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Yeshe Tsogyel: Enlightened Consort, Great Teacher, Female Role Model

By Rita M. Gross

Recently, two English translations of Yeshe Tsogyel's biography have been published.¹ They constitute an important resource for those interested in Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism who do not read Tibetan. Yeshe Tsogyel, probably Tibet's most influential and famous female religious teacher and one of the world's most significant female religious exemplars, lived in the eighth century C.E. An important teacher in her own right, she was also, in her early life, the student of Padmasambhava as well as one of his principal consorts until he left Tibet. Padmasambhava is a semi-legendary figure, the first great tantric master to come from India to Tibet to teach Vajrayāna Buddhism.

This text is so provocative and intriguing that scholars and theologians with many interests can profitably study it, thereby enriching their reflections and their scholarship. I come to this text as an historian of religions, a feminist theologian, and a practitioner of Vajrayāna Buddhism. I am primarily interested in the text as hagiography and I will be using it in the way the hagiography traditionally functions—as inspiration to student practitioners who look to the great teachers as role models. However, many of my concerns and conclusions are not traditional.

The text is both difficult and provocative. Despite many years of the study and practice of Tibetan Buddhism, I often found the text difficult because of the inevitable Vajrayāna technical language that preserves the inner secrets of the oral tradition while revealing the outer level of information. If this text is difficult for someone with some access to Vajrayana oral tradition. I do not know what it would be like for someone with little knowledge, especially practical knowledge, of Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism. At times, when Tsogyel's various practices and initiations are described, the text may read to an outsider like the book of Leviticus. On the other hand, in terms of the sheer story line I have never read a similar story and find it quite fascinating.

Anyone familiar with the basic mythic outline of the hero's life² and with the life of Siddhārtha Gautama and other great Buddhist exemplars will immediately recognize that Tsogyel's life-story manifests those patterns. In addition, the biography is characterized by a strong element of the kind of sacred history typical of Tibetan historical writing. In sacred history the story is told from the point of view of enlightenment and narrates the emergence of primordially enlightened mind into phenomenal reality. Thus many events in

Tsogyel's biography are told on two levels—on a “mythic” level narrating the life of a great human religious teacher and on the level of “sacred history” narrating how enlightenment manifested in the form of Tsogyel. These two forms of the story can seem far apart and the “sacred history” is often based on esoteric concepts.³

Tsogyel's biography is divided into eight chapters. Their titles, paraphrased or quoted from Tarthang Tulku's translation, summarize well her life history. (1) “Yeshe Tsogyel sees that the time has come for her to teach and appear in the world”—which narrates, on the esoteric level, the story of her conception. (2) “The arrival and manifestation of Yeshe Tsogyel in the land of Tibet”—which narrates Tsogyel's exoteric human conception and birth. (3) “Yeshe Tsogyel recognizes the impermanence of all things and relies upon a teacher”—which narrates Tsogyel's failed attempts to avoid conventional marriage, her suffering within conventional marriage, and her eventual union with her guru, Padmasambhava. (4) “Yeshe Tsogyel asks her teacher for instruction in the Dharma”—which narrates Tsogyel's early training and her acquisition, by buying him out of slavery, of a principal consort, Atsara Sale. (5) “The manner in which Tsogyel did her practices”—which narrates Tsogyel's solitary three-year practice in a cave at the snow line of a Himalayan mountain, the incredible austerity and discipline of those years, and the sexual and other fantasies that were part of her experience in those years. (6) “A summary of the auspicious signs which occurred as Yeshe Tsogyel practiced and the siddhis she manifested after achieving realization.” (7) “The manner in which Yeshe Tsogyel acted to benefit sentient beings”—which narrates Tsogyel's enlightened compassionate activities throughout her life. Finally, (8) “How Yeshe Tsogyel reached her goal, achieved Buddhahood and entered the expanse of all that is.”⁴ Out of the wealth of her story I have chosen to focus here on Tsogyel's relational life, especially focusing on how her relational life intersects with her practice and her eventual achievement of enlightenment and Buddhahood. Initially I had thought I would focus only on her relationships as consort, but I found her relationships with women so interesting that I also want to include them in my discussion.

In my reading, the single most dominant theme in the story of Tsogyel's relational life is the single-mindedness with which relationships are seen, not as ends in themselves, but as aids or detriments on the path of practice to Tsogyel's eventual realization of Buddhahood. When Tsogyel is portrayed as consort to Padmasambhava the emphasis is on how the relationship fosters her spiritual training and development, not on their hypothetical erotic relationship or on how she meets Padmasambhava's needs. Similarly her relationships with various other consorts foster her own spiritual development as well as theirs. They are not primarily erotic encounters to meet quasi-instinctual needs. The consort-relationship develops both partners in their spirituality which though no different from ordinary physical existence, nevertheless, pushes people beyond conventional habitual patterns into

luminous awareness of the sacredness inherent in ordinary experience. Her relationships with women were similarly oriented to practice and realization. Tsogyel is seen either as the discoverer and teacher of talented female practitioners or a sister-adept of other highly developed women. In several episodes of her biography Tsogyel and other female adepts meet, share teachings with one another, and delight in each other's *dharmic* company.

