

Children of Sera Je

**The life of children in a Tibetan Buddhist monastery
and their opinion about that life**

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Master Thesis

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March 2004

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Acknowledgements

The work that you are about to read would simply not have existed without the help, support and patience of a vast number of people.

First and foremost among these are the monks of Sera Je by whom I was accepted and tolerated and who patiently answered all the questions I had. Special thanks hereby go out to Tenzin Shenrab, the principal of Sera Je Secondary school, during the period of research, who provided me with the most perfect accommodation and gave me unlimited permission to interview his students, use the computers and who generously shared his knowledge with me. Without him this research could not have been carried out in the way I had planned it.

If possible, even more thanks of course go out to the children of Sera Je, and in particular to those 15 boys I interviewed and their *shagens*. They informed me about their lives in such honesty that all of the information that follows in this thesis could be considered as highly valuable! Of course I can not forget Nyima Dorjee, my interpreter, without whose help I could never ever have received the information I needed.

Outside Sera monastery, I want to thank all Tibetans who live in the settlement of Bylakuppe. They have shown me lay-Buddhist life, they have included me in their lives, accepted this blonde stranger almost as if I were Tibetan. They made sure that when I wanted to escape from my monk-surroundings, I still felt at home. In this case very special thanks go out to the people of the Tibetan Children's Village of Bylakuppe, where I could be amongst women and girls one day a week, and where I was able to observe how Tibetan culture is being preserved in a very useful way. Even though a lot of these children have to live without their parents, they have a home and several mothers and friends to take care of them and love them. And I am proud to have been one of those people for a while.

In The Netherlands I thank Dr. F.E. Tjon Sie Fat of the University of Leiden, who gave me the liberty to prepare and act out my research in my own way, who only stimulated me to experiment and try new techniques and who in the end read my thesis and gave me the necessary criticism. I also thank Dr. Y.M. van Ede, of the University of Amsterdam, for reading and reviewing my work and providing me with extra literature and information on Tibetan monastic culture in particular.

I also want to thank Pema Thinlay, who added an extra dimension to this period and who provided me with a personal Tibetan experience which made me feel even a little bit more Tibetan.

Last but not least, I want to thank my parents for always supporting me in whatever plan I had and in actually acting it all out. I thank them for giving me all the freedom, even though I decided to study such a strange and unknown thing as Anthropology. They knew, even before me that that subject would include all my passions and fascinations and so, even though they did not know if I could “make a living” with it, they always encouraged me even more to continue. Even so did my brother and sister and the rest of my family and friends, who stayed in contact with me during my 9 months abroad (during and after my fieldwork) and without whose emails and sms'es it would have been a lot more difficult for me to do what I wanted to do!!

Monique Jacqueline van Lochem

Note to the use of Sanskrit, Pali and Tibetan words

In different books on (Tibetan) Buddhism different terms and spellings of words are being used. For this thesis I have chosen to use the words that were mainly used by my population. This means I mainly try to use Tibetan terms. Still, some Sanskrit or Pali words are more common in Buddhology or Tibetology. If that is the case then, to avoid general confusion, I will use these words. If the information I state comes from a book that uses words from a specific language and these words are considered general knowledge amongst scientists and students in this field, I will use the same terms. However, in the information that I collected during my own fieldwork I will use mainly Tibetan terms. For example the book in which the Buddha explains the monastic rules and regulations is generally called by the Sanskrit name *Vinaya*, but in Tibetan this is called the *Dulwa*. Still, I will use *Vinaya* most of the time in the theoretical part of this thesis, while using *Dulwa* in the analysis of my own data.

If the term is new and unknown it is written in Italics and the explanation is to be found in the glossary in back of this work.

I have only studied Tibetan, I can only speak about this language in terms of spelling. It is hard to precisely transcribe the word into our Arabic letters. The phonetic spellings of the words one will find in the literature are different for almost every writer. In this thesis I have tried to use the most common spellings, which I have found in several books. To make it easier for the “lay-reader” to understand the Tibetan terms I have not exactly copied the Tibetan words according to one of the standard transcription systems (which are used by some other authors) but I have spelled the words in the way the words are supposed to be pronounced.

Introduction

Everywhere they are present. In some countries even more than others, but every person around the world sees them, socializes them and influences them with his or her beliefs and culture: children. However, even though children are the future of every culture, they are greatly ignored in anthropological research! This, to my opinion, is very strange. Considering the fact that it is the children who have to and will continue our way of life, our beliefs and our culture, probably in a different way than their parents, or at least with slight changes, I think it is very important to include them in our research. I find this especially important because, as anthropologists we are not only interested in the way a culture is functioning now, but we are also trying to see what will happen in the future, and the children are that future!

This is why, in my fieldwork, I found it very important to interview and observe children as well as adults. I even aimed my research mainly on a specific group of children in a Tibetan religious community: child-monks in Sera monastery. My interest in Tibetan Buddhism and the “Tibetan case” and children in general are the main reasons for choosing this particular subject.

In Tibetan culture children play a very special role. While living among them and observing them it becomes clear that children are actively seen as the future of the culture and more specifically their religion. Especially since the Chinese have taken over Tibet and made it part of their own country. Due to this the Tibetans have been oppressed and outnumbered by the Chinese in their own country. Monasteries were destroyed and education was “reformed” in such a way, that nowadays most of the Tibetans in Tibet can not even speak their own language anymore, let alone practice their religion or possess pictures of their spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama. For this reason many Tibetans have fled and still flee out of their country to live in the so-called Tibetan settlements in India, Nepal or even further abroad. Even the monasteries were “moved”. Monks of monasteries in Tibet have built up new monasteries in the settlements abroad, where monks, now, can freely study their religion and learn their own language. In this way everywhere around India and Nepal¹ “Little Tibets” have come up, where the people attempt to live in more or less the same way they used to in Tibet itself. Still not everyone can afford to come to Nepal and India (the political consequences are severe when a person is discovered while fleeing to Nepal or India) or wants to leave their country. But most of the families do send at least one child abroad, either to study at one of the Tibetan Children’s Villages (TCV’s) or to become a monk or nun at one of the

¹ And of course in the other settlements around the world. But since my experience has only been in settlements in India and Nepal, I focus on these two countries

monasteries or nunneries, both with the intention (among other) to give their children the possibility to learn about their own culture, language and religion, in order to be able to continue that when Tibet ever becomes a free country again.

So as we can see, children are acknowledged by Tibetans as a very important part of their (future) culture and in the preservation of that culture.

Nehru, the president of India and good friend of the Dalai Lama, told him, when the Dalai Lama and a lot of his followers came to India:

“If you want to keep the Tibetan case alive, do not count on the United Nations, but make sure the children of your people get a good education” (Dalai Lama, 1990: 233, my translation)

Seeing and reading about this I was even more amazed to find out that no other research had yet been performed on the “normal” children in Tibetan monasteries. There are books to be found about specific people in the monasteries, *tulkus* and *rinpoches*, but a monastery as Sera, with about 4600 monks living there, of course has more monks than only those special ones. And it is the children who make sure there are so many monks, because they arrive there at a young age and since most of them have no one or nothing else to depend on, they stay in the monastery most of their lives.

When I told people at home about this custom: children going to monasteries at a very young age, being disciplined and having to study hard even from the age of 6 on, everybody seemed to have a (negative) opinion about it. “How can parents send off their children when they are still so young!”, “These children need the care of their parents at such a young age!”, “They need time to play and they should not have to study so hard yet.”, “Their lives must be awful!” These were comments I heard all the time. But who can better command on these subjects or answer the questions than the children themselves? Do they find that they need more time to play? Do they miss their parents? Or do they get substitute parents? Do they hate studying so hard? Do they know why in some cases they were sent to the monasteries and do they agree with that decision? Why were they sent to the monastery at all? And do they intend to stay there and preserve their culture in that way? These were all questions that, when reading about Tibetan monasteries, came up in my head and which I have asked the children during my research.

As I said, these children, their reasons, their way of life and in general their education in the monasteries, were hardly mentioned in the books. And what was mentioned, eventually turned out to be at least incomplete or even totally wrong. Still I do not say that what you will read in this thesis is applicable to all child-monks in all Tibetan monasteries. In Tibetan Buddhism there are different traditions, with each

different ways of living and education. Even the individual monasteries sometimes have a different policy considering the children.

The monastery (Sera) I stayed in and carried out my research, during the first three months of 2003, is one of the most important and largest monastic communities found in the Tibetan diaspora. This means that for Sera some rules and regulations are a little stricter than in other monasteries. Still, I do think that this thesis will provide Tibetologists, anthropologists and sociologists specialising in Tibetan culture, with additional information about monastic life for children. And it will also show how interesting it can be to include children in a research, to let them tell about their lives, instead of adults telling the researcher about the lives of the children, because in the end, who knows better about his own life than the children themselves?!

All of this led me to my main research subject: “The life of children in the Tibetan Buddhist Sera monastery in South India and their opinion about that life”. I have investigated this subject and the result of this can be found in the following chapters.

In order to give you, as the reader, an impression of how this thesis is structured I will describe the contents of each chapter below.

Chapter one will provide you with the theoretical orientation on which my research was based. As said, not much had been written about my specific subject, still basic information on the monasteries (in exile), the Tibetan habit of sending children to these religious institutions and comparable information on Catholic boarding schools and religious consciousness of children has been given in the literature. In this Chapter I will give you the most important information which I used as a basis for my own fieldwork.

Chapter two will show you the aim of my fieldwork and the methods and techniques I have used in order to get answers to my questions. Chapter three will then show who, exactly I have interviewed and from whom I have received my data.

Chapter four describes the sociology and history of Tibetan settlements in India, in general and Bylakuppe in particular. It also provides information on how Tibetans in exile attempt to preserve their culture at schools. Chapter five further specialises to Sera. It describes the history of Sera, the structure and the role of Sera Je Secondary School, the school where I have performed most of my research.

Chapter six goes into a special and important ceremony for new childmonks: the initiation ceremony. How the process goes and the latest changes in this ceremony will be described.

Chapter seven deals with the social surroundings of the child. How is a monk supposed to act, according to theoretics and how does it work in reality? And who play the largest roles in a childmonk’s life?

Chapter eight is then the most important chapter of this thesis. This Chapter answers most of the main research questions and thus describes the background of the children, how this might influence them or their families and what the children themselves think about their lives. Chapter nine, then, goes deeper into the lives of the childmonks, by giving 6 life-histories.

The last chapter, Chapter ten can be seen as a review of all of the information given in the previous chapters, together with opinions and suggestions given to me by other Westerners who are in close contact with the monks of Sera.

During the preparation for this research I already found out that there had not been written any book yet about the life of children in Tibetan Buddhist monasteries. This made it hard for me to find information about the subject, and it made sure my fieldwork contained much more than initially had been the objective. Still, some authors wrote small parts about subjects that are related to my research. And even though some information, that has been written by those people eventually appeared not to be correct or at least not applicable to Sera's situation, it did, in advance provide me with possibly important subjects of influence and viewpoints with which I was to investigate my own subject².

1.1. The monk

For Tibetan Buddhists the three Gems (Buddha, *dharma* and *sangha*) form the basis of their religious devotion. They prostrate for them and take refuge in them. In the case of this research the *sangha* is the most important of the three. This is the community of Buddhist practitioners and especially the *bhikkus* and *bhikkunis* (monks and nuns). Also laymen and –women are considered part of this order. (Rajesh, 1998: 14) The fact that it is such an integrated community is important for my subject, since the children who become monks, always come from a family who are lay-people³. Because both parts of the *sangha* work together and depend on one another it is possible to shift from one position in the *sangha* to another.

So it seems to be easy for a lay-child to get accepted in the monastic order and become a monk-child. The way in which children become monks or why they become monks will be discussed in the paragraphs below. But who is a monk and who is not?

According to most of the literature a child who enters the monastery is first called a novice⁴ (*genen*), it is unclear if this person has been officially initiated or not, at least he has been accepted into the monastery and to the study of the *dharma*. Strong states in his book that there is a ritual for accepting the child as a novice into the monastic community. This ritual is called “wandering forth” (*S. pravrajya*) and involves acquiring the robes and bowl of a monk and taking a total of 10 precepts⁵. (Strong, 1995: 111-113)

² About what role this theoretical orientation exactly played in my research can be read in Chapter 2

³ See Chapter 8

⁴ According to Mills this novice-state is already called *drapa* and a boy will continue to be called a novice until he takes his first vows of *getsul*, see for further explanation paragraph 1.7. (Mills, 2003)

⁵ These 10 precepts are: refrain from: 1) killing; 2) stealing; 3) unchastity; 4) lying; 5) intoxicating drinks; 6) eating at the wrong time (after noon); 7) entertaining oneself; 8) personal adornment; 9) using high or broad beds; 10) accepting gold or silver. The first five are the same as the vows for lay-Buddhists, only unchastity is reduced for them to sexual misconduct.

The Tibetan term for monk is *drapa* and that level will be reached, according to Rajesh, after 2 or 3 years in which the novice only has to refrain from lying, stealing, killing, the use of intoxicants and sexual conduct. (Rajesh, 1998: 63-65) After the initiation-ceremony performed by the abbot⁶, the boy will be a real *drapa*, but he will only work as a servant of his teacher. He performs the lowest of jobs and it is even said that in the old Sera monastery, he was not even allowed to wear shoes, even when it was snowing. In the three years of being a *drapa* (according to several sources *drapa* was merely a stage and not a general name of all monks) he gets to know monastic life further, just like he did when he was still a *genen*. (Website 1, 2002) After the *drapa*-stage follows the *rigchun*-stage. An important difference between the three stages mentioned above is where the students sleep. In the Vinaya (T *Dulwa*) there was no mentioning of *genen/drapa* and *rigchun*, but it does mention the terms “a pupil” (the *rigchun*) and “one who shares a cell” (the *genen* or *drapa*). This would mean that while moving up the ladder, children would also get more privacy in the form of their own sleeping place. (Horner, 1962: 83; Rajesh, 1998: 63-64) Although the *rigchun* apparently is seen as a higher monk novice than the former two stages, he is still not allowed to fully join rituals. This he can only do when he has been initiated into the *gelong*-stage, which means he is a fully ordained monk. To reach the *gelong*-stage a monk has to take 253 vows, which are described in the Vinaya. Once he knows all this he can request his full ordination. (Powers, 1995: 412)

According to the Sera website the monk does not only need to know the monastic rules and regulations, he also needs to know a number of texts. When he can recite these texts as well he has to take an oral exam with the abbot and only then the student can start his formal studies, for which the grade of *geshe* is the highest one can reach⁷. (Website 1) According to the Vinaya a monk can only become *gelong* when he has been 20 years of age. (Horner, 1962: 119-120)

1.2. Age of entry to the monastery

A few months before I left for my research a discussion had started in Tibet about a new policy of the Chinese government about the age at which children could enter the monastery. Traditionally children were around the age of 7 or 8, when they would join the monastery. (Goldstein, 1998; Havnevik, N.D.; Hoffmann, N.D.; Rajesh, 1998) In an attempt to decrease the amount of monks and so the involvement of lay-Tibetans in monastic life and the influence of Buddhism in general on the lives of the Tibetans, the Chinese had decided to make the minimum entry-age 18 years. This caused an enormous protest amongst Tibetan families, who wanted to send their children to the monastery, much younger. Tibetans, in general seemed to think that children should enter the monastery as young as possible. One of the reasons that was given in the article by Simons was: “In reality we find that some of the best scholars began as children...”.

⁶ In my research it appeared that not only the abbot can perform the initiation but also other high *lamas*

⁷ See for further information about this *geshe*-degree paragraph 5.5.

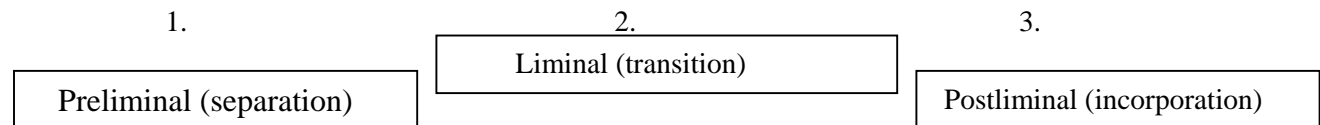
(Simons, 2002b: 16) On top of that it is said by the Buddha himself, in the Vinaya, that the monks that will be the best in the future are either a small child, since he is still ignorant about material life, or a layman who had been married. The last one is supposed to become a good monk because he already knows what life can bring him and that that kind of life will not bring him happiness in the end. Study of the *dharma* will bring happiness, so he will choose very consciously to renounce the lay-life and accept the monk-life. (Horner, 1962)

In Simons' article, it is said that Tibetans simply do not accept this new rule and they avoid it by smuggling their children into the monastery⁸. The respondents in this article seem to be quite proud of their child-monks. They believe that generation will save Tibetan culture and Buddhism. Nevertheless, even the Dalai Lama is not always only positive about sending children to the monastery. He said: "One of the main reasons Tibet was so backward is that too many men were in the monasteries and not contributing toward development... I continually advise parents to send their children to schools, not to monasteries. Otherwise our population will remain stagnant, and we will never be able to compete economically"⁹. (Simons, 2002b: 37)

1.3. The initiation-ceremony: a model¹⁰

To become a real monk, a child has to be initiated by the abbot¹¹ (or another high *lama*). This happens in an official ceremony of which the exact time did not become clear from the literature. Still, this ceremony can be compared to the initiation-ceremony Van Gennep describes in his phases.

According to Van Gennep there are three phases within an initiation ritual or "rite de passage" (transition ritual). These can be put in a structure like the one below:



(Van Gennep in Bowie, 2000: 151-153)

In the first phase the child has arrived in the monastery and starts looking for a so-called "sponsor"¹². This person will help the child inside the monastery and may or may not be a close relative, mostly an (maternal) uncle who is already in the monastery. (Rajesh, 1998: 64; Website 1, 2002) In the Vinaya it does not mention a sponsor but rather a teacher who guides the child into the monastery and

⁸ Or they simply send them to one of the monasteries in Nepal or India.

⁹ See also paragraph 5.4.2. about the subjects at SJS and the support of the Dalai Lama in this way of monastic education

¹⁰ For a more extensive elaboration on this subject and the way it is described in the literature see Van Lochem, 2002a: 11-15

¹¹ See also Chapter 6 on the initiation ceremony in Sera

¹² See paragraph 1.10. and 7.3. for more information about the guidance of a child in a monastery

introduces it to the other monks. (Horner, 1962: 81) In my own data the Vinaya-information appeared to be more correct than the other. In Sera such a teacher was called *shagen*.

In this first phase the child has already been separated from his family (especially the ones who come from far) and his social world in general.

The second phase focuses on the official start of his life inside the monastery. Once the child has a sponsor or teacher he will be checked for physical deviations, which could prevent him from being a proper monk. (Rajesh, 1998: 64) After that the initiation-ceremony can take place. As said before, there is some confusion about when this ceremony is supposed to take place. According to Rajesh a child can not be initiated yet when he has just arrived in the monastery, because then, the child is not yet a full member of the community and he only is, when he has spent some time there. (Rajesh, 1998: 64) In the Vinaya more or less the same thing is written. There it says the child first has to be accepted to the method of the *dharma* and only after that he can be initiated.

According to the Sera website the teacher gives the child a new set of robes¹³ and takes him to the abbot. They take with them a *khatag* (a ceremonial scarf) and a pot of fresh tea. The novice then prostrates three times in front of the abbot. With this he does not only show his respect for the abbot, but he also demonstrates his physical condition. Then the abbot asks him if he wants to enter the religious life, to which the boy answers “yes”. Then the abbot cuts the last piece of hair as a sign of his breach with his profane life and his family. Then the novice gives a *khatag* to the abbot and someone else serves tea to the abbot and the novice. By drinking tea together the symbolic relationship between the abbot and the novice is confirmed. (Website 1, 2002)

About this drinking of the tea is not mentioned anything in any other source, still it appeared to be quite important according to my respondents in Sera, since from this tea the future of the monk can be “read”.

Phase three is actually the phase in which the connection with the outer, or lay-world is being broken. In Hoffman’s book the information is more or less the same as on the Sera website. It says that the child receives his monk’s robe directly. Also it says that his hair will be shaven except for one little piece on the top of the head. The abbot, during the initiation ceremony, cuts off this little piece. The child then also receives a different name. Only then he can start his study to become a *drapa*. (Hoffmann, N.D.: 182-183) More or less the same description of the initiation ceremony is to be found in the biography of the family of the Dalai Lama. The Dalai Lama’s brother was initiated as a monk, because he was recognised as a *tulku*. (Craig, 1998: 66-67)

¹³ According to Rajesh this part of the whole initiation, symbolises the departure of the Buddha from his palace in which the prince (in his nicest outfit) exchanges his clothes with a beggar, who’s clothing symbolise the monk’s robe. The child also exchanges his nice clothes for the monk’s robe. (Rajesh, 1998: 63-64)

When this scheme is followed securely the child will reach a new life as a monk and so a new position in the social world. In short: the preliminal phase takes the child out of his normal surroundings, the liminal phase takes the child to the higher level of the initiation ceremony after which he will reach the postliminal phase in which, on one hand he is incorporated as a monk into his monastic surroundings, on the other hand his new role will be incorporated into the lay-world as well.

Nevertheless, there are other theories about this 3-phase scheme. Victor Turner has developed another idea. He places more emphasis on the second phase especially in the case of monks, who, according to him, transfer from the profane world to the sacred world and then stay there. After phase one, leaving the profane world, the boy enters the sacred world by this initiation ceremony, but he never returns to the profane world, so he stays in phase two forever, if of course he stays monk. If, at some moment he wants to give back his vows he will return in the profane lay-world, hence phase 3.

