

## **The Question of Gender in Tibetan Buddhism: The Case of Orgyan Chokyi**

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Orgyan Chokyi, a Tibetan Buddhist nun, is the main subject of Kurtis R. Schaeffer's work *Himalayan Hermitess*. The text includes an early autobiography by a woman, which is uncommon among Tibetan historical works. The life of Orgyan Chokyi is documented from her youth up until her time as a Buddhist nun and subsequent isolation during her self-imposed hermitage, with an afterword by Schaeffer chronicling her accidental death. During many points of her writing, Orgyan Chokyi takes great pains to focus on her gender, usually through lamenting it or even despising it. However, the most important factor in this is that she continually wishes to be reborn through samsara, the Buddhist term for the concept of a cycle of death and rebirth, as a male. It seems that her problems and wishes stem from the apparent gender roles in Tibetan society at the time of her writing, as Schaeffer describes in his commentary. However, it is possible there is another layer to her opinion of her gender. Tibetan Buddhism, in a strictly spiritual sense, transcends the concepts of physical gender and gender identity. Orgyan Chokyi was perhaps using her faith as a conduit through which to convey her dissatisfaction with her own physical gender and to express her true gender identity.

In order to fully examine this issue, Schaeffer's understanding of gender must be dissected. In the chapter entitled "Women, Men, Suffering," Schaeffer describes not only Orgyan Chokyi's frustration with gender-related subjects, such as her dissatisfaction with the typical male as seen through her eyes, but also with gender in Tibetan Buddhism and culture in general. The problem with Schaeffer's view is that it is entirely binary. According to Schaeffer, gender is a completely stationary concept with a clear divide between male and female, and this is especially prevalent in his continual emphasis that gender differences play a very large role within Tibetan Buddhist practices. As Schaeffer writes, "I see this line of inquiry as but a part of a larger endeavor to look at gender as an important aspect of Buddhist religious life in specific times and places, and to relate this to transcultural Buddhist

themes.”<sup>1</sup> While his view is not incorrect, it is still very simplistic. The problem that Schaeffer encounters when analyzing Orgyan Chokyi's *Life* is exclusion. He recognizes that both men and women exist and face different problems within the Buddhist faith, but he neglects to recognize the very possible factor of transgendered people within his work. In modern society, it is clear that gender is not such a black and white field, and that such individuals exist. Schaeffer's understanding of gender concepts leaves more to be desired.

Regardless of Schaeffer's comprehension of gender, Tibetan Buddhism as a spiritual practice is an accommodating religion, one which goes beyond notions of gender due to its very anti-materialistic nature. It is true that certain gender stigma does exist within the religious practices. Women are considered the embodiment of samsara due to biological functions such as childbirth. As Schaeffer states, “Women's bodies are – in her terms – the round of rebirth and suffering, the negative pole in the dualistic system of bondage and enlightenment that constitutes the Buddhist predicament of human existence.”<sup>2</sup> However, such stigma is created by human social constructs. At its core, Buddhism speaks to the spirit rather than to the body. If the idea is that the physical form represents attachment, then gender becomes completely irrelevant in the face of the ultimate goal of Buddhist faith: to rid oneself of attachment and break through samsara.

The accommodating nature of Tibetan Buddhism also exists in the portrayal of the various Bodhisattva, or enlightened beings, within the Buddhist faith. Especially after its migration from India, Buddhist depiction of these beings are completely androgynous in both their features and their character within artwork. In their book *Dunhuang Art: Through the Eyes of Duan Wenjie*, authors Wenjie Duan and Chung Tan state, “After entering Gaochang, the Indian Bodhisattvas lost their gender

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<sup>1</sup> Kurtis R. Schaeffer, *Himalayan Hermitess: The Life of a Tibetan Buddhist Nun* (New York: Oxford UP, 2004), 8.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

distinctions. The eight categories of supernatural beings present behind the Buddha also lacked distinctions of age and sex.”<sup>3</sup> This speaks to the notion that once one has attained enlightenment and become a Bodhisattva that person may, like the religion in general, completely transcend all that is physical and material, including gender.