This overreaching theme in Tsogyel's relational life is foreshadowed already in the esoteric story of her conception—"Tsogyel saw the need for beings to be taught and manifested in the world".⁵ Seen from the view point of enlightenment narrated in sacred history, Tsogyel is a multilayered being. Her *dharmakaya* manifestation is Samantabhadrī—primordial Buddhahood; her *sambhogakāya* manifestation is Vajrayoginī—one of the most important *yidams* (personal, non-theistic deities) of Tibet; in the *nirmāṇakāya*, the apparition-body of ordinary human form, she is Yeshe Tsogyel, 8th century Tibetan woman, great teacher, enlightened consort.⁶ Seen from the other side, this Tibetan woman who exerted herself on the path of practice and attained Buddhahood in a single lifetime manifests the inherent *sambhogakāya* and *dharmakāya* qualities of all beings and all experience. To appreciate Tsogyel's life, it is necessary always to read and hear the story on many levels at once, especially on the levels of both myth and sacred history.

According to the narrative of her prehistory, Tsogyel, as a lady-merchant appeared before a previous Buddha and expressed her vow never to be reborn except to benefit beings. Eventually she became the (Hindu) Goddess Gangā, revered Śākyamuni Buddha and became the (Hindu) Goddess Sarasvatī. Then, according to the text, Padmasambhava reflected, "Now is the time for the Goddess Sarasvatī to manifest and help me spread the Mantrayāna teachings,"⁷ which led to Tsogyel's human conception and birth. At the same time, on another level, her *sambhogakaya* level, Tsogyel is quintessentially understood as the speech emanation of Vajravārāhī (a slightly more esoteric form of Vajrayogini). Vajravārāhī, like most *guru*-s and *yidam*-s, takes five emanations: body, speech, mind, quality and action. Padmasambhava, who "worked through appropriate and mystic consorts in order to spread the Mantrayana doctrine,"⁸ had consorts who were emanations of each of these five aspects of Vajravārāhī. In addition, there was a sixth "essence *ḍākinī*" who was also an important consort, as well as "...appropriate and mystic consorts more numerous than the sesame seeds it would take to fill the four walls of a house."⁹ Tsogyel is the speech emanation and one of two major consorts. Some of the other consorts are important in the unfolding of Tsogyel's relational life-history.

Having seen the need for Tsogyel's manifestation in the world, the *guru* and *ḍākinī* (Padmasambhava and Tsogyel in supramundane form) meet in supramundane realms to engender Tsogyel. The story of her conception is told on two levels. On one level, "the vajra of the *Yab* joined the Lotus of the *Yum* and together they entered the state of great equanimity. . . . The Great Bliss of the *Yab-Yum* penetrated everywhere into all realms of the world, and

great tremors and earthquakes shook the universe. Light rays burst forth like shooting stars from the union of the *Yab* and *Yum*. The red letter *A* came into view, and from it spiralled a garland of white vowels. The white letter *VAM* appeared and from it spiralled a chain of red consonants. The lights and letters penetrated into the world, striking the ground. . . in Tibet.”¹⁰ Meanwhile, on another level, “One day when the Prince, my father, was twenty-five years old, while he and his queen, my mother, were enjoying the pleasures of love-making, my mother had a vision.”¹¹ Extraordinary visions continued throughout the night for both. Nine months later the queen gave birth painlessly to a female baby with unusual abilities. Almost immediately, it was predicted that either she would become a great religious teacher or the consort of an emperor, an obvious parallel to the Buddha’s life story.

Despite this extraordinary conception and birth, as is typical of many mythic biographies, the parents had absolutely no appreciation for her extraordinary potentialities and were concerned primarily with making a proper marriage for Tsogyel. This marriage was very difficult to arrange because Tsogyel’s mundane beauty aroused intense jealousy between the mundane kings. Finally her parents simply sent her away, with the edict that whatever man caught her first could have her and no one else could wage war over that event. Tsogyel’s desire not to enter such a marriage was not taken into account by anyone. When captured, she resisted to the extent that her feet sank into a boulder as if it were mud and only after being whipped “until my back was a bloody pulp,”¹² did she submit. However, she kept her resolution to obtain enlightenment in a single life and escaped while her captors celebrated her capture in a drunken stupor. Living in a cave, subsisting on fruit, she was found out, and the wars over her threatened to continue. To end the turmoil, the emperor took Tsogyel as wife. The other suitors had to submit and soon thereafter, the emperor, who was eager to learn the Buddhist teachings, gave Tsogyel to the guru as part of his *maṅḍala*-offering.

This turn of events suited Tsogyel perfectly, since she cared only to learn the teachings and her guru was willing to teach her. However, she did not receive the full teachings at this point. Her guru consort, Padmasambhava, told her “. . . without a consort, a partner of skillful means, there is no way that you can experience the mysteries of Tantra. . . . So go to the valley of Nepal where there is a sixteen-year-old-youth with a mole on his right breast . . . find him and make him your ally.”¹³ She found her consort, after a long harrowing journey, but she found him in slavery and had to purchase his freedom. She did so by raising from the dead the son of an important Nepali family. They paid her with gold, which she used to purchase the freedom of her consort. Soon thereafter Tsogyel matured her practice with a three-year solitary retreat at the snowline. Well into the retreat, among the many illusions she found it necessary to experience were projections of:

“charming youths, handsome, with fine complexions, smelling sweetly,

glowing with desire, strong and capable, young men at whom a girl need only glance to feel excited. They would begin by addressing me respectfully, but they soon became familiar, relating obscene stories and making lewd suggestions. Sometimes they would play games with me: gradually they would expose their sexual organs, whispering, ‘Would you like this, sweetheart?’ and ‘Would you like to milk me, darling?’... all the time... trying all kinds of seductive foreplay. Overcome by the splendour of my *samādhi*, some of them vanished immediately; some I reduced to petty frauds by insight into all appearances as illusion;”¹⁴

