
Review of *The Words and World of Ge bcags Nunnery*

Nicholas Hobhouse, University of Hong Kong

Keywords: *Tibetan Buddhism, nuns, Tantra, meditation, embodied knowledge, ethnography*

Elizabeth McDougal. *The Words and World of Ge bcags Nunnery: Tantric Meditation in Context*. Brill, 2024. Pp. 238; ebook \$25.00; hardback \$109.00, (978-90-04-69174-2). <https://brill.com/display/title/69349>

Elizabeth McDougal's *The Words and World of Ge bcags Nunnery: Tantric Meditation in Context* is a pioneering ethnographic study of a Nyingma nunnery located in the Eastern Tibet region of Nangchen, in present-day Qinghai province in China. A notable feature of Géchak (*Ge bcags*) is that it continues to follow exclusively the contemplative practice lineage of its founder, Tsangyang Gyatso (1848–1909). This strong emphasis on contemplative practice used to be more common in Nyingma and Kagyü circles. However, Géchak is now an outlier among large monasteries and nunneries not only in contemporary Nangchen but also across the wider Tibetan Buddhist world because it has not established a monastic college dedicated to the scholastic study of Buddhist treatises. No Tibetan Buddhist monastic institution like Géchak has previously been the subject of such a rigorous ethnographic study, and McDougal's work therefore serves as a valuable counterweight to the multiple ethnographies focused on Tibetan Buddhist institutions with a scholastic orientation.¹ The potential demise of Géchak's system of contemplative practice, which McDougal highlights in her conclusion, lends her work an added urgency and poignancy.

The book, which is based on McDougal's doctoral dissertation, has a prologue, a thorough introduction, six substantive chapters, a conclusion, and two appendices. Its chapters are logically organized and the book as a whole is easily navigable thanks to an extensive table of contents and a useful index. Thirty-nine beautiful photos interspersed throughout the text help to bring the descriptions to life.

An underlying question that motivates McDougal's research is whether Géchak's nuns acquire different "ways of knowing" as a result of their holistic contemplative training compared to those trained in an intellectual, scholastic fashion (7–11). For example, she is intrigued by how nuns who are experts in a given tantric ritual, and who recite its accompanying text for multiple days every year, are often unable to name its main deity (195). McDougal's compelling suggestion, developed throughout her work, is that this is not evidence of stupidity. Rather, she takes it as indicative of the nuns' orientation to a different kind of embodied, experiential knowledge. This kind of knowledge, she shows, is inculcated through multiple aspects of the training and way of life at Géchak (the "world" of the book's title), including the manner in which nuns read their texts (the "words" of the title).

McDougal's methodology involves some textual analysis but emphasizes the standard ethnographic technique of participant observation, which she conducted over more than a decade,



tracing back to her time as a nun in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition (although she was not a full-time member of Géchak). While she sometimes quotes from the tantric compositions attributed to Tsangyang Gyatso, her central concern is not so much to elucidate these texts in the abstract as to show the experiential ways in which they are read and realized. Indeed, in her discussion of her “decolonial knowledge approach,” she rejects what she takes to be the “classical paradigm” in Buddhist studies, namely, the prioritization of literal, purportedly objective understandings of such texts over the embodied meanings experienced by those who put them into practice (11–13).²

The first chapter of the book traces the history of Géchak from the time of its foundation in 1892 to the present day. The second chapter focuses on Tsangyang Gyatso’s autobiography and the sixteen volumes of his written corpus. Together, these two chapters provide the necessary context for the ethnographic study that constitutes the remainder of the book.

In the third chapter, McDougal first examines the nuns’ backgrounds and Géchak’s physical environment. She then explains the structure of the nuns’ shared contemplative lives. Upon joining Géchak, they tend to spend a year looking after its yak herd. They then complete the required preliminary practices before entering three-year retreat where they first learn the main tantric practices of Géchak’s lifelong contemplative system. After completing the retreat, they are assigned to one of sixteen divisions devoted to the practice of a particular meditation deity. They also participate in eighteen “great accomplishment” ceremonies each year.

The fourth chapter examines the “mind-body paradigm and principles of learning” at Géchak (126). This covers content that will be familiar to scholars of Buddhist Tantra, such as the foundational views and actual methods of deity yoga. An important question is how the nuns learn these challenging topics, which are, as McDougal notes, “philosophically and psychologically sophisticated” (140). McDougal explains that the nuns’ understanding of difficult issues is inculcated gradually over many years through informal instructions, rather than through the systematic classes one would find in a monastic college. Moreover, throughout their training the nuns are regularly reminded that the pith of these instructions is the conceptually simple (yet spiritually profound) principle of buddha-nature, namely, that buddhahood is already present as the nature of their awareness and that the meditation deities are fundamentally inseparable from this nature. Attitudes such as faith, devotion, and compassion also play a central role in the contemplative life of the nunnery.