1.4. Nuns

Even though in the end I have not been able to pay much attention to nuns, I do find it important to mention some generalities about them. The organisation in nunneries seems to be more or less the same as in monasteries. But what immediately catches the attention is the fact that there are far less nunneries than monasteries. And thus also less child-nuns than child-monks. An important difference that is explained by the Vinaya is that a nun, in order to be initiated she has to go to a monk. Only a monk can initiate a nun. (Horner, 1962: 194-195) An other book even states that nuns in Tibet can never get a full ordination. They will always remain a novice! (Havnevik, N.D.:44-45)¹⁴

1.5. Restrictions in the admission to the monastery

In all books it is said that all children can enter the monastery, but that some “castes” of people are less preferred, or even refused. This could be people who perform jobs against Buddhist principle like butchers (the killing of animals is considered a very bad act) or blacksmiths. After the Buddha’s teachings and as Buddhism developed a number of prerequisites for ordination were established. Buddhists seeking to enter monkhood needed to be of a certain age, to have permission of their parents, to be free from certain diseases and physical deficiencies, not to be debtors, runaway slaves or army deserters and not to have committed terrible crimes. This was all to ensure the good reputation of the community. Besides, in the Vinaya it is also stated that candidates for ordination had to be humans. (Strong, 1995: 61-62)

¹⁴ In the few interviews I did at the nunnery of Namdroling (Nyingma tradition) I was told that nuns and monks are totally equal, even though they do not always consider themselves to be that. Still, the Dalai Lama is a great advocate of the equality of nuns and monks and there are even, though few, female *tulkus*

1.6. The position of a child in his Buddhist family

I think that the position of a child in his family can be of great influence on the reason why a child goes to a monastery. Since most of the children who come to the monastery at a young age are not yet old enough to have made this decision by themselves, most of them are sent by their parents. Theoretically, one could say, that that shows the bond between parents and their child is very distant. Otherwise a parent could never send off his child, often to a place far away and inaccessible. Most probably the strength of this parent-child bond has much to do with the amount of children in the family. In Tibetan societies, this bond is also influenced by their specific culture and in this case their religion, Buddhism. First of all a woman in a Buddhist society (referring to Bopearachchi's study of Buddhist education in Sri Lanka) is supposed to give children, if she fails she is like a tree without fruit. Still, in the four Noble Truths as described by the Buddha, birth, like dying is suffering. And all Buddhists try to avoid suffering in order to reach happiness. If then, a child is born this is considered to be a reincarnation of new being. Since this child has already lived several lives and carries with him a complete history, it is seen as an individual with a personality of his own, determined by his *karma*. Before the delivery of the child, *lamas* come to visit the mother and perform rituals to make the birth easier and the child healthy. According to a source on the Tibetan settlement of Bylakuppe (where I performed my research) a few days after birth the child is taken to the monastery to be shaven. (Balasubramanyam, 1976: 56-57)

Then, during his childhood, all phases are celebrated, from getting his first haircut, to leaving the parental home. It is considered to be a very essential part of the moral and physical development of the child. In the Buddhist canon are even recommendations on how to preserve the harmony between parents and child. The parents in this book are described as very respectable people and the killing of parents is one of the 5 evil deeds that should be punished immediately. The murderer will then go to hell and it is extremely hard to escape from that. (Vetter, 1996: leereenheid 6: 1)

In the end Bopearachchi says that in a Buddhist society the realisation of obligation and respect towards parents dominates in the relationship between parent and child. (Bopearachchi, 1994: 213-237)

1.7. Reasons for entering the monastery

As said before not much has been written specifically about "normal" children who join the monastery. Still from all books that have been written on Tibetan Buddhism in general, more specifically monastic life or even in biographies of *tulkus* or *rinpoches*, some reasons can be collected on why people either have to join the monastery themselves, or send a child to a monastery. Since these reasons have played a very important part in my research, I will describe the different types of reasons in the paragraphs below.

1.7.1. The *Tsung gral* system

Traditionally, like in the West for Catholic monasteries, there was a sort of “monk-tax”, in Tibet this was called *Tsung gral*. This system ensured that parents would feel obligated to send on or more of their children to a monastery. Normally the oldest son would stay at home, to look after the parents, get married and continue the lineage. A second son could then be sent to the monastery.

This rule was present in Tibet before the Chinese occupation. (Rajesh, 1998: 24)

1.7.2. Religious reasons

Although the reason described above seems very obligatory, the main reason for going to a monastery is a religious one. Parents, who send their child to a monastery or nunnery, believe that they will be reborn in a better state, or that their child will get a promising next life. Another religious reason to be found in the literature is when a child is ill, but gets better, the parents promise in their prayer to send that child to a monastery out of gratitude. (Rajesh, 1998: 24; Strong, 1995: 76) Diki Tsering also seems to recognize this: “The *lama* advised my parents to send him to a monastery, because when if he would stay home he would die at a young age. Tibetans have a lot of faith in the judgement of the *lama* so my parents decided my brother should go to the Kumbum-monastery” (Tsering, 2000: 36-37, my translation)

But not only parents give in to these religious reasons, also children sometimes feel they were meant to go to the monastery. The same happened to the brother of the Dalai Lama, Jigme. He was delighted to hear that he was recognized as a reincarnation of a monk of the Kumbum-monastery: “That boy seemed to be extremely happy and wanted to leave his house immediately. One of his favorite fantasies – and that was not unusual for Tibetan children – had always been that he walked away from home to become a monk!” (Craig, 1998: 61, my translation)

According to the website of Sera, at the birth of baby, old people of high status pay attention to see if anything special happens around the time of birth. This should predict if the child has good potential in spirituality or not. If it happens that the child is a *tulku*, then the parents immediately give the child to the monastery¹⁵. (Website 1, 2002)

1.7.3. Religious consciousness of children

The idea of a religious decision made by children, for example what we read above about children themselves deciding to go to the monastery because they feel some sort of “vocation”, is of course based on the assumption that children have a religious consciousness. Books about this topic in general were hard to find in libraries in The Netherlands. Most of them have a strong Christian focus. In these books it is assumed that children are indeed very religious, but do not realise religion yet. They do have a sixth

¹⁵ See life history 6, paragraph 9.6.

sense that makes them more sensitive to religion and with which children are much more sensitive to things than adults. This “organ” makes sure children are very open and receptive to supernatural phenomena. (Meiler, 1967: 49)

In another article a very anthropological standpoint is taken by psychologist Ana-Maria Rizzuto. She says that a child is introduced to a religion by the culture in which it lives. According to Rizzuto a human being is not a “homo religiosus”, which means a person is not in principle a religious being. She says that any kind of religious consciousness only appears when it starts having evolutionary advantage for the person, especially death and birth seem to play a great part in the development of this consciousness. Every person, sooner or later, will ask the question “what happens with us after we die?” and since, no one can give a straight answer to that, people have to make up an answer. This is the start of religious consciousness for children. On top of that, Rizzuto states that every person has his own psychological world. A child too will develop that. Anything that happens in that little world needs to be explained and with this, the child forms his own religious idea with which he can explain the world around him. While creating these explanations he will be influenced by the society he lives in, especially his parents. (Rizzuto, 1993: 16-19)

Another theory on the development of religious consciousness with people is based on the use of language. In the article of one archeologist, he states that, before there can be any form of religious consciousness, there has to be a language with which supernatural, non-visible beings and phenomena can be described and explained. In the past there was a language but that language could only be used to say daily things, but it could not refer to the past or future. (Corbey and Roebroeks, 1996: 917-921)

Considering the fact that the youngest children also can not speak yet (they can of course more or less comprehend the language that is being spoken around them) this could play a part in their religious consciousness. If people indeed need a language to get a religious consciousness, it could simply be said that these young children can not have a religious consciousness yet. However, older children do understand and use their language, but does that mean that a 7-year old can be considered having a full understanding of his religion? This is still unclear, but for my research I have assumed that a child, at least, does have an opinion about his religion and hence can make a decision about it.

1.7.4. Economical reasons

Besides the religious reasons parents might have to send their child to a monastery, because of financial shortcomings. Tibetan society (in this case at least Amdo, a province in eastern Tibet) used to have a patrilineal settlement system for marriages. This made sure that parents did not only have to look after their own son, but also their daughter in law and their children. Because of this, boys more often than girls, were sent to a monastery. In Lhasa, on contrary, girls did get sent to a nunnery for financial reasons.

If a family had more than one daughter it was a heavy load to arrange marriages for all of them. (Tsering, 2000: 37) If a couple had many children it could also happen that they simply did not have enough money to take care of them all, thus they would send one or more of their children off to a monastery, where there would be taken care of them. (Goldstein, 1998: 15; Shan, N.D.: 5; Strong, 1995: 76)

When children lost their parents and their family did not want to take care of them, they were also sent to a monastery. Most of the time people preferred this to arranging a marriage and, in the case of a girl, paying a large dowry. If a daughter became a nun, the family only had to bring tea and pay for the clothes occasionally. (Van Ede, 1999: 120-121)

1.7.5. Socio-cultural reasons

In early Buddhism in India, people saw joining monastic life as the only escape from the lay-life they could not accept (because of the caste-system), or thought of it as an easy way of acquiring good food in return for little physical labour. (Strong, 1995: 76)

The monasteries in Tibet were the only institutes where a child could get proper education, so for some people this was also a reason to send their child to a monastery. It was said that: "In no farm, many men could earn a living, whereas a monk, even from the poorest family, could strive towards a high position if he was talented". (Craig, 1998: 74; Strong, 1995: 76-77)

Especially girls seem to go to a nunnery out of free will, sometimes even against their parents' wishes. These girls do not want a life full of obligations and so they seek the relative freedom of a nunnery. (Havnevik, N.D.: 46)

Another reason in this category was to accompany a brother, cousin or uncle, who had already joined the order. (Strong, 1995: 76-77)

1.7.6. Ideological reasons

Since the annexation of Tibet by China there has come up an even more ideological reason for sending children to monasteries or nunneries. In Tibet, since the Cultural Revolution, thousands of monasteries were destroyed and hundreds of monks and nuns were killed. To preserve Tibetan culture and religion, parents find it extra important to do that by letting their children become monks or nuns. They do this as a protest against the Chinese policy. Some people say: "By reducing the number of monks, the Chinese are attempting to destroy our religion!". (Simons, 2002: 36)

This is one of the reasons which was also very present among the children and parents that I interviewed in Sera.

1.8. The monastic structure¹⁶

According to some authors there seem to be different levels of monkhood within the monastery which are structured hierarchically and which all come under the abbot (*khenpo*) who is the head of the monastery. To go from one level to another depends on the age and phase of study, in which the monk resides at that time¹⁷. As we saw in paragraph 1.1. in the literature it was not exactly clear when the child is officially monk or not. I will now assume that after the initiation a child is a real monk. He will then move from *genen* to *drapa* to *rigchun* after which level he can take even higher vows and then he can accept higher functions. Besides having his regular function as a monk, he can also have a specialized “job”. He can be *umze* (chant-master), *lobpon* (teacher), *nerpa* (he is in charge of the purchases for the monastery), *kuner* (the attendant and the person in charge of the assembly hall) or *gegu* (disciplinary monk). (Rajesh, 1998: 64) These jobs are all on the same level, for some you need a higher degree than for others, but they are all “horizontal” functions.

There is of course also a hierarchical structure of the monastery. In the books, not everything becomes quite clear, but in my research I investigated this structure more and that description can be read in paragraph 4.5.

Like we saw in paragraph 1.1. it is not completely clear when or how the vows are taken. Most of the books though describe two levels of vows, even though, when a child first arrives in the monastery also takes very simple, basic (lay-)vows, according to Mills. Still, shortly after his initiation, a boy can take the *getsul*-vows, yet he does have to be able to recite certain texts. This level contains 36 vows, which he has to remember and by which he has to live. This ordination is being performed by an incarnate *lama*. Taking the vows makes him a semi-ordained monk and this allows him, Mills says, to take part in various rituals and start his education into the literary and philosophical corpus. Then, and it is not sure if there is a minimum age for this, he can take the *gelong*-vows. These are 253 vows, including the 36 *getsul*-vows, prescribed by the Vinaya. By taking the *gelong*-vows, in a day-long ritual, the monk is fully ordained and can he perform more specialized tasks, as seen in the beginning of this paragraph. In many cases a monk would travel all the way to Himachal Pradesh to receive his *gelong*-vows from the Dalai Lama himself.

Considering the high status of incarnate *lamas* in the Gelug-tradition, an incarnate *lama* is preferred, to perform the ordination. An ordination from any other person than a *tulku*, would not be respected by laity or by other monks, so even though it is technically possible to receive ordination from any other

¹⁶ In Paragraph 5.5. I will explain the structure of Sera monastery

¹⁷ Especially the phase of study appeared to be quite important in giving a certain job to an appropriate monk. See appendix F for the list of subjects during the monk’s study at the university.

holder of the ordination lineage (like the *lobpon*), it is not preferred¹⁸. (Mills, 2003: 34, 43-45 and 316; Powers, 1995: 412)

Having taken certain vows gives the monk a higher status as well. During ceremonies, the novices (*drapas* as Mills calls them or *genen*, *drapa* and *rigchun* as Rajesh calls them in paragraph 1.1.) are not allowed to join the rituals. They have to sit at the back of the temple, farthest away from the statues. Fully ordained monks (*gelong*), sit closest and in between the fully ordained and the novices are the semi-ordained (*getsul*). The novices are considered too young to participate and only serve tea. (Mills, 2003: 34) Not only do the number of vows make a difference in participation in rituals, according to Mills there is also a difference in the clothes they wear. (Mills, 2003: 43-44)

Besides the horizontal structure of different “jobs” in the monastery and the vertical structure of the vow-levels, there is another vertical structure within, especially, Gelugpa-monasteries. This is sometimes called the *geshe*-system. After finishing their studies at the university (for most monks this takes over 25 years of study), all monks take oral exams, in the form of debates. Originally these *geshe* candidates were examined in the *Potala*, in Lhasa, by the highest scholars, among whom the Dalai Lama. When the candidates pass their exam, they receive one of three levels of *geshe*¹⁹. Mills calls these three *lharampa*, *tsogrampa* and *dorampa*, of which *lharampa-geshes* are by far the most talented and intelligent monks. Of the same status (more or less) are the *tulkus* (incarnate *lamas*). (Mills, 2003: 237 – 240) From my own research, it appeared that these *tulkus* are all *geshe* already, since in their previous lives, they have already done the exams and in that way received the *geshe*-degree.

1.9. The *tulkus*

Even though my research was purposely aimed at non-*tulkus*, since so many books have already been written about these special monks, I could not avoid including one of them. *Tulkus* have a very special position in the *gelug*-monasteries. They often have their own houses (*labrang*) and live more or less separate from the other monks, even though they are totally included in their lives. This difference in living conditions (monks living together in one building, but in separate rooms and *tulkus* having their own large houses) is the most obvious of differences between normal monks and *tulkus*. This follows from the rule that all reincarnations inherit the property and religious students of their previous incarnation. (Mills, 2003: 313-314)

Originally *tulkus* were considered to be incarnates of parts of the Buddha’s mind, in order to defend the purity of the Buddhist doctrine. Nowadays, *tulkus* are mainly reincarnated *lamas* who are respected

¹⁸ All of the above I have found in my own research as well, though I have not investigated this subject thoroughly, since it is not directly related to the children. Nevertheless, I do find it important to have all of this mentioned, because it explains how the (Gelugpa-)monastery is structured and what lies ahead of the child.

¹⁹ In my research there appeared to be 4 levels of the *geshe*-degree. See paragraph 3.5. for more information

highly by both laity and the other monks. As we have seen, this brings with it a special role in, for example, ordination ceremonies and other rituals. (Mills, 2002: 315-316)

Recognizing a *tulku* as being the reincarnation of a certain high *lama* or *rinpoche* is being done by his students. The most famous story is that of the Dalai Lama and even though the happenings that precede the birth of a *tulku* are not always as spectacular, his story gives a good idea of how the process of finding the reincarnation and then testing him exactly works. Still, the Dalai Lama is a very special incarnation. He is said to be the incarnation of a *bodhisattva*, Chenrezig (S. Avalokiteshvara). When his mother was pregnant with the Dalai Lama, his father was ill for 2 months, he was dizzy and every time he tried to stand up, he fell down and saw his parents' faces. Before that the horses at the farm stopped eating and drinking, they became ill and died, one by one, all thirteen. After this, there was a famine for 3 years. Because of this people started moving and only thirteen families stayed in their homes. Early one morning Lhamo Dhondup (the name his parents gave the Dalai Lama before he was recognized to be the reincarnation of the thirteenth Dalai Lama) was born and all of a sudden the father was also better again, as if he had never been ill. He said this baby-boy should become a monk, because he was special. After his birth, all disaster ended. According to his mother, Lhamo Dhondup had always been different than any other child. He was always packing his bags, because he was planning to go to Lhasa, even when he was only 1 year old. His mother also had had strange dreams before he was born and he himself said he had fallen from heaven. When the Dalai Lama was over 1 year old, a delegation came to visit, in their search for the incarnation of the fourteenth Dalai Lama. They had received clues from the previous Dalai Lama which had pointed them to the region where Lhamo Dhondup was born. They came by two times more. Once, they had put two sticks in the corner of the room, of which Lhamo Dhondup immediately took one and asked one *rinpoche* why they had taken his stick. The same thing happened, when one other person was wearing the *mala* he had once received from the previous Dalai Lama. Then when he was officially tested, they showed him several objects of which he had to pick one. Each time he chose the one that had belonged to the 13th Dalai Lama. He could also answer their questions in Lhasa dialect, even though he had never heard that language before. When the delegation left, Lhamo Dhondup screamed and said he wanted to go with them. After the tests with the other boys, they decided Lhamo Dhondup was the 14th Dalai Lama. (Dalai Lama, 1990: 23-27; Tsering, 2000: 95-113)

1.10. The supervision of a child in the monastery

Every child that wants to become a monk has to be guided by a monk. In paragraph 1.3. this person was called a sponsor by Rajesh. Following the Buddha's words in the Vinaya, this supervisor has to meet some requirements. For example, a monk who is ignorant and inexperienced can not be a supervisor. Then

the Buddha also explains exactly which deficiencies a supervisor can not have²⁰. (Horner, 1962: 81) He states 5 abilities a supervisor needs to have: 1) he needs to be able to teach the basic principles of the doctrine to his student; 2) He should be able to lead the student in his training; 3) He should be able to explain that is in the *dharma*; 4) He should be able to explain everything that comes with the discipline and 5) he should be able to explain the student how he can discuss all this.

In addition to these there are 5 more characteristics. A supervisor should: 1) know what is an offence (light and serious); 2) have read the two *pratimoksas*; 3) be classified; 4) be justly intonated; 5) have respect for explanation of the rules. This all makes a total of 16 requirements. (Horner, 1962: 80-85)

This supervisor is most of the time, the same person as the one that has introduced the child into the monastery, and so, often an uncle of the child. This supervisor is then, immediately the personal guide of the child and so, one of the two teachers that a child receives. The other person is the real teacher. In my research in Sera, the supervisor, or personal teacher was called *shagen* (home-teacher) and the other teacher was called *gegen*. All his presents and income, the child has to give to his *shagen*, according to the website, and he will keep it safe. The *shagen* will have to teach the child about the rules in the monastery and all other aspects of monastic life. He also takes care of the food of the novice, his clothes, medication, and, if necessary, additional teachings. (Website 1, 2002)

1.11. Boarding schools

During the preparation for my research, I made the comparison between life for Tibetan children in the monastery with the boys in the West who used to go to Catholic monasteries or boarding schools²¹.

Even though these Catholic boarding schools have been abolished in The Netherlands, there is a great similarity between both institutions where boys (or girls) live within their learning environment, separated from their parents, together with religious specialists. In the case of the Catholics these specialists were priests, fathers or other kinds of people serving for one and the same religious order. In the Tibetan case these are the monks, also all part of the same Buddhist tradition. Another similarity between the two institutions is the fact that both only take either boys or girls. It is never a “mixed” community. This means the children are raised without influence of the opposite sex. For boys this meant they only saw their sisters and mother on visiting days, but they were mainly warned for any female influence. Students of seminaries were prepared for the life of a priest and so they should not have close contact with women. Sometimes girls were even seen as the cause of all sin. “We already blushed when seeing a lady’s bicycle!”, one of the ex-students says, “we became totally shy among women, just because the teachers were so frustrated about it!”

²⁰ See Van Lochem 2002a: 23 for exact information on those deficiencies

²¹ These boarding schools were often founded by existing monastic communities

The fact that most boarding schools were founded by Catholic missionaries ensured that the students had to live by more or less the same rules as the monastic community. And just like in Tibetan monasteries sometimes boys were admitted into the school even before the school-age. (Perry, 1991: 9-13 and 141-144)

Despite these similarities there is one big difference. In contrary to the children in Tibetan monasteries, about whom hardly anything has been written, the boys who used to go to Catholic boarding schools did write books about their experiences. These experiences might, again, provide similar information as the experiences of Tibetan boys in Buddhist monasteries.

Reasons for sending their children to the monastic schools seem more or less the same as those of Tibetan parents, even though the emphasis is a little more on the educational side than a strictly religious motive. Since the parents themselves had not been able to get good education, they wanted their children to have the best and boarding schools had the reputation of being able to provide their children with that.

In some families it was also just tradition to study at boarding schools, it seemed to be part of a certain social status. On top of this, the discipline that was enforced in the boarding schools made them stricter than regular Catholic schools, this was especially helpful for the children who were unmanageable at home. Children did have some sort of influence on to which boarding school they were sent. Often they could choose where they wanted to go, but even more often parents simply sent their children to whichever boarding school they thought would be best for their child.

Half of the boarding schools in The Netherlands were seminaries and many boys who went there had chosen to go their themselves. They had an uncle or exemplary person who was a priest, or they had been altar boys and in this way they had become familiar with the work. By then, it was also very common to have priests and other religious servants visiting the family often. (Perry, 1991: 15 - 20) This is the same as in Tibetan families, where usually at least one other relative has already joined the monastery and where monks are often good friends of the family and visit them all the time. These Catholic priests also recruited boys for the seminaries, they especially checked good Catholic families with sons of the right age, who could also learn quite well. A boarding school or seminary, though, always cost money, in contrary to the Tibetan monasteries where boys were also sometimes sent exactly because the family did not have money enough. (Perry, 1991: 21-26)

Being in a different place than the parents was often as difficult for the parents (if not more) as it was for the child. One man says about the day he left his parental house for the first time "It was the first time I saw my father cry!". When boys had to travel by train or bus, it was common that a priest would take the boys with him. Whether the schools were near or far, the boys felt as if their parents were unreachable after they left. Sometimes boys were not allowed to cry, because they should not hurt their parents' feelings. Once alone, inside the school the boys had to adapt to their new situation. They did not want to

attract attention and tried to be the same as the other boys. They did not have to wear a uniform (like the Tibetan monks) but there were strict clothing-prescriptions. “Being different in clothing was a disaster. Together with another boy, we were the outcasts.” (Perry, 1991: 26 – 32)

Just like in a Tibetan monastery²² the children were busy from the moment they woke up, until they went to bed again, there was strict discipline, which now, afterwards, is appreciated by ex-students. They say that without this discipline they would never have managed to get their diploma. Punishments involved, being beaten, sitting on the knees, staying inside all day and writing-assignments. (Perry, 1991: 33- 53 and 103-104)

At the seminaries, the boys had to recite prayers all the time. By repeating them so often the meaning got totally lost, they say²³. In some boarding schools not only “internal” students had class there, but also “external” students came to the school every day to study. They were, often, kept strictly apart, had separate playgrounds and in class they did not talk with each other. (Perry, 1991: 81-83) I think this can be compared to the child-monks and lay-children, only these two groups are still very much in contact with one another. (See Chapter 7)

During their time off, the boys often played soccer on the playground or they played cards. They were not allowed to go into certain parts of the village. Only the best students could become member of theatre-groups or choirs, otherwise it would take too much of your time. (Perry, 1991: 86-93)

There was hardly any contact with the parents. Only during holidays the boys were allowed to visit them, which was about 2 or 3 times a year, and parents hardly ever visited their sons. They did write letters and sometimes the boys received a small present with it, a chocolate-bar or money. And the boys also wrote back, in the beginning they simply copied a letter from the blackboard and sent that, but as they became older, they were allowed to write their own letters, but they always had to put it in an open envelope, so that it could be checked by the authorities.