However, during later stages of her practice, she practiced “the last austerity practiced for my own benefit. . . . The austerity of the “seed-essence of coincident Pleasure and Emptiness” . . . with three consorts including the redeemed slave.¹⁵ Very soon after completing this practice, she returned to her *guru* Padmasambhava. He praised her dharmic accomplishment lavishly and extensively after saying:

“O *yoginī* who has mastered the Tantra,
The human body is the basis of the accomplishment of wisdom
And the gross bodies of men and women are equally suited.
But if a woman has strong aspiration, she has higher potential.”¹⁶

After this point the narrative focuses more on Tsogyel’s accomplishments and her activities to benefit others, though she continues further advanced practices as well. Immediately after Padmasambhava had praised her accomplishment and made the above comments about female practitioners, he suggested that she find a certain youth who would be her consort in the Yoga of Immortality Practice. She replied that she also wanted the initiation of Vajrakīlaya or Dorje Phurba, the Remover of Obstacles, specifically because of obstacles from the outside world that she, a woman, faced.

“Inadequate women like me with little energy and an inferior birth incur the whole world’s hostility. When we go begging the dogs are hostile. If we possess food or wealth then thieves molest us. If we are attractive we are bothered by fornicators. If we work hard the country people are hostile. Even if we do nothing the tongues of malicious gossips turn against us. If our attitude is improper then the whole world is hostile. Whatever we do, the lot of a woman on the path is a miserable one. To maintain our practice is virtually impossible, and even to stay alive is very difficult.”¹⁷

After receiving the Vajrakīlaya initiation, she quickly found the required new consort and together they quickly “achieved identity with Dorje Phurba, . . . had a vision of the deities of Phurba’s *maṇḍala* and gained Phurba’s *siddhi*.”¹⁸

We are now at the last two chapters of Tsogyel's biography concerning her activities in "establishing, spreading, and perpetuating the teaching" and her "fruition and Buddhahood." She gains innumerable disciples, both female and male, and brings many of them to high levels of realization. She also leaves many *terma*¹⁹ texts in various places to be rediscovered later, when the time is ripe. These activities occurred both while she was with Padmasambhava and after his departure, when she remained behind, "because of her superiority to work for the welfare of beings and to fill the earth with the Guru's teaching."²⁰

After Padmasambhava's death she performed her final austerity "the exchange of my *karma* for that of others"²¹ in which she took on or worked with the extreme sufferings of others. She extricated from hell an official who previously had given her extreme trouble. She says "I gave my body to ravenous carnivores, I fed the hungry, I clothed the destitute and cold, I gave medicine to the sick, I gave wealth to the poverty stricken, I gave refuge to the forlorn and I gave my sexual parts to the lustful. In short, to benefit others I gave my body and life."²² In this phase of her practice, two especially difficult challenges came to her. She chose to accept both of them without being coerced in any way. She gave her body-parts to another person to be used in a transplant operation. She also lived as wife with an extremely repulsive, diseased man who cried out for companionship.

After these accomplishments she began to manifest throughout the universe in different forms satisfying whatever were people's needs—food, wealth, clothing, etc. "To the childless I appeared as sons or daughters, bringing them happiness; to men desiring women I appeared as attractive girls, bringing them happiness; to women desiring husbands I appeared as handsome men, bringing them happiness."²³ The list continues, dealing with those afflicted by anxiety and frustration, those wandering in the *bardo*,²⁴ in short to those in every difficult situation. She explains, "In short wheresoever is sentient life, there are the five elements; wheresoever are the five elements there is space; insofar as my compassion is coextensive with space, it pervades all human emotion. Appearing first as one emanation and then as another, I remained . . . for twelve years."²⁵

Immediately thereupon the narrative concludes with Tsogyel's death. Yeshe Tsogyel "composed [her] self in the *samadhi* that brings all things to extinction."²⁶ In a long concluding narrative her students ask for further teachings and receive final teachings and predictions.

"With this farewell she ended, and light, shimmering, sparkling iridescently in splendid vivid colours, streamed towards the South-West and vanished from sight. All of us who witnessed this final departure prostrated countless times after her . . . Then our minds full of grief, our hearts heavy, our stomachs in our mouths, our tears flooding the path, staggering, unable to control our bodies panting and heaving, we retreated to the meditation cave . . . where we spent the night."²⁷

Before going on to comment on these facets of her story, I want to narrate briefly several more incidents exemplifying other variants of the relational theme.

Not all of Yeshe Tsogyel's relationships with men are "positive," at least in the conventional sense. What is notable about these episodes is the way they are turned into dharmic events by Tsogyel, promoting either her own practice, or the realization of her very tormentors. The first negative episode involves her attempts to avoid conventional marriage and the cruel treatment she receives from her captors. But she transforms this into her first lesson in basic dharma, concerning the pervasiveness of suffering and impermanence. A predharmic initiatory ordeal necessary to motivate one towards the path of dharmic practice and an important event in any Buddhist biography. After she meets Padmasambhava she says,

"I am young, but not inexperienced
For suffering was revealed to me at the age of twelve
When my parents denied me my request for celibacy
And gave me as a bride in a lay marriage."²⁸

And he replies, confirming her assessment of her experience.

"You, a woman of sixteen years,
Have seen the suffering of an eighty-year-old hag.
Know your pain to be age-old *karma*,
And that the residue of that *karma* is erased."²⁹

Because of this coincidence of her suffering and her meeting the teacher, she is able to hear and practice Buddhism and the Vajrayāna.

