

One Desires You, One Cries: A Taxonomy of Female Disciples in Great Perfection (*rdzogs chen*)

Kali Nyima Cape

(Georgia State University)

This article will explore what an important Tibetan Great Perfection (*rdzogs chen*) scripture states about female adepts in the 14th century. It begins with a translation of an excerpt from *The Seminal Heart of the Dākinīs* (*Mkha' 'gro snying thig*), a scripture entitled *The Prophecy of the Lineage Holder's Disciples* (*Brgyud 'dzin gyi slob bu'i lung bstan*). Its implications for women and consorts are unpacked through an analysis of a consort taxonomy, and the taxonomy of female disciples described here. The final section examines what is gleaned about women in post-tantra from this text. This includes the exploration of women's liberation, attention to women's bodies, and female disciple's sexual relationships. It concludes by analyzing the striking assertion of redemption as a possibility for all the female disciples, including those with negative characteristics, a direct contradiction to the rule of the consort taxonomy elsewhere in the scripture which designates such women as those to be renounced.

1. Introduction

Amidst the rising influence of all-male monastic learning centers, female adepts practiced in Great Perfections communities that centered religious sexuality. Significant questions loom as to how the literature of these post-tantric communities differed from or overlapped with normative tantric formulations of women's roles. Germano has argued that classical Great Perfection represented novel post-tantric reinterpretations of key elements of Buddhist philosophy and praxis, producing an extensive body of literary masterpieces that constituted an indigenous Tibetan reinvention of Buddhist tantra. Thus, Great Perfection can be considered post-tantric because of its sustained critique of mainstream tantric literature, its redefining of

tantric discourses and praxis, and its effort to distinguish itself from tantra.¹ However, how these innovations extended to topics of women and sexuality is a question yet to be answered. In particular, the historical development of the paradigms governing women and consorts in classical Great Perfection literature has remained largely unstudied, leaving a gap in understanding of how the most influential post-tantric movement in Tibet factors in the history of Buddhist women. This research addresses a piece of that missing history by analyzing scriptures of pivotal importance to Tibetan Great Perfection, known as *The Seminal Heart of the Dākinī* one of the major 14th century texts that shaped the *Seminal Heart* (*snying thig*) genre, the genre that came to define Great Perfection in Tibet.

The present discussion draws inspiration from the three other works addressing women in Great Perfection, without which this research would be impossible. Each of these works addresses questions of women, gender, and identity in Great Perfection, *Seminal Heart* literature. Those works include Germano and Gyatso's study of Longchenpa's (Klong chen pa, 1308–1363) encounter with a female disciple.² Likewise, Gyatso and Klein addressed topics concerning women in later pre-modern Great Perfection texts.³ The discussion here will focus particularly on female disciples in the classical period, the pivotal era of *Seminal Heart* literature in the fourteenth century, investigating a key text in the corpus known as *The Seminal Heart of the Dākinī*.

2. A Historical Context for Post-Tantric Praxis

The Seminal Heart of the Dākinī emerged at the turn of the 14th century in Tibet, a period of the formation of Tibetan canons⁴ and the rise of large-scale monasticism.⁵ Tibetan monasteries in the premodern period would become a ruling elite that dominated large sections of the population through exerting influence over economics as well as religious, political, and cultural affairs. Eventually monasteries came to house anywhere from ten to twenty-five percent of the Tibetan male population.⁶ However, monasteries were not the only focal point of religious life in this era. Hermitages (*ri khrod*), religious encampments

¹ Germano 1994: 205, 207.

² Germano and Gyatso: 2000.

³ Gyatso 1998; Klein 1995.

⁴ A major compilation of the Tibetan canon in the 14th century was by Tibetan historian, Buton Rinchen Drup (1290–1364). See: Schaeffer 2004: 265-281.

⁵ Davidson 2005: 84-85.

⁶ Jansen 2018: 10.

One Desires You, One Cries

(*chos sgar*), and nomadic religious groups organized around a charismatic leader existed as some of the alternative religious societies beyond institutions. One form of ideal religious community that was the focus of Great Perfection literature was communities of non-celibate male and female adepts, for whom religious sexuality was a central concern.⁷ This was facilitated in part due to tantric and post-tantric movements in Tibet. Tibetans had imported the full gamut of teachings from Buddhist India, but many regarded esoteric lineages, known as tantra, as the highest form of teachings. Therefore, even though the 14th century saw the consolidation of monastic authority within large male-only centers of religious learning, there were still communities that involved women. In this period, these groups were under pressure to legitimize themselves and justify their reasons for their praxis. The central figures of these communities did not have vows of celibacy, but instead sought to embody the alternative ideal of the yogi or tantric adept (*rnal 'byor pa, sngags pa*). Their meditation practices included sacramental sexuality,⁸ sexual yogas,⁹ and symbolic imagery of male and female buddhas embracing one another. Due to these interests, the writers of the literature analyzed here were earnestly theorizing about women, relationships, and how to relate to women as potential consorts for the purposes of sacramental sexuality, sexual yoga, and companionship.

3. The Source Text

The text presented here is an excerpt from *The Seminal Heart of the Dākinī*, a scriptural revelation produced in 1313¹⁰ by Pema Ledreltsal (Padma las 'brel rtsal, 1291–1315/17¹¹) shortly before his death.¹² Following typical Tibetan scriptural revelation conventions, this cycle, *The Seminal Heart of the Dākinī*, is attributed to a constellation of authors. This includes a male adept, Pema Ledreltsal, as the revealer. It also includes the previously mentioned influential scholar yogi, Longchenpa. Additionally, authors included students of the Third Karmapa, Rangjung Dorje (Rang 'byung rdo rje, 1284–1339),¹³ and his

⁷ The literature studied here presents sexual dimorphism and portrays human life as heteronormative from the human to cosmological domain.

⁸ Sacramental sexuality refers to rituals involving sexual intercourse, both visualized and embodied.

