Journal of the American Academy of Religion, 2024, **92**, 110–129
https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfae059
Advance access publication 20 September 2024
Article

OXFORD

She Said No: Toward a Survivor-Centered History of Vajrayāna Buddhist Sexuality

Sarah H. Jacoby*

ABSTRACT

As a contribution toward survivor-centered approaches to the study of religion and sex abuse that centers historical Tibetan Buddhist women, this article focuses on key passages from the autobiography of Sera Khandro Dewai Dorjé (1892–1940), through which a nuanced vision of Vajrayāna technologies of sexuality emerges. Drawing on insights from feminist historiography, this article listens to Sera Khandro's portrayal of Vajrayāna sexual ethics, including her critiques of the hypocrisy of lust-driven men masquerading as celibate monks and sexual yoga virtuosos, as well as her articulations of sexual yoga as potentially liberatory. Through these passages we will hear the many ways Sera Khandro refused sex, even when it was proffered in the name of salvation, with the aim of making it harder to weaponize the weight of Buddhist tradition to justify sexual predation.

GIVEN the spate of high-profile media exposés, legal allegations, prosecutions, and out-of-court settlements, the problem of sex abuse within international Vajrayāna Buddhist organizations is, finally, impossible to ignore. Shambhala International and Rigpa have both splintered under the weight of their leaders' sexual misconduct, and the sexual assault as well as child and spousal support cases against the seventeenth Karmapa Ogyen Trinley Dorje have reportedly been settled out of court. These plus a plethora of sexual misconduct and abuse allegations in other smaller communities have brought Vajrayāna Buddhism squarely into the #MeToo era.[1] Unfortunately, Vajrayāna lineages are not alone.[2] Despite the increasing evidence that sexual misconduct and abuse is and has been a pervasive problem in Buddhist contexts, it is remarkable

* Sarah H. Jacoby, Department of Religious Studies, Northwestern University, Crowe Hall 4-134, 1860 Campus Dr, Evanston IL 60208, USA. Email: s-jacoby@northwestern.edu. I wish to thank those who have provided me with valuable editorial advice and feedback about this article, including Damchö Diana Finnegan, Ann Gleig, Lama Jabb, Amy Langenberg, and several survivors of sex abuse in Buddhist communities who I am not naming.

[1] In 2018 and 2019, the #MeToo Movement entered anglophone Buddhist circles and the #Metooguru hashtag emerged. Mainstream media picked up the story of sex abuse within Shambhala—see Newman 2018 and Michel Martin's National Public Radio interview with Project Sunshine creator Andrea Winn https://www.npr.org/2018/07/15/629282010/a-look-at-the-metoo-movement-in-the-shambhala-buddhist-community.

[2] Since the 1980s sexual misconduct has negatively impacted multiple Buddhist communities, especially Zen lineages, in the United States. Examples include Richard Baker of the San Francisco Zen Center, Taizan Maezumi and Dennis Genpo Merzel of the Zen Center of L.A., Dainin Katagiri of the Minnesota Zen Center, as well as Eido Tai Shimano and Joshu Sasaki, whose stories both made the *New York Times* (see Oppenheimer 2010; Oppenheimer and Lovett 2013). For analyses of these crises, see Downing 2002; Kaza 2004; Gleig 2019 and 2020.

how little scholarship analyzes this problem.[3] This article aims to support burgeoning work in this area by highlighting relevant critiques and analysis written by a historical Tibetan Buddhist woman, Sera Khandro Dewai Dorjé (སེར་མཁའ་འགྲོ་བའི་རྡོ་རྗེ། 1892–1940), who was herself repeatedly propositioned for sexual services by religious men.

Listening to Sera Khandro's accounts of Vajrayāna sexual practices requires attention to complexity—rather than ruling all such practices exploitative, she found soteriological value for herself in certain instances, providing a rare counter-story to the well-worn tantric paradigm of male meditator and female aide. In other circumstances, Sera Khandro made concerted efforts to refuse sexual solicitation by Buddhist hierarchs through employing and deflecting rationales that still circulate in Vajrayāna Buddhist communities today relating to what counts as sexual yoga versus sexual misconduct, whether celibate monastics should liaison with consorts to enhance their longevity, and in what circumstances (if any) it is permissible to refuse a Vajrayāna teacher's command.

SILENCES, STEREOTYPES, AND CRITIQUES

The lack of scholarly attention to sex abuse is part of a larger hesitation to research the history of sexuality in Vajrayāna Buddhist texts and communities.[4] There are many reasons why scholars have not written more about sexuality as a method in Vajrayāna Buddhist practice. For one, knowledge about practices involving sexuality in Vajrayāna lineages is secret, requiring initiation and specific commitments (Skt. *samaya*; Tib. དམ་ཚིག). That said, the secrecy of these practices should not be overstated. A closer look at Tibetan-language materials reveals an array of sources that shed light on sexual practices in Buddhist contexts, not all of which are sealed with commands of secrecy. This suggests that there is no need to be more reticent than the Tibetan and Sanskrit sources themselves are. In any case, the most secret aspects of Vajrayāna sexual practices are lineage-specific instructions for visualizations, liturgies, empowerments, and mantras, not general descriptions such as those included in this article. Furthermore, an argument can also be made that the widespread misinformation about "tantric sex" already circulating in the public sphere (just Google it) calls for the dissemination of more accurate information as a corrective.

Another reason for reticence on the topic of sexuality in Vajrayāna Buddhism and sex abuse in particular is that the vast majority of relevant historical source materials remain untranslated from Sanskrit and Tibetan, making in-depth inquiry the time-consuming preserve of specialists. Many such specialists maintain commitments to particular Buddhist teachers, making it difficult to address issues that cast Buddhism in a negative light. Some receive funding or other forms of research support from Buddhist organizations that are implicated in sex abuse allegations or are themselves members of such organizations. Even those who lack such overt conflicts of interest may be influenced by the disciplinary divide between theology and the history of religions that renders the latter camp wary of scholarship motivated by normative agendas, including gender justice. Despite decades of critique coming from feminist theorists and others, historians of religion tend to be more comfortable writing from the perspective of no perspective, claiming a stance as a neutral observer. This can easily result in a "both side-ism" that amounts to an evasion of responsibility, especially when the research subject is sex abuse and survivors of it (Lofton 2018). Neutrality is itself a stance, one that aligns more naturally with the interests

[3] A welcome exception is the book Ann Gleig and Amy Langenberg are currently writing about sex abuse in US convert Buddhism. Their work is part of a larger project titled The Religion and Sexual Abuse Project, funded by the Henry Luce Foundation.

[4] The two main monographs on Buddhism and sexuality (Faure 1998 and Cabezón 2017) focus on East and South Asian sources respectively, not on Vajrayāna Buddhism as practiced in Tibet and the Himalayas in recent centuries.

of religious institutions than with survivors of guru sex abuse because it leaves existing power structures in place and does not challenge the status quo. Being a scholar of religion requires us to take a stand on an issue as harmful as sexual violence within Buddhist communities. Taking such a stand is not tantamount to fueling moral panic about sex and religion, nor is it a return to conservative, antiqueer tropes about the sexual predator, as Leigh Gilmore has characterized a strand of anti-#MeToo rhetoric (Gilmore 2023, 72). Instead, it is a call for nuanced and careful analysis that centers survivors instead of defending abusers and the institutions that back them.

The limited scholarship on the history of Vajrayāna Buddhist sexuality and sex abuse has contributed to an information vacuum currently being filled by a cottage industry of extractive and superficial books and seminars monetizing an orientalist fantasy of "tantric sex." It is also beginning to be filled by journalistic publications and blogs, many of which vilify Tibetan gurus as rapacious charlatans, rehearsing racist tropes of Asian backwardness and Western exceptionalism. These are variations on the larger theme of Western media representations of Asian gurus as hypersexualized fraudulent predators (Lucia 2018). For instance, a recent book on the abuse allegations involving Rigpa's former leader Sogyal Lakar argues that "the lamas and their followers both have a lot to learn about how to cope with the cultural dissonance that could not be avoided when feudal-medieval old Tibet met modern Western liberal democracy" (Finnigan and Hogendoorn 2019, 3). Even though well-intentioned in its effort to support the victims of sex abuse in Buddhist sanghas, by reinforcing the tired binary of medieval misogynist Tibet and modern egalitarian liberal Western democracy, this rhetoric fixes Tibetan religion and culture in a past timescape in need of updating by civilized outsiders who can fast forward Tibetan Buddhism into modernity.

Discourses about sexuality are often the currency through which empire and its colonial imperatives are reinforced. In the context of Buddhism, we have already seen virulent instances of this in history, such as British imperial interpretations of Vajrayāna as a maligned devolution of the Buddha's rational philosophy, one that was purportedly rampant with sexual debauchery, idolatry, excessive ritual, and ornate ecclesiastic hierarchy. In other words, Vajrayāna Buddhism was Catholic in nature and beyond the borders of British rule (Almond 1988; Lopez 1995). It is crucial now that we are again interrogating the place of sexuality in Buddhism in light of burgeoning sex abuse allegations that we not fall into the well-worn treads of orientalist critiques of Vajrayāna sexual excess.