This view of gender within Buddhism can even be found in the writings of Orgyan Chokyi herself. While it is clear that she longed to be reborn as a man, towards the end of her life enlightenment became a higher priority for her. The ending of her purification vow recitation strongly alludes to this, “By the merit obtained, Through preserving moral conduct, May all sentient beings, Quickly attain the state of the powerful Sage.”<sup>4</sup> This suggests that enlightenment is an event that can happen to any sentient being, regardless of physical aspects such as gender. This anti-materialistic view is also defined by Orgyan Chokyi's master, Orgyan Tenzin, when he instructs her on how to properly meditate: “If you understand the mind, you are a Buddha. Do not look elsewhere for Buddha. You must meditate correctly on consciousness.”<sup>5</sup> This teaching helps to further illustrate the irrelevance of the physical within Buddhist thought, and solidifies the idea that physical and mental gender are completely unnecessary factors in the search for true enlightenment.

In understanding the anti-materialistic nature of Buddhism, one may wonder why Orgyan Chokyi displays such a strong drive to be reborn as a male and expresses such hatred for her current gender and station in life. The fact is, people are material simply by being born. The material form cannot be denied, though Buddhists through their practices seek to rid themselves of attachment to it. Buddhism also teaches that those who have not reached enlightenment still suffer from attachment. As faithful as she was, Orgyan Chokyi still submitted to this attachment in her strong desire to be reborn as

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<sup>3</sup> Wenje Duan and Chung Tan. *Dunhuang Art: Through the Eyes of Duan Wenjie*. (Abhinav Publications, New Delhi, 1994), 223.

<sup>4</sup> Schaeffer, Kurtis R., *Himalayan Hermitess*, 177.

<sup>5</sup> Schaeffer, Kurtis R., *Himalayan Hermitess*, 148.

a man. It is also certainly accurate to consider in the socially constructed aspects of Buddhist teaching, the female body is regarded as a vessel of samsara, and thus a wish to not be a vessel of samsara would only seem natural. There is also a tantric aspect to this; indulgence can be used to cure attachment.

Orgyan Chokyi's reoccurring wish to be reborn as a male could be considered a form of tantric thinking, and perhaps, through this, she could better rid herself of the desire to be a man. Further still, one can look back to the concept of provisional existence. Khedrup writes that life by its very nature is an impermanent construct and will not be the same thing hundreds of thousands of years in the future. Orgyan Chokyi does seem to borrow a bit of this thinking when she again expresses herself in verse, "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."<sup>6</sup> Orgyan Chokyi clearly seems upset by the impermanent nature of life during this verse and she seems to support the notion of the female body being a vehicle for samsara. She goes on to state, "When acts of desire are committed, suffering must follow. When I see the mare suffering, melancholia flares. Behold us with mercy, Lord of Compassion. Let me not be born a woman in all lives to come. When I ponder the suffering of beings, melancholia flares."<sup>7</sup> Orgyan Chokyi believes strongly in the teachings of provisional existence, and the role that the female plays within this concept.

It seems that Orgyan Chokyi's wish to be male ventures beyond the fundamental teachings and concepts of Buddhism. This is especially noticeable in her intense, almost constant hatred of her gender. She relates her mental state to the idea of the mare, "May I not be born again in a female body. May the mare not be born as a mare. The steed follows yet another mare. When I see the shamelessness

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<sup>6</sup> Schaeffer, Kurtis R., *Himalayan Hermitess*, 100.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

of men, [I think:] May I be born in a body that will sustain the precepts.”<sup>8</sup> Not only does this passage illustrate her hatred of being a woman, but it also illustrates her general criticisms of men. Her writings establish that her gender identity obviously does not coincide with her physical form. It would seem that Orgyan Chokyi is in some form transgendered; the gender identity in her mind is male with some reservations as evidenced by her mistrust of the typical male. This conclusion is further supported by her gradual transformation over her life according to her biography, in which she is seen as holding constant disdain for her suffering, especially suffering perceived to be brought about by her gender when she is young. Her later religious experiences run parallel to these thoughts taking a lower priority in her mind than seeking enlightenment, or so the literal interpretation of the text would lead the reader to believe. When considered on a deeper level, this fading of her disdain could be characteristic of a peace growing within her mind, an acceptance of her state as a transgendered individual and the realization that, just like “seeking the Buddha” as her master Orgyan Tenzin taught, her true gender identity lies within her mind and spirit rather than elsewhere.

One can further look to her final stage of life and her becoming a hermitess for insight into Orgyan Chokyi's identity. The entire concept of isolation could easily be interpreted as a passive rejection of her society. Though isolation was by no means unheard of in her time, Orgyan Chokyi's self-imposed exile seems to be a pivotal point in her life. By detaching herself in this way, her inner peace could further grow, leaving room for her continued quest for true enlightenment. She writes of this isolation, “Now, in this rocky cave of mine I am unbothered by snow and rain. I do not hear the noisy sounds of birds and bees. This rocky cave of mine is not lit up by the kitchen fire. There is no rock like this one in the meditation cells of Tadru.”<sup>9</sup> This passage supports the idea that her isolation

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<sup>8</sup> Schaeffer, Kurtis R., *Himalayan Hermitess*, 142.

