

Introduction



Tensions between Families and Religious Institutions

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It has been well noted at this point that Buddhist studies has suffered from a disproportionate emphasis on its idealized ascetic representations. Family life has, as a result, been marginalized (if not entirely ignored).

Recent scholarship has been broadening the conversation, challenging the worldview presented by popular textbook materials such as Walpola Rahula's *What the Buddha Taught*. The attempt to sever worldly attachments is certainly a key Buddhist goal, but it is not necessarily the practice around which all Buddhists organize their lives. Family ties have surely always bound Buddhist communities together, regardless of how impermanent those families might be or how easily such ties can lead to *dukkha*. Placing the spotlight on family life brings these ties and practices into focus.

The articles in this collection do a wonderful job of describing messy moments that arise when families and religious institutions interact. Each article in its own way reminds us that religious communities are filled with families and that these families necessarily contribute to the organization of those communities. To use a classical Buddhist formula, Buddhist institutions and Buddhist families are deeply and inevitably interconnected. They can never be pulled apart into neatly separate categories. Buddhist clerics may function as institutional authorities in certain contexts, but the articles here remind us that clerics do not have their authority handed over to them in a social vacuum. On the contrary, Buddhist institutional power, in its various community settings, is invariably replete with social and familial ties and dynamics.

We (the guest editors) find these articles suggest that the relationship between religious authority and family ties can be one of competition. Although none of the articles identifies competition as a feature of this dynamic, when read together, we see the highlighting of competition as a fascinating by-product of the contributors' analyses.

Consider, for example, Joel Gruber's contribution. In it he examines two Nyingma texts including *Blazing Splendor*, the memoirs of Tulku Urgyen, which, among other things, tells of his grandmother Könchok Paldrön, a teacher in her own right. The family/religious-authority connection is evident in its very authorship, but Gruber's study goes well beyond this obvious point. Gruber highlights a number of scenes in the text in

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which the religious establishment comes into conflict with Paldrön's own family's history and needs. The most powerful example presented takes place when Könchok Paldrön's son is identified as a tulku. After his identification, a monastic committee arrives at the house requesting that the child be handed over to them. The problem, however, is that they have come during a family funeral. Könchok Paldrön therefore requests that they return at a more appropriate time. The monastic committee is offended, but does eventually leave, only to return not long thereafter with a much larger group with a more threatening demeanor. To avoid shedding blood, Könchok Paldrön finally agrees to give her son away, but a few years later, after the drama appears to have subsided, she asks for permission to have her son visit her at home. The monastic authorities agree, and the son returns. She then refuses to send him back. According to the text, this is how she manages to get her revenge.

This scene, as described by Gruber, functions as an extraordinary example of how families and religious institutions can find themselves in a tug-of-war over the children they each believe they have priority over. Elijah Ary, a tulku in the West, describes a similar tension arising around his own identification as a tulku.¹ Gruber and Ary ask poignant questions: To whom does a child belong? Does the child belong to religious communities claiming to have power over the supramundane world, or does the child belong to the family? Or to both? And when, if ever, is the child empowered to be part of answering those questions?

Jay Valentine and Jessica Starling have each contributed articles describing negotiations between families and religious institutions as they jointly raise future clerics. Jessica Starling's article examines the training of young temple priests in Japan, particularly in the Jōdo Shinshū school. Such temple priests are often married and have children, and they usually pass on their priestly authority from father to first son.

As Starling demonstrates so well, the training of a young temple priest in Japan is usually the product of two very different kinds of teachers: family members and seminarians. Young priests today have training programs they can participate in that teach them about temple by-laws and the legal issues surrounding temple organization (along with much other required information). Students have to take standardized exams to gain official certification. But, as one of Starling's informants explained to her, being raised in a temple and watching his family members interact with the community probably taught him just as much, if not more, about what it means to be a priest. He learned from his parents, his uncles, and his aunts about how to be an effective priest, although he recognizes the need for seminary training as well. Both learning environments contributed to forming him into the priest he eventually became. Starling seems to suggest that neither training style on its own would have been enough.

Jay Valentine's article suggests a similar hybridity in a different Buddhist institution. He explores the narratives of some of the founding lineage holders of the Northern Treasure tradition of the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism that, like Jōdo Shinshū, hands

¹ Elijah Ary, "The Westernization of Tulkus," in *Little Buddhas: Children and Childhoods in Buddhist Texts and Traditions*, ed. V. R. Sasson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 398-427.

authority down from father to son. Gödem Truchen, the tradition's founder, is described as receiving authority from his father, first and foremost. His authority is said to be in "his bones." He has a genetic inheritance that provides him with religious authority, and it is this inheritance that he passes on to his own son, thereafter.