Two other events stand out. While on her journey to the Nepal valley to find her consort Atsara Sale, seven thieves sought unsuccessfully to steal her gold.³⁰ Many years later, after completing most of her practices, including the Vajrakīlaya practice for removing obstacles, she was robbed and raped by seven bandits.³¹ In both cases, her speech to her tormentors converted them to the path of *dharma* and transmuted their energies from their previously aggressive and unenlightened expression to dharmic, enlightened pursuits. In all fourteen cases the formerly depraved men became her students when she unlocked for them some insights into the sources of their destructive energies and how to work with those energies more effectively. I find these examples quite provocative and challenging.

Finally, in terms of biographical episodes, I want to present a few examples of Tsogyel's relationships with women. In the narrative, she has many, many women students, of whom a few stand out. One of them was thirteen when she began to bring offerings to Tsogyel during Tsogyel's three year retreat. Tsogyel asked the girl's father, a Bhutanese king, to allow the girl to accompany her, which he agreed to do. The girl, named Tashi Chodon,

became the Activity Emanation of Vajravārāhī and one of Padmasambhava's six main consorts. She was with Tsogyel until the end, one of her eleven root disciples. Another of Tsogyel's eleven root disciples, with her until the end, was Kālasiddhī, who became Tsogyel's disciple much later. She also was recognized as an emanation of Vajrāvārahī, the 'quality emanation', and became one of the six major consorts. Among the eleven root disciples are also two other women, one of the queens, Liza Jangchub Dronma, and Shelkar Dorje Tsomo. (Incidentally, faithful Atsara Sale, the redeemed slave, was also there at Tsogyel's death.)

More extended discussions of Tsogyel's companionship with the other two women, who are major emanations of Vajrāvārahī, are given. Early in her practice, just after meeting Atsara Sale, they go to visit Śākya Dema, the 'mind emanation' of Vajrāvārahī. At that point Śākya Dema is probably more accomplished than Tsogyel, who asks Śākya Dema for teachings. Śākya Dema then asks Tsogyel to give her any teachings she can pass on. The two women also acknowledge each other as consorts of the guru. "Then our finite minds united in the Buddha's mind and we exchanged precepts and instructions."³² Near the end of her life, in the last story narrated before Tsogyel's last instructions and prophecies, "... the flower Mandāravā came from India. Emerging from the sky with her six disciples, she greeted me. She stayed with me for thirty-nine human days and we exchanged and tightened our precepts, making endless discussions on the dharma."³³ Mandāravā was the Body Emanation of Vajrāvārahī and major consort of Padmasambhava in India. The two women exchanged advanced teachings with each other and wrote encomiums to one another. Both expressed their unity with one another and resolved to work to enlighten all sentient beings. Mandāravā ends her poem to Tsogyel thus :

"May I be one with you, Mistress of Powerful Magic.
Hereafter, purity suffusing the sphere of purity
In your field of lotus-light,
You and I will project emanations of Buddha's *karma*
As light-forms of Guru Pema Skull-Garland's compassion:
May we empty the depths of the three realms of *samsara*."³⁴

To conclude the condensation of Tsogyel's relational biography, I quote a passage describing her essential relationship with Padmasambhava, her root guru and her consort.

"The Guru and Dākinī, mystic partners, having identical ambitions, serve all beings with skillful means and perfect insight; with the same activity of speech we expound *sūtras* and *tantras*; with the same apparitional projections we control the phenomenal world; with the same knowledge and talents we work for the good of the teaching and all living beings; with the same karmic activity we utilize the four

karmas of transformation at will. Ultimately Pema Jungne and Yeshe Tsogyel are identical to [*Yab-Yum* of the Absolute]: our Body, Speech, Mind, Activity, and Quality are co-extensive with all-pervasive space.”³⁵

This account of Tsogyel’s relationships is haunting, provocative and appealing to me. I know of no similar story of a woman whose relational life and spiritual journey are so intertwined and support each other so thoroughly. I would like to sort out several themes important to that assessment.

First, a sharp differentiation exists between conventional relationships and dharmic relationships, relationships between *sangha* members on the path. Tsogyel bitterly fights against conventional marriage and suffers greatly within it. Many other times, including the two encounters with thieves discussed earlier, she encounters aggression, violence, and attempts to restrain her from her spiritual practice by malicious or misguided outsiders. These attacks are based on the neurotic passions or *kleṣa*-s, rather than on the enlightened passions, or mindfulness practice, and on compassion. Tsogyel, because of her high spiritual attainments, provides a model in working skillfully with these situations, and transforming difficult circumstances into spiritual practice, both for herself and often for her tormentors as well. Bringing such difficulties into one’s spiritual practice rather than merely freaking out by launching into a major outburst of neurotic passion is a very important practice and skill in Vajrayāna Buddhism.

Dharmic relationships are different. Not based on neurotic or unenlightened passions, they are neither mutually exploitative nor exploitative of one or the other of the partners. Regardless of who is the leading or more developed partner, the relationship serves to develop both partners more fully, to mature them both in spiritual practice. Though one partner may be the more advanced practitioner, that person’s practice still needs the support of the less developed consort. Tsogyel’s consorts are often referred to as her “supports”, as are Padmasambhava’s consorts. Furthermore, these roles are not gender-fixed; they depend on levels of development. Padmasambhava is Tsogyel’s guru; she is his consort during periods of training. But she is also guru to both female and male students; some of the male students are also her consorts supporting her practice.