<sup>9</sup> Schaeffer, Kurtis R., *Himalayan Hermitess*, 171.

brings her a great deal of peace, and of particular note is the phrase “not lit up by the kitchen fire.” Earlier in her life, one of her last chores when she was younger was to tend the kitchen. Social constructs dictated that kitchen work was considered a feminine thing, as evidenced by Orgyan Tenzin's response to her complaints, “‘You are wrong to be unhappy at the kitchen,’ he replied. ‘Men are just right for the field, Women are just right for the kitchen.’”<sup>10</sup> In Orgyan Chokyi's isolation, not only do we see a developing inner peace, but we also see a rejection of feminine things, further solidifying the idea that her gender identity did not match the positions in life that she had to suffer through during her formative years. Her isolation may very well have been a way of rejecting her feminine past and expressing her inner masculinity.

Orgyan Chokyi's life story is a situation of a woman in body whose mind has a different concept of gender identity. However, the most striking thing about this is that her case is not unique in the larger scheme of Tibetan Buddhism. Schaeffer writes on the subject of the desire to be reborn as a man, “This is not an unusual request among Buddhist nuns in the Himalayas. Even nuns living at Bigu Nunnery in Nepal during the 1970s expressed such a wish.”<sup>11</sup> This establishes the fact that not only are these sentiments found in other women, but also that they are not limited to Orgyan Chokyi's period in time. This is interesting in the sense that Tibetan Buddhism is a very accommodating religion, with core principles far beyond gender and gender identity. While other religions such as the Judeo-Christian faiths may emphasize the human body and the material and regard them as sacred, Buddhism's focus on the mind creates a haven for those with questions regarding the self and the nature of gender. This focus can foster and even promote a transformative process within the mind in which the true identity of their being is revealed to the practitioner. While the general understanding of the

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<sup>10</sup> Schaeffer, Kurtis R., *Himalayan Hermitess*, 160.

<sup>11</sup> Schaeffer, Kurtis R., *Himalayan Hermitess*, 100.

desire to be born a male is to avoid being the embodiment of samsara, perhaps the true meaning of this phenomenon is one that stems from a far greater understanding of the ego that following the teachings of Buddhism can potentially unlock.

Orgyan Chokyi's life, from its humble beginning to its pious end, paints a vivid portrait of a woman who struggled with her gender identity and the meaning of the self. Through her autobiographical work we are led through a tale of great suffering, spiritual insight, and new concepts related to gender identity not only in the individual Buddhist but in the Tibetan Buddhist religion as a whole. Schaeffer's writing implies that Orgyan Chokyi's continual wishing to be reborn through samsara as a male stems solely from the socially constructed gender roles of her time, but the careful reader is able to piece together a story of what may be one of history's earliest documented cases of a transgendered individual. Furthermore, Tibetan Buddhism as a whole conveys the idea of a religion that, by virtue of being focused on the mind and the spirit rather than the body and the material, lends itself to being extremely accommodating to men, women, those who are questioning and those who are in between. The spiritual and meditative focus found in Tibetan Buddhism has great potential to provide a path to inner peace for those following its teachings, as shown by Orgyan Chokyi's journey from a Buddhist practitioner to an isolated hermitess, claiming solitude as her home and focusing inward in order to achieve a greater understanding of her being. It is also important to remember the fact that Orgyan Chokyi's case is not unique within the scope of Tibetan Buddhism, nor is it specific to the time period in which she lived. This incites us to further investigate the phenomenon of the desire within Buddhist women to be born again as men. Could this be evidence for a largely overlooked aspect of the religion, in that it provides the solace and avenue necessary for one to explore the depths of their mind and inner being in order to discover the truth about their own gender and identity? Does Tibetan Buddhism have the potential to serve as a conduit for any of its adherents to fully realize and express their true selves? In closely examining the life story of Orgyan Chokyi and Kurtis Schaeffer's

commentary and examination of her writings, this religion clearly has an understated power to move its members in such a way that not only is enlightenment possible, but a true definition of one's ego, gender and otherwise, can be obtained simply by following its teachings.