That said, sex abuse in religious contexts or elsewhere undoubtedly calls for critique. Critique is not necessarily an effort to burn down the house of Vajrayāna Buddhism; it can also be a constructive project to reinforce its foundation for the benefit of future generations. A strong argument can be made that if sex abuse in Vajrayāna Buddhist organizations continues without censure, this will diminish the sustainability of these organizations. But as we critique the abusive power dynamics, ethical failings, misunderstandings, and ambitions that have resulted in widespread damage within global Vajrayāna communities, it is important to remember that critique is not only a Western liberal prerogative (Asad et al. 2013). Tibetan and Sanskrit texts record a depth and richness of analysis about the purposes and problems associated with Vajrayāna sexual practices that can inform newer anglophone analyses. Western interpreters of Vajrayāna are not the first or the only ones to call out gurus' bad behavior, sexual misconduct, and hypocrisy. Scholars can and should amplify the interpretations, insights, tensions, critiques, dilemmas, and judgments about sexuality as a part of Vajrayāna Buddhist practice inscribed in historical as well as contemporary Buddhist sources.[5] Such attention to Vajrayāna Buddhist history and

[5] For an exploration of the history of critique in Tibetan literature demonstrating that critique is neither modern nor derived from foreign colonizers, see Jabb 2015, 59–69. The incarnation of Kalu Rinpoche has publicly condemned sex abuse and other forms of violence that he experienced in his monastery (see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z5Ka3bEN1rs&list=PLiP-B56AeyS2snKCtjixuTMPt79O72ojCq). For a critique of sex abuse in Bhutanese nunneries, see Dadon and Choedron 2019. For critiques of sex abuse in Tibetan Buddhist contexts found in modern Tibetan literature, see Gayley and Bhum 2022.

contemporary practice can complement and enrich the interpretive tools and approaches scholars bring from psychology, cult studies, legal studies, and other disciplines outside of Buddhist studies to understand and prevent sex abuse in Buddhism (Gleig 2020).

SERA KHANDRO AS A SUBJECT OF FEMINIST HISTORIOGRAPHY

As a contribution toward centering historical Tibetan women's vantage points on Vajrayāna sexual ethics, this article focuses on key passages from the autobiography of Sera Khandro Dewai Dorjé (1892–1940). Sera Khandro was extraordinary in multiple ways, including her eloquence, spiritual realization, candor, and prolificity; arguably she wrote more than any other female religious master in Tibetan history (Jacoby 2014). She became renowned as a Treasure revealer (གཏེར་སྟོན།), which means that she revealed scriptures that came to her in visions and discovered sacred objects in prophesied holy sites in Tibet. She was born in Tibet's capital city Lhasa into a high-ranking wealthy family with ties to Qing Imperial rule through her Mongolian father and to a prominent Tibetan lineage (གཤུགས།) through her mother. The comforts of her childhood were short-lived because her father began arranging a politically advantageous marriage for her when she was only eleven years old, and two years later her beloved mother passed away. Sera Khandro managed to forestall her impending wedding until she was fifteen, but she could not delay further. Instead of going through with the marriage, she ran away and joined a group of pilgrims from the Golok region of eastern Tibet, headed by Drimé Özer (དྲི་མེད་འོད་ཟེར།, 1881–1924), son of the important Treasure revealer Dudjom Lingpa (བདུད་འཇོམས་གླིང་པ།, 1835–1904). Sera Khandro transitioned from her privileged upbringing in which she was being privately tutored in Chinese to losing her high-class status in her move from Lhasa to Golok. She became a beggar who was illiterate in the Tibetan language and therefore initially unable to recite scriptures alongside her new companions, some of whom were celibate monastics and others noncelibate religious specialists. Sera Khandro was completely devoted to her religious path, but she was also young, beautiful, foreign to the independent Golok territory, and alone, which repeatedly left her in an insecure position "without my father and brothers' backing (རྒྱབ་ཕ་མིང་མེད་པའི་ཀུན།)" (Dbus bza' mkha' 'gro 2009, 319). She later faults this insecure status for her mistreatment and divorce from her spouse, Gara Gyelsé (མཁར་རྒྱལ་སྲས།, 1882/3-?), as well as his involvement with another woman. But by the end of her life, Sera Khandro was no longer a pious mendicant or a spurned spouse; she was a renowned guru, Treasure revealer, and sought-after spiritual consort. Her writings attest that she was also a compelling storyteller, especially the four hundred–plus-folio autobiography she completed in 1934. The poetic elegance, profundity, and wit of this work renders it not only a valuable resource for religious history, but also worthy of appraisal as a work of great world literature. Sera Khandro's myriad extraordinary qualities remind us that she is not the everywoman of Vajrayāna Buddhism, at the same time as the extreme rarity of female-authored and survivor-centered Tibetan biographical writings makes hers essential reading.

Examining Tibetan history through the writings of Sera Khandro is a deliberate choice to foreground the perspectives of a woman who was herself a survivor of sexual predation and various forms of denigration inflicted upon her by powerful men in her domestic and religious milieus. Calling Sera Khandro a "survivor of sexual predation" in a Tibetan Buddhist context is transposing her Tibetan-language world into contemporary terms different from those she used, but I argue that these terms resonate with her accounts of repeatedly needing to reject the sexual advances of male Buddhist adepts. Applying the term "survivor" to Sera Khandro does not pertain to whether or not she succeeded in resisting unwanted male predation but instead attends to the fact that she needed to resist in the first place, which is a deeply familiar experience for many young female Vajrayāna Buddhist practitioners in particular. My effort to amplify

Sera Khandro's voice as a survivor of sexual predation is thus not a neutral contribution to the history of religions but a targeted decision intended to support other work being done to foster survivor-centered approaches to Buddhist studies (Gleig and Langenberg 2020).

Sera Khandro was not only a survivor of sexual predation; she was also an agent who participated in Vajrayāna sexual practices for her own benefit as well as that of others. One way to think about this aspect of Sera Khandro's writing is to understand it as a form of counter-storytelling, following Blossom Stefaniw's claim that "the act of telling, archiving, collecting, and persistently repeating counter-stories must be the central act of feminist historiography" (Stefaniw 2020, 282).[6] This article argues that Sera Khandro provides a counter-story in which she rewrites the familiar agent-object/male-female (*yab-yum*) sexual relation valorized in much of Vajrayāna Buddhism, instead portraying men as the potential consorts to be evaluated and summoned for mutually beneficial encounters.

This article's reading of Sera Khandro is also an act of feminist historiography in that it examines the past partly for insights into the present and ideas for the future, which is not a sign of feminist bias but an acknowledgment that all historical narratives are motivated by present-day concerns. In this case, the concern is that by avoiding sensitive subjects, such as the history of sexuality and sexual violence in Vajrayāna Buddhism, we let monolithic ideas of Tibetan Buddhist tradition stand uncontested, thereby making it easier for contemporary abusers to weaponize the weight of tradition to justify sexual predation. One way to make it harder for this to continue is to produce scholarship that explores the variety of authoritative voices and the shifting attitudes, regulations, ambiguities, and interpretations of sexual ethics that have actually comprised Buddhist "tradition" over time. The scare quotes around tradition here are meant to emphasize that tradition is not singular but rather inclusive of many lineage streams and individual voices; it is more accurate to speak of tradition*s* in the plural. Centering Sera Khandro's voice casts the history of Vajrayāna sexuality in a new light, one centered on a woman's prerogatives, including her consent to as well as refusal of male lamas' solicitations.

BUDDHIST TECHNOLOGIES OF SEXUALITY

Sera Khandro spent the majority of her life on the margins of the monastery in the sense that she embodied an intermediate status she described as "neither nun nor laywoman" (ཇོ་མིན་ནག་མིན།) and "neither servant nor bride" (གཡོག་མིན་གནས་མིན།). As such she negotiated between monastic Buddhist conceptions of the virtue of celibacy and nonmonastic tantric conceptions of the liberatory and healing powers of specific forms of sexuality. It should be noted that using the English word *sexuality* to refer to particular Vajrayāna practices involves a significant shift in register, given that it is a modern and culturally specific term that has no precise equivalent in Tibetan or South Asian tantric texts. Derived from the eighteenth-century Latin botanical term *sexualitas*, the word *sexuality* first appeared in 1797 and did not apply to humans until the nineteenth century. Only in the late nineteenth century did it come to refer to sexual orientation as a feature of personal identity.[7] Like the word *religion*, which also has no precise equivalent in South Asian languages, *sexuality* as applied to Vajrayāna Buddhist practices involves layers of linguistic, cultural, and even somatic translation. As with all forms of translation, transposing what I term "Buddhist technologies of sexuality" into contemporary anglophone discourse is an act of interpretation involving approximation, not exact replication. In what follows, I elucidate key Vajrayāna formations of sexuality, namely celibacy and sacramental/yogic sexual practices,

[6] As Stefaniw clarifies, counter-storytelling is a method that emerged in Critical Race Theory and refers to writing from a marginalized subject position that aims to counter dominant narratives (Delgado and Stefancic 2017).