In the long run, Vajrayāna Buddhism presents a balance of feminine and masculine energy, both on the ultimate level and on the empirical level.³⁶ During the period of development and training to achieve that ultimate balance, sometimes the leading role is taken by a man, sometimes by a woman. When such status or authority is devoted to enlightening all beings rather than to aggrandizing one’s own position, exploitation cannot happen. Thus the power-plays so common in conventional relationships are not present in Tsogyel’s dharmic relationships. And the neurotically compulsive insanity that so often plagues relationships is not part of Tsogyel’s relationships with her dharmic consorts and friends.

This rather different quality of relationship comes through especially

clearly in the unconventional and non-possessive conduct of the relationships. Though Tsogyel is Padmasambhava's consort, she is not with him much of the time. Often she is doing solitary practice or is practicing with her other consorts. When she is with him, the narrative concerns the practices they did together and their activities to teach and spread the *dharma*. Tsogyel's other consorts became Padmasambhava's students and attendants; her female students sometimes become Padmasambhava's consorts. Various combinations of these dharmic friends often travel and practice together. Furthermore, Tsogyel's most vibrant encounters with women occur with Padmasambhava's other major consorts, Śākya Dema and Mandārāva, her equals on the path.

An aspect of this non-possessive and non-neurotic mode of relationship involves the way sexuality is integrated into these relationships. They are not primarily erotic encounters; they are primarily dharmic encounters to which there seems to be a sexual aspect. In fact, the sexual level of these relationships is so much *not* the focus of the narrative that I bring up the topic at all only because of stereotypes about the Vajrayāna and the importance of consorts in some aspects of Vajrayāna Buddhism. This is not because Tsogyel's sexuality is ignored or repressed; working out an enlightened version of her sexuality was apparently an important part of Tsogyel's training during her retreat. In that narrative her sexual fantasies—still based somewhat on wantingness, desire, and ego orientation—are dealt with very explicitly. I found the passage quite interesting both because it reverses the more usual motif of women tempting men and because, as far as I know, spiritual biographies of women usually do not portray the women as having strong sexual desires themselves, but mainly as having to fend off the lust of men.

It is interesting that the most explicit discussion of Tsogyel's sexuality involves her inner world. As many feminists have pointed out, such an inner life usually is based on rejection of aspects of one's own psyche, which are then projected onto others, turning them into objects. Those objects then become, in terms of Buddhist psychology, the objects of desire, grasping, and fixation, and the whole cycle of samsaric suffering is kept spinning. When Tsogyel has integrated her psyche, has become more realized, men are not such objects of grasping and fixation. Then all aspects of experience, including sexuality, are in proper relationship with one another, a situation which cannot happen when sexuality is an end in itself, engaged in with an ego-orientation of self-gratification and clinging. When sexuality no longer involves a process of objectification, it does not demand special comment or description. Tsogyel's integration of spirituality and sexuality provides an important paradigm for understanding the proper connection between relationship and dharma practice. This topic is important for contemporary women, because dharma, in the extended sense of concern for truth and social service are often difficult for women to integrate with their conventional role expectations and their natural longing for companionship.

What is the connection between relationship and spiritual or intellectual discipline? Which one is or should be the leading element in one's life? Which one promotes which? What mishandling or unbalancing of the two would cause destruction of one or both? These are important questions, especially because so frequently relationship is the most difficult and frustrating arena of life, much more so than one's livelihood, profession, or spiritual practice. This occurs because of unbalanced priorities and unrealistic expectations of relationship as the solution to existential anxiety and suffering. What Tsogyel's relational biography shows is that relationships carried on in the context of a spiritual discipline can dissolve clinging, grasping and fixation and need not involve the anxiety, neurotic passion, and jealousy of conventional relationships. So often in conventional relationships, expectations, needs and neurotic passions cause the relationship to increase rather than to ease suffering. The only way out of this situation is to dissolve the unrealistic expectations surrounding the relationship. These ego-fixations and ego-orientations dissolve through spiritual discipline. Tsogyel's "vision-quest"³⁷ all her life was to dissolve the confusion and clinging in her mind, not to find the relationship that would make her feel better. Her biography demonstrates a proper balance or prioritization of relationship and spiritual practice. She seeks enlightenment and gains both enlightenment and enlightened relationships.

In her ability to integrate enlightenment with enlightened relationship, Tsogyel provides a provocative, challenging and untypical model for women and companions of women. Tsogyel, in her relational life, is consort, not wife and not nun. In order to undo the fixations of conventional relationships it is not necessary for her to renounce relationship; in this combining of relationship and dharmic achievements she presents a significant model in my view. As consort, she provides an unusual model contrasting to the much more typical Buddhist roles for women as either wife or nun. The consort model, as exemplified by Tsogyel, is very inspiring despite its rarity and unconventionality, particularly for contemporary women whose vision-quest is enlightenment and dharmic service. In many ways, this model is much more workable than either of the conventional models—wife or nun. Conventionally, at least in patriarchal societies (and all Buddhist societies have been patriarchal), wives are essentially servants to their husbands and children. It is not a role that fundamentally promotes realization, though many women manage to circumvent the liabilities of the role. On the other hand, male companionship, heterosexual experience and, the presence of male energy, are important to some women as a component of the total path of spiritual discipline they tread. The nun role, despite its liberating potential, does not allow this kind of male companionship. Tsogyel as consort, though unusual in the repertoire of roles for women found in Buddhist literature, is a model worthy of emulation by, and inspiring to, contemporary women.