⁹ Sexual yoga refers to contemplative exercises involving intercourse that is either visualized or visualized and embodied.

¹⁰ Germano 1994: 270.

¹¹ Germano and Gyatso 2000: 244.

¹² *Ibid.*: 245.

¹³ *Ibid.*: 248.

disciples. They each added to the cycle either directly or through commentarial literature and redactions. Little is known about the history of the cycle's redactions over time, including between its first iteration by Pema Ledreltsal and the form used by Longchenpa. The corpus was adopted by Longchenpa in his thirties and he came to identify himself as the reincarnation of its revealer. At some point, the scripture came to be primarily transmitted as part of *The Four-Part Seminal Heart* (*Snying thig ya bzhi*) which consists of *The Seminal Heart of the Dākinī* and earlier works, *Seminal Heart of Vimalamitra*, along with Longchenpa's own three commentarial extensions.

The Seminal Heart of the Dākinī in the Adzom drukpa chögar (*A 'dzom 'brug pa chos sgar*) woodblock edition is a double-sided, five hundred and nineteen folio corpus, in two volumes with one hundred and twenty-six different texts in verse and prose.¹⁴ This article also relies on the Peltseg edition (*dpal brtsegs*), which is almost identical.¹⁵ The corpus primarily includes philosophical, ritual, and contemplative literature. Today, this scripture remains an important and authoritative text for the Nyingma tradition and its contemplative cycles are drawn upon in some of its largest Tibetan Buddhist monasteries.¹⁶ The presence of female figures pervades the entire corpus. Indeed, *The Seminal Heart of the Dākinī* tells the story of a scripture that is in transition to a patriarchal lineal succession even though it had previously centered itself, narratively speaking, on hagiographies of two famed female disciples of the past. These two female figures are Yeshe Tsogyal (*Ye shes mtsho rgyal*, 8th century), and Princess Pemasel (*Lha lcam padma gsal*, 8th century), daughter of Tibetan King Trisong Detsen (*Khri srong lde btsan*, 8th century). They are the first two people the scripture is taught to. Women are also represented in the text through its pervasive tantric couple (*yab yum*) imagery as well as through the presence of Yeshe Tsogyal, as the primary interlocutor, the scribe who records lectures and dialogues with Padmasambhava, and is his primary consort in hagiographies. The scripture also contains references to women within instructions for consort praxis. Consequently, the question that looms over this manuscript is what were the actual lived realities of women who engaged with these scriptures? This is a question that is impossible to answer based on extant sources, a persistent problem in the study of women in this period. Thus, it is necessary to consider what little historical evidence is extant, namely the types of claims that were made about women, to investigate human women's realities as

¹⁴ Dri med 'od zer 1975: 441-446.

¹⁵ Dri med 'od zer 2009: vol. 5-6, 169-172.

¹⁶ Such as Namdroling, in India, which relies on this 'scripture for the "gomdra" (*sgom grwa*) or three year meditation retreat.

portrayed by the scriptures, and what types of literary techniques were used to facilitate and rationalize women's inclusion. In doing so, this investigation focuses upon the discursive landscape within which women would have negotiated their lives.

A scripture within *The Seminal Heart of the Ḍākinī* features particularly revealing descriptions of female disciples and consorts of the treasure revealer, Pema Ledreltsal. This scripture is called *The Prophecy of the Lineage Holder's Disciples*. It offers a glimpse at what the roles of women in the non-celibate, female inclusive Great Perfection *Seminal Heart* communities would entail and the role of taxonomic knowledge in these portrayals. The scripture is composed of a taxonomy that describes the twenty-one disciples of Pema Ledreltsal, the treasure revealer of *The Seminal Heart of the Ḍākinī*. Although it is framed as a prophecy given from Padmasambhava to Ledreltsal in his past life, the actual writer of the scripture is impossible to know. It could have been Ledreltsal himself, as the text asserts, or because of its references to female disciples that would be reborn as disciples in the next lifetime, it is also plausible to consider it may be an addition by Longchenpa and his disciples after the life of Ledreltsal. In that case it may be read as rationalizing the past life histories of the women in Longchenpa's circles. Both these readings lend themselves to classifying this taxonomy as applied taxonomy used to make sense of people the author had encountered, rather than generic types. However, it is also feasible to consider that the scripture could have been added much later, with or without the same functions, despite its claim to be Ledreltsal's revelation.

The Prophecy of the Lineage Holder's Disciples presents one of the major taxonomies in the *Seminal Heart of the Ḍākinī*, the other major one being in *Ḍākki's Path and Fruit*, (*Dā kki lam 'bras kyi skor*) a taxonomy of possible consorts, which I have already analyzed in another article.¹⁷ *The Prophecy of the Lineage Holder's Disciples* is a brief text, less than three folios. In terms of its size in context, it is a short scripture in a corpus filled with many short scriptures. Among *The Seminal Heart of the Ḍākinī's* texts, only a few scriptures are larger, running around thirty folios in length or more. However, the corpus has many more very short scriptures like the one examined here. Indeed, approximately half of its scriptures are five folios or less. *The Prophecy of the Lineage Holder's Disciples* is one of these brief scriptures, but it serves as a rich source of information because of its detailed description of female Great Perfection adepts, providing a window into the world of non-celibate religious culture.

¹⁷ Cape 2020.

4. Methodology

Taxonomy is a favored Buddhist information technology. It appears in a range of forms, from Abhidharma literature that classified factors of reality to taxonomies of beautiful and terrifying female consorts appearing throughout tantric literature.¹⁸ In general, taxonomy is a discursive framework used to organize knowledge into simple, accessible structures. It is a tool and method of interpreting, classifying, and filtering information. Because it is different from a list with classifications of types of information, it allows a person to interpret the information, make sense of it and identify types. The classifications allow the user of taxonomy to determine what the relationships are between different types and to make decisions based on this information. There are different types of folk taxonomies, but the type of interest here is *applied taxonomy*, which does not seek to describe all possible classifications in an encompassing way, but instead seeks to address specific examples in terms of the pre-existing framework. Applied taxonomy does not adhere to a strict basis, even though it partakes of preordained categories. However, it varies on a rule-by-rule basis, refining, expanding, and pruning taxonomic sets and classifications based on what is being examined.