Only when it was strictly necessary, the boys could leave during schooldays, but often they were escorted by one of their teachers. If they were allowed to go to an event (for example a sibling’s marriage) alone, they were always warned against the evil influences some of the attendants to the party could have on them. (Perry, 1991: 98-100)

Like the Tibetan monasteries, the boarding schools also had “jobs” for those students who performed very well or were in the highest classes of the school. These were jobs that gave a student a certain status²⁴.(Perry, 1991: 123-124)

²² See paragraph 5.4.2. for a detailed description of a regular schoolday in Sera Je

²³ This is also done on purpose in Sera, the children first study the texts, so that they know them by heart, only after that they are considered to be able to really learn the meaning of it.

²⁴ This seems to be in contrary to the tasks children in Sera have. There, young children only have special “jobs”, the older ones seem to be “freed” from these obligations, at least until they go to the university.

2.1. General aim of fieldwork

Trying my best to prevent myself from the “Shangri-La-view”²⁵ on Tibetans and especially the monks, I have observed them, participated in *pujas*, and interviewed the monks in order to get as-objective-as-possible data for my general fieldwork aim:

To study the life of children in the Tibetan Buddhist Sera monastery
in South India and their opinion about that life

In Chapter one I have shown what had been written about my subject: “The life of children in the Tibetan Buddhist Sera monastery in South India and their opinion about that life”. But, as we saw, only very little information is known so far about the “normal” children in the monastery. This is strange because sending children to monasteries, or becoming monks, has been a very normal and important part of Tibetan culture ever since the first monasteries were founded. Nevertheless, all scientists, working on Tibetan subjects have, up until now, always been more interested in the more “special” people of monastic life, i.e. *rinpoches* and *tulkus*. Still, in monasteries, like Sera, where 4600 monks live and study, it is hard not to wonder where all these monks come from. Especially when seeing the children, it is clear that apparently most monasteries depend, for their existence, on the supply of “fresh” monks (i.e. children) to their institutes. This means that boys (and also girls, but my research has been aimed at boys) leave their parental homes at a young age, and start living their lives at monasteries, with different goals. In order to reach these and to stay monk the rest of their lives, one could expect a strict discipline with motivated students. But is this the truth? And are all prejudices I found during the preparation for this fieldwork, either mine or other people’s, about the hardship these children have to endure, true? In general, do the children like their life in the monastery? And what exactly involves this life as a monk for them? These were the main questions I wanted to get answered. Because of the lack of information in the literature a lot of questions remained unanswered by reading the books, probably too many for only 3 months of research. Still, I have tried my best to collect as much data as possible on this subject in a way that the children themselves literally have a word in it. Because who are we, as adults, to tell each other how children experience their lives or how they should lead it? And what could be the future of this way of life without the children and their opinions on changing or preserving it?

²⁵ For further reading see Van Lochem 2002a

My subject of research can therefore be formulated in the following research question: “How is monastic life in Sera to the opinion of children?”. This I will try to answer in the Conclusion. However, since this question is not exhaustive, I will further proceed to speak about my research subject(s) and not about my question, although all subjects/objectives can of course be put into a question as well.

2.2. Specific objectives

As stated above (paragraph 2.1) there are many questions one could ask, that are related to the main general subject of my research: “The life of children in the Tibetan Buddhist Sera monastery in South India and their opinion about that life”. This is exactly what I did in order to make the question-lists as they are in Appendix B. Of course, when having only three months to perform the research, not all subjects of interest can be covered. Unfortunately, I had to remove things or formulate it in a different way²⁶. Since I did not have an exhaustive research question but moreover a comprehensive research subject that I wanted to explore, I operationalised my main subject into several “sub-subjects” or “specific objectives” which eventually lead to the question lists. As said, many changes have taken place in comparison to my research plan. Nevertheless, in the parts below I will discuss the objectives I have eventually investigated during my fieldwork.

The objectives can be divided into different categories. First of all there are the main background subjects which were meant to provide me with factual information, in order to get more knowledge about the general course of events in Sera Je. These factual background objectives were:

1. The initiation-ceremony
2. The education of the children and structure of the monastery in general
3. The history of Sera and SJS
4. The demography of the whole settlement and Sera
5. The way the TCV tries to preserve Tibetan culture

Without these subjects I could still have investigated the children’s opinion, but in order to put those opinions in a context and considering the fact that this information had not been described yet (at least not about Sera), I found it necessary to include them in my research.

The second group of objectives was meant to provide me with information on the actual life of the childmonks itself. As will be explained in paragraph 2.3. this information would lead to 6 life histories and a lot of qualitative data. During my fieldwork I came across more subjects, that appeared to be quite important, than I had planned to investigate. This information was not only collected amongst childmonks,

²⁶ See also Appendix A for changes I had to make during my research in comparison to my research plan

but in order to make a good comparison and to understand the (background and motivations of) childmonks better, also amongst lay-children of the TCV in Bylakuppe.

These subjects are:

1. Where the children come from
2. The journey to Sera
3. The age at which children enter the monastery
4. Reasons why children join the monastery
5. The social surroundings of the children and the role other monks play in their lives
6. The position of monastic life in Tibetan families

All of these subjects seemed important because they influence the child(monk) and the way it experiences its life and forms its opinion on it.

Most important of all objectives then is, and this is also the red line throughout all these subjects, the opinion of children, especially the childmonks, about monastic life and with that the future of the Tibetan Buddhist monasteries²⁷.

2.3. Research methodology and analysis

In order to collect data on all of the above subjects I have included different kinds of people²⁸ in my research. But, as always in anthropological research, during my fieldwork, extra subjects or people seemed to be important too and I had to make special question-lists²⁹ to cover the extra subjects that I came across.

Because my aim was to study life of children in a Tibetan Buddhist monastery and their opinion about that life, which had not been done before as far as I know, my research was an exploring one. Some information was already written in the literature but this appeared incomplete or at least not totally applicable to the situation in Sera. Besides, the opinion of the children themselves had never been investigated before. This way I also did not have a theory or statement that I could test. Of course all the information that was written in the literature provided me with ideas about certain subjects, which then I have also “tested”, but since my main objective was the opinion of the children, my research can not be called testing. In order then to cover as much subjects as possible and to remain open to all kinds of changes into new subjects, my research question or –subject was (as can be seen in paragraphs 2.1.

²⁷ In the next Chapters all of these subjects will be described and explained and in the Conclusion the main answers will be given

²⁸ See paragraph 2.4. and Chapter 3 for a description of all respondents

²⁹ See Appendix B for the question-lists I used

and 2.2.) quite general and not-detailed. In this thesis, therefore, I will only attempt to make clear which elements are of influence to the children's opinion and how these elements influence the children³⁰ in an explanatory and descriptive way.

In order to collect simply as much data as possible to find out what factors played a role in the life of children in the monastery the methodology followed was mainly qualitative. I did not want to waste my extensive data, coming from individual interviews by putting it into mere statistics. But I wanted to use the stories of all kinds of people as much as possible. Also in this thesis I have attempted to give as extensive as possible explanation about the data I collected. Russell Bernard (1995: 363) says about qualitative research: "Qualitative data analysis depends heavily on the presentation of selected anecdotes and comments from informants – quotes that lead the reader to understand quickly what it took you months or years to figure out".

However, to get a complete and quick idea of the situation in the monastery I have also collected quantitative data besides the qualitative data, which provided me with the general background information. This data indeed gave me a quick idea of who the children were what the majority thought. In this thesis this information, put into tables, will be illustrated by quotes and comments from my individual respondents, with whom I had in-depth interviews. In this way the qualitative and quantitative data complement each other.

The most qualitative data an anthropologist, or any social scientist, can get are life histories. Even though the children, I have aimed my research at, are still young, I have tried to collect enough information about some of them in order to write a life history about a selected number of children. Still, these "life histories" will not describe the whole life of those children, but the descriptions will be centered on the part of the lives of the children as monks and a little before that. This is why these stories might better be called "religious histories". (Du Boulay and Williams, 1984: 249) The objective of this technique is to deepen the general data, I have collected, in order to get a clear idea of what is going on in a child's life before and after becoming a monk. Since the children themselves were often too young, to exactly remember what happened in the process of becoming a monk, I have also interviewed their parents (whenever possible), and their teachers to get a more complete picture.

2.4. Research techniques

In order to receive all this qualitative and quantitative data I have used several techniques. Besides interviewing the children, their teachers, their parents, specialists, older monks and Westerners, I have done group-interviews with classes of both SJS and the TCV-school. The interviews were never one-to-

³⁰ This process of taking a general subject, collecting data in the field and consequently finding the elements of which this subject exists or which influence the subject is called "induction".

one, because my interpreter was always present³¹. Nevertheless, the individual interviews involved trying to get answers to the questions on my question-lists. These question-lists were the same for most of the people in one group, but for the specialists the case was different. These respondents often were supposed to give me specific information about certain subjects. So, when starting these interviews I only had the subject and I just asked the specialist to tell me about that. As that interview continued I asked different questions, following the information he had just given me. These were, in this way, very unstructured interviews. I used this technique for the interview with the abbot, the astrologer, the initiation specialist and the principal of SJS (see paragraph 3.4). In some cases I also asked questions which are on the “Senior monks question list” (see Appendix. B).

The group-interviews also involved getting answers to my questions on the list, but instead of asking the children in the class these questions personally, I asked the children to raise their hands when the option of their choice came up. One could say these question-lists had multiple-choice answers, so most of these questions were closed. During these group interviews I have also posed open questions to which the children could give their own opinion. This of course, caused some chaos in the group, but it did provide me with good information.

As shortly mentioned in paragraph 2.1. I have used even more techniques than only interviewing. I have also participated in several *puja*'s (as far as a Westerner can participate in that) and events, especially during *losar*³² (Tibetan New Year). Besides this I volunteered every Friday in the Tibetan Children's Village (TCV)³³. There I helped the mothers and observed the role of women in the lives of children and the way Tibetans treat their children. By participating in the lives of these children and women I did not only get to see the female influence and role in children's lives, but I also got to see the lives of Tibetan lay children. These techniques mean that most of the time was taken in by observation. As an anthropologist, as soon as there are people around we observe them, see what they do, where they go and then try to interpret their behavior. This is exactly what I did. Not only during my fieldwork in Sera, but also during the 6 months after that when I lived among Tibetans in other parts of India and Nepal. In consideration to this specific fieldwork I observed the children going to school, during the lessons, during the *pujas* and in their free time.

One experimental technique I have used was to let children make drawings of different situations in their lives. This appeared to be a visual way of letting them express themselves in a different way than talking. Most of the children seriously took this assignment home and drew a beautiful picture for me³⁴.

³¹ See Appendix A on my experiences on working with an interpreter and other fieldwork experiences.

³² During the two weeks around *losar* the children had more freedom than usual and they organised special events (playback-shows, traditional dancing etc)

³³ The TCV is a Tibetan part of the SOS children's villages. In this specific village there are 30 homes, each lead by one mother, *amala*, who looks after and takes care of about 30 children. See paragraph 3.8.

³⁴ Some of these drawings can be seen as illustration in Chapters 7 and 8.

3.1. Tibetan settlements in India

Map 3.1. Tibetan settlements in India



Key

- Tibetan settlements
- Settlement of Bylakuppe

Source: Website 3, 2002 and Microsoft Elsevier, Encarta Grote Wereldatlas 2000, Winkler Prins

From the moment the Dalai Lama fled out of Tibet, after the Chinese had started taking over his country in 1950, many Tibetans have come to Nepal and India, to settle in exile. The first group of people came together with their religious leader in 1959. (Kvaerne, 1984: 266) Because of the Dalai Lama's friendship with the President of India, Nehru, he was appointed land where he and his people could live.

The first settlement became the one in Bylakuppe³⁵, but since the weather in South India was so much warmer than the weather in Tibet, many Tibetans died and India gave them more land in the north of the country. Eventually the Dalai Lama settled in the Dharamsala, a small hillstation in the state of Himachal Pradesh and he was followed by other Tibetans. (Dalai Lama, 1990)

In map 3.1. we can see where the most important Tibetan settlements, in India, are. Nowadays Tibetans have spread all over India, but most of them still live in their own communities. In total some 131.000 Tibetans live in exile. They are living all over the world but 25.000 live in Nepal, 2.000 in Bhutan, 2.000 in Switzerland, 600 in Canada and 1500 in the United States of America. India has the

³⁵ See paragraph 3.2. about the history of Bylakuppe, the settlement where I did my research

largest Tibetan community, about 100.000 Tibetans are living in India. They are divided among 7 parts of India.

Most of them live in the settlement of Bylakuppe, South India (where there is also Sera monastery). About 30.000 Tibetans live there. In Central India (among other settlements there is Mundgod, where two of the most important three monasteries are, Drepung and Ganden) there are about 8000 Tibetans. In Uttar Pradesh (East of Delhi), there are 6.500 Tibetans. In Himachal Pradesh (where the Dalai Lama lives) there are 21.000 Tibetans. In North Eastern India (among which are the states of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh) are 8000 Tibetans. This area was partly Tibetan before the Chinese took over the country. In West Bengal and Sikkim (North of Calcutta) are about 14.300 Tibetans. Another 5.600 Tibetans live in Ladakh, the North-Western part of India that, culturally, is strongly connected to Tibet. (Website 3, 2002)

In these settlements, the Tibetans have also started to build monasteries again, right from the beginning of their arrival in the area. At present, there are over 200 Tibetan monasteries and nunneries in India, Nepal and Bhutan with a population of over 20000 monks and nuns. There are also over 700 Tibetan Buddhist centres abroad.

All of the settlements and monasteries fall under the rule of the *kashag*, the Tibetan government in exile. Except for criminal activities, everything is determined by the Tibetan policy. This strongly contributes to the isolation of the settlements in their host-country. The government also gives money to the different settlements, money that is often earned by sponsorship of Western charity but also by the export of Tibetan carpets and other handicraft. A vast amount of the money also comes from the tax Tibetans pay. The amount of this tax depends on the income of the person, who has to pay.

All settlements consist of one or more “camps”. In these camps live about 100 families. In order not to let the settlements get too large, the people who get out of Tibet are sent to one of the camps. This is determined in the refugee centres, either in Kathmandu, Nepal, or in Dharamsala, India. In these refugee centres the newly-arrived are asked if they have any relatives to whom they want to go, or if they have any other preference of where they want to live. Then the person goes to either one of the settlements in Nepal, or one in India. Monks, in this case, are always sent to the monastery of their choice.

Looking at these settlements one will see that the vast majority of the camps are Tibetans. Hardly any mixing with surrounding people exists. This makes the settlement a “little Tibet” where Tibetan women still wear their traditional dress, *chuba*, and monks and nuns live in monasteries that are “copies” of the ones in Tibet. To maintain their culture and to make it possible that their children, even though they are brought up outside Tibet, can still identify themselves with their culture, the schools and the TCV’s have a strong Tibetan influence on their curriculum. They all teach in Tibetan and the emphasis is on Tibetan history and religion, besides, of course, the regular school subjects, like mathematics, geography, Hindi, English etc. (See paragraph 3.3.)

Having seen several settlements throughout India and Nepal, I can say that the level of wealth in the settlements is quite different. In my settlement, Bylakuppe, which is also the oldest and largest settlement of them all, people seemed to be quite wealthy. The monasteries were enormous and the statues inside were equally impressive, people were not dependent on temporary income, but they had a steady income all through the year. (See paragraph 3.2) Dharamsala, on contrary, seems to be mainly dependent on tourism, and so on the high and low seasons. Most Tibetans there, have handicraft shops or guesthouses in order to serve the increasing amount of tourists in the village. From the stories of the monks in Sera and other Tibetans, the areas of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh are among the poorest of India. People mainly live off agriculture, but not always is there enough food for everyone.

Nevertheless, most settlements, besides being very Tibetan on its own, are located in a, originally, Tibetan cultural area. The Northern parts of India are near the Himalaya where Tibetans, or their kin, have been living for a long time. Due to boundary-fights between India and China, nowadays the regions are split up. Still, when I was in these regions it was clear that the Tibetan influence is still there. Monasteries look exactly the same for example and even important *tulkus* have been born in these parts, when they were still part of Tibet. While living in these culturally and physically Tibetan areas, the Tibetans who live there can still have a strong sense of being in Tibet. For the southern settlements, this is of course a lot harder, but, from what I have seen, they have adapted very well and they have been able to create their own “little Tibet” in these more tropical surroundings, but it is not the same as in Tibet.

3.2. Bylakuppe

When, in 1959 the Dalai Lama fled from Tibet to India, about 7000 monks followed him. By then, they did not have anywhere to go so they settled on the border in small establishments. The settlement there, is now called Buxa (North West of Calcutta). The monks and nuns of all traditions of Tibetan Buddhism lived together. When in 1960 the Indian government gave land to the refugees in the Southern part of India, first the lay-people went there. They were administered 3000 acres for 3000 people in the state of Karnataka, the settlement that is now called Bylakuppe. They could have agriculture there and live from that. Nevertheless, the land that the Tibetans had been promised consisted of forest and thus needed to be cleared. Because it was such hard work and the refugees were not used to such high temperatures, a lot of them died. When most of it was ready for use, the people started forming the camps. First they set up 5 camps in the area called Lugsam, within the settlement of Bylakuppe. By the Tibetans themselves these 5 camps are called the Old Camps (See appendix C for a map of Lugsam and its camps). The 16 New Camps came into existence around the area of the Old Camps at around 1969. This area is called Dicky Larsoe. After having lived in the Buxa for 10 years, the monks and nuns also started coming to the south and they started to build their monasteries.

As said in the previous paragraph Bylakuppe seems to be one of the most wealthy Tibetan settlements. Their main source of income is the Tibetan tax. Secondly the refugees still receive money from the Indian government, which is mainly meant for education. Thirdly a lot of money comes from the West. Either from relatives who live in the West and send money to their families or from Tibetan institutes in the West that support the refugee communities. A large sponsor is the Tibet Foundation and SOS-children's villages, of which the TCV's are a specific department. The Dalai Lama himself also donates money to the settlements.

Nowadays the only new arrivals from Tibet arrive in the monasteries or nunneries. The amount of lay-people only grows because of births. In table 3.2. it can be seen how the population is divided among the different camps of Lugsam.

Table 3.2. Population spread in Lugsam given by camp (until 31 March 2003)

Camp	Adults (>21)		Children (<21)		Total
	Men	Women	Boys	Girls	
Sera	3753	0	501	0	4254
Namdroling ³⁶	671	18	8	0	697
Tekchenling	21	0	6	0	27
Sakya	31	0	42	0	73
I camp	302	274	112	145	833
II camp	258	243	87	94	682
III camp	325	320	131	140	915
IV camp	272	264	80	70	686
V camp	290	309	133	132	865
VI camp	262	254	123	125	764
TCV	231	216	287	294	1028
Old people's home	29	36	0	0	65
Total	6445	1934	1510	1000	10889

Note:
Sera, Tekchenling and Sakya are monasteries. Namdroling consists of a monastery and a nunnery.

Source: Office of the representative of Lugsam Samdupling settlement

3.3. Preservation of culture (at schools) in exile

In the settlements as described above and especially the settlement of Bylakuppe, several Tibetan schools have been founded. According to the Dalai Lama, in his autobiography, President Nehru has made education the priority for the Tibetan refugees. Since, they were already driven out of their own country, the children were the only wealth they still possessed, and thus they needed proper education. Nehru made

³⁶ According to my visits to Namdroling I do not agree with the number of girls mentioned in this table. When I visited the nunnery there were definitely girls living there under the age of 21. Probably the nunnery has grown since the numbers for this count were written down.

sure the Tibetans could build up their own schools in which their children would be taught Tibetan language and culture. The Indian government would be responsible for most of the funding (and this still remains this way). The Dalai Lama agreed with Nehru too, when he said that even though the traditions should be kept alive, the children should also learn about the modern life. (Dalai Lama, 1990: 227-228)

This is exactly what happened. All settlements have their own schools where children are being taught about their own history, their religion (taught by a monk) and all this either in English or in Tibetan. Besides these traditional subjects children also learn Hindi, mathematics and computer-science. Nevertheless the emphasis on Tibetan education is large. Children also learn Tibetan traditional dances, and in music-class they learn how to play traditional instruments. There are even dancing-competitions between schools.

Adults, themselves, preserve their culture in their own way. In the settlements the main language is still Tibetan, sometimes mixed with some English words. Most older (or married) people still dress in the traditional way, more or less adapted to the climate they are living in. And they have built large prayer wheels, monasteries and stupa's (Tib: *chorten*). Even though there are no yaks, large mountains or endless empty landscapes, walking around the settlements definitely feels like being in a "Little Tibet".

The fact that children have the possibility to learn their own language, something that is not possible anymore in Tibet itself, is a very important thing for parents. Some children for this reason alone are sent to India or Nepal, from Tibet, to study there. From talks with people it appeared that being a Tibetan is largely identified with speaking the language. People are proud of their language, the Buddhist scriptures are also written in Tibetan and thus, for them it is essential that at person can speak and read Tibetan, in order to be able to act, believe and really be a Tibetan³⁷.

Just like they used to do in Tibet, Tibetans can now still walk their *khora*, turn the prayer wheels, join *pujas* and send their children to monasteries, even though they live in a completely different country.