[7] "Sexuality, *N.*" *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford UP, July 2023, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/8985460941.

which I present as technologies in the Foucauldian sense of being modes of operation that effect the transformation of one's body, thoughts, and conduct "in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality" (Foucault 1988, 18).

Perhaps the oldest Buddhist technology of sexuality is celibacy. Vajrayāna Buddhism inherited the code of monastic discipline enshrined in India in the Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya in which having sex came before even murder in the list of defeats (*pārājika*). Sexual intercourse is thoroughly defined by Vinaya lawmakers as insertion of the male organ in any of three orifices (vagina, anus, mouth) of three types of partners (human, nonhuman, and animal), who may be male/female/or *paṇḍaka*, and may be either awake, asleep, or dead.[8] Sexual intercourse resulted in penance or even expulsion from the Buddhist monastic order.[9] One reason for this was because abstaining from sex was a defining feature of the Buddhist monastic community, that which made its members worthy of lay patronage (Gyatso 2009, 287; Faure 1998, 64–65). On a soteriological level, having sex was so bad because sexual desire was an obstacle to spiritual awakening (Cabezón 2017, 196–200). According to the second noble truth of Buddhism, sexual desire is a type of craving, literally a "thirst," for sensual pleasure (Skt. *tṛṣṇā*, Tib. *sred pa*) at the root of human suffering. The problem with sensual pleasure for Buddhists is that indulging in it produces a thirst that can never be quenched, like drinking salt water or scratching an itch. Conversely, renouncing sensual desire eventually leads to its extinguishment, or *nirvāṇa*, thus effecting the eradication of suffering.

Tibetans imported this foundational Buddhist association between sex, desire, and suffering during Tibet's Imperial period from the seventh to ninth centuries, during which time Tibetan royalty patronized the first Tibetan Buddhist monasteries such as Samyé. Celibate monasticism gained ground slowly in Tibet, fluctuating over centuries depending on royal patronage and the degree to which political authority was fragmented or centralized. In some regions of the Tibetan plateau such as Golok, where Sera Khandro lived the majority of her life, monasticism did not fully take root until the nineteenth century (Don grub dbang rgyal and Nor sde 1992). But by the modern period Tibet was known for what Melvyn Goldstein has termed "mass monasticism," or the fact that in 1951, 20 to 30 percent of all males in Tibet were monks, which was perhaps the highest rate of monks per capita in the world (Goldstein 2009).

Alongside celibacy, the importation of later Indian Buddhist tantric texts into Tibet from the late-tenth century forward brought new technologies of sexuality. Also sometimes translated as "consort practice" or "sexual yoga," these practices appear in tantric texts classed as *Anuyoga* (Further Yoga) and *Yoganiruttara* (Unexcelled Yoga) as *mudrāvidhi* (seal rite), *maṇḍalacakra* (mandala circle), *mahāsamaya* (great sacrament), and *maithuna* (copulation). In Tibetan these practices are often glossed as "action seal" (Tib. ལས་ཀྱི་ཕྱག་རྒྱ།), which is a translation of the Sanskrit term *karmamudrā*, as well as "the path of skillful means" (ཐབས་ལམ།).[10] To make sense of the diversity of tantric sexual practices, scholars chart a trajectory from older (ca. eighth century) sacramental uses of sexual fluids, such as those found in two of the four consecrations (*abhiṣeka*) conferring Vajrayāna initiation, to yogic processes involving the manipulation of internal psychophysical energy within the body.[11] More specifically, this wind-energy (Skt. *prāṇa*; Tib. རླུང་) moves vital essence (*bindu,* ཐིག་ལེ།) through capillary-like channels (*nāḍī,* རྩ།) that radiate

[8] Note that despite the completeness of this definition, including even necrophilia, lesbian sex apparently runs under the radar, though its prohibition is insinuated in other Vinaya rules (see Langenberg 2019, 2020). On the definition of *paṇḍaka*, see Scherer 2021.

[9] According to Shayne Clarke (2009), all Vinayas aside from the Pāli Vinaya allow a monk who has committed a *pārājika* offense, including sexual intercourse, to perform penance and remain within the Buddhist monastic fold.

[10] See Davidson (2002, p. 198) for mention of some of these Sanskrit terms. A recent book written by a Tibetan doctor (Chenagtsang 2018) calls sexual practices *karmamudra*.

[11] See the *Hevajra Tantra* for a description of Vajrayāna *abhiṣeka*. See David Gordon White (1996, 2003) for an account of the transformation from "hard core" tantra involving sexual fluids to a more internalized, sublimated, psychologized yogic version.

outward from channel nexuses or *cakra*s located along the central axis of the vajra body (Tib. རྡོ་རྗེ་ལུས།). Different tantric systems identify varying numbers of *cakra*s, which are then homologized in distinctive ways with a complex array of divinities, mantra syllables, elements, and sacred pilgrimage sites. The aim of these yogic practices, commonly called "channel and wind" (རྩ་རླུང་།) practices in Tibetan, is to remove obstructions to the smooth circulation of vital essence throughout the body's channels and thereby propel vital essence into the central channel. This allows mundane and super-mundane accomplishments to manifest, most importantly longevity and spiritual liberation. Note that channel and wind practices do not necessarily involve any form of sexual interaction between people; they often consist of one individual engaged in contemplative visualizations.

WINTER FLOWERS

Even so, upon first appraisal, celibacy and religiously purposed sexual practices could seem like contradictory religious *dicta*. This tension between variant Vajrayāna technologies of sexuality is audible in Sera Khandro's autobiography. For instance, she recounts that when she was thirty-five, a *ḍākinī* appeared before her in a vision and admonished her for following what she positioned as the safer Buddhist path of celibacy promoted in "the lesser vehicle" (i.e., Hīnayāna) instead of the "quick path of Mantra" (i.e., Vajrayāna):

> Why is your body, speech, and mind
> attached to the conduct of the lesser vehicle doctrine?
> Don't you see the result attained through the special features
> of the quick path of Mantra?[12]

This prompted Sera Khandro to explain:

> Listen, older sister of the equal rank:
> if one practices the special features of Secret Mantra,
> I have no doubt
> in the reality of the quick result one will attain.
> I pray that in this and all my lives
> I meet with this quick path.
>
> Nevertheless, in these degenerate times,
> people's lustful desire burns like fire.
> Under the pretext of Mantra, they practice nonvirtue.
> Ruining both themselves and others, they teach false Treasures.
> Two men have sex, throwing away their *bodhicitta*
> like spit in the dust.[13]
>
> Those who practice proper Mantra are extremely rare.
> Because of this, out of concern that my inferior female body
> would become the cause of my own and others' ruin,

[12] Dbus bza' mkha' 'gro 2009, 451.

[13] Some Tibetan experts with whom I read this line (ཕོ་གཉིས་སྙོ་སྦྱོར་བྱང་ཆུབ་སེམས། མཆིལ་མའི་ཐལ་བ་བཞིན་དུ་དོར།) interpreted it differently, as two people or a man and a woman having sex with each other, but my translation reflects the literal words on the page. In these lines, Sera Khandro is critiquing everyone, including "people" (མི་རྣམས།) and "men" (ཕོ།) who she perceives are not practicing Mantra properly.

> my physical conduct followed the path of monastic discipline
> with the intention of being able to abandon malevolent men.
> How could it cause harm
> if I cast misconduct with bad consorts far behind and
> delight in entering the path of the two truths?[14]

Vajrayāna Buddhist interpretations of celibacy as safe but slow sound in this passage, as do the dangers of utilizing sexuality as a method. People can fool themselves or intentionally fool others into thinking they are practicing Vajrayāna when really they are indulging in the nonvirtue of lustful desire, a pitfall well attested in recent instances of sexual predation by Vajrayāna gurus. A tone of critique emerges here, as Sera Khandro calls out the hypocrisy she sees among those pretending to practice Vajrayāna and making up teachings they claim to be authentic Buddhist revelation, or Treasure (གཏེར་མ།). The charge Sera Khandro levies against some of these men, namely that they are "throwing away their *bodhicitta* like spit in the dust," is particularly poignant. Etymologically, *bodhicitta* means "the mind of awakening," as its Tibetan translation attests (བྱང་ཆུབ་སེམས།). In Mahāyāna Buddhist contexts, *bodhicitta* refers to the intention one cultivates to realize enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings, which is the underlying motivation for accomplishing the Buddhist path. In some Vajrayāna contexts, this intention obtains a physical substrate in the body, referring to the relative aspect of vital essence (ཐིག་ལེ།).[15] In the abovementioned passage, "throwing away *bodhicitta*" means wasting vital essence by releasing it through ordinary, lustful sex instead of gaining mastery over the circulation of vital essence through sexual yoga.

