanation,⁵² different types of empowerments,⁵³ an extensive prophecy regarding 108 future Treasure revealers, their names, the occasions for their Treasure discoveries, and from whom they are emanated.⁵⁴

The question-and-answer dialogues between Padmasambhava and his disciples are not representative of real-life conversations, but stylized conversations setting the stage for an enlightened teacher and his disciple(s). They are also performative accounts that list all

⁴⁹ Rig 'dzin rgod ldem 1973 vol.5: 321–401. Turpeinen 2018 provides a translation of a major part of this dialogue.

⁵⁰ See, for example, Bla rung aryatäre'i dpe tshogs rtsom sgrig khang 2013 vol.6: 247–250, 319–321.

⁵¹ *Mkha' 'gro ye shes mtsho rgyal gyi skyes rabs rnam thar rgyas pa*: 25b.

⁵² *Ibid*: 29a–30b.

⁵³ *Ibid*: 122a–b.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*: 152a–162a.

the steps of the ideal exchange in which the teaching is requested and then received. This performative aspect becomes clear when we look at the overall sequence of events in these *zhus lans* between Padmasambhava and his female disciples:

1. Opening scene;
2. Female disciple(s) requesting teaching from Padmasambhava;
3. Discussion on the inferiority of women: lamentation from female disciples themselves; or criticism from Padmasambhava;
4. The main body of the text (the order for the following two are interchangeable):
 - a. Admonition or exhortation by Padmasambhava: "This is a worthy disciple who could do it" or "It is not going to be easy, but practice nonetheless!"
 - b. Teaching from Padmasambhava;
5. Concluding scene.

After the opening narrative, a disciple requests some teaching from Padmasambhava. S/he will need to demonstrate a need for such teaching, usually citing the reason for their lack of realization or understanding. The required act of humility is done by Khri Srong lde btsan and other male disciples as well, just to a lesser extent than the female disciples, and not explicitly gendered.⁵⁵ For women, this demonstration takes on two forms: either they themselves lament about their inferiority, or they receive criticism from Padmasambhava. The teacher then continues with the teaching and allows the transmission to take place, which consists of the main body of the text. This is done by either singling out the disciple asking questions as a worthy recipient (for example, Ye shes mtsho

⁵⁵ While the male disciples of Padmasambhava also make literary gestures of humility in their requests for oral instructions, they do not regard their shortcomings or vices as characteristic of their gender. Consider the following example from *Gsang sngags kyi gseb lam: sdig po che sngon la sangs rgya ba'i man ngag* ("The Narrow Path of the Secret Mantra: Instructions on Enlightenment in the Face of Grave Sins"), in which King Khri Srong lde btsan confesses his immorality and inadequacy in practice when asking for teachings from the master: "A king like me has little faith but a lot of wealth and prestige. My virtuous thoughts are limited, I am vicious and hostile to the Teaching—I am an evil person! I take pleasure in distractions and enjoyments. If I have good fortune in this life, I do not even fear the prospect of bad transmigration in the future." *bdag rgyal po 'dra ba dad pa chung ba/ khe grags che ba/ chos la gnag pa/ gdug pa/ dge sems chung ba/ sdig pa shas che ba/ chos la mi gnas pa/ g.yeng ba dang bsod nams la dga' ba/ tshe lam 'di la bsod nams dang ldan na/ phyi ma ngan song du 'gro yang 'jigs sems med pa lags pas/* ('Jam mgon Kong sprul blo gros mtha' yas 1976–1980 vol. 92: 191).

rgyal), or by emphasizing the difficulty, but encouraging the disciples to practice nonetheless.

In these conversations, women are represented (and represent themselves) as generally inferior to men in many aspects of their lives. They are constantly warned that their practice will be difficult and their spiritual path treacherous. These copious comments on women's limited intelligence, debaucherous lifestyle, and unscrupulous inclinations could be easily (and perhaps not unjustifiably) interpreted as a reflection of the general misogyny in the Tibetan Buddhist context. However, it might also be worthwhile to see what these accounts achieve beyond beating the dead horse of women's well-established inferiority and if we can ask more of these accounts. By looking beyond what the text is saying but at what it is doing and who is the intended audience, and by treating women as a conventionalized performance required of a disciple, I suggest that these texts could also represent an uneasiness toward—if not an implicit break from—misogynistic tendencies. If Padmasambhava (or the Treasure revealers associated with these texts) really dislikes women so much or thinks so little of them, why go through all the trouble berating them and then grant them teachings? Why not refuse to teach women altogether? It is easy to explain why women are disparaged in these texts—it is in line with the established inferiority of women in Buddhist traditions. However, it is the unusual exhortation from Padmasambhava that deserves our attention. An equally important takeaway from these dialogues, besides that women are considered second class citizens in Tibetan society, is that these dialogues are also evidence that women are, at least in the literary imagination and in some rare cases, recipients and practitioners of Buddhist teachings.