The fifth and most original chapter of the book examines the nuns’ “tacit quality of knowledge” and their “ways of reading” (155). Whereas a typical scholar’s engagement with a text would be oriented toward the literal meaning of the words, Géchak’s nuns repeatedly chant and gradually memorize their texts over many years, without an initial concern to decipher verbal meaning. As they slowly gain proficiency in ritual actions and visualizations, and as they internalize contemplative instructions while drawing inspiration from the examples of older nuns, their chanting of the texts can come to serve as the basis for experiences that, by virtue of being embodied and nonconceptual, transcend the limited verbal meanings that a scholar would find in the same pages. To illuminate this process, McDougal draws on theoretical discussions from various academic fields, including those concerning “tacit” and “explicit” forms of knowledge and those relating to the supposed dichotomy between orality and literacy.³

McDougal’s sixth chapter presents her ethnographic observations from a great accomplishment ceremony. Here, she pulls together and concretizes various themes from the

earlier chapters. She offers a speculative translation of a section of the ritual text, according to her estimation of a young nun's experience with it.

The great strength of McDougal's book lies in its thorough and insightful presentation of the various elements of Géchak's contemplative system and of the ways in which these interact to support the nuns' spiritual development. It also constitutes a notable addition to the growing academic corpus on the lives and practices of Tibetan Buddhist women, although a discussion of its merits from that perspective lie beyond this scope of this review.⁴ Moreover, it can be read as a powerful refutation of the Buddhist modernist distinction between (soteriologically useful) meditation and (obsolete) ritual; within Géchak's contemplative system, no such distinction can be found.⁵ McDougal's work therefore makes a significant contribution to Tibetan and Buddhist Studies and will be of interest to academics in the field of Contemplative Studies more generally. With the remainder of this review, I will discuss what I take to be some minor weaknesses of the book. However, these critical remarks should not be understood as detracting significantly from my overall praise for McDougal's work.

The first issue relates to how McDougal frames the Géchak nuns' style of knowing and reading in sharp contrast to an intellectual, scholastic style. She draws attention to the many suggestions in Géchak's texts and oral discourses that conceptual thought is an obstacle to the nonconceptual awareness of one's buddha-nature (76–80, 211). Such anti-intellectual rhetoric is common in certain Nyingma tantric texts and communities. For example, I have often heard it at Yachen Gar, another contemplative institution in Eastern Tibet. It is entirely appropriate for McDougal to report the attitudes of Géchak's nuns. However, given the centrality of this theme, one would expect McDougal to occasionally step back from the emic perspective and, with the benefit of etic distance, address the extensive Tibetan Buddhist discussions (which have been well documented in the academic literature) about how intellectual training might in fact reinforce tantric practice and ultimate realization. The classic Tibetan Buddhist rubric of study, reflection, and meditation is, surprisingly, not mentioned once in her entire book. Nor is the age-old Tibetan Buddhist debate about gradual versus sudden paths to enlightenment.

In general, McDougal tends to associate intellectual endeavors with groupings and abstractions extraneous to the Nyingma and Kagyü orders, including Western traditions of knowledge, globalized educational values, the scientific-materialist Communist Party of China (6) and, within Tibetan contexts, the Geluk and Sakya orders (76). Géchak's reluctance to establish a monastic college is presented, in effect, as a heroic defense of its traditional contemplative identity, even while other Nyingma and Kagyü institutions are swept up in pernicious modern trends. McDougal does observe briefly that certain nonsectarian figures of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, including Nyingma masters like Mipham Gyatso (1846–1912) and Khenpo Zhenga (1871–1927), sought to “bolster” contemplative practice lineages through the promotion of scholastic learning (39–40). However, McDougal downplays the extent to which such masters advocated intellectual study, preferring to emphasize that they engaged in “less analysis” than Geluk scholars (40), that they still encouraged “oral meditation instructions and prolonged retreat sessions” (40), and that even their scholastic activities were sometimes inspired by visionary experiences (73). Each of these points is true in isolation, but they are selectively chosen and, taken together, can give a somewhat misleading impression. Mipham Gyatso, for example, doubted that

all but the most exceptional individuals could attain high realization without prior intellectual analysis. He writes in his *Beacon of Certainty*:

By just examining the origin, abiding, and cessation of the mind,
it is possible to determine truthlessness.
But this is extremely rare;
not everyone can achieve realization this way.

In cutting through to primordial purity,
one needs to perfect the Prāsaṅgika view.⁶

If Mipham Gyatso's claim is correct, most of Géchak's nuns are probably making little progress in their contemplative practice, since they eschew the systematic study of topics like Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka. McDougal's discussion would be strengthened if she properly represented these alternative perspectives.

A second issue concerns the obvious difficulty of evaluating the inner lives of Géchak's nuns. McDougal is cognizant that the embodied transformation that the nuns aspire to achieve is neither measurable by a third party by virtue of being a subjective experience, nor directly articulable by the nuns themselves by virtue of being nonconceptual (7, 149, 215). She therefore relies heavily on indirect signs that appear to indicate this transformation, including the nuns' happy and cheerful disposition (105), their emotional perceptiveness (109), their warm-heartedness (143), and their poise and steady gaze (149). She also mentions some of the miraculous signs that the nuns themselves take as evidence of realization, such as corpses not decomposing (102, 152) and the spontaneous appearance of rainbows (131, 151). Perhaps of more interest to academic researchers who might set little store by such signs, she briefly cites preliminary neuroscientific data showing that psychophysical energy can be generated in deity yoga (134–136). However, it does not appear that the nuns themselves participated in any such experimental studies.