Note that Sera Khandro does not refuse the *ḍākinī*'s suggestion that she should engage in the quick path of Secret Mantra by taking on a consort. Instead, she balks at the difficulties of this path. Earlier in her autobiography, she lists these difficulties more concretely to another *ḍākinī* named Dorjé Zungma, who appeared to her in a vision and engaged her in a conversation about Vajrayāna sexual ethics:

> I said,
>
> > In this area of Domey, Golok, men are of such bad ancestry that they have a deathly color—their lack of food and clothes makes them ashen-colored. They have rough characters, like thorns. I thought that taking them on as my disciples would not bring about the perfect realization of liberation via skillful means, so I didn't bother. Men of good lineage are like winter flowers. Of those, some already belong to others, some hesitate because of their Vinaya precepts, and since some are rich, they seem not to want me because I am poor. Now, no matter what you say, I have no need for a consort. Through relying on a visualized method consort according to the pith instructions of the secret quick path, one can actualize the primordial wisdom in which desire is naturally liberated. Beyond that, there is no point and nothing to gain from having relations with a man. If I meet with a man who is an unsuitable receptacle, it will pervert the path of Mantra and surely cause myself and others to go to the lower realms. Hence, I think I will live alone.

[14] Dbus bza' mkha' 'gro 2009, 451.

[15] Vital essence according to the nineteenth-century polymath Jamgön Kongtrul means "nucleus or seed of great bliss" (Jamgön Kongtrul Lodrö Tayé 1998, 469). It has a conventional or relative aspect (ཀུན་རྫོབ་ཀྱི་ཐིག་ལེ།) and an ultimate aspect (དོན་དམ་ཡེ་ཤེས་ཀྱི་ཐིག་ལེ།). The former is a substance that can be either white or red. In their pure forms, white vital essence abides in the head as the letter *HAM* and red vital essence abides below the navel as a small letter *a*. White vital essence is masculine and refers to semen and red vital essence is feminine and refers to blood. Both males and females carry white and red vital essence as a consequence of their conception, when they inherited these from their father and mother, respectively. For a thorough typology of the variant meanings of *bodhicitta*, see Wangchuk 2007, ch. 7.

Dorjé Zungma responded,

> Enchanting woman who desires desirelessness—
> you have connected with a visualized method consort
> and actualized the primordial wisdom of great bliss.
> But through your pure karma and aspirations, you are empowered in Treasures—
> without auspicious connections, it will be difficult to benefit oneself and others.
> When method, insight, aspirations, and time converge,
> abandon laziness and flattery;
> you must carefully cultivate auspicious connections.
>
> There is no way for you to live alone,
> so energize all men with bliss,
> and show desirous ones the desireless clear light.
> Find a way to lead them to the ground of union.
> By this, you will bring about benefit for self and others, *yoginī*.
>
> Although you have realized desireless primordial wisdom,
> if you remain with a consort of good lineage,
> once you fully master the teachings of enhancement,
> you will loosen the knots at your five cakras.[16]

Sera Khandro's words reverse the well-worn paradigm found in tantric texts of male meditator choosing female consorts as accoutrements. Instead, Sera Khandro is a female meditator evaluating male consorts and finding suitable options as scarce as "winter flowers." A tone of pragmatism shines through this passage—good men are hard to find because either they already have partners, they favor wealthier women, or they refuse sexual practices to uphold the celibacy required by their Vinaya vows. Another fascinating element of Sera Khandro's dialogue with Dorjé Zungma is the question they surface regarding whether consort practices need to be literally enacted by a meditator couple or visualized by an individual. Sera Khandro claims that "there is no point and nothing to gain from having relations with a man" because it is possible for her to realize "the primordial wisdom in which desire is naturally liberated" by herself through visualization practices. Dorjé Zungma objects to this not because Sera Khandro's point is invalid but because physical sexual union can enhance her realization and that of her consorts, as well as bring together the auspicious connections (*tendrel*; རྟེན་འབྲེལ།) necessary for Treasure revelation (Thondup 1986; Jacoby 2014, ch. 4, and 2023). This question whether Vajrayāna practice involves literal or visualized sexual union relates to a long-standing hermeneutical conundrum about the antinomian rhetoric found in some tantric texts. In the context of analyzing tantric depictions of the "5 meats," Christian Wedemeyer concludes that even asking whether tantric texts "really meant what they said" is a positivist project close to irrelevant (Wedemeyer 2007, 392). However, when the subject is sexuality, whether tantric texts meant what they said in a literal sense has significant ramifications for the social history of tantric communities and their legacies today, especially for girls and women. In Dorjé Zungma and Sera Khandro's conversation, it is notable that the question of whether sexual rituals are symbolic rhetoric or literally enacted reality leans squarely toward the latter.

Sera Khandro and Dorjé Zungma's conversation underscores the main soteriological purpose of sexual yoga, which is to transform lustful desire (འདོད་ཆགས།) into primordial wisdom-infused

[16] Dbus bza' mkha' 'gro 2009, 151–52.

great bliss (Skt. *mahāsukha*; Tib. བདེ་བ་ཆེན་པོ།). In Vajrayāna terms, great bliss is much more than hedonistic pleasure; it is both the catalyst for spiritual liberation, as well as the fundamental nature of buddhahood. A common analogy tantric texts use for this is an insect born from wood (i.e., desire), which then consumes that wood and transforms it into liberating wisdom.[17] Rather than understanding sexual desire as something to be stamped out through strict celibacy, in theory sexual yoga utilizes the energy of desire to eradicate it. Therefore, instead of being competing religious protocols, celibacy and sexual yoga operate according to the same logic—both are methods aiming at effecting desirelessness, the *sine qua non* of Buddhist liberation, albeit through different means. Both require rigorous sexual continence, contrary to the ordinary downward outflow of vital essence. A far cry from the common Western perception that tantra is all about enhancing sexual pleasure, Sera Khandro's conversations with *ḍākinī*s suggest that pursuing relationships with men is entirely pointless unless they are capable of supporting the extraordinary purpose of actualizing primordial wisdom in which desire is naturally liberated. That this was a tall order is beautifully expressed through Sera Khandro's metaphor of suitable men as winter flowers—maybe this was not as impossible as the paradigmatic Tibetan "horns of a rabbit" metaphor, but nonetheless it was exceedingly rare.

A serious potential pitfall of sexual yoga from a survivor-centered perspective rings in Dorjé Zungma's call for Sera Khandro to "energize all men with bliss" (སྐྱེས་བུ་ཀུན་བདེ་བའི་རྩལ་བསྒྱེད།) in order to "show desirous ones the desireless clear light" (ཆགས་ཅན་རྣམས་ཆགས་མེད་འོད་གསལ་སྟོན།). This demand positions Sera Khandro as the helpmate to desirous men, the one whose sexual yoga services can liberate them. At the same time, it is important to consider that the source of this command is not coming from a man seeking her as a consort but from a visionary experience in her own mind; one could understand this as an internal dialogue Sera Khandro is having with unseen enlightened female presences (*ḍākinī*s) who she supplicates in her tantric practice as she seeks to divine a Vajrayāna sexual ethic appropriate for her. In this process, Dorjé Zungma urges Sera Khandro to discover "the primordial wisdom of great bliss" through associating with a male consort, thereby "fully master[ing] the teachings of enhancement" and reinforcing her progress on the path to liberation. Sera Khandro's dialogue with Dorjé Zungma thus envisions a sexual ethic defined not by the virtue of celibate monasticism or the expedient means of serving male subjectivity, but rather an ethic of mutual benefit for male and female consorts—in short, Sera Khandro comes to understand that associating with a consort can be valuable if and when it brings "benefit for self and others" (རྒྱན་གཉིས།), as Dorjé Zungma phrases it.

If this mutuality still sounds suspect in the wake of contemporary guru sex abuse, which overwhelmingly but not exclusively features male gurus abusing female disciples, another aspect of Sera Khandro's description of sexual yoga deserves mention. Given the preponderance of tantric texts written by and for heterosexual male meditators seeking female consorts, previous scholarship has questioned whether Sanskrit and Tibetan-language Vajrayāna sexual yoga instructions written from the perspective of a female meditator exist at all.[18] Here Sera Khandro's counter-storytelling sounds strongly, for her writings contain unmistakably female-centered sexual yoga instructions. In Sera Khandro's autobiography, the Indian siddha Kukkuripa appears to her in a dream and instructs her to visualize her body and that of her consort using distinctly sexed imagery—she is to visualize her own body's "four-petaled lotus

[17] For this analogy, see Blo bzang chos kyi rgyal mtshan 1973, 40–41; Tsong-ka-pa, H.H. the Dalai Lama, and Hopkins 1977, 201.