As Valentine argues, however, Truchen's authority has to be rooted in more than family lineage if it is to have significance. His father dies when he is quite young, so his training is provided by a host of other people in his life. He is trained by his mother and other family members; he is also trained by clan elders who shared his father's traditions. He is, in other words, trained by an entire community of people. Beginning with his genetic inheritance, Truchen's trainers expand out from nuclear family to institutional authorities from other clans who, though still related to him, represent the impersonal authority of the tradition more than the interpersonal authority of the family. This training blurs the lines between "family" and "institution," and reminds us not to reify such notions. The whole spectrum is necessary for Truchen to become the extraordinary teacher he eventually does mature into.

One of Starling's subjects provided an appropriately Japanese and homely expression for this phenomenon: her subject described life in a Japanese temple as "team baseball." Everyone participates in creating a religious community and in raising the clerics of the next generation. Religious authority is not something that can be kept apart from family structure; the two are intertwined. Interestingly, neither Starling nor Valentine alludes to any competitive struggle, but should they ask that question, we wonder what kinds of answers they would receive from their respective sources of information. In contrast to the struggle, even menace, that Gruber describes, here the atmosphere is collaborative, especially in the Japanese context. Perhaps the realms of authority reflect the continual interpenetration of *uchi/soto* (inside/outside or us/them), demonstrating, again, the danger of reifying these binaries despite their prominence in discourse on Japanese culture and culture in general.

Ben Wood reveals a differing tension. In his article—which is also focused on Tibetan biographical materials—Wood highlights tensions between the idealized child saint and his (usually *his* rather than *her*) deficient family members. Over and over again, Wood identifies in Tibetan narratives a device in which the family members raising a child saint are depicted as particularly lacking. He argues that the family members are depicted this way to contrast them with the exceptional qualities of the child. From Milarepa all the way to Chögyam Trungpa, nine centuries later, Wood demonstrates that there is a theme in the literature in which the child is identified as saintly *despite* his environment (at least his familial environment), and not as a result of it. In these cases we see an inversion of the tension in Gruber's story of Könchok Paldrön. Here it is institutional figures who rescue these saints from their families (and sometimes from their early, deficient teachers).

Although Wood does not read this as competition, looking at all these articles together has us wondering whether there is room for such an interpretation. The religious authorities writing the texts push family members away from the gifted child. Wood's analysis, identifying this tension, leads us to wonder if it is present not merely to

highlight the child's qualities, but also to highlight the child's identification *as a religious authority*—the authority out of which the text itself emerges. In other words, precisely because family and religious systems are so deeply enmeshed in the sphere of these special children, competitiveness results in the hopes that one of the two systems will prevail. But, in the end, a mutually recognized authority rests in these children, *themselves*, now authorized as priests or teachers. Happily, both systems of authority may claim these new figures as their own.

It may be, though, that such competition thrives when the playing field is level and there is something worth fighting over. When the field is small and the resources few, survival usually requires cooperation rather than competition. This may be seen in Helen Waterhouse's study of the Sōka Gakkai International community in the UK. In this context, she notes a remarkable lack of competitiveness between families and the SGI religious establishment. Waterhouse interviews the children of SGI converts in the UK and, among other salient points, she notes that children are not pressured to marry within the community or even to take up chanting (the central practice of SGI members). One religious authority in the community makes the argument that children should not be pressured to marry within the fold because each person should choose the best partner for themselves, irrespective of religious background, reasoning that, when one chooses a plumber, one does not look for a Buddhist plumber, but rather the best plumber. Although Waterhouse does not ask this question, we wonder whether SGI authorities would continue with this worldview if the social stakes were higher. Waterhouse notes that, though a minority religion in the UK, SGI remains a strong and international missionary movement with expansionist hopes. Would its assertions of power over its affiliated children be extended if the movement became more dominant in the region? Or are we seeing here a contrast between Japanese-based and Tibetan-based Buddhist traditions? A comparative study of Sōka Gokkai in Japan would be worthwhile here.

When read together, the articles in this issue raise a number of fascinating questions about the inevitable relationship between families and religious institutions. Both are authorities in their respective domains; when those domains overlap their differing values create tension and even competition

It surely has not escaped the reader's attention that three of the five papers here focus on the Nyingma tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. Here is why that happened: it just did. Without intention to focus on Nyingma-pas, and without redress when the submissions had that focus, the guest editors simply accepted the best contributions. We do, though, wish to offer one conjecture: that Nyingma Buddhism, with its traditions of tulkus combined with familial charisma transmitted through the bones, plus an openness to non-monastic practice and authority, is an ideal crucible for both the playing out of familial/institutional dynamics and for their analysis. We might even say this special issue's focus was inevitable.

We have learned from these articles; we hope their insights interfuse and spur both their authors and other researchers to pick up their lines of inquiry. We must, though, remain acutely aware of the nascent state of this field of Buddhism and the family. Its very

name, “Buddhism and the family,” is provisional and may evolve into something better. Indeed, we hope it does. As Buddhologists and as parents, we are exquisitely conscious of the ongoing dynamics described in these articles as they play out in our own lives and in our children’s. We conceive no more important field in Buddhist studies than this little one we cultivate. We hope this collection will inspire others to share in the work.