³⁷ See paragraph 8.6.

The main target population were of course the individual child-monks. Since they are a lot younger than the other monks and they are physically smaller they were easy to recognise. Besides, because I stayed in the Sera Je part of Sera monastery, during my research I started focussing only on the children in Sera Je and not Sera Me³⁸. All monks stay in their own parts of Sera most of the time, so there was hardly any confusion. On top of that my interpreter³⁹ was a teacher in the school of Sera Je, so he knew all of the children. In this way he could help me find exactly the kind of children I needed. Of course, during my research I found out that other people also seemed more important than I had expected in advance, so I ended up interviewing more people than I had planned.

In the end I have done 50 individual interviews and 9 group-interviews. In table 4.1. it is explained how many people in which “category”. In the paragraphs below I will explain what each category exactly consists of.

Table 4.1. Number of interviews by respondent-category (N= 50)

Children	18
Shagens	9
Parents	5
Specialists	5
Senior monks	4
Westerners	5
Extra information	4
Groups	9

N is the number of individual interviews

Source: Fieldwork data

4.1. The individual child-monks

This group was my main target group. They have provided me with the most important information: their opinion about their lives, their activities and their lives in the monastery in general. This group of 18 children includes 4 nuns who, in the end, I have decided not to include in my research. Since, in the settlement where I performed my research was only one nunnery, I could only use that one. Nevertheless, this nunnery belonged to a completely different Tibetan Buddhist tradition, so, in order to

³⁸ Sera monastery consists of two parts, Sera Je and Sera Me, for more information on Sera monastery I refer you to paragraph 5.1

³⁹ See Appendix A for my experiences in working with my interpreter

get a complete picture of the life of nuns and to get good data to compare their situation with that of the monks in Sera, I would have had to investigate this tradition and nunnery as well. To be able to do this well, I would have needed more time. So in my data-analysis I will still tell something about the nuns, but I was not able to make a full comparison.

The other 14 children were monks at Sera Je. Their age varied from 5 until 17 years old. Most of them though, were between 11 and 14 years old. All children went, or were about to go, to Sera Je Secondary school⁴⁰. Nyima, my interpreter and teacher at SJS, and I often simply took children from the street and interviewed them. After the first number of interviews we also went to the different *khangtsens*⁴¹ in order to get a little more variety in the background of the monks we interviewed. In total there are 13 *khangtsens* in Sera Je. This regional division appeared to be very important for the reasons for which the children had been sent to the monastery (for example: poor regions mostly seemed to send their children for economical reasons).

Table 4.2. Division of interviewed childmonks by *khangtsen*

Teho	4	N = 14
Drati	2	
Ngari	1	
Tsetang	1	
Tsawa	2	
Loba	1	
Dema	1	
Unknown or other	2	

Source: Fieldwork data

Whether the interviews with the children were useful or not depended severely on the conditions in which the interviews were being held. When we were in a more private atmosphere the children were much more open and would give extensive answers. When teachers or other interested people surrounded us, the children immediately shut up and only nodded or shook their heads. In general the interviews with the children were very open, honest and useful!

⁴⁰ See paragraph 5.4. for more information about SJS

⁴¹ *Khangtsens* are groups of monks, from the same region, living together in different houses. See paragraph 5.3.

4.2. The *shagens*

These 9 respondents were also all monks at Sera Je. The *shagens*⁴² are the personal teachers of the children. The children live with their *shagen* and this man looks after all their needs. So right at the beginning of my research it appeared that this person is the most important one in the lives of the children. In order to collect more information for the life histories and to get to know more about this function of *shagen* I interviewed as many *shagens* of my child-respondents as possible. Nevertheless, unfortunately not everyone was present in Sera at the time of research and one *shagen* refused to give an interview because of bad experience with previous researchers.

To get all the information I had to make a separate question-list⁴³ for these teachers. Often it was hard to find the real teacher of a certain child-monk. This was because most of the monks' names are more or less the same. To quote from my journal, only a few days after having started interviewing:

“These monks don't only look the same, but they all have the same names too!! They are all called Tenzin! Tenzin this or Tenzin that!”
(My journal: 15 January 2003)

To interview the *shagen* all we really needed was the name of the child and a smile on our faces. Most of them loved talking about their “job” and the children they took care of. They were all some kind of father to the children.

4.3. The parents

This was probably the category of respondents that was hardest to find. Hardly any of the children in Sera have their parents nearby. And since India is very big, these parents lived too far to visit for an interview. Fortunately still some of the children had their parents in one of the camps of Bylakuppe⁴⁴.

These parents were often very open about their children's life and the choice they had made to have their son become monk. They proudly told me about their country and how they tried their best to preserve their culture outside Tibet. All families were as welcoming as others. Most of the time they did not even need to hear the reason why we were there.

“We knocked on the door and the mother opened. She immediately invited us into the living room, where grandmother was already turning her prayer wheel and saying *mantra*'s. Father also welcomed us and told us to sit down. All with a smile on everyone's face. The second we sat down the mother came in again and offered us buttermilk tea, only then Nyima had a chance to explain them why we were there!” (My journal: 3 February 2003)

⁴² See for further information about the *shagens* and the role they play in the child-monks' lives Chapter 7

⁴³ See Appendix B

⁴⁴ See paragraph 3.2 for more information on the settlement of Bylakuppe

To be in the houses of the parents not only provided me with the interview I needed, but in that way I could also observe the religiosity of these people (whether they had any Buddha-statues or a picture of the Dalai Lama in the house), their financial situation and their living conditions.

In the first instance, it was mostly the men (fathers) who answered my questions, while the mothers kept pouring us tea. Nevertheless, whenever the father said something incorrect, the mother would jump into the conversation and correct him!

4.4. The specialists

This is a good example of a category that was extended during my fieldwork. In my research plan I had meant to interview the abbot as a specialist and the principal of the school hoping that both of them could also provide me with information about the initiation and the structure of the monastery, which seemed to be the only extra information I needed. Both the principal and the abbot could give me extensive information about their own jobs, but for the initiation I needed other people who gave me a detailed description of the process. I ended up with two senior monks, who have already taken a lot of novices to the abbot, or another important *lama*, in order to get them initiated. One of them added this information to an interview that I was already taking, which is why I did not add him to the number of specialists in this list.

Then, during my interviews I found out about the special role of a monk-astrologer in the decision to send one of the boys to the monastery. Naturally I felt I had to do an interview with him to get some explanation. Another specialist was the *gegu*. Before my fieldwork I had seen this name before in a book, but I had no idea that this person played such an important role in the monasteries and more specifically in the lives of the children⁴⁵. So the total number of specialists grew from 2 to 5.

4.5. Senior monks

Before my fieldwork started I thought this group of monks could give me additional information about their lives in the monastery. And maybe they could also explain to me the difference between the life of children nowadays and their lives as children in the past. Nevertheless, since I had already taken up this extra category of *shagens*, who are also senior monks, I have included some of these “senior-monk”-questions in the *shagen*-question list. And since I simply could not cover everything I wanted and the *shagens* seemed more important than the general senior monks I did not go into this category very deeply.

⁴⁵ For more information about the important people that surround the child in the monastery see Chapter 7

4.6. Westerners

In Sera there are quite a few Western monks. They live in a special *khangtsen*⁴⁶, at least some of them, and others live with their teachers. These Western monks could, of course, be a focus of research themselves (what motivates a Westerner to give up everything and live his life in a Buddhist monastery?). I did not have time to ask them everything I wanted to know as a curious anthropologist, but since they come from more or less the same culture as I they could make better comparisons between Western children and Tibetan child-monks. Because these Western monks live more closely to the Tibetan monks, and thus the children, they have a closer perspective to the life of these children. This is why I interviewed the Western monks.

Among this category of Westerners are also three normal, but Western, Buddhists who are, each one a little more than the other, closely involved with the monastery. One of them is a sponsor of one of the monks in Sera and visited this monk during a period of 4 weeks, in which he lived with this monk. This way he had the opportunity to watch the lives of the monks closely. The other two are women, one of whom was living with a Tibetan family, and in this way she could give me a general view on the way children are raised in Tibetan families and the role they play within this small group. The second woman lived in another monastery in the settlement of Bylakuppe and teaches English to the monks. Even though she belonged to this other tradition, she could still give me interesting information about the children's life in monasteries.

4.7. Group: Sera Je Secondary School

In order to get some background data about the boys in Sera I decided to do group-interviews in 4 different classes of the Sera Je Secondary School (SJS). Each class consisted of about 25 children. I interviewed the boys of classes I, III, V and VII. These boys were all between 6 and 19 years old. In one part they had to raise their hands whenever their answer was mentioned. In the other part I posed an open question and they could give their reaction to it. Almost all boys participated very well. Especially the young ones were very serious, the adolescent boys were, just like in the West, stubborn, found it sometimes a little stupid and did not always answer the questions seriously. Nevertheless, I believed these group-interviews have given me very helpful statistic data.

Another assignment I gave the boys was to make drawings about different things (See also paragraph 2.4). This assignment I gave to the classes II, IV, VI and VIII. Respectively the drawings were about: themselves and the thing they like most about monastic life; themselves after 20 years; themselves

⁴⁶ See Appendix E for a list of all *khangtsens* in Sera Je

and the thing they like least about life in the monastery; themselves and the journey they had to make to get to Sera.

4.8. Group: Tibetan Children's Village (TCV)

The last interview group are the children of the Tibetan Children's village where I volunteered about one day a week. The TCV was founded following the Chinese occupation of Tibet in 1950. Many children had been orphaned during their flight to India or separated from their families. The most critical needs therefore was to find means to care for all these children. A "nursery for Tibetan refugee children" was set up and the elder sister of the Dalai Lama volunteered to look after the children. In cooperation with the international organisation SOS children's villages, the nursery could grow and set up several TCV's in Tibetan refugee camps in India and Nepal. In total nowadays about 14.354 children benefit from this organisation in India. In Bylakuppe this number is 1047. The children are divided into 33 homes, which are in charge of mothers, *amala*. Each house consists of 30 children who sleep, live, study and eat there. All TCV's have got a primary and secondary school where the children follow their education. The main aim of the TCV's nowadays is: "to ensure that all Tibetan children under its care achieve a firm cultural identity and become self-reliant and contributing members of the community and the world at large". (TCV-brochure)

The children are often orphans or sent to India by their Tibetan parents. This means these children are lay-children and all of Tibetan descent. Most of them though are born outside Tibet, but to Tibetan parents. The TCV-school has a good reputation, which is why children are often sent to these schools, also because they place a lot of emphasis on the preservation of Tibetan culture.

In order to find out how children in general think about monastic life, if they still support it, or if they think it is old-fashioned, I asked these children multiple choice questions, to which they had to raise their hands, and I posed open questions to which they gave very serious answers or suggestions. All of the children seemed to be seriously interested in the questions and all of them participated well. I could even ask some questions in English and let them respond directly to me. Fortunately, though, my interpreter was always there, in case the children could not find the right words in English.

5.1. History of Sera

Sera used to be one of the three most important monasteries of Tibet. Together with Ganden and Drepung, it was the religious and political centre of Buddhist Tibet. All three monasteries belong to the *Gelug*-tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, of which the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama are the heads. Ganden, Drepung and Sera were located near Lhasa, the capital of Tibet. Between 1930 and 1959 about 6000 monks lived in Sera⁴⁷.

The monastery was founded by Jamchen Choje Sakya Yeshe in 1419, after the request of his teacher, Tsong Khapa (the founder of the *Gelug*-tradition). Sakya Yeshe had been teaching at the Chinese court and had converted many people to Buddhism. The objects he brought from China, later on, became the treasures of Sera. When the Chinese occupied Tibet, besides thousands of other monasteries, Sera was largely destroyed and its monks were sent away or captured. About ten years ago, the Chinese government has given permission to rebuild and restore part of the old monastery. Nowadays about 700 monks live in the old Sera monastery⁴⁸.

Sera monastery in Bylakuppe is more or less an exact copy of the original. Just like in Lhasa it consists of Sera Je and Sera Me, which each have their own main temple⁴⁹. In the old Sera there was also Sera Ngagpa, the tantric university. This institute was not rebuilt in the new Sera. After finishing their regular studies, monks go to the new Drepung or Ganden for their tantric education⁵⁰. Nevertheless the *khangtsen*-structure⁵¹ of the monastery and the university curriculum still exists in exactly the same way.

The new Sera monastery started being built in 1970. First the monks lived in army-tents⁵² for about 3,5 years, near what is now Sera Me health care⁵³, the creek nearby was their water supply. The monks had to chop down all the trees, with help of the Indian government, to make open fields. Sera Je and Sera Me monks worked together then. The food came from abroad by then, but it was not much, as one of the senior respondents told me.

⁴⁷ See appendix D for pictures of Sera in Lhasa

⁴⁸ When I visited Sera in Lhasa it felt empty, like a museum. In contrary to, for example, Tashi Lhunpo-monastery in Shigatse, or even Drepung in Lhasa, Sera does not really live anymore. The only people I saw were tourists and a few monks, of whom I doubt their Tibetanness⁴⁸. In the other two monasteries also lay-people still go there and make their offerings or *khora*. I hardly saw any lay-people in Sera the time I visited it (July/August 2003). The total amount of monks I saw was about 20, they were the ones looking after the statues and rooms.

⁴⁹ See Appendix D for pictures of the new Sera

⁵⁰ See paragraph 5.5.

⁵¹ See paragraph 5.3.

⁵² See paragraph 3.2.

⁵³ See Appendix C for a map of Sera

“We had only one bread a day, which we had to share with our teacher and maybe two of his other students. That is all we had to eat by then. Fortunately now we have more food.”

When the fields were ready the monks started working on it and continued to do so until recently. The government also built one house for the monks of Sera. With this as a starting point the monks built more houses and Sera Je and Sera Me slowly separated again. The older monks also went looking for new monks. First they went to the other camps of Bylakuppe, but they even went as far as other settlements in India and Nepal to recruit more boys. Once Sera was being set up, the monks of Drepung and Ganden went to Mundgod, because there was not enough space for all three monasteries to be together.

5.2. Monastic population

In the table below we can see how the monks are divided into the parts of Sera Je and Sera Me, and it also shows the number of monks in each age category.

Table 5.1. Age division in Sera

Age	Sera Je		Sera Me		Total	
	Amount	%	Amount	%	Amount	%
>85	7	0,2	1	0,07	8	0,2
60 to 84	226	7,3	103	6,8	329	7,1
33 to 59	774	25	501	33	1275	27,6
18 to 32	1759	56,7	638	42,1	2397	51,9
7 to 17	330	10,6	270	17,8	600	13
0 to 6	7	0,2	3	0,2	10	0,2
Total	3103	100	1516	100	4619	100

Source: Office of the representative of Lugsam Samdupling settlement

From this table we can conclude that the group of monks at whom I have aimed my research (Sera Je monks between 0 and 18 years of age) make up 10,8% of the total population of Sera Je. The largest group of monks in Sera Je is between 18 and 32 years old. This shows that in the last few years the amount of monks has increased. It has more than doubled the population that built up this monastery. I assume that the larger the physical monastery became, the more boys arrived to Sera to become monks. Either the recruiting of the older monks worked very well, or parents saw this new Sera as a renewed possibility to give one of their sons education at one of the most reputable Tibetan monasteries.

5.3. The role of the *khangtsens*

In order to structure the 4600 monks of Sera, there is a system of “region-houses”. Both Sera Je and Sera Me consist of 14 *khangtsens*. These are monks’ houses in which a group of monks from the same region live together. In Sera this means that, when a child arrives into the monastery, he is asked about the region in Tibet where he comes from, or, more importantly, where his parents are from. Every *khangtsen* then has its own temple, its own *geku*, and head. The *khangtsen* is then, besides the *shagen* and his other students the first group a child-monk belongs to. It can have as many as 1000 monks, or only 1 or 2.

As said, each *khangtsen* is linked to a certain region in Tibet, or nowadays, to a region in India or another country. Besides the Tibetan *khangtsens* in Sera there is even an international *khangtsen* where Western monks can live⁵⁴. This structure into houses does not only mean that the monks have smaller groups to identify themselves with, but it also helps a newly arrived child to adapt to his new situation a little faster. Most of the time, the child will see relatives or old neighbors in that *khangtsen* again, because they all came from the same region, but more importantly, the child will be able to speak his own dialect. The Tibetan dialects can vary greatly and a person from Western Tibet may have difficulty understanding a person from Kham for example. So seeing familiar faces and being able to speak his own language, although being far away from home, makes the transition from his previous life to this new life a little easier.

Every *khangtsen* is kind of a monastery on its own. As said, they all have their own temple, their own specific deities they worship and they all have their own hierarchic structure. But their individuality comes up especially when talking about the admission of children to the monastery and the assignment of a *shagen* to the child.

When a child enters the monastery, he first goes to the *khangtsen* of his region. In most cases he will be taken there by his parents, or another relative who already knows the monastery. If this person is also a monk, then most probably he will be appointed as the *shagen* of the child. If this is not the case, then, depending on the system of each *khangtsen*, there might be some sort of a lottery. All names of all monks who have finished *Dulwa*-class⁵⁵ will be put in a bowl and the one that is being taken out will be the next *shagen*. This was the case in, for example, Teho-*khangtsen*. Another system might be that all students, who have finished at least *Dulwa*-class are being put on a list and then the name on top will be the *shagen*. Within this *khangtsen* the child will live, which does not necessarily mean he will really live on the same ground as most of the rest of the monks, but it means he will belong to that *khangtsen* and some of the activities he does as a monk, will be performed within that group (for example reciting religious texts)⁵⁶.

⁵⁴ See Appendix E for a list of *khangtsen*-names and their region.

⁵⁵ See Appendix F for the curriculum of Sera University

5.4. Sera Je Secondary School (SJS)

SJS is the school from where I have interviewed the children. It is a rather modern school, considering the fact that it belongs to a monastery. Because of that it is the only school that has an affiliation with the Indian School board. Besides Buddhist philosophical education, the students learn modern subjects as well.

5.4.1. History of SJS and present situation

The school was founded in 1975, when a handful of monks was taught in Tibetan by a senior monk teacher. It was a part-time learning centre to which anyone could join regardless of age. In June 1984 SJS was restructured, due to a sudden increase of monks. Also many foreigners started visiting Sera, but no interpreter was present, because nobody could speak English, so there was a need for good education. SJS was first recognised by the state government as a charitable educational society. In 1996 the school was recognised as a monastic school which caters to the educational and social needs of novice children of the Tibetan community. By October 1997 the Central Board of Secondary education in Delhi recognized SJS as the first ever Tibetan monastic school of secondary level by granting the affiliation status. At the moment SJS has about 555 students in the age (more or less) between 6 and 18 years and there are 10 classes.

About 75% of the students of SJS continue their religious education at the university in order to receive their *geshe*-degrees. About 20% join other colleges and institutes for modern education and 5% drop out of formal studies. (SJS Newsletter, 2000-2001)

A very special thing about SJS is its strong connection to the West. Especially Australia is a great sponsor of SJS and the monks of Sera. Many Australian Buddhists send money every month to several children and senior monks and sometimes they even come to visit. The school has even got special rooms where the sponsors can stay during their visit.

5.4.2. Subjects at SJS and school-schedule

As said before, the students of SJS do not only study their religious texts, but they get a total modern education besides that as well. The subjects they take are: Performing arts, general science, mathematics, social studies, Tibetan calligraphy, Tibetan language and grammar, English and Hindi. From class VII on children start studying preliminary philosophical texts and they begin debating sessions.

During the assembly for the school the children will say the *mantra* of Manjushri, the *Bodhisattva* of wisdom, in order to acquire the qualities to study well. Besides they will sing the Tibetan and Indian anthems.

⁵⁶ See Appendix G for a picture of reciting monks at Tsawa *khangtsen*

An average school day would then look like this:

6.30 am Breakfast, memorisation of religious texts and scriptures until 8.45 am
9.00 Morning assembly, speech and newspaper reading at SJS⁵⁷
9.15 – 10.30 2 periods
15 minutes break
10.45 – 12.00 2 periods
12.00 - 2.00 Lunch break
2.00 – 3.20 2 periods
15 minutes break
3.35 – 4.55 2 periods
5.00 – 6.00 Dinner
6.00 – 8.00⁵⁸ Recitation of scriptures and class assignments

5.5. Monastic structure of Sera

Sera belongs to the Gelugpa-tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. Of the four schools⁵⁹ the Gelugpas are traditionally most scholastic and place much emphasis on monastic discipline. The Gelugpa-school was founded by Tsong Khapa (1357-1419). He first founded the Ganden-monastery, so the school was principally called Gandenpa. About Tsong Khapa many legends go around, but it is true that he was an important scholar and at the age of 32 he had already studied the most important Buddhist texts and he had started writing down how, to his opinion, Buddhism could best be interpreted and carried out. One of his most important ideas was that he put strong emphasis on a strict following of the rules, as written in the *Dulwa* (S. Vinaya). To him it was important that monks would study Buddhism and practice *tantra*, without breaking the monastic rules. (Kvaerne, 1984: 260-263; Samuel, 1993: 274-277) In order to achieve all this the Gelugpa-monasteries have a strict monastic system which is hierarchically organised⁶⁰ and Sera is no exception to that.

On the top of each monastery is the abbot or *khenpo*. Under him are several functions of which the *gegu* (disciplinary monk), the *lobpon* (head teacher) and the *umze* (chant-master) are the most important. Although the children do not have real jobs yet, they do have to carry out certain tasks. For example, during *pujas*, they have to serve tea and food to everyone⁶¹.

⁵⁷ See Appendix G for a picture of the line-up of the children before school starts

⁵⁸ The duration of this last teaching can last longer. When a child can not recite the texts well enough he might have to study until he can.

⁵⁹ The four schools of Tibetan Buddhism are: Nyingmapa, Kagyupa, Sakyapa and Gelugpa, sometimes also Bon is included in this group.

⁶⁰ See also paragraph 1.8

⁶¹ See Appendix G for a picture of a childmonk serving tea during a *puja*

More importantly Sera is set up in different groups. First of all the monastery is split into two parts: Sera Je and Sera Me⁶². Besides a slight difference in the texts they study, the split is moreover one to divide the enormous amount of monks into two groups. Then, each of these two parts is divided into *khangtsens* which consist of more or less the same structure as the monastery itself. They have their own head, their own *lobpon*, *geku* and *umze*. Within the *khangtsen* there are the groups of students who all belong to the same teacher⁶³. Because of all these smaller departments the monastery is quite easy to control.