This research draws on theories of applied taxonomy to propose that the taxonomy of female disciples represents applied taxonomy, an inductive framework. As such it demonstrates how this taxonomy of disciples negotiates between consort taxonomies from tantric literature and a social world full of human women. I argue that this taxonomy can be regarded as a valuable archive of knowledge practices, revealing data about the social world of the text, discursive practices, and ways of understanding persons. Particularly it reveals how women were theorized in the non-celibate milieu. I also argue that taxonomies are not only ways of organizing influential and important knowledge, taxonomies of women also function almost clandestinely to exclude possibilities. Therefore, they shape what types of female roles are fostered and what types are denied. For example, one illustration of this principle is in the typology of women described in contemporary defenses against allegations of abuse of women in Buddhism. Certain religious leaders have recently responded to abuse allegations by stating they are clearly false because, as is well known, there are women who are trying to discredit a Tibetan leader, those who are mentally unstable, and those who simply don't like the teacher,¹⁹ those who are gold-diggers or who

¹⁸ Cape 2020: 354.

¹⁹ Orgyen Tobgyal Rinpoche 2020.

One Desires You, One Cries

have been paid to make false allegations. This is taxonomy at work, being utilized to make sense of current events, by offering accessible lists of culturally legible categories of possible women. What does it imply when, in these possible explanations, that the compendium of possible types of women is full of categories of women who are lying and omits categories of women whose allegations are true? As this example illustrates, taxonomies of persons matter. They are information retrieval systems that reflect and perpetuate biases and as shown in this illustration, they can make some persons seem credible while discrediting others. Therefore, taxonomies are not just summaries of information, nor are they mere descriptions. They are an inductive framework that allows the user to make systematic inferences about what is likely to be.²⁰ *The Prophecy of the Lineage Holder's Disciples* functions in this way, an inductive framework that in this case advocates that advanced Great Perfection adepts may be female and if so, they are also potential consorts who could rapidly attain buddhahood.

This analysis of *The Prophecy of the Lineage Holder's Disciples* will demonstrate that taxonomies were mutating discourses and that the curious, sometimes seemingly bizarre taxonomies of divine and demonic consorts in tantric literature were potentially applied as ways of managing knowledge about living persons. They were instruments used to earnestly make sense of people and relationships. This is a general property of taxonomy, taxonomies succeed when they are being applied.²¹ Perhaps this explains why taxonomies of consorts have been so persistent across tantric literature. In that sense, this article contributes to missing histories of women in Buddhism, in Great Perfection and Tibet. Yet, it also contributes to histories of Tibetan information science and knowledge production praxis. The project of the current essay is to analyze elements of how a particular taxonomy represents women, as evidence of how discourses about women acquired authority but were also negotiated with and transformed.

5. The Taxonomy of Female Disciples

The following is the taxonomy of female disciples, an excerpt from *The Prophecy of the Lineage Holder's Disciples*. It excludes the section about men and one disciple whose sex is unclear. *The Prophecy of the Lineage Holder's Disciples* says:

²⁰ Atran 1998: 548.

²¹ Flett and Vernau 2011: 226-235.

Hey, you, the one with intelligence and compassion! After you have opened the door to my treasures up until you pass away, there will be twenty-one disciples of various types. There will be fourteen males. There will be seven female *Ḍākki* types who will be physical connections²² or dharma connections.

First, one type will come who has a good birth, has great faith, knows a little virtue, is devoted to Mahayana, has great knowledge, sharp intellect, with a large family, is selfish, does not get along with others, and who will be criticized by all. That type is a Karma *Ḍākki*, thus, the condition to receive blessings will be a medium lifespan. She will apply the key points of instruction. She will be liberated in the first bardo....

...One type will come who has a slender body, hot presentation, is attractive, has a red body, has steady faith, and stable mind. This type moreover, is the kind which is a Lotus *Ḍākki*. She will have a long life. In this life she will become a buddha without remainder.

One type has great desire, is short-tempered, has little wisdom, has a blue body, a medium body. That one is the type that is a Karma *Ḍākki*. Thus, since she is attracted to you, she will engage in sex [with you]. She will bestow the meditative stability of bliss emptiness [through sexual practice]. That one is not a relationship of the profound key points.²³ If she has two rebirths, then after becoming your disciple she will become a buddha. She will have an average lifespan.

One type has a steady mind, is devoted to dharma, has great compassion. Furthermore, because that is a relationship with the profound key points, she will become a buddha. This is a Secondary Lotus type.

²² *lus kyi 'brel pa*, bodily connections refer to sexual connections including a long-term relationship such as a spouse or short-term sexual relationship.

²³ This is a repeated attribute in the taxonomy. Based on the *a 'dzom* edition, it could also be read as "Although it is a connection of the profound key points," (*zab mo gnad kyi 'brel mod*)... However, the translation above followed the Peltseg which has it as, "...it is not a relationship of the profound key points," (*zab mo gnad kyi 'brel med*), which is more likely because she requires two more lifetimes before attaining buddhahood.

One Desires You, One Cries

One type is not devoted to dharma, is very happy, has a big body, is beautiful, her mind strays wildly, and has a pleasant voice. Due to a previous relationship [with you], there is reverence and humility. Since she seizes an ordinary form, she will engage in sex, open the doors of the channels, and grant the common accomplishments. This is the secondary Vajra type, however, there is no dharma connection, just a physical connection. Give teachings to her in the next life. Having performed as the activity seal consort,²⁴ she will attain buddhahood.

