

Ora et Labora: Buddhist Nuns as Road Builders in Zanskar

Marta Normington

Building roads can metaphorically and practically mean constructing new ways for oneself, opening new possibilities and proactively inviting change. It is laying the ground for future access, potential new connectivities, joining up remote settlements on the trail forgotten by administration. It is also a symbol of human resilience, of creating a passage through inhospitable natural terrain. The difficult environment also symbolically reflects karmic hardships in Buddhist soteriological context, and the building of a road - one's resourcefulness and skilfulness of means in carving a spiritual path amidst difficulties and drawbacks. In this sense the high mountain road and the difficult life path of a female Buddhist renunciant reflect each other, highlighting outer and inner labour of transforming obstacles into support for one's spiritual practice.

One spring day, after finishing a class teaching younger nuns some basic English vocabulary, I noticed one of my older students, eighteen-year-old Dorje Palmo, herding donkeys with bags full of sand towards the rarely used path on the other side of the nunnery. As we chatted, I followed her and, to my surprise, I discovered that stones and sand were being carried to that rocky and desolate patch of land, and

the rough ground was being compacted – the nuns were building a road. Immediately compelled to witness and document this activity, I accompanied my nun friends with an old and battered analogue camera, a roll of locally bought black-and-white film and a shovel. The images presented here were thus taken over the course of one spring week in 2008 (during my longer stay at the Khachot Drubling nunnery in Karsha), when quite unexpectedly I found myself involved in building the road to the nunnery, together with the nuns.

Nuns from Karsha nunnery working at the road construction site.

Photo: Marta Normington



Self-reliance in highland desert

Zanskar is a remote, high-altitude, moon surface-like desert nestled between the Greater Himalayan range and the Karakoram, in the north-western Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir. It comprises sparsely populated villages and impressive monasteries with a thriving Tibetan Buddhist culture. Due to its challenging geographical location, the valley remains landlocked for a major part of the year, as heavy snowfall on the high mountain passes blocks the overland road access into the region. Over the centuries, inhabitants of the area learned that in this severe natural environment one needs to rely on one's own hard work, unwavering faith and harmonious relations with neighbours in order to survive and be self-sufficient.



*A view from Karsha
nunnery onto Zaskar
and the Himalayan range,
with a nun's handmade
cell in the foreground.
Photo: Marta Normington*

The road, its symbolic location and the connectivities of renunciation and labour

The road, which was partly built by the nuns, is the northern mountain approach to Karsha nunnery from the villages of Skyagam and Tungri. It is a loose scree trail leading to the nunnery, as well as to an ancient Avalokitesvara temple (known locally as 'Chuchikjall') and to the traditional doctor's (*amchi*) house. It was also the only route connecting the nunnery directly to motorable transport. The alternative trail is a narrow and steep mountain path, accessible only by foot, down the hill on which the nunnery is perched. This takes about twenty minutes and a fair bit of physical effort to climb, especially when carrying heavy supplies. However, this narrow path, at the dizzying height of 3,670m above sea level, was (in 2008) the main access route to the nunnery from Karsha village below, and further on to Padum, the largest village and the administrative centre of the Zaskar region.

The location of the nunnery and the roads leading to it seem at the same time physical and symbolic. If one reads architecture and spatial positioning in the built environment as a manifesto of the forces guiding the social lives and aspirations of their constructors and inhabitants, we may note a clear separation between the three distinct worlds of the valley: nunnery, monastery and village. By looking at the interstitial spaces between them – the “non-places” (Augé 1992) of roads and paths – we can learn about connectivities and distances, simultaneously joining and dividing them. Roads and paths serve as connectors of places and as joiners of the gravity centres of different activities. They are spaces of movement and multidirectional flows. Just like frontiers in Michel de Certeau's analysis, they can serve as “a narrative symbol of exchanges and encounters” (de Certeau 1988: 127).



Location of the nunnery above the village of Karsha: the small settlement higher up on the left.

Photo: Marta Normington

The separation between the earthly, mundane goings on of the village and the sacrum of religious life at the nunnery is reflected in the latter's location high above the village and its worldly affairs. And yet, nuns travel continuously on the path between these separated yet intertwined realities, sometimes even a few times a day, running errands and accomplishing tasks for the benefit of both: the monastery-based monks and the village-dwelling families. Instead of being detached, the nuns are ultra-connected and torn between these worlds, serving as links, free labourers and 'dutiful daughters' in all the spatially divided and yet interrelated realities. Their ever-shuttling position reveals highly connected social worlds, with distinct roles and responsibilities attributed to them.

Nun travelling the zigzagging main path between the village and the nunnery.

Photo: Marta Normington



The road in this context is a link between renunciation and societal duty, between one's spiritual life and the daily demands of subsistence and earning a living. It connects a place of spiritual, religious and intellectual retreat from the demands of village life, with the realm of mundane, labour intensive activity.