In order to get one of these higher positions students have to follow an educational path, which can eventually lead to the *geshe*-degree, the highest degree within Gelugpa-monasteries.

First they start at SJS, where they learn Buddhist subjects as well as modern. After finishing the ten classes of SJS they can continue studying at the university. There they will study only the *dharmā*⁶⁴ and they will debate⁶⁵ a lot. This course will take at least 20 years, after which they will do exam and receive one of the four levels of *geshe*: Linsay, Rigram (BA), Tsogram (not successful enough for Lharampa, but still Master), Lharampa (PhD). To get the highest *geshe*-degree, one has to take 6 exams, which are competitions against the two other big monasteries, Drepung and Ganden. Reaching the Lharampa-level is extremely hard and only few, very determined, monks will get it. Once they receive the *geshe*-degree (no matter what level), they are allowed to wear the special *geshe*-shirt, which is not only dark-red, like the normal monks-shirts, but it has yellow on it, by which they will distinguish themselves. Nevertheless only Lharampa-*geshes* can become abbots.

In order to receive the degrees and be a good monk, one has to live by the strict rules of the monastery and listen well to his teacher. Respect for the teacher is considered to be very important. Theoretically all (important) teachers can trace their roots back to the most important scholars of Buddhism. And since, in that way, they have directly received their teachings from important teachers as well, they will always show the greatest of respect to their own teacher⁶⁶, since they have already accumulated more wisdom than the students.

After finishing the Sera Je University the monks can go to other monasteries to study tantric practices. In other traditions of Tibetan Buddhism, monks will study these practices already during their regular studies, but the Gelugpas think that one can only study tantrism after totally understanding the *dharmā*, otherwise things could go wrong⁶⁷.

⁶² See also paragraph 5.1.

⁶³ See Chapter 7 about who surround the child in the monastery

⁶⁴ See Appendix F for the subjects of Sera Je university

⁶⁵ Debating is a specific way of studying, typical for the Gelugpa-tradition. Two monks face each other and question one another about the studied texts. While discussing, hand and body- gestures support the things they say.

⁶⁶ This also means that a student will take everything his teacher says and does as true. (See Chapter 7 and paragraph 8.8)

⁶⁷ Tantrism is aimed at doing things that you are not supposed to do in order to reach enlightenment more quickly. If these practices are not done properly it could have negative effects.

6.1. The process of initiation

When children arrive in the monastery they are first accepted by a *khangtsen* and they get a *shagen* appointed to them. This *shagen* gives the child his new monks' robe and often the child also receives one set from his parents. When this is all done, the *shagen* is supposed to take the child to the abbot, but most of them leave it to someone else.

Since I was not allowed⁶⁸ to attend such an initiation ceremony, I was dependent on the eyewitness reports and experiences of two senior monks, who attend these initiations very often. In contrary to most of the new or younger *shagens* they know exactly how to behave in front of the abbot and how to prepare the child for it. Only monks who have finished the *Dulwa*-class, the ones who are allowed to be *shagen*, are allowed to take a child to the abbot. In Sera though, it is commonly known which monks are good in doing the initiation with the child and, as said, two of these monks have told me all about the ceremony.

There are two types of initiation:

1. *Thak Ringi Dagyul* (far-away initiation)
 - a) For a lay-person from Tibet, who is already registered at a monastery in Tibet
 - b) For a monk from Tibet, who comes to India to continue being a monk
2. *Nyikha gi Dagyul* (nearby initiation)

For lay-people (Tibetan) from India, Nepal and Bhutan

The process for both of the initiations is more or less the same, but for the children that I have interviewed the second type of initiation is performed, so this is the one the two monks have explained to me. Besides, several children, at the same time can be initiated. In that way only one *shagen* can take several novices to the abbot at once.

As said, the child receives monks' clothes from his *shagen*. When he has his new robe, his hair will be cut, leaving a little piece on the top of his head. When all this is done, he has to tell/ask the abbot he wants to be a monk and he wants to study in Sera. This is what the initiation is all about.

An assistant of the abbot will make an appointment with the abbot for the child, which could be the same day or the next. Sometimes a child receives an auspicious date from the astrologer the he will be initiated on that day. When the abbot is occupied that day, the child can be initiated by another high *lama*.

The *shagen* or senior monk will then take the child to the abbot on that day and they will bring, good tea, a nice *khatag* and an envelope with money. The quality of the tea symbolizes the qualities of the child to become a good monk. If the tea is good, the child will be a good monk. The *khatag* is offered to the abbot as a tradition that has been taken over from Tibet, probably as an expression of respect. The envelope with money which usually consists of 5 rupias⁶⁹ represents the respect for the abbot and the religion. In Tibet it used to be the symbolic amount of one “rupiah”, with this the future monk shows he is willing to give up everything for the *dharma*. The family can also offer something, but only if they can really afford it. It does not happen very often though that the family offers something, mostly because they do not even know when the initiation is taking place.

After the offerings, the tea is given to the attendant by the senior monk, after which the real initiation starts. It all takes place in the room of the abbot. A completely new monk does 3 long prostrations⁷⁰ in front of the abbot. The abbot can then see how the physical condition is of the child. The senior monk then also prostrates, but only the short way. The novice and the senior monk, sit down lower than the abbot out of respect for the abbot and their religion.

The attendant then gives all three of them a cup of tea, to which the abbot says he offers it all to the gods. Everyone then drinks the tea and gives the cup back to the attendant. Then the abbot starts asking questions to the senior monk and to the child. The child is asked: From which part of India/Tibet are you? Were you already monk in Tibet? How is Tibet at the moment? How was your life in Tibet? How did you come to India? And most importantly: Do you really want to become a monk? The child has to answer these questions himself! When the senior monk answers them, the abbot will suspect that the child might not speak Tibetan⁷¹ properly or can not speak at all.

Then the abbot will take the little piece of hair and ask the final question: “Are you happy that you are now becoming a monk?” The child then has to answer “yes” and then the hair is cut. This is supposed to be the last check if it is really the child’s own wish to become a monk, but mostly it is not really voluntary what he says. (See note 4)

⁶⁸ Only people who have been initiated themselves can attend an initiation of someone else. This is why the abbot forbade me to be present at such a ceremony.

⁶⁹ 5 Indian rupias is about 5 eurocents

⁷⁰ There are two types of prostration. The long one is mostly done by lay-people in an expression of total devotion. People can throw themselves onto the floor with their whole body. The other one, only goes until the knees. I saw monks doing this when they entered the prayer hall before a puja, but also lay-people when they bowed down for the Buddha-statues.

⁷¹ This is why sometimes a child only gets initiated after he has learned Tibetan. In this way it can happen that a child already lives in Sera for a year or so, but only after that he gets initiated. To avoid all this trouble, children are also often instructed about all the questions the abbot might ask and what they should answer. In this way it is not really the child’s answer anymore but rather a pre-programmed answer. This ensures that the final question that is asked does not have real value. The child is not really asked about his desire to become a monk, but simply answers the way he is expected to.

The child then receives a new name from the abbot. This is his monk's name and it is up to him whether he uses it or not. When the monk takes *getsul* or *gelong* vows he will receive another new name. Most of the monks continue using their lay-name, because everyone knows that one, but the *gelong* name is considered to be most valuable.

Before the child leaves the abbot gives several advises to the child: Be a good monk; obey to the rules of the monastery; study well; respect all teachers and do not cause any conflicts in the community. These are all conditions to become a good monk.

The senior monk will then ask permission to the abbot if the child can be among other monks during *pujas*. He poses this request for the coming three years, after that, the child is supposed to be used to the monastic life, he will be following the discipline well and he will be studying himself. After this ceremony the novice and the senior monk go to the *gegu* of the monastery and he will write down the name of the child in a book. Also with the *gegu* the child and the monk will have to stay lower than he. If he sits cross-legged, the child and the senior monk will have to squat, and when they stand, they have to be lower than he⁷².

After the *gegu* they go to the head of their *khangtsen* to whom they tell they have finished the whole process. The senior monk also asks, on behalf of the child if he can be treated in the same way as the other monks. The head gives the same advice as the abbot to the child and he writes down the name of the child in a book.

As the last part of this process the child and senior monk will visit the head of the *khangtsen*-kitchen, to whom they will ask if the novice can also receive the tea and food etc. just like the other monks.

6.2. Shugden

Since 2002 an extra element has been added to the initiation process which has to do with a deity called Shugden. In the past this deity was worshipped a lot among Tibetans. But, according to the Dalai Lama, this demon causes a lot of trouble to his life and that of the Tibetan government in exile, Buddhism in general and the Tibetan case. If many people worship him he will get stronger. Because of this the Dalai Lama asked the whole Tibetan society to stop worshipping Shugden. When I was told about this my informants became very nervous and emphasized that they had absolutely nothing to do with Shugden and that their names could not be written down in combination with this demon⁷³.

⁷² This is not only during this ceremony, but always. Whenever the *gegu* passes by or the monks pass by him they will slightly bow their heads in order to be lower than him.

⁷³ When employees of the monastery or other acquaintances want to apply for a job, they sometimes request a declaration from the principal of SJS which says they have nothing to do with the Shugden cult. This is an important reference, without which they might not get a job in the Tibetan community.

Thus, during the initiation, it has to be made clear that the child and his teacher do not have any relationship with this deity. The child has to sign a declaration that says: “I am a genuine follower of Buddhism. And I follow the path shown by H.H. the Dalai Lama and I don’t have any relationship with the Shugden-cult.” The child’s signature, the *shagen*’s signature and a stamp of the *khangtsen* have to be put at the bottom. The child has to bring this paper to the initiation and there the *gegu* has to sign it too. During a big puja the child and his *shagen* will be asked to be present among all other monks. The *gegu*, abbot and administrators of the monastery will be there too. The children will then line up in front of the deity Tandin. This is the protective deity of the Tibetan government. His task is to protect the good Buddhists and he punishes the bad ones, especially monks. The power of this deity depends on the amount of followers he has. In front of the statue there is a microphone through which the children have to declare two things:

1. If the child has never had a relationship with Shugden he will say: “I have never had a relation with Shugden so far and I will not get one in the future!”
2. If the child was involved with Shugden he will say: “From now on I will not follow Shugden anymore!”

Considering the above given information and looking back at paragraph 1.3., where I explained the three phases that Van Gennep describes on “rites the passages”, we can indeed say that this model is applicable to the initiation ceremony in Sera.

The preliminal (first) phase will, in this case, consist of leaving the family, arriving to Sera and finding a *shagen*. The liminal phase will start when the child receives his monk’s robe and when his hair is cut. However, he actually gets to the top of this liminal phase when the abbot cuts his last piece of hair, which is the definite separation from lay-life. Until the official cutting of the last piece of hair, the child is in-between laymanship and monkhood, he does not officially have a new role yet. The postliminal phase will occur when the *shagen* then takes the child to several senior monks in order to get the novice completely accepted. The child is then officially monk and accepted by the other monks and in his new role he will also be accepted by the lay-people.

7.1. Monks as “holy men” versus monks as “modern religious practitioners”

A monk, when categorised, is a religious practitioner, can be considered an “ascetic renouncer”: “In its simplest form, the ideal renouncer is seen to rise above the social world and all its desires, distractions and obligations, and, from a vantage point of detachment, to seek the way towards full liberation from *samsara*.” (Mills, 2003: 54)

The idea of monks as almost holy beings, described in the quote above, is still very much alive in the West. And although this might apply to some of the monks living in monasteries or in this case, Sera, the vast majority of them is still very much connected to the lay-world and its desires, distractions and obligations. Of course these three are not the same for monks and lay-people, but monks have their own. To know in what kind of an environment a child-monk lives one has to know who surround them and who thus influence him.

In their parental homes, children have probably heard a lot about monkhood and by seeing monks they have also created an image of their own⁷⁴. This image probably does not conform to reality. Just like the Western or “Shangri-la” image, by which I was influenced, does not conform to reality. In the West we think monks live a strict and hard life, dictated by the discipline and their teachers. Part of this is true, but since most of the monks do not come to the monastery voluntarily⁷⁵ they do not feel so obliged to live in renunciation. Naturally, there are vows which, most of them, obey. But, they do treat renunciation especially in a very flexible way. One could also say, they have simply adapted quite well to the modern world they have to live in.

Even though possession and attachment is something, at least in the West, which is not immediately associated with Buddhist monks, in Sera one can see that monks are proud of, for example, their new watches. Monks can be seen making phonecalls on their mobile phones, or driving around on their motorbikes. I must say, there is a difference in this between the Tibetan Buddhist traditions⁷⁶. Tourists were often surprised too, by the amount of internet-access there was in Sera. After the evening debates it was always very busy in the three internetcafés because monks were sending emails to their sponsors, relatives or friends abroad. They were chatting and playing games. Sometimes, when I used the internet, a porn-site would just pop up, meaning that it had been visited before, and not by me.

⁷⁴ See paragraphs 8.7. and 8.8.

⁷⁵ See paragraphs 8.5. and 8.6

⁷⁶ For example in the Nyingma monastery it was common to see monks on motorbikes, but they were not allowed to possess their own house. Monks all lived in flats. In Sera, on contrary, monks could have their own houses, especially the richer ones, but they were hardly seen on motorbikes, even though some monks did have cars.

Now that SJS is also such a modern school it will probably mean that the “new monks” will continue this adaptation to modernity in combination with their monastic life. Monks can therefore really be seen as special religious practitioners with the same human needs as lay-people, only they learn not to put too much emphasis on it.

7.2. Creating your own identity

Living among 4600 monks who all look the same, wear the same uniform, the same haircut encourages the need for individual distinction. “Wearing clothes is social in that what people wear is treated by those around them as being some sort of indicator of who they are”. (Dant, 1999: 107) This quote definitely applies to the way lay-people can recognize monks because of their specific dress, but it also applies to monks recognizing each other as individuals. Wearing an expensive watch, new socks and nice shoes are some of the few things with which a monk can express his own identity. These are things that he can choose himself and with that distinguish himself from the other monks.

This was also seen among the children. Some of them had a rich *shagen* or a sponsor themselves, so they received more pocket money than the rest, with which they could buy more sweets, nicer shoes etc. This created a difference between monks. Just like with “normal” children, the “poorer” ones looked up to the children with all these nice things. The only way they could then “fight” that was to study well and eventually become *geshe*, because then they were allowed to wear a different shirt and so distinguish themselves intellectually.

7.3. The role of the *shagen*

A child-monk in Sera, generally, lives far away from his parents. This means that there is hardly any parental influence on his life, besides maybe some good advice when they meet again. On top of that, there is no female influence at all in his monk’s life. All roles that normally play a part in a child’s life, mother, father, siblings, teachers, friends are now being carried out by monks. Often a child has been sent by his parents⁷⁷ to the monastery with the wish to become a good monk and *geshe*. Sometimes a relative already lives in the monastery, or in the surrounding camps, but also with them he will be in little contact.

The most important role, therefore, plays his *shagen*. A man can not even be a monk, formally, if he does not have a *shagen*. This *shagen* then is really like a father to the children. He looks after their health, their pocket money and their progress in study. He has the greatest influence on the child, since he is the one who is closest to him.

⁷⁷ See paragraph 8.5.

One of the *shagens* told me:

“I think a *shagen* has to treat his students as if they were his own children. He has to advise the child, guide him into the right direction. He should be as a light in the darkness. He has to feel that the life of that child depends on him, therefore he should give the right example.”

If the *shagen* is a serious and ambitious monk, it is more likely the child will be that too. The life of the child-monk also greatly depends on the way the *shagen* treats him. Some are very strict and will punish the child quickly when he does something wrong, others are more understanding and will treat the child more patiently. Just like strict or not-strict parents influence their children’s lives, so do these *shagens* influence the lives of their students. *Shagens*, though, do not really teach the children:

“We only give them modern education. The children are busy enough with their formal education, that I only stimulate and motivate them”
(*shagen*)

It is important to know that a *shagen* can have from 1 to hundreds of students at once. All of them live with him. An old monk can therefore have students who have already achieved their *geshes* but also children who have just arrived to the monastery.

“Of course the young ones need more attention than the older ones. The old students help me with the novices. When I die, one of them will take over all of my students and look after them. Still, both young and old monks need my attention.” (Old and popular *shagen*)

One can say the *shagens* have a great responsibility and through their father-role they become attached to the children, sincerely care about them and worry when they leave the compounds.

“I am always concerned about my children, when they go to Kushalnagar to buy fruit, I always send a senior monk with them to look after them. I am afraid that something will happen to them. I have to look after them, their parents have trusted their children to me, so I must take good care of them!” (*shagen*)

This attachment to the children, the responsibility and the time it takes to take care of the children is something that most *shagens* dislike about their task. Most of them wish they had more time to study for themselves instead of worry about the children. Some of the *shagens* told me that they feel distracted all the time, because they are concerned about their children, so they can not concentrate well enough on their own texts. Some also say that they feel guilty when a child does not meet the expectations of a parent. But most of them think it is very important that a child, at least, feels happy with his life. So if a child prefers to go to a normal school, they will let him go, but it depends on the *shagen* how he will treat the child in that case.

“If one of the children does not want to become a monk and has not broken his vows, he can easily go, but this only applies to older children. The little ones can not just leave. I will advise them to stay or hit them to make them realise they have to stay.” (*shagen*)

Another *shagen* said:

“When a child complains about his life, I am first of all, very happy that he trusts me enough to talk about his problem. I will always first ask the child what he wants. To me it is most important that a child receives education, where, does not really matter. I will do everything to achieve that. But, of course, before I let the child go I will advise him to stay, I will tell him the advantages of life as a monk, but if the child is really unhappy I will let him go.”

7.4. The *gegu* and discipline

As said before, there are several *gegu* in Sera. The children, who I have interviewed, have most contact with the *gegu* of their school, SJS. Of course there is also a *gegu* in their *khangtsen* and in the monastery, but the SJS-*gegu* is more than only a disciplinarian. He is also the counsellor. When children have problems with their study, the class or their teacher they can come to him and he will try to find a solution.

Nevertheless he is also the one who will punish them when they have done something wrong, which of the time is physical punishment.

“When I see a child doing something wrong I will first give some advice, or warning. I know all the children of the school, so I know their behaviour. When a child behaves badly 1 or 2 times more I will beat him.” (SJS-*gegu*)

Teachers of the school are only allowed to “snap” the children when they disturb the class. If it really gets too bad they will call the *gegu*. Beating plays an important part in the way children experience their lives in the monastery⁷⁸. There are different types of beating, according to the *gegu* of SJS. When children continue to behave badly he will undress the lower part of the child, in front of the other school-children and hit him with a stick. This is meant as a warning for other children. When the child still continues to disturb the classes he will be dismissed from the school and he can not come back. The SJS-*gegu*, though, not only disciplines the children by punishing them, he also gives presents when they do well.

During *puja*'s I have seen the monastery-*gegu* hitting children who have fallen asleep or who do not participate actively. He hits them with some kind of whip. Also the *gegens* (religious teachers) use this object to make the children study harder.

Since the respect for teachers is so big, children will hardly ever go against the punishment they get. They realise it is being done for their own good, but of course they still do not like it.

⁷⁸ See paragraph 8.8.

7.5. Friends

My young respondents told me that most of their friends are also monks. Since almost 75% of the monks of Sera comes from outside of India⁷⁹ (not to mention the parts of India that are equally far away), their families and old friends live far away from them. In addition, because they are not often allowed to go outside Sera they can only make friends within the monastery. With these friends, they play all kinds of games. Some children, who come from Bylakuppe, are still in contact with their old friends, but just like their siblings, they only see them when they are allowed to visit their family. So most monks only mix with other monks. These boys are, then, almost like brothers. They live together, have more or less the same background, study together, know the same people and behave in the same way. The childmonks act as if they were regular boys too, and in a way of course they are. They also like being mischievous or doing things they are not really supposed to do, or things that are not expected of them. One example is when I had attended to a special dance, which was concluded with a fire *puja*. In such a *puja* fire is offered, and thus is a sacred thing. After the ceremony, while everyone went home, the little monks started playing with that fire, throwing sand on it at⁸⁰.

⁷⁹ See table 8.1. in paragraph 8.1.

⁸⁰ See Appendix G for a picture of childmonks playing with the fire

8.1. Where do the children come from?

In contrary to the children of the TCV, who almost all were born in India, the majority of the childmonks were born in Tibet. This can be seen in the table below:

Table 8.1. Place of birth of childmonks and TCV-children

Birth country	Childmonks	TCV-children
India	24,70%	78,60%
Tibet	59,80%	24,20%
Other (Bhutan/Nepal/Ladakh ⁸¹)	15,50%	2,60%
Total	100%	100%

Source: Fieldwork data

From this, one could conclude that apparently, parents in Tibet pay more value to sending their child to a monastery than Tibetan parents in India. This might have to do with the suppression of Tibetan culture in Tibet itself, because of which Tibetans find it more important to act out their own culture (in this case religion). Since this is almost only possible abroad, they send their children to monasteries in India or Nepal, where they can have Tibetan education. Parents in India itself have already seen that not only monasteries pay attention to Tibetan culture, but also the TCV-schools. This could be a reason why they chose to send their children to TCV's instead of monasteries.

Another reason could be that parents in Tibet are still more influenced by tradition than the Tibetans living in India. Tibetans in India still have their Tibetan culture, but living abroad has definitely changed that. Besides, they have been influenced by the Westerners a lot. Monasteries in India and Nepal are very accessible for Western Buddhists, who want to study Tibetan culture. Not only do they learn from the Tibetans, their "Shangri-la" view of Tibetans also influences Tibetans themselves. And since, for Tibetans in India and Nepal, it is a lot easier to travel abroad, they often have relatives in the West who also influence the Tibetans in India or Nepal.

People in Tibet have not had this much of a Western influence yet. Of course also their culture has changed, especially because of the Chinese attempt to destroy most of their culture (by taking down monasteries), but they also have much more modern things now. In a lot of places in Tibet, nowadays

there are electricity and proper roads so that cars and trucks come and go. Still, I think, the suppression of Tibetan culture in Tibet by the Chinese makes that the people are more fanatic in trying to preserve that culture. This would then also mean that people are more attached to their tradition, if only to bother the Chinese. Since the Chinese have set up this policy that children can not join the (few) monasteries anymore below the age of 18, whereas traditionally this was definitely the case, parents send their children to monasteries abroad. Besides, I think, even though culture is preserved very well at TCV's, monasteries are traditionally the religious and educational centres of Tibetan culture. And since their religion plays the largest role in their culture, sending their children to monasteries seems to be the best way of preserving that.