One type has great faith, she has yellow skin and is beautiful. She does not speak much, has a steady mind, works hard, and her body is short and wide. She also is devoted to you and that is a physical connection. Merit will increase. That type moreover, is the Jewel type. Her lifespan will be long.

One is talkative, has black skin, is very busy, has a busy mind, and says, "I did great things!" She stays in harsh places, has an intellect that bends,²⁵ cries a lot, has short breath, is short-tempered, and weak-minded.

Should it be that you die before completing all these relationships, they will certainly become students in the next life. However, if you remain alive, in this life they will be your disciples.²⁶

²⁴ Skt. *karmamudrā*, Tib. *las kyi phyag rgya*.

²⁵ This is rendered as *lteb*, to bend or fold instead of *steb*, whose meaning is unknown.

²⁶ *e ma shes rab snying rje can/ khyod nyid nga yi gter sgo phye nas tshe'i dus ma byas kyi bar du bryud 'dzin gyi slob bu rigs mi 'dra ba bdun gsum 'byung ste/ skyes pa'i slob bu bcu bzhi 'byung / bud med DAK+ki'i rigs chos sam lus kyi 'brel pa bdun 'byung ste/ dang po rigs gcig ni/ skye ba bzang ba/ dad pa che ba/ yon tan en re shes pa/ theg pa chen po la mos pa/ shes rab che ba/ blo srab pa/ tsha rus che ba/ rang 'dod che/ gzhan yang blo mi mthun pa/ kun gyis gshe ba zhi'ong / de karma DAK+ki'i rigs te/ de la byin rlabs 'jug rkyen tshe lo 'bring thub/ gdams pa gnad du tshud/ bar do dang por grol lo/ [....] bud med kyi slob ma bdun ni/ dang po rigs gcig ni/ lus phra/ rnam gzhas tsha/ yid du 'ong / lus dmar/ dad pa mi 'gyur/ blo brtan pa cig 'ong ste/ rigs kyang pad+ma DAK+ki'i rigs/ tshe ring skye ba 'di la lhag med du 'tshang rgya'o/ gcig ni chags pa che/ spro thung / shes rab chung / lus sngo/ gzugs 'bring / de ni las kyi DAK+ki'i rigs te/ khyed la sems pas chags pa spyod/ bde stong gi ting 'dzin ster bar byed/ zab mo gnad kyi 'brel med de/ skye ba gnyis na khyod kyi gdul byar gyur nas 'tshang rgya'o/ tshe 'bring thub/ gcig ni blo brtan chos la mos/ snying rje che/ de yang zab mo gnad kyis 'brel nas 'tshang rgya'o/ tshe yang ring / pad+ma shugs 'gro'i rigs so/ gcig ni/ chos la mi mos bde ba che/ lus rgyas/ bzhin sdug/ blo sho rgod/ skad snyan/ de ni sngon gyi 'brel pas gus shing 'dud/ gzugs tha mal 'dzin te/ chags pa spyod/ rtsa sgo 'byed/ thun mong gi sid+d+hi ster/ rdo rje shugs 'gro'i rigs te lus kyi 'brel pa las/ chos kyi 'brel pa med/ skye ba phyi ma la sprod/ las rgya byas te 'tshang*

6. *The Structure*

The taxonomy in *Prophecy of the Lineage Holder's Disciples* is made up of one hundred and seventy-six descriptors. Each description offers a range from three to eleven different characteristics, followed by their lifespan and remarks about whether they will realize liberation and if so, when. Some of the disciple types are also described in terms of their relationship with the teacher as will be discussed below. Although they are flexible structures, applied taxonomies include a pre-ordained set of categories, and such common consort classifications do indeed occur in *The Prophecy of the Lineage Holder's Disciples*, such as: karma type, lotus type, and jewel type of disciples.²⁷ However, six of the eleven male figures in this taxonomy do not have a classification. Likewise, one of the female ones lacks a classification as well. These unnamed types are called, 'one type,' (*gcig ni*) and are structured exactly like the general pattern of the taxonomy.

In *The Prophecy of the Lineage Holder's Disciples*, the taxonomy diverges from the common framework of consort taxonomies in tantric literature as lists of divine and demonic women, those to renounce and adopt. Nor is it presented as a universal taxonomy such as its related text from the same corpus, *The Dākki's Path and Fruit*, which focuses on general, universal categories.²⁸ It also diverges from the descriptions of these classifications of consorts that are described elsewhere in the corpus and in other related tantric literature. Instead, this taxonomy presents nuanced figures who partake of some beneficial and some neutral or negative categories while maintaining their classification as ideal disciples who progress towards liberation. For this reason, this taxonomy is classified as applied taxonomy, since it appears to be deployed to discuss actual persons, rather than theoretical, abstract ideas about general types of consorts among the variety of possible women as it would in the universal taxonomies that appear elsewhere in the corpus. As such, it serves as an example that consort taxonomies are not just literary devices or repetitions of the rhetoric of previous tantric literature, though they surely served in those ways as well, but

rgya'ol/ gcig ni dad pa che/ sha mdog ser la yid du 'ong / kha nyung / blo brtan/ bya ba 'ol che/ lus thung la rgyas/ des kyang khyed la dad cing lus 'brel byed do/ bsod nams spell/ /rigs kyang rin chen rigs/ tshe ring ngo / gcig ni/ kha mang / mdog nag/ rtsab rtsub mang / blo rgod/ ngas byas che/ 'gro sa drag/ blo steb/ ngu dad che/ dbugs thung / spro thung / snying chung ngo / gal te 'brel pa rnams ma rdzogs par 'da' mi srid de/ skye ba phyi ma'i gdul byar 'ong nges so/ khyod tshad du bzhugs na tshe 'di nyid kyi gdul bya yin no/ a+thi+i brgyud 'dzin slob bu'i lung bstan ni/ tshe sgrub 'od phreng gi gter kha nas byung ba yin no/ Dri med 'od zer 2009: vol. 6, 169-172.