[18] Take, for one instance among many, Yael Bentor's comment in her illuminating article "Can Women Attain Enlightenment through Vajrayāna Practices" that "Vajrayāna manuals that instruct on practices for a man and a woman who practise together are written from the point of view of the male practitioner. So far I have not come across any exception" (Bentor 2008, 130).

with a *BAM* syllable in the center" (རྒྱུས་པདྨ་འདབ་མ་བཞི་བའི་དབུས་སུ་ཨཱཾ་) and her male consort's "white five-pronged vajra with a crystal-colored *HUNG* in the center" (རྡོ་རྗེ་དཀར་པོ་རྩེ་ལྔ་པའི་དབུས་སུ་ཧཱུྃ་དཀར་པོ་རྒྱས་ཤིལ་གྱི་མདོག).[19] Next Kukkuripa's instruction moves from visualization to physical enactment when he tells Sera Khandro to "thoroughly examine, summon, and train a fully-qualified hero endowed with all the proper attributes who is a magical emanation of the five buddha families."[20] Since heroes (དཔའ་བོ) are male-identified in Tibetan Buddhism, this is an explicit instruction for Sera Khandro to seek a qualified male consort, also called a "method consort" (ཐབས་ཀྱི་གནས།). Kukkuripa explains that after she has conferred ripening instructions and liberating empowerments upon him, "when the method [consort]'s cloud of [*bodhi*]*citta* descends into the insight woman's secret space and the white and red meet, the eighty types of discursive thoughts are vanquished into the ultimate sphere and the inexpressible primordial wisdom of equanimity is actualized."[21] He then describes successive stages of spiritual realization that occur as the insight woman pulls the *bodhicitta* higher up the central axis of her body until it reaches the top of her head, culminating in buddhahood.

Although it remains heteronormative, Sera Khandro's inclusion of Kukkuripa's teaching reverses centuries of tantric manuals enumerating the types of female consorts males should summon and train and the successive stages of realization that will ensue in the male body. Her words do not stand alone, however, for they are intricately intertextual with the hagiography of Tibet's preeminent enlightened female figure, Yeshé Tsogyel, who famously sought and trained the Indian young man Atsara Salé as a consort for her own spiritual liberation (Changchub and Nyingpo 1999, 42–45; Jacoby 2014, 196–204). Whether we describe this in emic Tibetan Buddhist terms, recognizing Sera Khandro as a reincarnation of Yeshé Tsogyel, or in etic secular terms, recognizing Yeshé Tsogyel as an important female authorizing referent that allowed Sera Khandro to represent herself as an agent capable of engaging in sexual practices for her own spiritual liberation, the power of female precedent is palpable.

Taken together, these passages neither prove nor disprove that sexual practices within Vajrayāna Buddhism are wholly abusive or liberating for women. They allude to the fact that in the hands of historical Vajrayāna practitioners as much as their contemporary incarnations, sexual yoga provided a ruse for indulging in desire in the name of eradicating it. Given that sexual yoga has been and continues to be used to justify manipulative and abusive sexual interactions between male Vajrayāna teachers and (often young and female) students, the possibility that Vajrayāna teachers can use sexual desire as an effective method on the path to enact desirelessness remains suspect.[22] But some flowers do grow in winter—the snowdrop, for instance. Sera Khandro's writings hold out the possibility that not all Vajrayāna practitioners who engaged in sexual yoga were pretenders, and her emphasis on mutuality and female-centered sexual yoga instructions leave open a chance that these practices could support female empowerment. A close reading of Sera Khandro thus invites us not to view sexual yoga as necessarily abusive but to attend more carefully to the many dimensions of embodiment, vital energy, and bliss as understood by Vajrayāna practitioners operating within specific social contexts and human power relationships.

[19] Dbus bza' mkha' 'gro 2009, 88.
[20] Dbus bza' mkha' 'gro 2009, 90.
[21] Dbus bza' mkha' 'gro 2009, 91.
[22] Two examples coming from Himalayan communities of male lamas using sexual yoga to coerce young nuns into engaging in sexual misconduct can be found in the writing of the early twentieth-century abbess Jetsun Ani Lochen (Havnevik 1999) and in the previously mentioned scholarship by Dadon and Choedron (2019) on sexual exploitation in contemporary Bhutanese nunneries.

NOT ON YOUR LIFE

If this point about leaving open the "winter flower" potential of sexual yoga as liberatory sounds equivocal—a sort of threading the needle at both ends—in the passages from her autobiography we turn to next, Sera Khandro's critique of male hypocrisy and bald-faced lust is anything but. Sera Khandro recounts an episode that took place in 1918 when an important lama from Pelyül Dartang Monastery in Golok named Gotrül (Gochen Tulku Jikdrel Chökyi Lodrö སྒོ་ཆེན་སྤྲུལ་སྐུ་འཇིགས་བྲལ་ཆོས་སྐྱིད་བློ་གྲོས།, c. 1876–1919) tried to convince the twenty-six-year-old Sera Khandro to consort with another monastic hierarch named Dhibir Tuktsa Tulku (རྡིབ་བིར་རྟུག་རྩ་སྤྲུལ་སྐུ།, n.d.):

> At that time, Dhibir Tuktsa Tulku and a few people in his entourage were doing a retreat in the area. Gotrül said,
>
> > Now since you have the auspicious connections to be able to dispel the obstacles to Dhitrül's longevity, please be sure to help him however you can with this. He presents as a Vinaya vow holder—last year he requested full ordination vows from Dodrup Rinpoché. The astrological signs were extremely disturbed. In particular, the prophecies of Dzokchen Rinpoché and many other great masters proclaim that for the sake of sustaining his longevity, he needs to have a secret liaison with an insight lady. Not only that, even though he is also a Treasure revealer, since he is the head of a big monastery, he doesn't conduct himself as a mantrin but maintains strict monastic discipline and exclusively practices meditation. Because there is no one better than you to sustain his longevity, be sure to do this!
>
> I responded,
>
> > If he is an authentic Treasure revealer, why does he need to be a hypocrite? The head of Orgyen Minling Monastery is of course very famous for being a Treasure revealer. Hence, I don't know if it is certain that one must be a Vinaya vow holder to be the head of a monastery. I don't have a way to dispel obstacles to his longevity. For one thing, I have a partner. Additionally, because robbing the vows of a Vinaya holder is cause for a great offense, I certainly will not do that.
>
> Gotrül replied,
>
> > Why do you have to be so uptight? You have mastered the pith instructions on the channels, vital essence, and wind, and you do not engage in perverse behavior. Moreover, all you do is benefit others without any negative selfish thoughts, so how could it be an offense? I can make the decision for Gyelsé. In that regard, I guarantee that no harmful defilement will befall you. If you don't take this opportunity now, Dhitrül certainly won't live past thirty-seven or thirty-eight.
>
> Again, I said,
>
> > Even if Gyelsé approves, I have an extraordinary root consort who surpasses him. If he doesn't approve, I won't start a major undertaking. Will it be sufficient if I help him by reciting a feast ritual? Even if that is insufficient, there is absolutely nothing I can do. I will not be duplicitous in maintaining samaya.
>
> Again he responded, "Now go with one of my monks to see Dhitrül and you will each understand what I mean."

Then, I went according to his command.

> Dhitrül spoke at length about both worldly and dharma matters, including key points about the visualization stages of establishing the wheels of the three seats, the exhalation, inhalation, and abiding of wind, and the three vajras. In particular, he prayed and made aspirations that in all his lifetimes and rebirths he would be born as the son of the mother tantra *ḍākinī*s. He gave me his bowl and a necklace of various jewels as gifts and left the actual auspicious connection for later.

I returned to Gotrül and gave him a detailed account of what happened. He commented,

> Until now I didn't realize that you had an extraordinary consort! Now it's wonderful that you have him. Still it is extremely important for you both to be very careful. Like the proverb "when the deities are intense, the demons are intense," at any and all times you cannot let obstacles take over.

Also he gave me his silver-plated bowl, a sealed practice text, and several other items. After this, we returned home.[23]

A fascinating array of elements sound through this passage, which Sera Khandro conveys with both subtlety and vehemence. The pragmatic purpose Sera Khandro cites most often for consort practices comes up front and center here—one of the special powers of female tantric consorts is their power to cure illness and prolong life through sexual yoga (Jacoby 2014, ch. 4). This connection between longevity and particular yogic practices can be found across traditions from Taoism to Hinduism, but here Sera Khandro is having none of it. One problem is that Dhitrül is masquerading as a celibate monk upholding Vinaya vows at the same time as Gotrül is trying to set up a secret liaison for him with her. She critiques this duplicitous behavior of doing one thing in public but another in private with a line for the ages, asking: "Why does he need to be a hypocrite (རྫུལ་འཆོས་བྱེད་ཅི་ལ་དགོས།)?" She provides evidence that pretending to be a celibate monk when actually engaging in consort practices is unnecessary by pointing out that there are indeed well-known monastery leaders in Tibet who are not celibate monks, such as the hereditary leadership of Mindrolling Monastery in central Tibet.

Sera Khandro's next line of defense makes it clear that Gotrül's command to "dispel the obstacles to Dhitrül's longevity" is specifically sexual in nature, for she argues first that she cannot do this because, she says, "I have a partner (ངར་བདག་པོ་ཅན་རེད།)." The Tibetan here (བདག་པོ།) uses a word I have sought to translate neutrally as "partner," but it also means "owner" or "husband," implying that Sera Khandro is one who is under the protection or guardianship of another man and is therefore not available for this liaison. Second, she declines Gotrül's command because she will not commit the sin of robbing the vows of a celibate monk. So far her words are emphatic and definitive.