The bumpy road to enlightenment: female Buddhist monastics as labourers

Buddhist nuns of Zanskar are labourers who sustain their position in a difficult natural and social environment through various acts of labour and self-sacrifice. In exchange for the work of their body, they gain a livelihood, freedom to practice Dharma and limited autonomy.



In the climatically and geographically challenging high-altitude world of Zanskar, one still needs to burn dried yak dung for fuel in order to stay warm in winter, and bring water from a partially frozen high mountain stream half an hour's walk away to make a cup of tea. And it is physical stamina, not spiritual-cerebral detachment, that accomplishes these tasks. The nuns' toned, sturdy bodies practice Buddhism in the most down-to-earth and physical way, also while building local infrastructure.

Fifteen-year-old Namdrol poses for the photo while waiting for donkeys to be loaded at the road construction site.

Photo: Marta Normington

The only assistance the nuns get is the forced labour of the borrowed 'beasts of burden': Himalayan donkeys.
Photo: Marta Normington



The work involves lifting heavy bags full of sand. It requires collective effort: harmonious and dedicated teamwork.
Photo: Marta Normington



Namdrol on yet another donkey-herding trip between the nunnery and the road.

Photo: Marta Normington

Improving the infrastructure for future rebirths

According to Buddhist soteriological discourse and the resulting concept of an 'economy of merit' (a hidden spiritual economy system) (Gutschow 2004), material and immaterial worlds, deeds and karma mix, intermingle and are exchanged. In this context, the road being built as a project beneficial to the whole community becomes a metaphorical road to enlightenment, where labour for the common good and any suffering endured in the process are an act of merit-making, symbolically used to purify oneself of negative karma accumulated in past lives. Thus, by laying



In the evening, after another day of work: the road in the process of being built.

Photo: Marta Normington

the rocky foundations for the new access road, the nuns are also symbolically laying the foundations of merit for their future wellbeing in the next life, not only in terms of resources available through access to a motorable road, but also that of a well-founded spiritual path. This path is harsh yet rewarding, providing a speedy way to karmic cleansing and merit. Eventually it leads to the highest Buddhist goal: liberation from the suffering of the samsaric cycle of rebirths, in the form of enlightenment.

Sweet tea by the roadside: personal reflections and notes



The work was backbreaking but, in such good company, it was also fun. We had numerous tea breaks, chatting and playing practical jokes on each other.

There was also no clear goal in near sight: the road had been under construction for the past few years and it was said that it would be ready in the next few years (or so

Thirteen-year-old Chotsok and eighteen-year-old Dorje posing for a photograph with their work donkey.

Photo: Marta Normington

I heard from the nuns). The time of its completion, though, did not seem to matter that much. What counted was the act of building itself – slow but steady contribution.



Ani Lobzang, Ani Angmo and Ani Kundzes take a break to sit down and rest on the road building site.
Photo: Marta Normington



Nuns and the author helping in the process of working on the road.
Photo: one of the nuns of Khachot Drubling nunnery, Karsha, Zanskar

Coming from Europe, with its social bureaucratic system where most work is delegated to 'specialised others', it still puzzles me that there I was - an unskilled labourer and a DIY builder, contributing with the work of my body to the collective effort of creating a path through the challenging natural environment, while learning some difficult lessons. In the process I acquired knowledge about the landscape – its limitations and demands – and about myself and the body I inhabit, as well as about my own society, with its mixed blessings and restrictions.



As I sat down to have a cup of tea in the evening after the day's work, I felt somewhat like how I imagine the builders of the great European cathedrals of the past might have done: a sense of pride in undertaking a task that is greater than oneself. These past engineers, builders and dreamers would rarely live to see their work's completion. But that was no big concern. The task was left to be finished by future generations: the labour and the ideas connected to it were from the outset involved in a grander scheme of things. Just like life itself, it was all a necessary work in progress.

Tea break at the rock collecting area. In the foreground on the left Ani Lobzang Dolma sipping her sweet milky tea.

Photo: Marta Normington

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Author:



Marta Normington is a mixed-media artist and documentary photographer, currently based in Munich, Germany. She holds a Master of Fine Arts degree from the Multimedia Communication Department of University of Arts in Poznań, Poland, and M.Sc. in cross-cultural psychology from SWPS University, Warsaw. She also studied documentary photography at University of South Wales, UK, and Tibetan and Mongolian studies at University of Warsaw. In 2007-2008 she spent almost a year residing in a remote Buddhist monastery in Zanskar, in the Indian Himalayas.

Marta travels extensively and slowly, both in Europe and Asia. She is interested in artistic re-interpretation of anthropological methods and practices, as well as experimental documentary forms, the relationship between image and reality, and collaborations between arts and science. She is fascinated by fluidity, transitory states, rhizomatic journeys, and crossing borders - both physical and disciplinary. She creates installations comprising photography, objects, text and video.

www.martanormington.com

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