²⁷ For an overview of typical classifications of tantric consort taxonomies see Cape 2020: 356-357.

²⁸ Cape 2020: 362.

One Desires You, One Cries

also functioned as living information systems applied in interpersonal settings to interpret human beings. This is evidenced by the application of preset categories such as jewel, lotus, karma but the addition of new categories and inclusion of disciples without categories alongside them. If this taxonomy was indeed applied to human women as it purports to be, then it also suggests consort taxonomies were functioning influentially to shape views about women, interpreting them according to categories, but also revising those categories based on observations. It also suggests that the treasure revealer may have posited those views authoritatively in the charged environment of the teacher-disciple, teacher-consort relationships. Thus, *Prophecy of the Lineage Holder's Disciples* is regarded as an example of applied taxonomy, an attempt to manage knowledge, to make sense of sets and differences using taxonomic reference points for pragmatic purposes. This scripture therefore reflects complicated hermeneutic praxis, a religious person making sense of other persons through the lenses made available to him, by earnestly applying the instruments of knowledge available to him.

7. Enlightenment in Female Bodies

The female disciples are comparable to the male disciples in the taxonomy. It is notable that the male and female disciples all share characteristics, are considered by the same categories, and are given comparable descriptors. The names of their classification such as Jewel Hero (*ratna dpa' bo*) are provided, followed by various descriptors. Three male disciples and three female disciples are said to attain liberation within one lifetime, the highest possible attainment in the taxonomy.

The predictions (*lung bstan*) that the women receive in the *Prophecy of the Lineage Holder's Disciples* have a pertinent history and context. Even in early Buddhist literature, in the *Therīgāthā*, there have been narratives of women's liberation. However, early Buddhist literature also evidenced the position that one could not become a buddha until they first received a prediction from a buddha, but such a prediction was something that only male monastics could receive.²⁹ To overcome this issue, women in narratives changed sex. Or as in the case of the *Sotaṭṭhakhī*, the literature found creative ways around the issue when the buddha did not give a prediction to a woman, but instead predicted that she would get a prediction later once she was a man. Women in *Mahāyāna* texts also changed sex to demonstrate their

²⁹ Derris 2008: 29–44.

capacity and the ontological emptiness of sex difference. This happens through magical means in *The Saddharmapundarikā Sūtra*, when the dragon princess first turns into a male. Likewise, a goddess in the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra* turns into a man, to demonstrate to the Buddha's disciples that women can achieve the same soteriological levels as men, not limited by sexed bodies which are ultimately empty. These are stories of women breaking spiritual barriers, but to prove their equality, become a buddha, and make their point, they must first change into a male form. Therefore, it is meaningful that women in *Prophecy of the Lineage Holder's Disciples* receive a prediction that they will attain enlightenment as women, *while they are in female bodies*.

The attainments of these women are described in various terms. The terms for liberation and to become a buddha are used throughout the scripture. Liberation refers to liberation from samsara, the cycle of suffering and ignorance that Buddhism seeks to end. However, more specifically, the women's attainments in *Prophecy of the Lineage Holder's Disciples* are described in the following terms. The Karma *Ḍākkī* type is predicted to be liberated in the first phase of post-death (*bar do dang por grol lo*), using the term *grol ba*, liberation, to be freed or released. The Lotus *Ḍākkī* is predicted to 'become a buddha without remainder' (*lhag med du 'tshang rgya'o*), referring to a final *nirvāṇa* in which there are no more rebirths, or no body left behind. The term *'tshang rgya ba* is a synonym for *sangs rgya ba*, to attain buddhahood, to become perfected or to become awakened. Four of the seven female disciples, the Action *Ḍākkī*, the Lotus *Ḍākkī*, the Young Lotus and the Young Vajra type are predicted to attain buddhahood using the same term (*'tshang rgya'o*). Both verbs for liberation (*grol ba*) and buddhahood (*'tshang rgya*) are used elsewhere by the larger corpus to discuss the results of the path, such as in *Six Tantras of Liberation by Wearing* (*btags grol gyi rgyud drug*), which promises that one will be liberated (*grol*) by reading the text, or even by merely seeing or hearing it one can become a buddha (*'tshang rgya*).³⁰ Soteriological inclusiveness is evidenced here in that these same terms for attainments are used for the male disciples as they are female disciples. Therefore, the women receive predictions of soteriological success that are not limited by sexual difference or gender.

The *Prophecy of the Lineage Holder's Disciples* is framed as direct advice to the lineage holder on how to regard his disciples including which ones should be abandoned. This is intimate advice, framed as if spoken from Padmasambhava to Ledreltsal directly in his past life as the Princess Pemasel, now recalled through the ventriloquy of treasure

³⁰ Dri med 'od zer 2009: vol. 5, 13.

One Desires You, One Cries

revelation.³¹ Thus, the scripture asserts that Pema Ledreltsal was told by Padmasambhava directly about who he should accept as disciples.

In a manner comparable to the male disciples, the female disciple's attainments and accomplishments span the full range. Four of the seven female disciples, the *Karma Dākkī*, *Lotus Dākkī*, Secondary Lotus, and Secondary Vajra type are liberated within that life. The Action *Dākkī* will be liberated after two lifetimes, reincarnating once again as the disciple of Ledreltsal in the future life to accomplish her enlightenment then. Two female disciples and one male disciple do not have a prediction of their enlightenment timing. However, none of the female disciples are specified as having to wait as long as fourteen lifetimes like a male disciple who is described as egotistical. Instead, in the case of the two female disciples, the women's descriptions link the consort praxis to their swift attainment. The secondary Vajra type will become enlightened because she has done sexual yoga with her teacher (*las rgya byas te 'tshang rgya'o*). The Secondary Lotus type likewise becomes enlightened because of the profound elements of connection of their relationship (*de yang zab mo gnad kyis 'brel nas 'tshang rgya'o*).