But Gotrül will not take no for an answer. He insists that his matchmaking efforts are not sinful, bolstering his stance with several lines of argument. The first is theological, for technically speaking, Vajrayāna ethics reconcile celibacy vows with sexual yoga for those with profound degrees of spiritual realization. According to the twentieth-century commentary on Ngari Panchen Pema Wangyi Gyalpo's (1487–1542) *Ascertaining the Three Vows* written by Dudjom Lingpa's reincarnation, Dudjom Jikdrel Yeshé Dorjé, "In prātimokṣa, sexual intercourse must

[23] Dbus bza' mkha' 'gro 2009, 305–7.

be abandoned, whereas the two higher vow categories view sexual intercourse as a method. However, as a method, intercourse must be unstained by desire so that it is performed as a practice" (Ngari Panchen Pema Wangyi Gyalpo 1996, 142). In other words, the individual liberation vows of Sūtrayāna require celibacy, whereas bodhisattva and tantric vows permit sexual intercourse as a method for those capable of utilizing it properly as a practice. Gotrül is claiming that Sera Khandro's realization is such that she can do this without a hint of sexual desire or attachment, therefore rendering her deed undefiled.

Second, Gotrül seeks to assuage Sera Khandro by promising to smooth things over with the man he thinks she is concerned about upsetting. Tellingly, he gets it wrong! He presumes that Sera Khandro is worried about Gyelsé, her husband and the father of their young daughter, but actually Gyelsé is not the one Sera Khandro is thinking about. She corrects Gotrül, explaining that she has "an extraordinary root consort who surpasses him," by which she means her guru Drimé Özer. The third argument Gotrül invokes is the quintessential hard sell: if Sera Khandro does not perform healing sexual services for Dhitrül, he will die!

Sera Khandro remains unmoved by even this prospective calamity, insisting that she will not "be duplicitous in maintaining samaya (དམ་ཚིག་མཉམ་སྐོར་མི་བྱེད།)." In other words, she will not maintain one commitment in public and another in private, thereby implying that the sacred bond she shares with Drimé Özer would be tarnished if she connected with Dhitrül on the sly.

But then she does go to see Dhitrül, following Gotrül's command, and the strength of her initial refusal appears to fade. Gotrül was an important figure in Sera Khandro's life. Not only was he an esteemed incarnate lama at Pelyül Monastery in Golok, but he was also the first person in Golok to recognize Sera Khandro as an extraordinary *ḍākinī* incarnation of Yeshé Tsogyel when she was in her early twenties. Additionally, through prophecies that came to her, Sera Khandro recognized him as one of four main "doctrine holders" (ཆོས་བདག) who would propagate the Buddhist teachings that came to her as revelation. In this case, his importance to her seems to have prevented her from completely refusing his request, demonstrating the extreme difficulty of saying no when a respected Vajrayāna lama insists.

The tenor of Sera Khandro's narration of her actual visit with Dhitrül holds none of the tone of vehement refusal that her initial reaction to it did. She respectfully recounts Dhitrül and her conversation and then offers the nuanced conclusion that they "left the actual auspicious connection for later (རྗེན་འབྲེལ་དངོས་རྗེས་སོར་དུ་བཞག)," suggesting that all she did was talk to him and receive teachings, without any consort practice. This is not a hard no but rather something more like a "maybe later." But "maybe later" sometimes actually means "never," and Dhitrül never reappears in her autobiography.

From a feminist or survivor-centered perspective, this conversation is ambivalent. The reason both men eventually accept Sera Khandro's refusal is not because she does not wish to perform her longevity-enhancing function but because she professes allegiance to the scion of the Dudjom lineage, Drimé Özer. Sera Khandro's demurral on account of having an "extraordinary root consort" emphasizes her status as someone involved in a spiritual partnership that was profoundly important to her. Regardless of whether we are meant to take her refusal to act without his approval as an excuse or at face value as her reason for abstention, it wraps this conversation in a patriarchal permission-seeking tone that mitigates the defiance of her language of refusal. Another mitigating factor is the way Sera Khandro seems to have to tell Gotrül twice that she cannot serve as Dhitrül's "insight lady" (ཤེས་རབ་མ།) because she is already with Drimé Özer. She tells him once before he commands her to go, but only after she returns from visiting Dhitrül does he seem to really hear her, exemplifying that being heard was even harder than saying no. Despite these factors that demonstrate how difficult it was even for Sera Khandro to refuse

unwanted sexual interaction, through this dialogue she effectively criticizes hypocrites and pretenders, deciding for herself with whom she would consort, whether or not men were dying to have her.

Elsewhere in her autobiography, Sera Khandro refuses male spiritual suitors even more adamantly. Perhaps her strongest refusal appears in the following passage in which Sera Khandro narrates events that occurred when she was twenty-four in 1916 while she was living with Gyelsé and raising their three-year-old daughter, Yangchen Drönma (དབྱངས་ཅན་སྒྲོན་མ།, 1913–?). During this time, a man named Gara Gyeltsen (མགར་རྒྱལ་མཚན།, n.d.) showed up, whose name suggests he was Gyelsé's relative:

> One day Gara Gyeltsen came and said again and again, "Since Gyelsé gave me permission to have you, we need to get together."
>
> > I thought to myself that it seemed like his mind had been possessed by demons. I spoke extensively about how one must uphold a foundation of completely pure morality from both dharmic and worldly perspectives, and how one must accumulate merit through the six perfections including generosity and so on, and how one should not waste this precious human birth. Even though I said many things about this, he was so consumed with lust that he not only couldn't understand what I was saying, but he went on and on, saying all kinds of indecent and lewd things with no regard for cause and effect.
>
> This made me extremely depressed. Saddened by people's attitude and conduct in the degenerate era, I said the following:
>
> > Padmasambhava, refuge and lord of the mandala,
> > Ḍākki Tsogyel of the changeless dimension, think of me!
> > Look upon this vagabond Dewai Dorjé with compassion!
> > Please dispel all my obstacles and unfavorable conditions!
> >
> > Listen, you immoral monk—
> > reflect on your own mind!
> > Examine your body, speech, and mind:
> > on the outside, you wear a monk's three robes.
> > On the inside, you are burning with lust like a cock.[24]
> >
> > The thoughts in your mind are like thieving bandits.
> > At all times you consume the food of dark donations.[25]
> > I don't desire someone with an evil body like you.
> > I may be an ordinary person with an inferior female body,
> > but my face is beautiful, that of someone from a *ḍākinī* lineage.
> > My mentality may appear like that of a silly woman,
> > but my mind sees the essence of the unborn three kāyas.
> > My work and activities may look samsaric,
> > but I don't need to part with the primordial wisdom of equanimity.
> > By mastering the ten winds,

[24] The association between lust and a bird (often a rooster) relates to a common depiction of the three poisons (hatred, ignorance, and lust) in the central part of the Wheel of Life in which a bird symbolizes lust, a pig symbolizes ignorance, and a snake symbolizes hatred.

[25] Dark donations (དགོར་རྒྱ) are alms donated to religious specialists by the faithful that become tainted when their recipients consume them with self-interest and without the proper intention and ability to benefit others.

everything appears as the nature of great bliss,
and I am liberated in the expanse of co-extensive space and wisdom.
I don't need someone with a body like yours.
I won't create suffering for this life and the next.

You, immoral one, think carefully:
don't exchange your meaningful body for a meaningless one.
When the fruits of karma undeceivingly ripen,
faint-hearted one, what will you do?
Now, think about this and control yourself.

After I said this, I escaped from the obstacles.[26]

Again a man soliciting Sera Khandro tried to convince her by seeking Gyelsé's permission, but in this instance, like the example above, the idea that Gyelsé's permission determined Sera Khandro's conduct backfired. Again we hear the theme of duplicity, in this case critiquing Gara Gyaltsen's veneer of celibate monastic comportment under which unbridled sexual desire ran rampant. And again Sera Khandro takes the high road, refusing a male religious figure with a confidence that came from knowing that she did not have to comply with these men's demands.

CONCLUSION: "JUST SAY NO" IS INSUFFICIENT

Let us count the ways Sera Khandro said no. At one point she said no because she did not find suitable men to serve as her partners in sexual yoga and because consorting with a human man was not necessary to actualize "the primordial wisdom in which desire is naturally liberated." At other points she said no because stealing the vows of a celibate monastic was cause for a great offense and because pretending to be a celibate monk while secretly taking consorts for the sake of longevity practices or just plain lust was hypocritical and immoral. She also said no because she was already in a spiritual partnership that was of utmost importance to her. She said no forcefully at times when the person soliciting her was not someone she knew well or had any religious or social obligation toward, such as Gara Gyeltsen. And she said no in more nuanced tones when the requestor was someone with whom she shared the sacred bond of samaya (དམ་ཚིག), such as Gotrül.