Particularly noteworthy and exemplary about Tsogyel's role as consort are the non-monogamous and non-possessive nature of her relationships

combined with her ability to be a companion to her consorts while not losing her vision of her own reason to live—enlightenment and service. This model is inspiring and comforting to women; it is also challenging to companions of women. Not only are women called upon and challenged to become a Yeshe Tsogyel; their companions are challenged to become a Padmasambhava, willing to engage in an intense relationship with a woman without the safety of monogamy, either on her part of his, or the subservience of the wife-role in patriarchal society.

Tsogyel's and Padmasambhava's essential complementarity and equality also provides a model of female-male relationship far more appropriate than the conventional patriarchal model of male superiority or the separatist and female supremacist version of current feminist theory. I began this study of Tsogyel's biography curious about whether her story indicated the existence of any traits, qualifications, or dilemmas that are intrinsic to women on the spiritual path and not shared by men. To answer this question adequately it would be necessary to compare Tsogyel's biography carefully with other biographies in the same genre.³⁸ Since I have not yet conducted this study to my satisfaction, my speculations are preliminary, possibly subject to change. However, at this point, my conclusion is that Tsogyel's biography, compared with biographies of other similar spiritual heroes in Vajrayana Buddhism, does not point to essential, basic differences based on gender that affect or enhance one's spiritual practice, though some more superficial differences probably occur.

Two statements, one from Padmasambhava and one from Tsogyel, on this question are found almost side by side. Both have already been quoted. After Tsogyel's completion of her three year retreat, her guru says:

“The human body is the basis of the accomplishment of wisdom
And the gross bodies of men and women are equally suited
But if a woman has strong aspiration, she has the higher potential.”³⁹

A few paragraphs later, Tsogyel complains:

“Inadequate women like me with little energy and an inferior birth incur the whole world's hostility. When we go begging the dogs are hostile. If we possess food or wealth then thieves molest us. If we work hard the country people are hostile. Even if we do nothing at all the tongues of malicious gossips turn against us. If our attitude is improper then the whole world is hostile. Whatever we do the life of a woman on the path is a miserable one. To maintain our practice is virtually impossible and even to stay alive is very difficult.”⁴⁰

Probably she is exaggerating because she is making her case to receive the Vajrakīlaya—Remover of Obstacles—practice. The more obstacles, the more need for the practice, since in Vajrayāna Buddhism one must always justify

receiving a new practice rather than demanding it or simply beginning to do it.

It is interesting that both Tsogyel and Padmasambhava attribute the better situation to the other sex, though Padmasambhava does not dwell on the difficulties of the male role. Such cross-sex curiosity and jealousy is actually very common in the literatures of many disciplines and cultures. Such comments probably indicate that everyone recognizes superficial differences between women and men and one often feels that she or he is missing something. Superficially, whichever sex one is, there are some disadvantages and some advantages, and one *is* missing something because one can be only one gender.

Nevertheless, spiritual biographies like Tsogyel's seem to me to emphasize that these differences are rather unimportant on any absolute or ultimate level, though certain ways of giving social form to these differences can be completely unjustifiable and cruel. On the path of spiritual discipline, women and men face the same essential difficulties of overcoming conventional lifestyles. Men too must often circumvent parental pressure to marry and continue the family enterprise. They must equally overcome neurotic passions such as aggression, ignorance, clinging, pride or jealousy.⁴¹ They equally experience discouragement, resistance, and many other such obstacles intrinsic to spiritual practice. The portrayals of enlightened, compassionate activity also betray no essentially different activities. Both teach, debate, discover students, give initiations, practice, edit and compose texts, and travel about the country giving whatever help is needed. And there is no evidence that the enlightened state of mind, the mind of Buddha, is different in a male than a female body. In fact, it is self-contradictory to imagine that One Mind could be different in different bodies—leading to the common statement that Enlightenment occurs neither in a male body, nor in a female body. Gender is not a category that is of ultimate significance.

This conclusion, if correct, is important since it is contradictory not only conventional patriarchal thought including those strands of Buddhist thought which state that womanhood is an inferior birth,⁴² but also to some currents in contemporary feminist thought, which posit an intrinsic female superiority based on female body experience and/or states of mind.⁴³ This separatist feminist train of thought has been produced by an over-evaluation of the relative uniqueness of women's experience. The conventional generic masculine, which sometimes treated women as men and sometimes as non-existent, is certainly inaccurate; therefore all the literature exploring women's experience is a needed corrective.⁴⁴ However, this correcting balance does not require a conclusion of innate essential differences between women and men with its consequent claims for the intrinsic moral superiority of women. Recognizing and exorcizing the evils of patriarchy does not depend on defining women as innately and essentially biophilic while men are necrophilic.⁴⁵ In fact, this conclusion and the essential impetus of feminism toward an enlightened society⁴⁶ are incompatible with each other. If the sexes are that innately different, if sexual and moral dualism is that deep, there is no hope

for humanity and it makes little difference which gender is theorized to have the "right" attitudes and values. If roughly half the human species is unhuman, lacking in basic goodness, how would we ever have an enlightened society?

My conclusion, of course, raises as many questions as it answers. If women and men are *not* so different, why have sex roles and stereotypes been so dominant, and so often so patriarchal and advantageous to men? In this context, I do not wish to explore historical and cross-cultural answers to that question, but to bring the question back to Tsogyel's biography and to Tsogyel as role model. Is Tsogyel a token, so rare as to be worthless as a role model? Worse, is Tsogyel's experience so much like that of other great spiritual models, many of whom are men, because, essentially she is one of the few women in a male system, a male-identified woman?