Prophecy of the Lineage Holder's Disciples offers an opportunity to examine an applied taxonomy which is different from a more generalized taxonomy that appears such as *Dākki's Path and Fruit*, the other important taxonomy scripture in the overarching corpus of *The Seminal Heart of the Dākinī*. Namely, *Prophecy of the Lineage Holder's Disciples'* taxonomy focuses much more on the mental dispositions and personality traits as the most frequent category of descriptions. In contrast, *Dākki's Path and Fruit* focuses its greatest attention on physical features.³²

However, the three disciples with the most physical and visceral descriptions are three female disciples, the Lotus *Dākki* type, who has a small, attractive, red, and hot body, the Young Vajra type who has a big, beautiful body, and pleasant voice, and the Jewel *Dākki* type who has a short, broad body, is beautiful, and has a yellow complexion. There are fifteen descriptions of the physical features of the female disciples. In contrast, there are only three physical descriptions of the fourteen male types, perhaps suggesting that the physical features of the female disciples were considered more significant since the male bodies are not attended to as frequently by the author.

³¹ Jacoby (2014) describes treasure revelation as ventriloquy, whereby the treasure revealer speaks through the voice of another.

³² See the discussion of physical features of ideal consorts in the other major taxonomy of this corpus discussed in Cape 2020: 349-372.

8. *Sexual Relationships and Female Consorts*

The taxonomy also serves as prophetic encouragement to establish sexual relationships with particular people. Such is the advice for an Action *Dākinī* disciple who will be attracted to Ledreltsel and due to that, she is one with whom Ledreltsel should enjoy sex (*khyed la sems pas chags pa spyod*). If this happens, the prophecy promises, then it will produce bliss-emptiness's meditative stability (*bde stong gi ting 'dzin ster bar byed*), a state of contemplative attainment. The female disciple's futures are thus entangled with their role as consorts.

The taxonomy sometimes discusses the qualities of the relationship between Ledreltsel and his disciples in non-sexual ways as well. For the male disciples this includes loyalty to Ledreltsel, regarding him with pure vision and accomplishing whatever instructions the lama gives. In the case of an evil male disciple, he throws away the teacher's advice, has malice towards the teacher and therefore, the taxonomy instructs, Ledreltsel should get rid of this disciple (*spang bar bya'o*). However, when the relationship between Ledreltsel and the female disciples is discussed, sexual relationships and their consequences appear as an additional element of classification, a classification assigned only to the female disciples even though all of the disciples may have participated in ritual sexual praxis that is described in the empowerments.

Indeed, its initial hierarchy of classifications, whether women are sexual partners or not is their defining distinction. Here, by naming these sexual partners as types, the scripture infers that female disciples will fit into some type of sexual partner for their teacher. Sexual partners are furthermore differentiated into physical connections, and dharma connections, the latter being the disciples who understand and embody the esoteric teachings espoused by the text. Furthermore, the taxonomy argues that certain female disciples, based on their prophesied status, are destined sexual partners. This sexual praxis is framed as beneficial and liberating both to themselves and the teacher.

In the taxonomy, the topic of the consort relationship appears eight times amongst the descriptors. This begins with the Action *Dākkī* type, who because she is attracted to Ledreltsel, the scripture says he should enjoy sex with her (*khyed la sems pas chags pa spyod*). This is especially since she will give him the meditative stabilization of bliss-emptiness (*bde stong gi ting 'dzin ster bar byed*). The Secondary Lotus Type will attain buddhahood through the relationship she has with him (*de yang zab mo gnad kyis 'brel nas 'tshang rgya'o*). The Young Vajra enjoys sex (*chags pa spyod*), bestows ordinary accomplishments, and she lacks any devotion to dharma. That is because, other than being a physical connection, she is not a spiritual connection (*lus kyī 'brel pa las/ chos kyī*

One Desires You, One Cries

'brel pa med). This is an interesting case in which one of the “twenty-one disciples,” is not otherwise interested in dharma, but is a sexual partner and therefore is listed as a disciple. What is more fascinating is that, despite the lack of devotion to dharma, she gains enlightenment through acting as *karmamudrā* (*las rgya byas te 'tshang rgya'o*). In other words, for her to gain enlightenment, no other relationship to Buddhist teachings or to the teacher is necessary than a sexual one. This is a powerful assertion of the practice of religious sexuality, that it could override fundamental requirements of the ideal disciple and ideal consort, such that just the intercourse itself is considered to hold the ultimate soteriological power.

This is a corpus that is steeped in sexual aesthetics and worldview centered on male-female divine couples, a worldview in which sexuality is viewed as liberating and beneficial. Therefore, these passages could also be read as a description of a faithful Buddhist describing his life in a sexually active community in positive terms. *Prophecy of the Lineage Holder's Disciples* is thus partaking of the overarching theme of *The Seminal Heart of the Dākinī*, which is to argue for and center non-celibate religious praxis and in this case, using taxonomy to do that. Since taxonomies are also used to describe male disciples and teachers in comparable ways, the issue of the degree of objectification present is difficult to assess. Within the overarching corpus however, despite exhaustive details about how to have sex, there is a conspicuous omission of treatment of the topic of sexual misconduct and sexual violence, narratives which are dissonant with the corpus's images of sexual bliss, equanimity and soteriological super-achievement, an issue that requires further attention. Nevertheless, the scripture takes a clear stance on physical violence in general including explicitly forbidding physical beatings, verbal abuse, disrespect, and disparagement of women.³³

The taxonomy itself leaves other questions unanswered, why did one female disciple cry a lot? Why did another not have faith in dharma? These descriptions imply judgements, so a possible reading is to consider the *Prophecy of the Lineage Holder's Disciples* as an example of how a treasure revelation is used to exert influence over persons in a community by attributing their qualities to a typology that implied how soon they would access buddhahood. In that case the scripture could be interpreted in terms of complex dynamics where faith, desire, respect, exploitation, and predation all may have overlapped at times, an issue worth noting, but one that is beyond the scope of this article.