All this naysaying was necessary in Sera Khandro's life narrative because of all the pressure, dare we call it sexual harassment, she received from myriad sources, some manifesting in her visionary experiences, some sounding through prophecies, and others emerging from mundane human men. The Vajrayāna arguments they used to encourage Sera Khandro's compliance resonate today in some dharma communities—for one, fulfilling prophecies to unite with a particular consort enhances the auspicious connections (རྟེན་འབྲེལ) necessary for revelation and progress on the spiritual path (Jacoby 2023). For another, sexual union with a prophesied consort who possesses curative powers removes obstacles to longevity. And last, if these more arcane justifications fail, there is one further argument that pops up in the aforementioned passages that is likely more jarring for our present-day ears—men seeking Sera Khandro attempted to procure consent first from her spouse, Gyelsé, reminding us of the patriarchal social context in which her spiritual life unfolded.

Sera Khandro's extraordinary qualities radiate through the passages examined in this article. Her mastery of the Vajrayāna path emerges in her eloquent verses of realization, and the

[26] Dbus bza' mkha' 'gro 2009, 237–38.

skill of her nuanced refusals of would-be-consorts she deemed unsuitable stand the test of time. But if even a celebrated Vajrayāna master like Sera Khandro had to find so many artful ways to decline sexual solicitations, how much harder is it for everyday Vajrayāna students to follow her example? Even as we can celebrate Sera Khandro's strength in asserting her right of refusal, it is crucial to note that all this emphasis on naysaying alone is insufficient to effect lasting change. Too much focus on the need for Vajrayāna students to refuse teachers' sexual harassment places the moral imperative on the student instead of the teacher and the community structures that enable such harassment in the first place. Additionally, the possibility of saying no is prone to being weaponized against survivors of sexual violence. It is therefore crucial to spell out that my purpose for detailing the various ways in which Sera Khandro deflected unwanted sexual solicitation is not to add fuel to the victim-blaming fire that many survivors of guru sex abuse face. As Ann Gleig and Amy Langenberg's research on sexual abuse in Buddhist communities demonstrates, it is commonplace for survivors of sex abuse perpetrated by Vajrayāna gurus to then be blamed for not saying no. For example, in the words of one survivor who comes from a Vajrayāna Buddhist community in the US:

> After over a decade of Vajrayāna study and practice with my guru, I finally had the courage to leave the sangha after years of sexual abuse from him. When I met my new guru and described the previous sexual abuse I experienced, my new guru asked me in a sharp tone if I had said no to my previous guru. I tried to explain how hard it is as a student to say no to your guru with whom you have samaya vows and are instructed to see as Buddha and to always follow the command of the guru. My new guru then said that if I had not said no to my former guru around the demands for sex then the abuse was my fault and that I showed a complete lack of common sense. These words remain lodged in my heart and I am still in the process of healing from this experience. I feel great shame that I did not say no.[27]

This survivor is far from alone in this experience; like survivors of other forms of sexual violence, it is often easier to point the finger at the victim than the perpetrator (Niemi and Young, 2016). This is all the more likely when the perpetrators are socially powerful members of prestigious institutions with financial and reputational incentives to support one another. For devoted students in Vajrayāna Buddhist communities, it is difficult to even conceive of saying no to one's guru. As another survivor of guru sex abuse within Vajrayāna Buddhism in the US reported: "When I was a young woman on retreat in a Vajrayāna Buddhist dharma center, it never occurred to me that I could say no to my guru's sexual advances, because he made it clear that this was required in order to attain enlightenment."[28] The work this article does in highlighting the myriad ways in which Sera Khandro said no is not intended as a retrospective judgment on the many Vajrayāna students who did not, and could not, find ways to refuse. Instead, it looks forward to a future in which saying no is more possible and therefore saying yes becomes a real choice.

The stories we tell about the past can help shape how future generations conceive of Vajrayāna Buddhist sexual ethics. This is why it is crucial for new generations of Vajrayāna practitioners, especially young women among them, to know that women within Vajrayāna "tradition" did, at least sometimes, refuse sex, even when it was proffered in the name of salvation. In the case of Sera Khandro, not only did she refuse many such propositions, but also, by her account, she then went on to attain enlightenment! Sera Khandro was not alone in refusing male gurus' solicitations, despite

[27] Thanks to Ann Gleig and Amy Langenberg for sharing this quotation from one of their interviews with survivors of sex abuse in Buddhist communities.

[28] Thanks again to Gleig and Langenberg for sharing this additional quotation from one of their interviews with survivors of sex abuse in Buddhist communities.

the dearth of Tibetan and South Asian sources documenting women's perspectives on consort practices. Jetsun Lochen Rinpoché (1865–1951) of Shuksep Nunnery in central Tibet disapproved of her nuns becoming consorts of male lamas (Havnevik 1999, 98). Before the nineteenth century as well, there is evidence that Vajrayāna women refused consort practice—take, for instance, Mingyur Peldrön (1699–1769), daughter of Mindrolling Monastery's founder, Chögyel Terdak Lingpa, whose biography narrates her rejection of the sexual advances of Lelung Zhepai Dorjé (1697–1740) (Khyung po ras pa 'gyur med 'od gsal 1984; Dyer 2022). This is all the more fascinating because Lelung Zhepai Dorjé's extensive writings cast his interactions with Mingyur Peldrön in a considerably more favorable light. History sounds different when women's perspectives are included, and given that most women's experiences were never committed to paper, we can understand these emergences of women in the Tibetan record to be "like the tip of an iceberg, indicating a rich heritage now lost to us" (Fiorenza 1984, 111).

Sera Khandro did not always refuse to engage in Vajrayāna sexual yoga. Her writings indicate that in specific situations, she found benefit for herself as well as for others in these practices. One conclusion we can draw from this is that there is still much more to learn about sexual yoga in tantric traditions. The presence of Vajrayāna channel and wind practices that harness sexual energies for spiritual liberation challenges oppressive binaries that associate maleness with mind and spiritual salvation and femaleness with body and sexual sin. Vajrayāna practices involving sexuality also reformulate the association between women, impurity, and *saṃsāra* pervasive in Buddhist ascetic contexts. Instead they valorize the human body as a site of spiritual liberation, articulating a type of sacred erotic, in Audre Lorde's sense, in which bodily pleasure transforms into wisdom energy.[29] Before we cancel all this as premodern misogyny, the task at hand is to better understand the purposes, meanings, and interpersonal ethics of sexual yoga, with the aim of lessening the harm being done in the name of dharma as Buddhism continues its global expansion.

The answer to the many sex abuse crises in global Vajrayāna Buddhist communities is not to fault "bad old misogynist Tibet" in favor of the "good modern egalitarian West." Tradition is not a monolith against which progress toward egalitarianism marches forward. It is never a stable backdrop but rather a shifting and multivocal dynamic reflecting the interests of its narrators and adherents. Even though we have to search for them, within Vajrayāna Buddhist tradition we can find the voices of women critiquing the hypocrisy of male Buddhist hierarchs driven by the power of lust masquerading as religion. And as we continue to explore the history of Vajrayāna Buddhist sexuality, these insights stored within the Buddhist tradition can serve as resources for how, and also how not, to envision a Buddhist sexual ethics for the future.

REFERENCES

Almond, Philip C. 1988. *The British Discovery of Buddhism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Asad, Talal, Wendy Brown, Judith P. Butler, and Saba Mahmood. 2013. *Is Critique Secular: Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech*. New York: Fordham University Press.

Bentor, Yael. 2008. "Can Women Attain Enlightenment through Vajrayana Practices?" In *Karmic Passages: Israeli Scholarship on India*, edited by David Shulman and Shalva Weil, 125–35. New York: Oxford University Press.

Blo bzang chos kyi rgyal mtshan. 1973. *Gsung 'bum*, vol. 4 (*nga*). New Delhi: Mongolian Lama Gurudeva. TBRC W23430.

Cabezón, José Ignacio. 2017. *Sexuality in Classical South Asian Buddhism*. Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications.

[29] In "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," Audre Lorde resists the way that "we have attempted to separate the spiritual and the erotic, thereby reducing the spiritual to a world of flattened affect," for "the erotic is the nurturer or nursemaid of all our deepest knowledge" (Lorde 1984, 56).