8.2. How did the children come to Sera?

Because of all the restrictions for Tibetans in present-day China, people do not have proper passports or other identity-papers. This is why it is very hard for them to go in and out of their country in the regular way, by crossing the border check-points. Many Tibetans, therefore, walk across the mountains, to get into Nepal or India, in order to avoid the police. This can be quite a dangerous journey and since even children have to do this, when they come to Nepal or India, this can definitely influence their behaviour or experience of (monastic) life. In the next three tables you can see how and with whom the children came out of Tibet (across the border into Nepal) and to Sera.

Table 8.2. Mode of transport to get out of Tibet

Mode of travel	
On foot	70,70%
By car/bus/truck	29,30%
Total	100%

Table 8.3. People who took the child out of Tibet

With whom to India	
Parents	20,50%
Relatives	53,40%
Other (local guide/ friends)	26,10%
Total	100%

Table 8.4. People who took the child to Sera

With whom to Sera	
Parents	24,70%
Relatives	43,10%
Other (friends/ reception centre)	32,30%
Total	100%

Source: Fieldwork data

In these tables it becomes clear that most children, from the moment they start their journey to Sera, are with other people than their parents. Most of the time this is a relative and sometimes it is a friend or

⁸¹ In the interviews it became clear that region of Ladakh is not considered to be part of India. It was put in the category "other". This makes sense since Ladakh is a completely different part of India, culturally very similar to Tibet.

neighbour of the family. First of all the children will arrive in Kathmandu, Nepal, where they will be taken to the reception centre. This is a centre where newly arrived Tibetans are registered and then it will be decided where they are going to. The people of the reception centre will then take the Tibetans to India by bus (unless they want to stay in Nepal) and from there the refugees will be sent to the different settlements. One young respondent told me about his leave from his parents:

“My mother gave me a *khatag* and said that I should study hard and listen to my teacher. My parents also said that, after 5 years they would come to Sera to visit me” (Childmonk, 11 years old, came from North East India)

This is something that applies to many of the children. Most of them were taken to Sera by a relative or family-member because that person already lived there. Sometimes a monk from Sera would come back to visit his birth-village and then visit some families as well. If these families had just decided their child should go to a monastery, this monk would take them back. In the case of the Tibetan children, the parents often take them to Lhasa, from where the children are being taken by friends or “professionals” who take people across the border more often.

One very striking thing is, which became clear from my group interviews, that the vast majority of the children had to walk across the Himalayas in order to get into Nepal. One respondent told me about his journey.

“My parents had died already and I was in a small monastery in Tibet. My grandfather looked after me, and when I told him I wanted to go to Sera, he decided to take me there. We both did not have a passport so we faced many problems. We had to walk through the mountains, but we were caught by the Chinese. I was still a child, so they left me alone, but they put my grandfather and some of the monks, who were with us, in prison. I felt terrible and cried and screamed and begged until they let my grandfather go. I think the Chinese felt sorry for me. The rest of the group stayed in prison. Then we had to walk for 20 days more and when we were finally in Nepal, we went to the reception centre. There we waited for one month for another group, with them we went to India.” (Childmonk, 17 years old, the above story happened when he was 11)

Even though the children are still quite young they realise very well what is happening, but as children, they have complete faith in the person who is taking him.

“I was not afraid during the whole journey. I knew they could not catch me. I was hiding in a good place under the luggage in the car” (Childmonk, 11 years old, came to Sera 1,5 years ago)⁸²

⁸² See also Life history 2 in Chapter 9

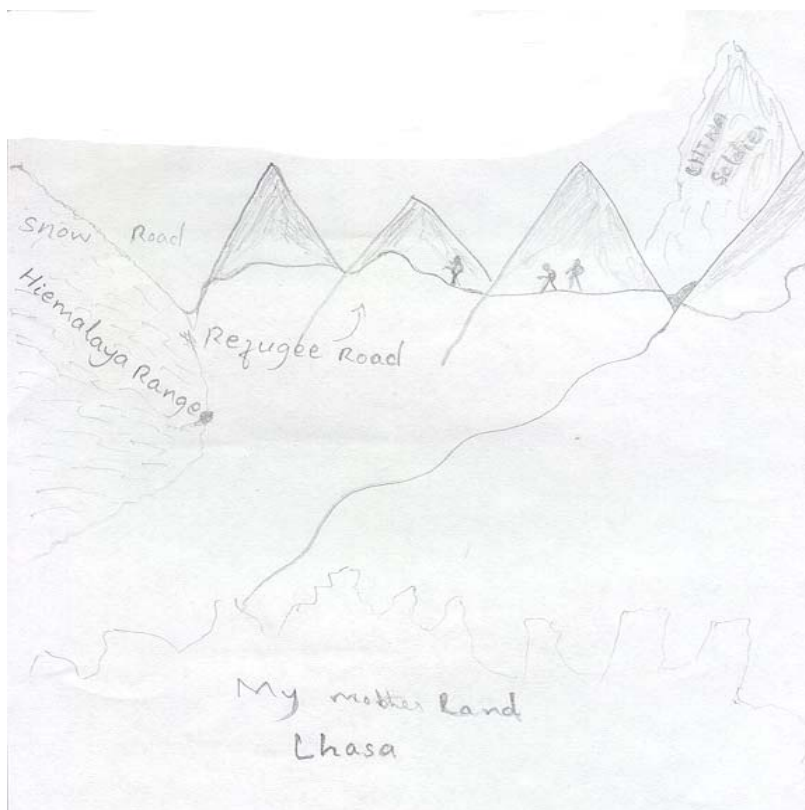
Besides, from a drawing assignment I gave to the students to “Draw yourself and how you came to Sera” it became very visual how the children felt when they had to undertake this journey.

Figure 8.1.



One class VIII – student of SJS (18 years old) drew this picture about himself and his journey to Sera. Footsteps can be seen across the mountains to show he walked there. And his face looks sad, indicating that he does not like to leave his country and all the people behind.

Figure 8.2.



This picture was drawn by a 19-year old class VIII student. He clearly made a distinction between the regular road where, as written on the picture (top right) the “Chinese soldiers” are and the road for the Tibetan refugees. This refugee road goes around the mountains and these soldiers, in order to avoid them. I think, this shows that children are very much aware of what they are doing, what the dangers are and how they can avoid these dangers or people.

Source: Fieldwork data

Not only is it striking to see that young children have to go through such dangerous journeys, but psychologically this must have a great effect on the children as well. Of course my fieldwork has been an anthropological one and not a psychological research, so I can not put any conclusions to this. Nevertheless I think it is important to know that many of these childmonks have been through this. And living in a *khangtsen*, with other boys who have come from the same region in probably more or less the same way can not do anything less than benefit them. They can talk about their experiences with their “brothers” and these boys will understand each other. There can of course also be another side to this. One of the older monks told me that, since it is such a “man’s world” it is “not done” to talk about one’s feelings or about the difficulty of the journey for that matter. I think though, that it greatly depends on the *shagen* as well. Some of the *shagens* I talked with would definitely try to help their child to get over this experience, others are indeed more “masculine” and would tell the child to focus on something else instead of “whining” about it.

8.3. Age of entry to the monastery

Since the Chinese government has changed its policy on minimum age for monks⁸³, this has become a discussion among Tibetans. First of all most do not agree with the fact that the Chinese try to limit them (again) in their religious practice, the way they want to practice it.

“It is not good the Chinese have made this policy. They do this for their own advantage. Their only goal is to destroy Tibetan culture. At 18 it is too old to start studying, when a boy is younger he does not have any experience yet with the material world, which makes it easier to be a good monk.”(Parents of a childmonk)

Secondly, as becomes clear from this quote as well, people are of the opinion that the younger the child is, the better a monk he will be. Also the Buddha says in the *Dulwa* that there are two moments in a man’s life at which he can become a good monk. First as a child, when he is still untouched by the material world and open enough to learn a lot. Also, when an adult man has been married and has experienced the life of a married lay-man, he can have the insight that life as a lay-man is not a very easy life and that it will not bring him everlasting happiness. Knowing this he can consciously decide to become a monk, knowing that that life will bring him more happiness, he will be very motivated and hence a good monk.

The minimum age at SJS is 6 years. Nevertheless, most of the children are between 8 and 12 years old when they come to Sera (57,4%). Only 11,1% is 7 or younger and about 30,8% was 13 years or older when he came to Sera. For the last category this can mean they were first monks in Tibet and after a few years came to Sera.

⁸³ See paragraph 1.2.

All of the interviewed children say that they were fine with the age at which they arrived to Sera. Most of them find 9 or 10 years the perfect age to become a monk. If a child is older when he joins the monastery, they say, he would have to start in class I amongst younger children, which would be very embarrassing. A child should, preferably, not be younger than 8, because a child wants to be with his parents too, for a while. The main reason that is given for joining the monastery at a young age is that it will be easier to study, when you are still young, which is an advantage in later studies. When you start late it is more difficult to learn things. Besides, as one of the children said:

“When a child is still young he looks nice in his monks’ robe”
(Childmonk, 17 years old)

As we will see in paragraphs 8.5. and 8.6. it was most of the time the parents’ decision to send the child to the monastery. Nevertheless, some of these parents now say that the age at which their son became a monk, was actually too young! They say, their son should have gone to a regular school first and after that (at the age of 15) become a monk.

“Children should get proper education, which they can have at a regular school. And if they want to learn about Tibetan religion, they should become monks, but after the normal school, because when they are still young they do not understand it anyway.”(Parents of a 6-year old childmonk)

Others send their child to Sera at such a young age, because they find the education at SJS better than at a regular school.

Senior monks speak from experience when they tell me about their lives as monks from such a young age on. And they all seem to have formed a different opinion about it.

“It is better when a child is 18 or 19 when he becomes a monk. Then, at least they choose for it themselves. It is better when they make their own decision.” (Senior monk, who was 10 when he became a monk)

“To become a monk at a young age is good. When a child is young, the mind is clear. Buddhist concepts and scriptures are very complicated. When a child is older the mind will be influenced by the material world, then Buddhist concepts are harder to understand. 13 or 14 would be the perfect age to join the monastery, the mind of the child is clear, but he will be able to understand it all.” (Senior monk, who was 13 when he became a monk)

8.4. The position of the child in the family

In paragraphs 1.6. and 1.7.1. we have read that children have a special position in a family and from that position he had more or less chance to be sent to a monastery. Especially being the second son seemed to increase the chance of becoming a monk. Reading this motivated me to investigate if this

traditional system is still working. Besides I assumed that the more children there were in the family the more chance there was of at least one child being sent to a monastery.

Table 8.5. Number of children in the family

Number of children in the family	Childmonks	TCV-children
1	2,50%	19,00%
2	6,20%	33,50%
3	7,90%	34,10%
4 or more	83,20%	20,60%
Total	100%	100%

Source: Fieldwork data

As we can see from the table above, there is a difference between the number of siblings of childmonks and that of lay-children. Nevertheless I can not immediately attach any conclusions to this. We have also seen, in paragraph and table 8.1. that childmonks were mainly born in Tibet and that this might be of influence on the way they behave in a probably more traditional way. Having many children used to be a way of insurance for old age of the parents. And the more hands there were, the more they could help on the farm. The TCV-children, on contrary were mainly born in India, where birth control etc. are more proclaimed and Tibetans do not need their children to work on the land anymore, since only very few Indian-Tibetans are farmers. Many children, that way, only cost money.

Knowing this it is still striking to see that more than 83% of the childmonks have 3 or more siblings, whereas only 20,6% of the lay-children do. Because of this I still intend to say that apparently, parents with many children would sooner send one of their offspring to a monastery than parents with fewer children. But, as mentioned above, there is probably one factor connecting “many children” and “one becoming a monk”, which is tradition. It could be written in a scheme like this:

Family with many children → more traditional → child becomes a monk/nun

Large families (in this case mainly living in Tibet) tend to be more traditional, which is probably why they have many children as well, so they find it even more important to preserve that tradition or culture (especially when living in Tibet under Chinese rule), which makes them send a child to a monastery.

From the above stated information it has not become clear yet, which child is sent to the monastery. According to the traditional system (*tsung gral*, see paragraph 1.7.1.) it used to be the second son, because the eldest son would look after the farm and his parents. Seeing the information about the number of children in a family, one could think that also in this system people would be very traditional.

Nevertheless only 38% of the groups of childmonks I interviewed confirmed the statement of having an

older brother. 62% said they did not have an older brother. So with this information in our mind we can say that traditional Tibetan families, with many children, do often send one or more children to a monastery, but they do not follow the traditional system of second sons anymore.

One child told me he could not become a monk, because his parents wanted him to help at the farm.

“When I was younger I really wanted to become a monk, but my parents did not agree with it. They wanted me to stay with my family, to help them etc.” (Childmonk, 15 years old, from Tibet who has 1 younger brother)

All of this does not say anything about the social position of the child in the family, the way the child is treated. This might also influence the child’s experience in the monastery when he does not live with his family anymore. He might then miss certain elements.

From observations during *Losar*, Tibetan new year, when complete families go out to watch dances or other performances, I can say that children are always included in the “adult things”. Sometimes in Western societies, when families go out, for example, to have dinner, children are put at a separate table, to not bother the adults. Among Tibetans children play with the adults all the time and adults seem to give them the attention they require, not only the parents, but also friends, neighbours or relatives. Tibetan families are, of course, a more extensive concept than Western families, so children easily adopt their cousins as brothers and sisters. Very often I was confused by the amount of siblings a person had, but when asked further they were all called “brother” but were actually cousins, nephews or even uncles. In the family though, the father seems to be the head of the household, but the mothers are still very present. They are also the ones who set the rules for a child and try to make the child obey them. The men are often playing with the child. Nevertheless, a child is hardly ever severely punished for his wrongdoing, because it is still considered a child. This gives the children a lot of self-confidence and some of them might seem arrogant and very demanding or spoiled to a Westerner.

When a boy then switches to a life as a monk, with a strict discipline he might miss this easy way of life. A childmonk is also perceived as an adult younger than when he had stayed a lay-person. Childmonks are treated more like adults than lay-children of their own age. Some parents call their 11 year old childmonk a “semi-adult”. This status is due to his position as a monk, which is always being looked upon and the fact that when the childmonk is allowed to visit his family, he often has little time, which makes that he sits with his mother all the time instead of playing with his friends or brothers. Regularly a child is considered an adult at the age of 21.

8.5. Who makes the decision?

As was more or less implied in the information given in the previous paragraphs, the majority of the childmonks became monk because their parents had decided they should.

There seems to be, nevertheless, an age-factor to this. This can be concluded from Table 8.6.

Table 8.6. Decision makers for different age groups

Who decided the child should become a monk?	Class I Av.age* 10yrs	Class III Av.age 13 yrs	Class V Av.age 15 yrs	Class VII Av.age 16 yrs	Total
Parents	79,20%	73,30%	71%	18.8%	60,60%
Child	20,80%	26,70%	29%	81,20%	39,50%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

* Av.age means Average age in that class. The range can be very wide though:

Class I - 6 to 14 years; Class III- 9 to 17 years; Class V – 13 to 17 years; Class VII – 13 to 19 years

Source: Fieldwork data

In this table it can be read that the majority of the children under the age of 16 was sent to the monastery by their parents. When a child reaches the age of 16 they often decide themselves that they want to become monks. The reasons that these older childmonks gave me were all socio-cultural. These reasons will be extensively discussed in the next paragraph.

So, we take it as a fact, that children, most of the time, do not decide for themselves that they want to become monks. Nevertheless, they told me, they always agreed with it. There was no childmonk who did not agree with the decision his parents had made. This decision, though, is often strongly influenced by relatives who have already joined the monastery. They will, when they visit their brothers or sisters, bring up the idea of sending one of their children to a monastery/nunnery. This will then make the parents think about it, after which they discuss the idea with their child. The child can then hardly refuse, because parents have the authority and often the child does not really disagree. As we will see in paragraph 8.7. the child is brought up among visiting uncles or friends who are already monks and still in almost every Tibetan family at least one person is a monk, so everywhere around him he sees them. Most children told me that they found the monks would look so happy, so they wanted to become monks too. Thus relatives bring up the idea, parents decide and children agree.

“My uncle, who is also a monk at Sera, told my parents I should go to a monastery because it would make me happy and give me good education, at home I would never get that. My parents then agreed with him and I did too. (Childmonk, 9 years old, became a monk when he was 7)

However, a child's situation is extraordinary. A complete outsider may then decide that the child should become a monk. This happened to one 15-year old childmonk, who was, due to a lot of illness, advised to become a monk by an astrologer. He said becoming a monk would save the child from further illness⁸⁴. And, in the case of a *tulku* I interviewed, the parents, who actually did not intend to send any of their children to a monastery, were more or less forced to give their son to the monastery⁸⁵. The child, in these last two cases, can do nothing but accept the decision that has been made for him.

Sometimes, there are children who, indeed, feel a "vocation" to become a monk.

"I wanted to become a monk myself, because I want to have a good future. My parents thought it was a good idea, so they asked the father of a *tulku* from our village to take me to Sera." (12-year old childmonk, who had become a monk 6 months before)

"When I was younger I wanted to become a monk. In Ladakh I always saw a lot of monks and they seemed happy to me. So I wanted to be like them. Unfortunately I was not accepted at any of the monasteries there, because I was too young. At Sera I was immediately accepted." (12-year old childmonk, who became a monk at the age of 8)

As we saw in a quote in paragraph 8.4. this vocation is not always accepted by the parents. So, even when a child himself decides to become a monk, he can only really become one, when his parents agree with him.

8.6. Reasons for joining the monastery

As we have seen in the preceding chapters there may be different reasons for parents to send their child to the monastery, or for a child to want to become a monk. These reasons may depend on the place where the parents live, their financial situation or their religiosity. Besides these reasons, there is the fact that the educational system in Tibet is not good, at least not for Tibetans. And the hope for a Free Tibet encourages people to raise their children with a little "Tibetanness" even when they are living in India.

Talking about one's financial situation is not very common in Tibetan society, so it was difficult to find out if children had been sent to the monastery because their parents could actually not afford them. During the group-interviews at SJS, the children, therefore, only put themselves in two out of four categories. These categories were: Financial, Educational, Religious, or other reasons. The children only answered Educational or Religious. In the table below it can be seen how many students said they came to the monastery for Educational or Religious reasons:

⁸⁴ See also Life history 1 in Chapter 9

⁸⁵ See also Life history 6 in Chapter 9

Table 8.7. Reasons for joining the monastery

Reasons	
Religious	61,60%
Educational	38,40%
Total	100%

Source: Fieldwork data

The reasons that parents had for sending their son to Sera, do not always conform with the reasons a childmonk himself would give to another child, if that child was to become a monk. To see if the child agrees with his parents, I asked him the question “If you had to convince another child to become a childmonk, what reasons would you give him?”. The majority of the children, first of all, said they did not want to convince someone else, because it should be his own decision. But when asked further, things were mentioned like:

“You will become happy when you are a monk, you will get free food and the education is good!”

“In the monastery you will get good clothes and you will learn to study the Buddhist texts well”

“Besides getting modern education you also learn the scriptures and you get money for the puja’s”

“You had better join the monastery, because when you get married, problems will come.”

So even though the majority of the childmonks say they were sent for religious reasons, the children put more emphasis on education, money and food. And sometimes the easy life. The fact that children mention money as a reason, and almost all of them do, means that this is something they do not get (at least not this much) at home. This, in its turn, can mean that the families those children come from, are quite poor. Also mentioning the good food here could signify that. However, Tibetans are generally very fond of (good) food, so having good food is something they find very important. It does not have to mean that children do not have food at home, but it can mean that the food in the monastery is just so good that it is worth to be mentioned.

8.6.1. Religious reasons

In table 8.7. it becomes clear that the majority of the childmonks was sent to the monastery for religious reasons. I too think that this is for everyone, even when they have other reasons as well, the main motivation. All Tibetans I talked with are religious people, they deeply believe in reincarnation and the best way to be born in a better next life is to devote your present life to the *dharma*. Therefore the reasons, as will be described in the next paragraphs, come together with this main religious reason, either as a “nice” side effect or as an important extra motivation. Their belief is, too, that not only the child will benefit from this situation in his next life, also the parents will benefit from it. Sometimes this gives some

hope for parents who have failed in monastic life themselves. One child said his father used to be a monk in Sera, but lost his principles. Now his son can follow his father's footsteps and hopefully finish it in the supposed way. The idea that parents also benefit from sending a child to the monastery, comes from the fact that they sacrifice one child, who could also have stayed at home and help them. This, of course, raises the suspicion that parents not only send their child, for example to diminish the costs of having so many children or giving their child a good future, but also for their own benefit, to get a better life themselves.

How religious a certain person is, and if, therefore, his religious reasons are sincere, is of course hard to tell. Nevertheless, in the houses of parents of childmonks, certain elements were always present. Parents would always wear a *mala* or rosary and there would be pictures of the Dalai Lama on the wall, together with pictures of Buddha's or other deities. The amount of pictures, though, appeared not to have anything to do with the religiosity of the people, but more with their financial situation: whether they could afford all these things or not. Unfortunately very few parents of childmonks live in one of the camps of Bylakuppe, so I did not have the possibility to compare many household to one another. However, as said before, all Tibetans I have met so far, during my research, but also during the time I was in other parts of India or Nepal, were more or less religious. Some expressed their religion by putting up pictures on the wall, and some simply walked their *khora* every day. In general I can therefore say that I believe in the religious reasoning parents give to send their child to the monastery. And even though the children seem to put the emphasis on other aspects than religion, they are followers of the Dalai Lama nevertheless.

When asked who is the most important person in their lives 98% of the childmonks and 100% of the TCV-children replies loudly: "The Dalai Lama!". The other 2% mentioned himself or his parents. This does not mean that the only way to follow him is by becoming a monk, but the majority of the lay-children and childmonks, agree when they say the best way to do so is by becoming a monk (or nun). So in that way also children find that their religion is an important factor in becoming a monk.