A positive answer to the latter question would, I believe, depend on a prior philosophy of feminism with which I do not agree. Therefore, I would not interpret Tsogyel as a male-identified woman. The former question, about Tsogyel as token because of the imbalance between numbers of women and men of her calibre is much more significant, disturbing and provocative. If women and men are equally suited for enlightenment, why are there so few women like Tsogyel relative to the numbers of men like her?

Actually, for the time and place described in the text, I was surprised to have the opposite reaction: there were a lot of women like her! Four of her eleven root disciples were women and the text constantly narrates her interactions with female students, both laywomen and nuns. Things seem to have become more male-dominated later. We may be seeing another of the "first generation phenomenon," so familiar to women's studies.⁴⁷

Actually, when we ask whether Tsogyel can be a role model because she is a token, we are not asking whether Tsogyel can be a role model, but whether Tsogyel's *society* can be a model society. The presumed negative answer may be depressing in some ways, but it is not determinative of anything and should not be given too much importance. "There are no fully adequate models in the past" has become a slogan for feminism. That slogan has been used to liberate from past authority; it has also been used as an expression of poverty mentality or frustration with the past. I would suggest more a sense of "there *could be* no fully adequate models in the past." I believe technological conditions prohibited fully adequate models in the past. But on a deeper level, an adequate model in the past would be useless if not realized and actualized in the present. It would even cease to be a model if it were only past; it would become a memory or a dogma. But if one is seeking to realize and actualize the present moment, the present situation, then one has an adequate model somewhere, somehow. Models are much more our inspiration than they are something that once existed separate from us.

Still, the "numbers question" has troubled me for many years and has been my most serious misgiving about and feminist criticism of Buddhism.

I have questioned where in Buddhist thought or institutions would lie the explanations. It is not found in the basic and essential Buddhist thought or worldview, which is profoundly non-dualist and therefore non-misogynist. A genderized deity, gender hierarchy, and hierarchical dualism simply are not characteristic of core Buddhadharma, at least as expressed in the Mahāyāna and the Vajrayāna; and the feminist Buddhist critique requires different categories of explanation than does the feminist Christian critique.⁴⁸

Currently, I am exploring an explanatory *nexus* of institutions, *karma*, and social reform, both to explain the past and as a wedge for contemporary challenge to change. Briefly put, though the Buddhist worldview is exemplary, classical Buddhist institutions are not. Furthermore, I am suggesting that a certain interpretation of the notion of *karma* prevented the rise of social criticism and social reform as a dominant Buddhist issue. (This is, I believe, a subtly mistaken view of *karma*, but it is impossible to discuss the issue fully in this context.) Therefore, Buddhists did not notice the contradiction between their non-misogynist worldview and their patriarchal institutions. Rather they explained that everyone's situation, including women's relative difficulties and even their female gender was due to their *karma*. Under then prevailing conditions, empirically women's lives were harder than men's and, empirically, it was more difficult for women to practice. That much was conceded, even appreciated. Unfortunately this situation was then explained as due to the *karma* of the beings currently reborn as women, rather than to social institutions in need of reform. Given the severe demands of intensive agriculture, high infant mortality rates, limited life expectancy, and lack of birth control, it may have seemed more reasonable to attribute the harshness of women's lives to *karma* than to imagine that humans could control or change those conditions. However, those conditions do not prevail today; therefore the institutions' social roles and life plans that coped with those conditions are out of date. The *karma* of women's lives has changed drastically, so that there are no adequate models in the past. Thus, rather than discouraging social criticism and social reform, an understanding of *karma* promotes it. Institutions must change in order to accommodate the drastically changed possibilities of women's lives. There are no adequate models in the past, including Tsogyel's society. But Tsogyel herself, enlightened consort and great teacher, remains a greatly inspiring female role model.

ENDNOTES

1. Keith Dowman, tr., *Sky Dancer: The Secret Life and Songs of the Lady Yeshe Tsogyel*. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984) and Tarthang Tulku, tr., *Mother of Knowledge: The Enlightenment of Ye-shes mTsho-rgyal*. (Oakland: Dharma Press, 1983).
2. The most well-known source for this basic mythic motif is Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, (Cleveland and New York: World Publishing Company, 1956).
3. This terminology is used to distinguish the two levels often found in Tibetan narratives. The more exoteric level of the story can well be handled by the term "myth" as used in history of religions. But it is helpful to have another term to distinguish the same

story, being told from another level or from another point of view. Some use the term "sacred history," though there is no consensus as yet.