5. Conclusion

This article examined the literary representations of Ye shes mtsho rgyal as the chief disciple of Padmasambhava in Treasure *zhus lan*, or dialogues, a genre to date less examined. These are sacred dialogues modeled after Mahāyāna and tantric canons and claiming themselves to be authentic transmissions coming from an unbroken lineage. This lineage can be traced back to Padmasambhava, who, in turn, was characterized as “the second Buddha.” These new revelations open the door to a canon only accessible through visions; the role of Ye shes mtsho rgyal in *zhus lan* literature (and to a larger extent, Treasure literature) is the indispensable conduit through which Padmasambhava's teachings were transmitted to future generations.

In most *zhus lan* texts, Ye shes mtsho rgyal is the disciple who addressed her questions to the master and was further entrusted with his teachings and their transmission to future generations. Much like Ānanda, the Buddha's favorite and most intimate disciple, she is said to possess infallible memory and can retain all the teachings in her mind, write them down, and transmit them to future generations.

On a less symbolic level—also quite like Ānanda⁵⁶—Ye shes mtsho rgyal is the spokesperson for women's concerns. Another word might be said of the historical background of these dialogues. The period of and after the renaissance of Buddhism in Tibet witnessed the rise to fame of several important female masters and practitioners from within and outside the Rnying ma tradition. These women include Ma gcig zha ma (1062–1149), Ma gcig lab sgron (1055–1149),⁵⁷ a group of female disciples of Longchenpa,⁵⁸ the 1st Bsam sding rdo rje phag mo (1422–1455),⁵⁹ and so forth. Groups of unnamed female practitioners also constituted a significant part of the Buddhist communities of that time.⁶⁰ Tibetan women were thus active participants in the Rnying ma Buddhist communities as well as other schools.

In the literary world, although negative comments on the inferior status of women abound in Padmasambhava's dialogues with his female disciples, it does not necessarily translate into the lack of access to Buddhist teachings for women. Upon a close reading of the content and style of these dialogues, I argue that the formulaic disparagement of women discloses more than simple misogyny from its composers. It confirms women's inferiority but also includes them in Buddhist teachings and practices. Some of these negative images contain rich details of women's daily struggles, suggesting an awareness of—and perhaps sympathy with—the lower social status

⁵⁶ Ānanda is said to have campaigned on behalf of the Buddha's foster mother, Mahāprajāpatī, for her to become the first Buddhist nun. Mahāprajāpatī wanted to become a monastic and went to ask the Buddha if he would initiate the nun's order. The Buddha turned her down three times. Ānanda encountered the weeping Mahāprajāpatī outside the Buddha's residence, learned about the reason for her distress, and decided to ask the Buddha again on her behalf. He reminded the Buddha of his personal debt to Mahāprajāpatī, who raised him after his mother passed away. The Buddha finally agreed to ordain Mahāprajāpatī and other women as nuns. Ohnuma presents an analysis of the importance of Mahāprajāpatī's role as a mother in the Buddha's decision to allow ordination (Ohnuma 2012: 94–112).

⁵⁷ For a discussion on the importance of these two female characters for the Tibetan Buddhist renaissance, see Davidson 2005: 290–293.

⁵⁸ Germano and Gyatso 2000.

⁵⁹ For a study on her Life (*rnam thar*), see Diemberger 2007.

⁶⁰ These groups are discussed in Martin 1996: 188–189; Davidson 2005: 293; Germano and Gyatso 2000.

of women. As performative accounts, they also satisfy the requirement for a disciple to demonstrate modesty and serve as part of a rhetoric about how teachings should be requested and then transmitted.

Lastly, by dividing my interpretation of female inferiority into “real concerns” and “performance,” I am not saying that the description of female inferiority in these dialogues should be read in either of the two ways—as a sympathetic acknowledgment of the difficulties women encounter in everyday life, or as a perfunctory gesture that mitigates granting women Buddhist teachings. Rather, these two aspects could very well function at the same time and provide some literary relief for women from their precarious situations.

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