8.6.2. Economical reasons

As we saw in the beginning of this paragraph, it is hard to ask Tibetans about their financial situation. Nevertheless, when visiting the parents of childmonks, the differences became clear easily. One of the camps in Bylakuppe is known for its rich people. Many of the inhabitants have relatives in America who send them money every year. These houses look nicer, and the people wear more luxurious *malas* and even have TV. In general Tibetans in Bylakuppe are quite wealthy, compared to settlements I have visited after my stay in South India. Although I have not visited the North Eastern part of India, i.e. Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, I was told that people there are quite poor. This also appeared during my research. Children from these regions (*Dati-khangtsen*) told me they were sent to Sera because "the food will be

better there” or “there you will have the food we can not provide you with”. Even though Tibetans are very fond of food it is striking to see that this was almost only mentioned by children from that specific region. Knowing then that this region is so poor, it is hard not to interpret these statements as euphemistic expressions of poverty.

One childmonk honestly explained how he had come to the monastery at the age of 2, because his mother simply could not afford him. His parents had split up and the mother was already pregnant of her second son. She did not have any money and had just come from Tibet. She first tried to send her son to the TCV, but he was not accepted there, so her only solution seemed to be Sera. She already knew monks there and even though her son was actually too young to be accepted by the monastery too, her extraordinary situation made the monks decide to accept the child. Nevertheless, he only became initiated when he was 6 years old, but he has been wearing monks’ clothes ever since he arrived.

Another boy was raised by his grandparents because his parents had died already. Since the grandparents were already old, they told this boy and his older and younger brothers that they should become monks, because the grandparents also would not be able to look after them forever. Thus, for practical and maybe also financial reasons this boy became a monk.

Something that also indicates economical reasons, is the fact that many children talk about free education and free accommodation and free food and that they get money for the puja’s. This definitely shows that money is an important thing for these childmonks. This, in its turn may imply that money is something they could not possess at home, perhaps due to poverty.

8.6.3. Socio-cultural reasons

As we saw in table 8.7. 38,4% of the childmonks says he was sent to Sera because of educational reasons. Even though this does not come up in the interviews with individual childmonks, when talking with the parents it became clear that indeed this was one of the reasons and especially identity played an important part in this.

When China invaded Tibet, the Tibetan education became part of the Chinese system of education. In the beginning the Chinese tried to avoid any conflict with the local Tibetans, but after the uprising in 1959 Tibet was closed for twenty years and nobody really knew what was going on inside Tibet. In 1980 a delegation of the Dalai Lama was sent to Tibet to investigate the standard of education. One of them was the sister of the Dalai Lama, the director of the TCV in Dharamsala. Compared to the schools in exile the standard of education in Tibet was judged to be very low. The teachers had often not studied beyond two years of primary school and their teaching was accordingly poor. In 16 out of 70 schools Tibetan was not taught at all. Moreover, the majority of the students at the schools were Chinese and so were the teachers. There was a segregation in education, Chinese students were taught by more qualified Chinese teachers

than Tibetan and Chinese students had better facilities than Tibetans. Tibetan students are only admitted if one of their relatives works for the Chinese, and then still it is hard.

Recently the language policy in schools has changed in favour of Tibetan language training. Tibetan is now used in primary schools all over Tibet, except in Chinese schools, and the Chinese language is introduced in grade 3. From middle school on, however, Chinese is the medium of instruction. The students are able to choose between a Tibetan and Chinese section, but the Tibetan section really only teaches Tibetan literature and medicine, which makes it difficult for these students to proceed to higher education. In order to reach middle school, students have to pass exams in Chinese, which is one of the main causes for the drop-out rate of Tibetans after primary school.

Besides the language problems in education, a very obvious cultural difference in education is the shift from Buddhist ideological dominance to Communist ideology. There has also been anti-religious propaganda and children learn very little about Tibetan history. Pictures in Tibetan textbooks are only focussed on the Chinese, Tibetan-looking people and Tibetan objects are totally absent. (Kyaga-Kapstein, 1993) This, in contrary to textbooks of the schools in exile, like, for example, the TCV-school in Bylakuppe.

All of these changes in Tibetan education in Tibet, were explicitly mentioned by the parents of childmonks I talked with. And this only speaks about regular education. The destruction of monasteries and the arrests of monks pursuing higher studies for the *geshe*-degree, during the political unrest in 1987-1989, not to mention the new Chinese policy which makes entry to the monastery below the age of 18 impossible, all ensured that Tibetans did not have faith in their own (monastic) education either.

But, especially since the Chinese were suppressing Tibetan culture in that way, preserving that culture became a very important issue for parents and the only way to teach their children their own culture was to send them to schools in India or Nepal. Especially TCV-schools and monasteries. But also children of Tibetan parents chose to leave their own country, in order to preserve their culture with their future children. One respondent told me:

“My parents lived in Chamdo [Eastern Tibet] and had a strict Tibetan ideology. They wanted to follow Tibetan customs very strictly, but the Chinese force their ideology upon the Tibetans. This means that when my parents die, my siblings and me would have the Chinese ideology and I did not want that. I want to follow the Dalai Lama’s path. That is why I came to India.” (Mother of a childmonk)

There, in exile, Tibetans could express their culture and religion. People wearing a “Free Tibet” T-shirt is a common sight in India and Nepal. Parents told me:

“A child is the future of Tibet, which makes it very important that he gets a Tibetan education. It is important to keep your own culture as a sort of weapon against the Chinese”

And:

“To feel Tibetan, people need Tibetan language. And to be a monk it is essential to know Tibetan language, because all scriptures are in Tibetan!”

Most parents, I interviewed, add to this that learning about Tibetan culture and learning the language can be done both at regular schools and monastic schools. Nevertheless, all of these parents have sent one of their sons to a monastic school, whereas the other children go to the TCV- or another Tibetan school in the settlement. Sending one child to the monastery has to do with the fact that most Tibetans still identify their culture mainly with their religion. Some even see separated tasks for the lay-community and the monastic community.

“Buddhism should be preserved by the monks, the language by the lay-people” (Parents of a childmonk)

Other parents said:

“Religion is most important for the Tibetan community and a monastery can preserve that. Of course our culture can be preserved without the monasteries, but in monasteries this can be done more intensively. That is why a monastic school is slightly better than a regular school, because in a monastic school, students learn Buddhist scriptures besides modern education.” (Mother of a childmonk)

From these quotes it becomes clear that both the lay-community and the religious community play an important role in preserving the culture, which can only freely be done in exile. And besides the elements in their education of culture, children are able to learn modern subjects as well. While visiting the TCV-school I was shown the computer-room, where children are taught about internet and several computer programmes. At SJS this was the same, childmonks not only learn their Buddhist scriptures anymore, but they are opened up to the modern world as well. There were even three internetplaces in Sera! Looking around in several monasteries in Tibet, I never saw any of these modernities. Nevertheless it must be said that SJS is one of the most advanced monastic schools. Even in exile most monasteries have not developed as far as Sera Je has, considering education. All parents, therefore called it a good thing that SJS has both modern and traditional education. For them this was an important reason for sending their child to Sera.

Reading the report of Katrin Kyaga-Kapstein it is clear that for parents in Tibet, sending their child to a monastery or a TCV-school in exile, is the only way to give their child proper education and their own culture.

Children totally agree with their parents on this. Both childmonks and lay-children told me that for them, one of the most important elements of their education were the cultural aspects. Learning traditional Tibetan music or dances and learning their own history and language were among the favourite subjects of

the students of the TCV. At SJS, whether or not the children really liked to be monks, they agreed on it that being a monk helps to preserve Tibetan culture, which to their opinion is a very important thing. The role of the monk in this, for some people, is then even more important, when thinking about a free Tibet in the future. One senior monk said:

“It is important to maintain the Tibetan monastic centres, because when Tibet was still free, there were the three big monasteries of Ganden, Drepung and Sera. One [Ganden] is completely destroyed and the two that are left only function a little. Very few monks live there and the education is restricted by the Chinese. However, monks can save Tibetan culture in exile. They can preserve Buddhism and teach other Tibetans and Westerners to bring peace into the world, including our own country”

8.7. Role of monastic life in Tibetan families

In paragraph 8.5. we saw that when a child was to become a monk, often a relative, who was already a monk himself, influenced the child and parents. This interaction between the monastic community and the lay-community is important. As said in previous paragraphs, most families have got at least one relative in the monastery. These people are not totally excluded from lay-life, although they have to abide to their own principles, they can still sometimes visit their lay-relatives⁸⁶. Especially in Tibet, people became monks or nuns in the monastery that was nearest, which made it easy for them to visit their family often. Nowadays in Tibet, monasteries do not really function anymore, but in India this habit has been continued. Monks still visit their relatives and celebrate important occasions with them. They may go to weddings of their cousin or play games with their little nieces and nephews during *Losar*. This is what I also saw during my fieldwork.

“Today I visited a bazaar in front of the Dalai Lama’s residence. Traditional dances were performed by TCV-children and after that there was this big typical Tibetan food-festivity. One could also play games, especially gambling, which was mostly done by the monks. It was funny to see them win large boxes with beer, and then giving it to their relatives, with whom they were laughing and chatting.” (My diary, March 3 2003)

So, in connection with my subject, lay-children see monks all the time. They speak with them, play with them and they are just relatives or friends. They do not have an isolated function or position in society. They do live separately from the lay-people⁸⁷ but are not totally isolated from them. When lay-people move to a new house, monks (and often relatives) will be invited to perform a special *puja* to

⁸⁶ See Appendix G for a picture of a monk with his niece on his lap

⁸⁷ Even though in some regions monks and nuns can live with their families or relatives, outside the monastery. And in some situations monks can even get married, but this only applies to monks with special mental achievements.

exorcise evil spirits. And lay-people will come to Sera, or any other monastery to receive blessings from the abbot, attend to puja's or simply walk around the village or temple. This means children see monks all the time and are even in close contact with them. This ensures that monasteries are not distant institutions but are simply the house of the monks.

Because monks play a part in children's lives, some childmonks told me they wanted to become monks because the older monks looked so happy. This they can judge from their own point of view. In addition to this there is the openness of Tibetan monasteries. Every monk can leave the monastery and stop being a monk, whenever he wants to. Theoretically, if a monk has not broken his vows yet, he can give back his robes to the person who initiated him and become a lay-man. If, after having been married and working hard, he decides lay-life is not what he thought it would be, he can come back, take back his robes and be a monk again. If a monk, though, breaks his vows, for example by sleeping with a woman, and other monks find out, he will be kicked out of the monastery and he may not return.

This freedom is being spoken of by the monks in an honest way. The senior monks all told me that they have doubts if they can remain monks forever, because, if they find a nice woman, they might want to get married. This means that some parents, uncles, aunts etc. of children might have been monks or nuns. If the children then hear their stories, they will also base their opinion about monastic life on that. On the other hand it is also true, that if a monk gets married and then comes back he will be made fun of by the other monks, so socially, amongst monks it is not completely acceptable.

For children this "giving back the robes" is even harder. Since they are still so young, their *shagen* will often not accept the child's decision. Most of the *shagens* therefore say that they will first try to convince their student or even beat him until he is convinced that monastic life is the best way of spending one's life here on earth⁸⁸. But of course this is probably something the children do not know when they become monks themselves.

Either way, children do get to know monks personally, they do not only have to listen to their parents' opinion about monastic life, but they experience the monks themselves too. That way they create their own opinion about it, probably still not very objective, and could therefore decide for themselves if that life could be nice for them too. And at least this monastic life is not all too strange for them anymore especially, when they arrive to become monk, and some friends or cousins are there already.

8.8. Opinion of the children about monastic life and the future of monasteries

From paragraph 8.7. we may conclude that children can, indeed, have an opinion of their own about a monk's life, based on their own experience with monks before they became monks themselves.

Nevertheless, this opinion might completely differ from the way a monk's life actually is. They can only

⁸⁸ See paragraph 7.3.

experience that once they have become monks. It is therefore interesting to know how lay-children think about monks' life and compare this to the child-monks' view on it. However, one should not forget the backgrounds of the interviewed children. "My" lay-children were mainly born in exile, whereas "my" childmonks mainly came from Tibet. How this influences their background and opinions is partly described in paragraph 8.1., but further research about the difference of Tibetan culture in exile, as compared to Tibet, would make this clearer.

During my group-interviews I asked the TCV-children if they ever wanted to join a nunnery or monastery. In table 8.8. the result can be read.

Table 8.8. Lay-children about joining monastic life

Would you become a monk/nun?	Class III	Class V	Class VII	Class IX	Class XII	Total
Yes	25,80%	5,70%	2,50%	3,10%	2,40%	7,90%
No	74,20%	94,30%	97,50%	96,90%	97,60%	92,10%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Note: Average age per class: Class III – 9 to 14 years; Class V – 11 to 12 years; Class VII – 13 years; Class IX – 15 to 16 years; Class XII – 18 years

Source: Fieldwork data

One should know that in the table above, the only children who said they might be interested in monastic life were boys! No girl said she wanted to become a nun. Why the girls, specifically are not interested in becoming nuns might have to do with the fact that there are very few (important) nuns and that in the past and still nowadays nuns are subordinate to monks. I have not been able to investigate this more thoroughly. However high *lama*'s like the Dalai Lama himself and for example Peno Rinpoche of the Namdroling monastery (and nunnery) in Bylakuppe, try to make the nuns feel better about themselves (they have very low self esteem) and treat them equal to monks. Nevertheless, in my interview only few boys appeared interested in becoming a monk. When looking at the reasons why they are attracted to the monastery I saw that most of them, when they were sent to the TCV by their parents (from Tibet!) the parents already expressed their wish for them to become a monk. And these children said they want to fulfil that wish. Others say they feel very religious and do not feel attracted to lay's life, but want to follow the Dalai Lama's path. Again others say that the monks always seem so happy and that they also want to have such a happy life. However, even children who do not want to become monks or nuns, still see positive things in monastic life. The *puja*'s increase the length of life and fortune. A monk can perform a

puja when one of his relatives is ill. And monks and nuns preserve religion, so it is important that there are monks and nuns.

The negative view of lay-children of monasteries are apparently more prevalent among the TCV-students I interviewed. The main reason for not joining the monastery is the restrictions monks have, and for nuns that they can not enjoy modern education⁸⁹. Other children say that it is not necessary to join a monastery in order to study Buddhism. And that life in a monastery must be very boring. More specifically for children their age to be in a monastery must be difficult, according to the lay-children. Study in the monastery is intensive and if you want to play cards or cricket that is not allowed, they say. Especially beating is mentioned as one of the worst things of monastic discipline.

The last comment is totally agreed with by the childmonks themselves. When asked what they find the least nicest thing of monastic life they all say the beating. About this subject, “What is the thing you like least about monastic life?”, I asked childmonks of class VI to draw a picture.

Figure 8.3.



Source: Fieldwork data

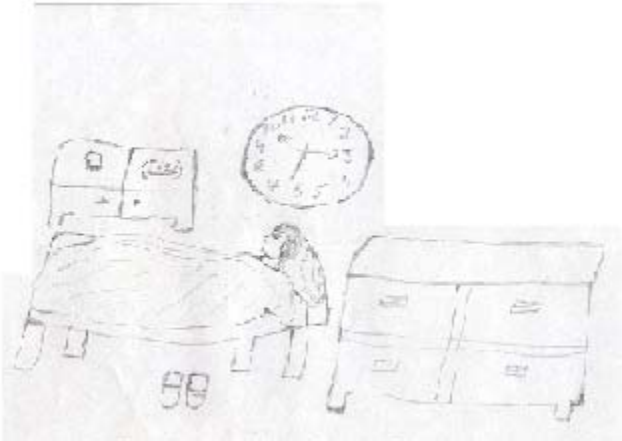
Figure 8.4.



⁸⁹ In Bylakuppe there is only one nunnery, belonging to the Nyingmapa-tradition. In this nunnery women only learn the scriptures, just like at most of the monasteries. Therefore, the only place for women to study modern subjects and at least a little buddhism is at the regular Tibetan schools in the settlement. SJS as a modern monastic school is an exception to this, but only monks can join there.

Of course this is not the only thing they do not like about their monastic life and it also greatly depends on their teachers and their own behaviour how often a child is beaten. Other childmonks also mentioned the study itself and therefore studying hard or getting up early as worst elements of monastic life. This can be seen in Figure 8.5.

Figure 8.5.



Source: Fieldwork data

Fortunately childmonks do not only dislike their lives, of some aspects they also see the positive side, like the good education they receive, which they might not have got in Tibet. Also the good food, the money they receive from puja's, the sports they can play with their friends and the study of Buddhism. This came from the assignment I gave to class II students: "Draw yourself and the thing you like most about living in the monastery. And some of them simply seem to like where they are.

Figure 8.6.



Source: Fieldwork data

Figure 8.7.



Interesting enough both designers of the above pictures have drawn mountains, which are not present in or around Sera. Nevertheless, with the sun and the birds, both pictures look quite happy.

For the future of the existence of Tibetan monasteries, I think, it is important to know how children and more specifically childmonks feel about monkhood and that future. Apparently, the childmonks especially do not like the beating but in general, while talking with them and observing them they did not seem unhappy with their situation either.

Table 8.9. Forever a monk?

Will you stay in the monastery forever?	Class I	Class III	Class V	Class VII	Total
Yes	65,40%	100%	100%	100%	91,40%
No	36,40%	0%	0%	0%	8,60%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

The age per class varies: Class I - 6 to 14 years; Class III- 9 to 17 years; Class V – 13 to 17 years; Class VII – 13 to 19 years

Source: Fieldwork data

From table 8.9. it can be concluded that in general childmonks think that they will be in the monastery forever. Only the younger ones seem to be in a little more doubt about that. Why it is specifically this young group that doubts their life as a monk I do not know. Actually, from my interviews with individual childmonks, all of them were certain in their wish to stay a monk, but like the senior monks they also appeared to be open to the idea of leaving the monastery one day, since nobody knows what will happen in the future. Maybe the older children realise how hard it actually is to leave the monastery and this might then be why they say they are more or less “stuck” there.

As we saw in previous paragraphs, most of the childmonks come from Tibet. In most of these cases, the only relatives they have in India are also monks or nuns or live in distant parts of India. Knowing this, one can understand that it is hard for a monk to just leave the monastery and become a lay-man. They do not have anything to live of and they do not have anyone to support them. Since, as a monk, they also do not have much money it would be hard for them to leave the monastery. This is different for monks who do have relatives nearby. However, it is still doubtful whether these ex-monks would be welcomed with open arms.

Nevertheless most of the childmonks think they will be in Sera for the rest of their lives. Some of them even mention that the fact that they became a monk at such a young age will make it easier for them to stay a monk forever. But of course they, too do not know what might happen in the future. One child said:

“I would like to stay a monk the rest of my life, but I do not know what will happen in the future, that depends on my luck.”
(Childmonk, 17 years old)

Another child said:

“Yes I really want to stay a monk, but it is hard to do that. If I become a lay-man, I will go back to Tibet, because there is my family, so I am happier there” (Childmonk, 12 years old)

In class IV of SJS, I asked the children to draw themselves and where/what they will be, 20 years from now. And all of them seemed to have religious plans for their future

Figure 8.8.



Source: Fieldwork data

Figure 8.9.



The above two drawers (14 years old) have drawn themselves as *geshes*, which is the highest degree a monk can get in Sera. This can be seen in the shirt the two monks are wearing. Only a monk who has reached his *geshe* degree can wear the red shirt with the yellow on it. The idea of achieving that within 20 years from now is maybe a little too ambitious, since the study towards the *geshe* degree takes 20 years, after finishing SJS, but at least they think they will study hard and reach a higher state of monkhood.

The left childmonk seems to be even more ambitious since the chair that monk is sitting on, with the microphone in front is either the abbot or the *umze* (chantmaster). To reach either one of these functions he would have to specialise and study even more.

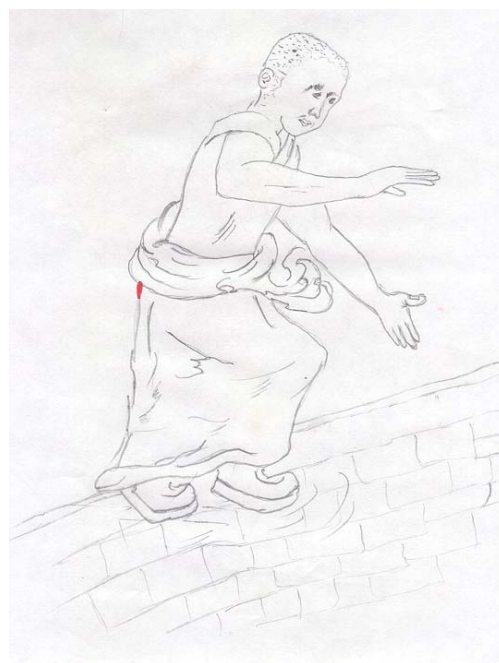
Two other monks drew pictures of themselves as (good) debaters. Debating is something which is very important in the Gelugpa-monasteries, especially the three most important ones, Sera, Drepung and Ganden. When monks are to receive their *geshe*-degrees they have to pass written exams, but be especially good at debating. This technique can be described as discussing the studied text with another monk, together with a lot of body-, hand and arm-gestures to make a point. Most of the time this is done one to one, but sometimes it is done in groups. The one who is being “tested” sits on the floor and the one standing asks questions or makes statements about the text. The one on the floor then has to answer these questions or react to the statements, and the one standing can then, by gestures and speaking, reject that answer and correct him. The highest *geshes*, the Lharam-*geshes* have to debate with the monks from Ganden and Drepung, in order to receive their degree, their debating will be judged by senior *geshes*.

Figure 8.10.



Source: Fieldwork data

Figure 8.11.



All of the 14 pictures on this subject, I received, had to do with religious ambitions. One had drawn himself as a monk on a lotus-flower, and writing with it that in 20 years he hoped to be enlightened.

Another had drawn Buddhist signs, also symbolising wisdom and enlightenment and one had drawn himself, in a small house in the mountains. These small houses are often for hermits (often monks) who will stay there to meditate. All of the children, though, when they had drawn themselves as monks, were wearing the *geshe*-shirt.

Considering the ambitions of these children to me it seems obvious that the childmonks now will be preserving monkhood in the future too. Even though there might be some disadvantages to the life of a monk (i.e. the beating, the strict discipline and hard study) apparently the children also see the positive side of it all. And since they do not know lay-life that well yet, they do not know what they are missing out on anyway. Besides, as a monk, they attain a certain status among their friends and relatives. As one childmonk said:

“Even though I have not taken the *getsul*-vows yet, in Sera the monks treat me as a real monk and at home they even respect me like a senior monk!” (Childmonk, 11 years old)

The status they receive as a monk must of course be very attractive too, to a childmonk. This might also motivate them to stay monk.