4. Tartang Tulku, pp. xi-xii.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 5; Dowman, p. 3. This passage discusses Tsogyel from the ultimate point of view by discussing her ultimate existence in terms of the *trikāya*, the three bodies of the Buddha. A good discussion of this difficult concept is found in Bhikshu Sangharakshita, *A Survey of Buddhism* (Boulder: Shambhala, 1980), pp. 240-255. Relatively detailed information about Vajrayoginī can be obtained in Chogyam Trungpa, "Sacred Outlook: The Vajrayoginī Shrine and Practice," in *The Silk Route and the Diamond Path: Esoteric Buddhist Art on the Trans-Himalayan Trade Routes* (Deborah E. Klimburg-Salter, ed.).
7. Tarthang Tulku, p. 12.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
11. Dowman, p. 10.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 44.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 78.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 85.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 86.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 89.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 92.
19. "Terma" texts are especially known or important in the more esoteric forms of Tibetan Buddhism. Supposedly, recognizing the need for them in future ages, great teachers encode the appropriate messages and hid them. Later, they are mystically rediscovered by another great teacher and taught much more widely by him or her. This concept could be compared to the stories found already in the beginnings of Mahāyāna, to the effect that the Buddha Śākyamuni taught the Mahāyāna sutras during his own historical life but then hid them with the *nāga-s* when he realized people were not yet ready to hear them. Both stories, on one level of analysis, function to show that "new" religious developments and texts are not really deviations.
20. Dowman, p. 125.
21. This term and the stories narrated at this point seem connected with the Mahāyāna emphasis on compassion, and to be examples of perfected *tong-len* practice. As a mediation practice, on the medium of the breath, one gives away all one's positive experience and qualities to others and then takes on their negativity and suffering. The fact that Tsogyel takes on these experiences as her "final austerity" and really is able to relieve the suffering of others *after* years of intense Vajrayāna practice demonstrates an important and often missed point about the Vajrayāna—it is an *upāya*, the skillful means quickly to attain the Mahāyāna so as to manifest Buddha-activity in the world.
22. Dowman, p. 135.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 146.
24. "*Bardo*" is the intermediate period between death and taking on a new body at conception. It is said to be extremely confusing and frightening to those of small attainments. For a translation and commentary on the classic text about the *bardo*, see Francesca Fremantle and Chogyam Trungpa, trs., *The Tibetan Book of the Dead: The Great Liberation Through Hearing in the Bardo* (Boulder and London: Shambhala, 1975).
25. Dowman, p. 147.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 150.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 186.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 44.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 118-119.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 56.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 147.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 150.
35. *Ibid.*, pp. 122-124. Bracketed phrase borrowed from Tarthang Tulku's translation of the same passage, p. 145.
36. A full discussion of the feminine and masculine principles in Vajrayāna Buddhism would be a vast undertaking, especially since much of the material is part of the esoteric teachings. My statement here summarizes my article "The Feminine Principle in Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism: Reflections of A Buddhist Feminist," *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, Vol. 16, No. 3, 1984 (pp. 179-192).
37. The term "vision quest" comes from the Native American traditions. It refers to an initiation in which young people go out alone to "cry for vision from the other world." It also refers, more metaphorically, to the life-long quest for a deeper vision of reality. For a short, beautiful, and authentic first-person narrative of a vision quest, see Arthur Amiotte, "Eagles Fly Over," in *Parabola: Myth and the Quest for Meaning*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (Sept. 1976), pp. 28-41.
38. Extensive hagiographic literature now is found in translation. The only other text addressed specifically to the hagiography of women is Tsultrim Allione's *Women of Wisdom*, (London:) Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984). Padmasambhava's life story, traditionally attributed to Yeshe Tsogyel is translated as *The Life and Liberation of Padmasambhava* (Berkeley: Dharma Publishing Co., 1978). Other important biographies include Herbert Guenther tr., *The Life and Teachings of Naropa* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), Nalanda Translation Committee, trs., *The Life of Marpa the Translator*, (Boulder: Prajna Press, 1982), and Lobsang P. Lhalungpa, tr., *The Life of Milarepa* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1977).
39. Dowman, pp. 86.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 89.
41. The list "aggression, ignorance, clinging, pride or jealousy" actually enumerates the five root-*kleśa*-s or defilements in Vajrayana Buddhism. They transmute into the Five Wisdoms of the Five Buddha families. See Chogyam Trungpa, *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism* (Berkeley: Shambhala, 1973), pp. 217-234.
42. Diana Paul, *Women in Buddhism: Images of the Feminine in Mahāyāna Tradition*, (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1979. Rpt. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985). Though much Mahāyāna literature contains highly positive images of women, one also finds quite negative images. The texts here are well arranged and explained so that one can readily see the various strands of Mahāyāna attitudes toward women.
43. Succinct statements of this thesis in feminist theory can be found in Charlene Spretnek, ed *The Politics of Women's Spirituality: Essays on the Rise of Spiritual Power Within the Feminist Movement*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1982), pp. 510-28 and 565-73.
44. The methodology condense into this statement is more completely explained in Rita Gross' "Women's Studies in Religion: The State of the Art, 1980," in *Traditions in Contact and Change*, ed. by Peter Slater and Donald Wiebe (Waterloo, Ontario, Canada: Wilfrid Laurier Press, 1983), pp. 579-591.
45. This terminology pervades Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978). See especially pp. 252-255 and p. 360. For a review of this position from the Buddhist point of view, see Rita Gross, "Bitterness and Effectiveness: Reflections on Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology*," in *Anima: An Experiential Journal*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (Fall 1980), pp. 47-51.

46. This use of the term "enlightened society" is a cryptic but direct reference to the tradition of Shambhala, the once and future enlightened society of Tibetan tradition. For some Buddhists, this tradition is completely alive and significant. See Chogyam Trungpa, *Shambhala: The Sacred Path of the Warrior* (Boulder: Shambhala, 1984).
47. Though not yet, to my knowledge, systematically studied, it is commonly noted that new or "frontier" situations tend to allow women greater equality and freedom than is later found in the same situation. This thesis could easily be documented for the origins of Buddhism, Christianity and Islam. But it is also noticeable in many reform movements within religious traditions and even in secular situations. For example, in many Western states, women could vote before women's suffrage forced its allowance throughout the U.S.
48. Though few people are yet working on this topic, some beginnings have been made. See Rita Gross' "Buddhism and Feminism: Toward Their Mutual Transformation," in *Eastern Buddhist*, Vol. 19, No. 1 and 2 (Spring and Fall 1986).