³³ Dri med 'od zer 2009: vol. 5, 75-111.

9. *Redemption of Female Disciples*

There is a talkative type that is a classification perhaps inserted by Ledreltsal, if he is indeed the taxonomist, which is perhaps why this classification is not named. It is not a disciple placed into any pre-existing taxonomic category from the corpus's lists of types. Ledreltsal's unclassified talkative type of female disciple is notable as one who is described in only negative terms. She talks a lot, is nervous, agitated, brags, cries a lot, is short-tempered and has little courage. Yet despite these traits she is a disciple in this life or the next and she is not classified as an unsuitable consort even though she would have been considered unsuitable by the standards set in *Ḍākki's Path and Fruit*. Thus, unlike the *Ḍākki's Path and Fruit*, the taxonomy of Ledreltsal's disciples in the *Prophecy of the Lineage Holder's Disciples* is a more forgiving taxonomy. There is redemption for the disciples, where there is not for the demonic consorts of *Ḍākki's Path and Fruit*. For striking examples of the possibility of redemption in *Prophecy of the Lineage Holder's Disciples*, it is notable that even an evil type of male disciple is predicted to attain knowledge in the future and even the one who enjoys evil will have a little awakening in fourteen births. There is also a Karma *Ḍākki*, a female type, who doesn't get along with others, is criticized by all and is selfish, but she will still get liberated in the post-death state (*bar do*). The unclassified talkative type is in a class all her own bearing all negative traits, but she will still have a chance to be a disciple in a future life. Thus, *Prophecy of the Lineage Holder's Disciples* goes beyond the good/bad binaries of the consorts to adopt or renounce in consort taxonomies.³⁴ These discrepancies once again support my argument that these taxonomies are flexible and novel structures, with overarching categories that may share some characteristics but were also changed according to their applications.

There is greater detail and the binary of those to be renounced versus those consorts to be adopted is not cleanly observed, with a mixture of characteristics, good and bad taking place within one single type of person. These more complex portrayals of women in *Prophecy of the Lineage Holder's Disciples* reinforces the theory that this is about specific people written during the time of the treasure revealer or shortly thereafter, rather than an overview of general characteristics of people one might encounter. These women can be reformed and can even have negative characteristics while still making soteriological progress. This also alludes to the sense of redemption and transformation that was believed to be possible through the *Seminal Heart of the Ḍākinī's* praxis and Great Perfection in general.

³⁴ See Cape 2020: 365-356.

Concluding Thoughts and Corroborating Evidence

The community described by the corpus includes women who play a prominent role in the transmission of the scriptures, but it is impossible to know to what extent these hagiographies referred to actual historical figures. Overall, records about female adepts are sparse in the period of this study from the 13th to the 14th century.³⁵ However, it is clear that women had lower religious status in Tibet than men in this period as evidenced in numerous ways, including the scarcity of written historical evidence about or by women which is connected to a relative lack of religious education and opportunity.³⁶ The absence of women in the major roles of religious authority in what became the dominant institutions of Tibetan Buddhism that formed during this era is another signal of their lack of equal status. However, there are records depicting women as lineage holders and leaders,³⁷ a theme that *The Seminal Heart of the Dākini* is built upon.

For example, the 15th century *Blue Annals* is an important early source for Tibetan history. This source describes a female teacher of The Great Perfection, Jomo Mermo (Jo mo sman mo, 1248–1283), in the 12th century, who was said to have taught the Great Perfection system as taught in Kham, eastern Tibet.³⁸ She was the teacher of an important male teacher of the Zur clan of the Nyingma tradition. This source also describes a few female lineage holders of the Great Perfection. For example, in its chronology of the Mind Series of Great Perfection (*rdzogs chen sems sde*), it includes at least two female lineage holders, Jomo Zermo (also known as Jo mo sgre mo) and Zurmo Gendun Bum (Zur mo dge 'dun 'bum).³⁹ In the *Blue Annals*, in the expanse class of Great Perfection section (*klong sde*) another accomplished woman is mentioned as a disciple, Nulmo Gyal le cham (Dngul mo rgyal le lcam), who is listed as one who received Great Perfection teachings. This includes an unnamed nun disciple who received Great Perfection pith instructions (*man ngag sde*) with her as well.⁴⁰

One contemporaneous source to the *Seminal Heart* corpus is described in *The Blue Annals* depicting women's activity in tantric circles. That is entitled, *Answers to the Questions of the Twenty-Four*

³⁵ Martin 1996: 35.

³⁶ Martin 2005, 80.

³⁷ Martin 1996: 35.

³⁸ Go gos lo tsa ba gzhon nu dpal 1976: 128.

³⁹ Ibid.: 171. Zurmo Gendun Bum is a figure who warrants further investigation. Later in the modern period, there is also Dudjom Rinpoche's history of the Nyingma Sect, she is also mentioned as a lineage holder of *The Sutra which Gathers All Intentions*, with a short narrative that describes her as a tantric ritual master (*rdō rje slob dpon*). Dudjom Rinpoche 1991: 700.

⁴⁰ Go gos lo-tsa-ba gzhon-nu dpal 1949: 181.

Jomos; Together with their Stories. Parts of this text are attributed to the mid-13th century.⁴¹ These stories describe twenty-four disciples of the Indian yogi, Phadampa. It provides descriptions of a few women's exemplary religious accomplishments in short hagiographies describing the signs of their achievements, such as miraculous signs and relics left behind upon their death, as well as the veneration shown to them by their teacher. Three of these Jomos, Ma che (Ma gces), Barma ('Bar ma) and Rozanma (Ro zan ma) were also consorts or wives.⁴² This is important evidence to suggest that in this period female disciples and consorts were thought to have gained realization, a possibility repeatedly asserted by *The Seminal Heart of the Ḍākini*. Five of the Jomos are also explicitly described as leaving their households, husbands, brothers or children, to pursue realization independently. One female adept appears to have remained with her husband and children.⁴³ Additionally a female adept, Jemo (Rje mo) is described as living to the age of a hundred and one and having her own attendant, who was one of the other twenty-four Jomos.⁴⁴ Therefore, *Blue Annals* describes women of soteriological accomplishments parallel to male counterparts, including those women who were consorts. They are also depicted as occupying positions in their social networks similar to male adepts who would also leave families and partners, or remain with a spouse, teach, and have students and attendants.