Given the fundamental inaccessibility of inner experience to anyone but the subject, McDougal's reliance on indirect signs is legitimate. A slight frustration, however, is that McDougal does not seem to have exhausted all of the resources available to her to shed light on the nuns' inner states and contemplative accomplishments. Notably, McDougal refers on multiple occasions to the "demonstrative exams" in which "a nun performs her yogas or describes her meditation experience to a teacher in person" (164). However, apart from a brief mention of the famous "wet sheet" ceremony, in which the nuns prove their mastery of tummo inner heat (115–116), and a throwaway remark about some nuns allegedly being able to hold their breath for minutes on end (143), McDougal does not offer further details about the content of these exams or what exactly might constitute successful performance in them.

Moreover, it seems to me that McDougal could have done more to elicit testimony from certain nuns about experiences that might have been amenable to verbalization, such as any changes over the years in their ability to visualize tantric deities. McDougal emphasizes the reticence of the nuns, which she attributes in part to their "culturally conditioned meekness" (149). However, she also reports how one nun unabashedly asked her about the quality of her own meditation practice (79). I therefore cannot help but wonder whether some of the reticence might have come from McDougal. As it is, she is somewhat overreliant on flimsily grounded speculation about the nuns'

inner states. This in turn casts slight doubt on her suggestion that the nuns' training system is effective in bringing about its intended goals and that a number of the nuns have probably attained significant realization (149).

To finish, it should be noted that there are a few editing issues. The text contains more typographical errors than one would expect, both in the English (for example, "emobody" [*sic*] on 215) and in the Tibetan transliterated according to the Wylie system (for example, "*bshad drwa*" rather than "*bshad grwa*" repeatedly on 40–42). More bothersome is the inconsistency around whether Tibetan terms or their English equivalents are used in the main text, and whether or not they are followed by a translation in brackets. For example, page 7 has "Buddha nature (*bde gshegs snying po*; Skt. *sugatagarbha*)"; page 77 has "'Buddha nature' (*bde gshegs snying po*; Skt. *sugatagarbha*, *tathāgatagarbha*)" but also "the *bde gshegs snying po* principle of Buddha nature"; page 78 has "*bde gshegs snying po*" without the English translation but also "Buddha nature" without the Tibetan translation, and so on.

Leaving aside such inconsistencies, the stylistic choice to frequently employ transliterated Tibetan terms in the main text is characteristic of Brill's Tibetan Studies Library, which is the series in which McDougal's book is published. An unfortunate effect of this might be to make the book less accessible to those outside the field of Tibetology. That would be a pity, as McDougal's work deserves a wide readership.

NOTES

¹ Book-length ethnographies of contemporary monastic institutions (or sets of institutions) with a scholastic orientation include: Jane Caple, *Morality and Monastic Revival in Post-Mao Tibet* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2019); Chandra Ehm, *Queens without a Kingdom Worth Ruling: Buddhist Nuns and the Process of Change in Tibetan Monastic Communities* (Varja Books, 2024); Michael Lempert, *Discipline & Debate: The Language of Violence in a Tibetan Buddhist Monastery* (University of California Press, 2012); and Kenneth Liberman, *Dialectical Practice in Tibetan Philosophical Culture: An Ethnomethodological Inquiry into Formal Reasoning* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004). In addition, a seminal work on Tibetan Buddhist scholastic education that cannot be narrowly categorized as ethnography but nonetheless includes various ethnographic observations and recollections is Georges Dreyfus, *The Sound of Two Hands Clapping: The Education of a Buddhist Monk* (University of California Press, 2003).

² In her discussion of the “classical paradigm” in Buddhist Studies, McDougal cites directly from two articles in the same issue of the *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*: José Cabezón, “Buddhist Studies as a Discipline and the Role of Theory,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 18, no. 2 (1995): 231–268 and Luis Gómez, “Unspoken Paradigms: Meanderings through the Metaphors of a Field,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 18, no. 2 (1995): 183–230.

³ Academic discussions of the distinction between “tacit” and “explicit” knowledge, which, in my view, are of considerable relevance to the field of Contemplative Studies in general, trace their origin to the works of Michael Polanyi, notably: Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (University of Chicago Press, 1966).

⁴ Recent academic scholarship on Tibetan Buddhist women is surveyed and discussed in: Alison Melnick, “Beyond the Recovery of Women: The Evolving Study of Gender in Tibetan Buddhism,” *Religion Compass* 14, no. 5 (2020): 1–10.

⁵ For a thorough overview of major trends within Buddhist modernism, see David McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁶ John Pettit, *Mipham's Beacon of Certainty: Illuminating the View of Dzogchen, the Great Perfection* (Wisdom Publications, 1999), 209.