Changchub, Gyalwa, and Namkhai Nyingpo. 1999. *Lady of the Lotus-Born: The Life and Enlightenment of Yeshe Tsogyal*. Boston: Shambhala.
Chenagtsang, Nida. 2018. *Karmamudra: The Yoga of Bliss: Sexuality in Tibetan Medicine and Buddhism.* Portland, OR: Sky Press.
Clarke, Shayne. 2009. "Monks Who Have Sex: Pārājika Penance in Indian Buddhist Monasticisms." *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 37:1–43.
"Confessions of Kalu Rinpoche." Youtube, November 28, 2011. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z5Ka3bEN1rs&list=PLiPB56AeyS2snKCtjixuTMPt79O72ojCq. Accessed June 11, 2024.
Dadon, Ven. Dr. Tenzin and Ven. Dr. Karma Tashi Choedron. 2019. "Silent No More! Critical Review of Sexual Exploitation in Buddhist Practice – A Monastic Perspective" in *The Proceedings of the 16th Sakyadhita International Conference on Buddhist Women: New Horizons in Buddhism*, 36–40. Blue Mountains, Australia: The Planning Committee of the 16th Sakyadhita Conference in Australia.
Davidson, Ronald M. 2002. *Indian Esoteric Buddhism: A Social History of the Tantric Movement*. New York: Columbia University Press.
Dbus bza' mkha' 'gro (a.k.a. Sera Khandro). 2009. "Rnam thar nges 'byung 'dren pa'i shing rta skal ldan dad pa'i mchod sdong." In *Dbus bza' mkha' 'gro'i gsung 'bum/Mgo log dpe rnying dpe tshogs*, edited by Mgo log khul gna' rtsom bya ba'i gzhung las khang, vol. 25, 1–537. Chengdu: Si khron mi rigs dpe skrun khang.
Delgado, Richard, and Jean Stefancic. 2017. *Critical Race Theory (Third Edition)*. New York: New York University Press.
Don grub dbang rgyal and Nor sde. 1992. *Yul mgo log gi lo rgyus deb ther pad+ma dkar po'i chun po.* Xining: Mtsho sngon mi rigs dpe skrun khang.
Downing, Michael. 2002. *Shoes Outside the Door: Desire, Devotion and Excess at San Francisco Zen Center*. Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint.
Dyer, Alison Melnick. 2022. *The Tibetan Nun Mingyur Peldrön: A Woman of Power and Privilege*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
Finnigan, Mary, and Rob Hogendoorn. 2019. *Sex and Violence in Tibetan Buddhism: The Rise and Fall of Sogyal Rinpoche.* Portland, OR: Jorvik Press.
Fiorenza, Elisabeth Schüssler. 1984. *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation*. Boston: Beacon Press.
Faure, Bernard. 1998. *The Red Thread: Buddhist Approaches to Sexuality*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
Foucault, Michel. 1988. *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.
Gayley, Holly, and Somtso Bhum, 2022. "Parody and Pathos: Sexual Transgression by 'Fake' Lamas in Tibetan Short Stories." *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines* 63 (April): 62–94.
Gilmore, Leigh. 2023. *The #MeToo Effect: What Happens When we Believe Women*. New York, Columbia University Press.
Gleig, Ann. 2019. *"Sex, Scandal, and the Shadow of the Roshi." In American Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Modernity, 84–110*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
——. 2020. "Sexual Violations in American Buddhism Interpretive Frameworks and Generative Responses," *Ten Thousand Things* blog, March 5. Available at http://blog.shin-ibs.edu/sexual-violations-in-american-buddhism-interpretive-frameworks-and-generative-responses/#_ftn5. Accessed June 17, 2024.
Gleig, Ann, and Amy Langenberg. 2020. "Sexual Misconduct and Buddhism—Centering Survivors, *The Shiloh Project: Rape Culture, Religion, and the Bible*. Nov. 18. Available at https://www.shilohproject.blog/sexual-misconduct-and-buddhism-centering-survivors/. Accessed June 17, 2024.
Goldstein, Melvyn C. 2009. "Bouddhisme tibétain et monachisme de masse [Tibetan Buddhism and Mass Monasticism]." In *Des moines et des moniales dans le monde: la vie monastique au miroir de la parenté*, edited by Adeline Herrou and Gisele Krauskopff, 409–23. Toulouse, France: Presses Universitaires de Toulouse le Mirail.
Gyatso, Janet. 2009. "Sex." In *Critical Terms for the Study of Buddhism*, edited by Donald S. Lopez Jr., 271–90. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Havnevik, Hanna. 1999. *"The Life of Jetsun Lochen Rinpoche (1865-1951) as Told in Her Autobiography."* 2 vols. PhD diss., The University of Oslo.
Jabb, Lama. 2015. *Oral and Literary Continuities in Modern Tibetan Literature: The Inescapable Nation.* Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
Jacoby, Sarah. 2014. *Love and Liberation: Autobiographical Writings of the Tibetan Buddhist Visionary Sera Khandro*. New York: Columbia University Press.

——. 2023. "Tendrel: Being Human in a More-than-Human World." In *Living Treasure: Tibetan and Buddhist Studies in Honor of Janet Gyatso*, edited by Holly Gayley and Andrew Quintman, 413–30. Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications.

Jamgön Kongtrul Lodrö Tayé. 1998. *The Treasury of Knowledge Book Five: Buddhist Ethics*. Boston: Snow Lion.

Kaza, Stephanie. 2004. "Finding Safe Harbor: Buddhist Sexual Ethics in America." *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 24:23–35.

Khyung po ras pa 'gyur med 'od gsal. 1984. *Rje btsun mi 'gyur dpal gyi sgron ma'i rnam thar dad pa'i gdung sel*. Thimphu, Bhutan: National Library of Bhutan. *Buddhist Digital Resource Center (BDRC)*, purl.bdrc.io/resource/MW23846. [BDRC bdr:MW23846]. Accessed June 19, 2024.

Langenberg, Amy. 2019. "Reading Against the Grain: Female Sexuality in Classical South Asian Buddhism." *Religion* 49 (4): 728–34.

——. 2020. "Love, Unknowing, and Female Filth: The Buddhist Discourse of Birth as a Vector of Social Change for Monastic Women in Premodern South Asia." In *Transdisciplinary Perspectives on Primary Sources in the Premodern World*, edited by Elizabeth Cecil and Peter Bisschop, 308–340. Asia Beyond Boundaries Series. Boston: De Gruyter.

Lofton, Kathryn. 2018. "Revisited: Sex Abuse and the Study of Religion," Aug. 24. Available at https://tif.ssrc.org/2018/08/24/sex-abuse-and-the-study-of-religion/. Accessed June 19, 2024.

Lopez, Donald Jr., ed. 1995. *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism Under Colonialism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Lorde, Audre. 1984. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press.

Lucia, Amanda. 2018. "Guru Sex: Charisma, Proxemic Desire, and the Haptic Logics of the Guru Disciple Relationship." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 86 (4): 953–88.

Martin, Michel. 2018. "A Look at the #MeToo Movement in the Shambhala Buddhist Community." NPR, July 15. Available at https://www.npr.org/2018/07/15/629282010/a-look-at-the-metoo-movement-in-the-shambhala-buddhist-community. Accessed June 11, 2024.

Newman, Andy. 2018. "'The 'King' of Shambhala Buddhism is Undone by Abuse Report," *New York Times*, July 11. Available at https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/11/nyregion/shambhala-sexual-misconduct.html. Accessed June 19, 2024.

Niemi, Laura, and Liane Young. 2016. "When and Why We See Victims as Responsible: The Impact of Ideology on Attitudes Toward Victims." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 42 (9): 1227–42. Available at https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167216653933.

Ngari Panchen Pema Wangyi Gyalpo. 1996. *Perfect Conduct: Ascertaining the Three Vows*, translated by Khenpo Gyurme Samdrub and Sangye Khandro. Boston: Wisdom Publications.

Oppenheimer, Mark. 2010. "Sex Scandal Has U.S. Buddhists Looking Within." *New York Times*, Aug. 20. Available at https://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/21/us/21beliefs.html. Accessed June 19, 2024.

Oppenheimer, Mark, and Ian Lovett, 2013. "Zen Groups Distressed by Accusations Against Teacher." *New York Times*, Feb. 11. Available at https://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/12/world/asia/zen-buddhists-roiled-by-accusations-against-teacher.html?unlocked_article_code=1.Kk4.TV1d.OLdBlriBa9m_&smid=url-share. Accessed June 19, 2024.

Scherer, Bee. 2021. "Queering Buddhist Traditions." In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*. June 28. Available at https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.765.

"Sexuality, N." Oxford English Dictionary, Oxford UP, July 2023. Available at https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/8985460941. Accessed June 18, 2024.

Stefaniw, Blossom. 2020. "Feminist Historiography and Uses of the Past." *Studies in Late Antiquity* 4 (3):260–283.

Thondup, Tulku. 1986. *Hidden Teachings of Tibet: An Explanation of the Terma Tradition of Tibetan Buddhism*. Boston: Wisdom Publications.

Tsong-ka-pa, H.H. the Dalai Lama, and Jeffrey Hopkins. 1977. *Tantra in Tibet*. Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications.

Wangchuk, Dorji. 2007. *The Resolve to Become a Buddha: A Study of the Bodhicitta Concept in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism*. Tokyo: The International Institute for Buddhist Studies of the ICPBS.

Wedemeyer, Christian. 2007. "Beef, Dog, and Other Mythologies: Connotative Semiotics in Mahāyoga Tantra Ritual and Scripture." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 75 (2): 383–417.

White, David Gordon. 1996. *The Alchemical Body: Siddha Traditions in Medieval India*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

——. 2003. *Kiss of the Yoginī: "Tantric Sex" in its South Asian Contexts*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.