Thus, both *The Seminal Heart of the Ḍākini* and the *Blue Annals* portray women as vital members of Great Perfection communities in this era. They unequivocally portray women who practiced in ways parallel to men. This evidence reinforces the plausibility that the female adepts described by the *Prophecy of the Lineage Holder's Disciples* could have existed as actual human women or at the very least were assumed to be credible descriptions that actual women could fulfill.

In conclusion, this article began by illustrating that taxonomy is an inductive framework, not merely a list or a description, but instead an instrument to organize information about persons according to biases and pre-existing categories. Reading *The Prophecy of the Lineage Holder's Disciples* in this light presents a scripture that argues for women as capable of attaining buddhahood in this life. It also simultaneously ties their liberation to their role as consorts, which the taxonomy implicitly argues, can lead them to liberation even if they are not otherwise devoted to dharma. The taxonomy portrays a community where religious sexuality is venerated, consistent with an overarching corpus that invests sexual relationships with ultimate ontological meaning,

⁴¹ Go gos lo-tsa-ba gzhon-nu dpal 1976: 915-920.

⁴² Go gos lo-tsa-ba gzhon-nu dpal 1976: 916, 917, 919.

⁴³ Ibid.: 920.

⁴⁴ Ibid.: 916.

mimetically connected to the buddha couples (*yab yum*) that signify the nature of reality. The female disciples in *The Prophecy of the Lineage Holder's Disciples* are described as participating in these ideals, albeit as flawed, complex characters who unevenly fill in the architecture of ideal types supplied by the consort taxonomies they were measured by.

Bibliography

- Atran, S. 1998. "Folk Biology and the Anthropology of Science: Cognitive Universals and Cultural Particulars." *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 21, no. 4: 547–569.
- Cape, Kali Nyima. 2020. "Anatomy of a Ḍākinī: Female Consort Discourse in a Case of Fourteenth-Century Tibetan Buddhist Literature." *Journal of Dharma Studies* no 3: 349–371.
- Davidson, Ronald M. 2005. *Tibetan Renaissance Tantric Buddhism in the Rebirth of Tibetan Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Derris, Karen. 2008. "When the Buddha Was a Woman: Reimagining Tradition in the Theravāda." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 24, no. 2: 29–44.
- Dri med 'od zer. 1970. *Snying thig ya bzhi, a 'dzom par ma* [Four Part Seminal Heart, Adzom edition], vol. 10–11. TBRC W1KG9720. New Delhi: Trulku Tsewang, Jamyang and L. Tashi.
- . 1975. *Snying thig ya bzhi, a 'dzom par ma* [Four Part Seminal Heart, Adzom edition], vol. 10–11, 441–446. Delhi: Palri Parkhang.
- . 2009. *Snying thig ya bzhi dpal brtsegs*. [Four Part Seminal Heart Paltseg edition]. Pe cin: Dpal brtsegs.
- Dudjom Rinpoche. 1991. *The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism: Its Fundamentals and History*. Translated and edited by Gyurme Dorje and Matthew Kapstein. Boston: Wisdom Publications.
- Flett, Alan, and Judi Vernau. 2011. "Applied Taxonomy Frameworks." *Business Information Review* 18, no. 4: 226–235.

- Germano, David. 1994. "Architecture and Absence in the Secret Tantric History of the Great Perfection (*rdzogs chen*)."
Journal of the International Association for Buddhist Studies 17, no. 2: 203–335.
- Germano, David, and Janet Gyatso. 2000. "Longchenpa and the Possession of the Dakinis," in *Tantra in Practice*, edited by David Gordon White, 239–265. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Go gos lo tsa ba gzhon nu dpal. 1949. *Blue Annals Part One*. Translated by George N. Roerich. Calcutta: Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal.
- . 1976. *Blue Annals Part One*. Translated by George N. Roerich. Calcutta: Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal.
- Gyatso, Janet. 1998. *Apparitions of the Self: The Secret Autobiographies of a Tibetan Visionary*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Jacoby, Sarah H. 2014. *Love and Liberation: Autobiographical Writings of Tibetan Visionary Sera Khandro*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Jansen, Berthe. 2018. *The Monastery Rules*. Oakland: University of California Press.
- Klein, Anne Carolyn. 1995. *Meeting the Great Bliss Queen: Buddhists, Feminists, and the Art of the Self*. Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications.
- Martin, Dan. 1996. "Lay Religious Movements in 11th and 12th-Century Tibet: A Survey of Sources." *Kailash* 18: 23–55.
- . 2006. "The Woman Illusion? Research Into the Lives of Spiritually Accomplished Women Leaders of the 11th and 12th centuries." In *Women in Tibet*, edited by Janet Gyatso and Hanna Havnevik, 49–82. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Orgyen Tobgyal Rinpoche. 2020. "Teachings on All-Otr.org." *YouTube*. Accessed August 8, 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hp5QKXpYjY>.
- Raven, Peter H., Brent Berlin, and Dennis E. Breedlove. 1971. "The Origins of Taxonomy: A review of its historical development shows why taxonomy is unable to do what we expect of it." *Science* 174, no. 4015: 1210–1213.

One Desires You, One Cries

Schaeffer, Kurtis. 2004. "A Letter to the Editors of the Buddhist Canon in Fourteenth Century Tibet: The 'Yig mkhan rnam la gdam pa' of Bu ston Rin chen grub." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 124, no. 2: 265–281.