Even though SJS has become such a modern school already, some of the childmonks seem to have the plan to go to a lay-school, mainly to learn English better. About 16,3% of the childmonks wants to stay in Sera until class 12 (they will be about 18 years old then) and then go to regular schools in order to get more modern education. When they have reached the age of 18, as we have seen in paragraphs 7.3. and 8.7., they will be more considered to be an adult, by their *shagens* and so it will be easier for them to leave the monastery. Nevertheless, without any money or relatives to help you, it is hard to go from being a monk to lay-life.

The following life histories might better be read as in-depth, personal information about 6 different childmonks. Because of the short life of these children so far and the shortage of available background-information about their whole lives, these stories are moreover religious histories than actual life-histories. They will give you a more elaborate view on how the process of their becoming a monk was, what their influence was and that of their parents and others and how they experience their lives now. In all histories the emphasis will be on different aspects of that process.

These stories were all noted down by me based on data I gathered from interviews with the child, his parents (if possible) and his *shagen*. They are all randomly chosen childmonks whose stories can be seen as representative of all childmonks of Sera Je.

9.1. Life history 1: Rinzin

The story of Rinzin is the most special one that I came across during my interviews. Rinzin, now, is a young boy of 13 years old. But when he was younger he suffered a lot from different types of diseases.

His parents told me:

“Rinzin was always sick and we found it hard to see him suffer all the time, while he was still such a little boy”

Since the doctors could not find what was wrong with Rinzin they went to an astrologer. This astrologer finally told them that Rinzin would always be sick and die at a very young age, unless they sent him to a monastery and let him become a monk. The parents took this advice of the astrologer (also a monk) very seriously and decided to send Rinzin to a monastery. They already had children in a monastery and nunnery, so they had never intended to send Rinzin to one as well, but if this was going to save his life, then he should go. For Rinzin there was no way of going against his parents' decision, the astrologer had spoken, so he had to accept it. The parents, nevertheless, said they would have been open to his objections, because they want to respect their children's choices, but in this case it was not their decision either. If Rinzin had not been ill all the time he would just have gone to a regular school. Besides that, the parents are of the opinion that a very young child is not a good monk. But still, Rinzin was only 6 when he was initiated as a monk. For both parents and Rinzin himself that was actually a little too young. They would all have preferred it to be a little bit later. Rinzin would have preferred the age of 8, and his parents the age of 10 to 12, because the teachers do not have to look after the child all the time when he is a little bit older. One of Rinzin's sisters (there are 7 children in the family) was already a nun.

So at the age of 6, Rinzin was taken to the monastery. Mother's sister's son introduced Rinzin to a teacher and asked on behalf of the parents to accept Rinzin as his student. Geshe Lobsang accepted Rinzin, because he would feel terribly guilty if the child would die, just because he had not accepted him.

And as it happened, after Rinzin became a monk, he has never had any health problems again!

For the initiation the *shagen* did not take Rinzin to the abbot himself. One of his many students, who had completed the *Dulwa*-class took Rinzin on his behalf. Out of gratitude, the parents offered a *khatag* and some fruit to the teacher.

Immediately after the initiation Rinzin started living with Geshe Lobsang, and he liked it. He played a lot with his friends and he has never shown any complaints about missing his parents. Still, he only sees his parents during *Losar*, which is only about 3 days a year. His parents say the teacher does not allow Rinzin to come more often, because when he is at home he watches TV and sees the life of the lay-people, that is not good for a monk, but sometimes Rinzin comes secretly. The parents also sometimes visit Rinzin at the monastery, then they bring him some fruit and a little pocket-money. They also always advise him to do his best and behave himself with his friends.

As a monk Rinzin has a busy schedule. He gets up at 5am and he either has breakfast then, when there is a special *puja*, but normally he has breakfast in school. Otherwise he can play until 7am. From 7 to 9 he has a scripture session at his own house. And at 9 school starts. At the time of the interview there was still holiday, so Rinzin's daily schedule was a little different. He could get up a little later, at around 7 or 8am, then at 9 they would have breakfast in the house. From 9 to 10.30am he had to wash himself and some clothes, but most of the time was used for playing. 10.30am is lunchtime with the house and after that there is time for an afternoon nap until 3pm. But Rinzin usually uses this time to play some more (we also could not find him for the interview). From 3 to 5pm he has to wash himself and he can play, but at 5 it is dinnertime. After that he can play again until 8pm, but at that time he has to be in the house, he can still talk with his friends until 11pm. At 11pm Rinzin goes to bed.

When it is not holiday, Rinzin finds it hard to follow the discipline, he does not like the strictness. But he realizes that if he lives as a lay-person, which seems a lot easier to him, he would die very soon, because that is what the astrologer said. He does like to go to school though, but his favorite way of spending his spare time is playing cricket. He does not like to stay in his room all day. But fortunately he only has to do that as a punishment.

Even though Rinzin dresses like a monk, is initiated and has already completed the first years of school, he does not feel like a real monk yet, because he has not yet taken the *getsul*-vows. He sees himself as a novice, which is a little different than a real monk, Rinzin says. When the monks are disciplined, the young ones are being treated much stricter than the old ones. The *shagen* would hit the young ones, but would only warn the older ones. Rinzin's parents, though, see him as a semi-adult. When he is home he does not have time to play a lot, so he only sits with his mother.

Rinzin's friends are also all monks, and he has a lot of friends he says. He thinks he can be a monk for the rest of his life.

“When a child becomes monk at a young age, he will be a monk also, when he grows up”.

His parents of course hope the same. They believe that when the child does not become a good monk, the family will also get problems. Still, they do not expect anything from Rinzin, they only hope that he will become a good monk and preferably also *geshe* and that is what they pray for. They do also feel that monasteries in general are very important. They preserve the culture and religion and so they are very important for the future of Tibet.

9.2. Life history 2: Lobsang

Lobsang was 9 when he came to Sera, now he is 10. For him that was a good age. He says it is better to enter the monastery when you are still young, because when you come when you are already 18, you still have to start in class one and that means you have had a bad education up until then. One of his uncles (father’s side) also lives in Sera and had sent his parents a letter to make Lobsang also come to the monastery. Then the parents told him that when a person dies, the monks will go to heaven and the lay people will go to hell. So the parents and Lobsang all decided that it would be better if he became a monk. On top of the good prospect after death, he would also get modern education, both English and Tibetan languages. Besides, Lobsang has one older brother⁹⁰.

When it was decided that Lobsang would join the monastery, his parents took him to the Barkhor⁹¹ in Lhasa, there was a car waiting for him. Lobsang had to get in with his luggage and he received a *khatag* from his parents for a safe journey. His parents told him “have a good journey!”. They were especially worried about the border with Nepal, since Lobsang did not have a passport. They also said “learn good English” and “we will come to visit you after two or three years”.

At the border, Lobsang had to hide well under the luggage.

“From there I could see the shoes of the policemen, they were hitting the car and I heard a lot of noise. I was not scared though, I knew they could not find me there.”

When he came out of his hidingplace, he saw that all the windows were broken. At the border he stayed with his uncle for 6 days. There too he had to hide, because he was waiting for the people that would take him further into Nepal.

“My uncle had to pay a lot of money to the Nepalese people who eventually took me. In Nepal, I stayed with these people for one night and then they took me to another uncle. A relative of that uncle, an old man, took me to the refugee centre in Kathmandu. After some

⁹⁰ This may have influenced his parents’ decision to send Lobsang to the monastery. See Chapter 8

⁹¹ The Barkhor is a square in front of Tibet’s most important temples, the Jokhang, in Lhasa.

days there, I, and a lot of other people, went to Delhi by bus. There I received 500 rupees pocket money. We did not stay in Delhi for long, we immediately went to Dharamsala. There I stayed for 2 or 3 months and then a monk from Sera took me to his monastery.”

When he arrived in Sera, the monk took Lobsang to his own *khangtsen* (Lhowa-*khangtsen*) but other monks came to look and talk with him and then he was taken to Teho-*khangtsen*, because his parents are from Eastern Tibet. Then the head of the *khangtsen* came to talk with him and brought him his uncle. But even though Lobsang has many relatives in Sera, his *shagen* is not a relative and he did not even talk with Lobsang’s parents until he met them in Bodh Gaya last year. After Lobsang became a monk the parents did say thanks to the *shagen* and in Bodh Gaya they gave him a pillow cover as a present. When Lobsang was initiated the parents could not give any offerings, but the *shagen* gave an envelope with money to the abbot on their behalf. Lobsang tells about the initiation-ceremony:

“A monk had already cut my hair, except for one little piece on the top of my head. Then the *shagen* made tea and took that together with a *khatag* to the abbot. Then the *shagen* first gave the envelope with money to the abbot and the abbot gave me some tea. We drank tea together and then he cut the last piece of my hair. Then the abbot said something to me and my *shagen*. He asked ‘how did you come to India and why?’”.

Now that Lobsang is settled in Sera he does not miss his parents very much. They are in good contact, they write every two or three months and sometimes they call or send him presents. His parents still live in Tibet, father in Lhasa and the mother in Chamdo. Lobsang’s uncles in Sera look after him. They give him money.

Lobsang remembers Tibet very well, but he knows the education is better here, he learns English, Hindi and Mathematics and that is all very important to him.

“So of course”, he says, “monasteries are very important, besides, the monks need a place to live, right?”

9.3. Life history 3: Tenzin

“For a couple of weeks now I see little Tenzin walking around holding his father’s hand (but often also together with his mother) all around Sera. In the interview his parents told me that Tenzin would become a real monk after Losar, as soon as the school started, and that he would start living with his teacher then. It seems like it that, until then, they are trying to make him get used to that idea. Just now I saw him and his father walking at the schoolyard towards the principal’s office. This Thursday (20 March) the school will start, so I guess that is the reason. Tenzin also seems to get more and more used to his robe. He walks around as a real monk with the zen⁹² on his head against the sun, and he always looks very decent.

⁹² A zen is the separate cloth of the robe, which is supposed to be worn folded around the upper part of the body, and over one shoulder.

I don't know if all children are slowly being used to their new living situation, but these parents definitely seem to make time for all of it."
(March 17th 2003, my journal)

In the very small house of the obviously financially very tight family of Tenzin (one room that serves as kitchen and living room for the two parents and their 3 young sons) I was warmly welcomed by all members with a cup of tea. Everywhere around the room there are pictures of several Buddhas and of course a picture of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. The father mainly answers the questions, while mother breastfeeds 6-year old Tenzin and listens carefully.

Tenzin (6 years old) was the smallest monk I saw walking around Sera Je when I first arrived here. He immediately took down the image I had of monks, I used to call him "monkie", because he was always playing with his friends, climbing on everything, so actually just being a regular mischievous little boy. Since he was so small (he looked 4 or 5 to me), but already walking around proudly in his monk's robe, he drew my interest and I requested an interview with his parents. Because Tenzin himself was apparently still too busy being a child an interview with himself wouldn't have been a great success. His parents also lived in Sera Je and Tenzin was still living with them. Since his father works as a garbage-cleaner in the monastery, and the mother works in the carpentry, also in Sera, they live close to the school and the other monks. But they have only lived there for about 2 years now. This means Tenzin did not grow up among the monks, but he did spend some of his lifetime among them. To his parents it seems that because he is used to living in a monastery already, it will be easier for him to adapt to his new situation, and they think he will like living as a monk soon enough. His older brothers, nevertheless, go to the TCV-school. Tenzin could not go there yet, because he was still too young, besides that, the parents have always wanted to send one of their sons to the monastery, so since Tenzin was not yet accepted at the regular school, they sent him to the monastery. The parents think it is good for Tenzin's future in this and in his future lives to live in the monastery now. Still, they never intended to send him to the monastery at such a young age. They wanted him to go to a regular school until the age of 15. The father says:

"We think that when a child is too young he does not have any understanding of the *Dharma* yet. He also does not know the rules, so he would break those rules a lot of times. This is why we think it is better when a child goes to the monastery when he is a little older."

In Sera though, the school of Sera Je (SJS) is very advanced in its curriculum, so Tenzin will still get the subjects he was supposed to get at a regular school, but at the same time he will be taught the *Dharma* and the discipline. The parents chose to send Tenzin to Sera because all the people from their village in Tibet sent their monks off to Sera, Tenzin's family does not have any relatives in any monastery.

The parents even came from Tibet, with their children (all three boys were born in Tibet), because of the bad quality of education in their home country, “because of the Chinese”. The parents think, that it is one’s own responsibility to learn about Tibetan culture and religion. That is why they came to India, because here their children have the chance to really learn all that. They say:

“The child is the future of Tibet, when Tibet is free again, it is important that he still knows about his own culture, so that they can rebuild Tibet, when the Chinese are gone!”

Even though Tenzin is already officially a monk (he has been initiated and he wears the monks’ robe) he still lives with his parents, which is very uncommon, because normally a child would immediately after receiving his initiation start living with his *shagen*. The parents say that Tenzin is still too young to fully understand monastic life, so he was allowed to stay with them until he starts school. Tenzin and his parents did not know this *shagen* before they came to Sera, but when they went to the *khangtsen* of their specific region, they set up some sort of a lottery, by which the name of this monk was drawn, and so he became Tenzin’s *shagen*. Tenzin’s initiation took place on an auspicious day, so that he would stay a monk forever, and be a good monk too! The parents did not participate in the initiation ceremony. The head of the *khangtsen* took Tenzin to the abbot and he also offered fruit juice and a *khatag* on their behalf.

Now that Tenzin is still living with his parents, they still completely see him as a child. They will continue doing so until he is about 9 or 10 years old, then they will regard him as an adolescent or even an adult. Since they live inside the monastery, and so very near Tenzin’s future *khangtsen* they will still be able to see him very often.

Of course these parents hope for their son to stay a monk for the rest of his life.

“We hope and pray for that, but we can not be sure of anything. Now we can still help him, guide him a little, but when he is an adult we can not direct him anymore”.

From the interview with Tenzin’s parents it seems like they send him to the monastery for two reasons: 1. good education, and 2. For the future lives of Tenzin. Still, from seeing the living situation of this family, and concluding that they are among the poorest Tibetans in Bylakuppe, I do suspect that finance is a third reason for sending one boy to the monastery. I do not doubt their religious sincerity and I also do not doubt the best intentions they have, educationally, for their three sons. But I think that supporting 3 sons, sending all three of them to a proper school is a little too much for them. And Sera is the ideal solution. They still will be living very close to their son, but he will get the education and food etc. for free. And since (good) monks seem to travel a lot, and even make money from their institutes abroad, maybe this family also hopes to get a little profit from that as well..

9.4. Life history 4: Thinlay

Thinlay (9 years old) came to the monastery when he was 7. To him that seems like a good age, younger would not have been right and older neither. He himself had come up with the idea of becoming a monk. One relative, mother's brother, was also a monk. In fact it was this man who suggested Thinlay to become a monk, and Thinlay liked that idea. The uncle said:

“You should become a monk, because it will make you happy and it will give you good education, at home you will never get that”.

Since his uncle was a monk in Sera, in Dati *khangtsen*, Thinlay also came to Sera, to the same *khangtsen*. Now that Thinlay himself is in the monastery he totally agrees with what his uncle told him back then. Right now, if another child was to become a monk, Thinlay would say:

“The food is better here than at home, you get money and free education!”.

The *shagen* though, who is the uncle, seems to remember that the parents had already decided that Thinlay should become a monk. According to him the parents said:

“He should get spiritual knowledge and modern education”.

So they asked him, since he was already in Sera, to take Thinlay to the monastery and let him become a monk. When Thinlay first came to the monastery, his uncle took him to the abbot himself. There, during the initiation ceremony:

“The abbot said something, which I did not understand, and he cut my hair.”

Then the uncle gave a *khatag*, fruit, tea and money in an envelope. After that he also started living with his uncle, the *shagen*. The uncle is very rich, so he has his own house, where there are some other senior monks and two other children. Thinlay explains: “The poor monks live in the *khangtsen*”.

Even though Thinlay has been a monk now for about 2 years, he still does not feel like a real monk, he still feels like a novice. To him, a monk is only a real monk after he has taken the vows with the Dalai Lama or another high lama. Still, he has a busy schedule. Even during the holidays he gets up early and studies hard. Thinlay really likes living in the monastery, he has a lot of friends (from different *khangtsens*), so he wants to stay there for the rest of his life. The thing he likes most is the money he gets from the *pujas*, even though he can not spend it immediately. He has to give the money to his *shagen* and later he will get it as pocket money. The only thing that he really does not like is the beating. In the school he sometimes gets beaten, for example by the teacher when he talks with his friends, during class. And sometimes the *gegu* beats him, for example when he talks during a *puja*, or while having food. At home the *shagen* also sometimes beats him, when he has not memorized his texts properly.

During the past 2 years Thinlay has not seen his parents. They never came to Sera and he was not allowed to go there. His *shagen* even told him that he can not see his parents for the first 3 years and

another monk said that he could not see his parents until he was in 5th class. But Thinlay does not miss his parents anyway, so he is okay with it.

Even though Thinlay has never been to Tibet, but only comes from Arunachal Pradesh, which, in the past, used to belong to Tibet, he feels very Tibetan. And when Tibet gets free, he will definitely go to Sera, near Lhasa, to be a monk there. To prepare himself for that day, he finds it very important to get a Tibetan education (language and culture).

9.5. Life history 5: Yeshi

Sometimes a child is clearly not happy with his life as a monk. And even though I only came across one of these monks once, I assume there must be more children like 12-year old Yeshi.

Yeshi is a Tibetan boy from North Eastern Tibet. His parents still live there and he does not have much contact with them. He misses them deeply, because he has not seen them since he left Tibet 3 years ago.

When he was to become a monk, his parents told him he could not come back before he had reached his *geshe*-degree. This will take about 20 years, which is why Yeshi is very sad that he became a monk. He would rather have stayed with his parents for some more years. He also does not know exactly why his parents sent him to Sera. He has one older brother and sister and one younger brother.

“My parents apparently chose me to study in India.”

Even though he is unhappy living apart from his parents, he thinks that when a child becomes a monk it is better when he does so at a young age. Between 6 and 9 is best, because before that a child does not know anything yet.

When Yeshi came to Sera, his parents took him to Lhasa. A “stranger” then took him to India.

“My father paid that man to take me to India. We had to walk through the snow and we had a lot of problems. I was very scared. The man took me all the way to Sera and then he left.”

Even though Yeshi is not quite happy with the situation he is in, he appears to be a good student, but has low self-esteem. He says he is not a real monk yet, because he can not think as an adult. He is also not treated like a real monk, because the senior monks are much more serious and he is mischievous. His friends, with whom he likes to play games, are all monks. Yeshi finds he has enough time to play with his friends during the day. Nevertheless a big part of his day consists of studying (memorizing and reciting) the scriptures.

He finds it hard to study so much, and therefore he thinks it is difficult to stay a monk forever. If he would become a lay-man he would go back to Tibet, to be close to his family. But now he would not rather go to a lay-school, because, he says “you will not get good food there”.

9.6. Life history 6: *Tulku Tenzin Lhondrup*, reincarnation of Ngawang Dhargye

Tenzin was living with his sister, parents and his adopted cousin (he now calls him brother), in Shillong, when at the age of 3 he was discovered as the reincarnation of a high *lama*. He is now 6,5 years old and has been living in Sera for two months.

When the previous incarnation of Ngawang Dhargye died, his students went looking for his reincarnation, in 1999. The Dalai Lama told them they would find him in the North Eastern part of India, and it would be a boy of 3 years old. Ngawang had died in 1995 and Tenzin was born in 1996. Normally the two closest *geshes* to the Rinpoche will go look for his reincarnation, but they could not, so they sent some students. These students collected pictures of all boys of 3 years old, among who Tenzin and his cousin. In total they took 17 pictures, not only in Shillong, where Tenzin was born, but also around. Together with some background information of the parents, the students took these pictures to the Dalai Lama. The Dalai Lama selected one picture of who he thought was the real reincarnation. With that he made a certificate that says that that boy is the real reincarnation. This boy was Tenzin. Only the Dalai Lama is able to recognize a *tulku* and so he is the one who has to make that certificate. Then the two *geshes* came to Shillong with the certificate and the picture.

Before the monks arrived Tenzin's father dreamed that he was walking in Sera among monks (he had never been to Sera). When the two *geshes* arrived to the house, they told Tenzin's parents that Tenzin was Ngawang's reincarnation and they showed them the certificate. Tenzin's mother was very confused and was afraid that Tenzin was not the real reincarnation.

The next day the monks came again to announce a special ceremony which would happen in the *labrang* (the *rinpoche*'s house), in the temple of Shillong on an auspicious day, two days later. The parents and senior monks offered food to the audience. By Teho-*khangtsen* (the *khangtsen* to which the previous *rinpoches* belonged) a party was organised. After all these celebrations Tenzin's mother was more convinced that Tenzin was indeed the reincarnation, because he cried very loud when the monks left, because he said he wanted to go with them to Sera (he had never been there). When it had become generally known that Tenzin had been recognized as the reincarnation, students from all over the world started sending him postcards. Ngawang Dhargye had set up an institute for Westerners in New Zealand and so 3-year old Tenzin received a postcard from them. When he saw the card, which had a picture on it of the institute, he pointed at a button, which, he said, when you press it, will open a door, and "then you can go inside". Tenzin's mother checked this later and it appeared to be correct.

After 3,5 years, when Tenzin became 6,5 the family moved to Sera. Immediately when he saw the house, Tenzin said that was his house and that he wanted to stay there. After the enthronement of Tenzin, the Western students organised a party for him, to celebrate that their teacher had come back. During the enthronement ceremony, any mantra's and prayers are said and even though he had never learned that

before, Tenzin moved and chanted with the other monks. After the enthronement all people could offer him a *khatag*. Also the principal of SJS gave him one, and although the new *rinpoche* and he had never met before, Tenzin called the principal by name, while he gave back the blessed *khatag*.

Another striking characteristic Tenzin has as well as his previous incarnation is his lack of interest in material things. When he was given money, which was offered by some people, he immediately gave it back, he rather gives it to the beggars. This was the same when the family was still living in Shillong.

Now that he has been recognised, his parents will leave him in Sera. This was of course very difficult for the parents, especially the mother seemed to have great difficulties with leaving her child behind. They had never intended to send any of their children to a monastery. But they decided they could not keep the new *rinpoche* away from his students. Another couple, whose son had also been recognised as a *tulku*, did not want to give up their son either. Shortly after they had made this decision their son died in an accident.

“Since his parents did not want to give him to where he belongs, the *rinpoche* needed to be born in another body, with which he could go to the monastery”

Tenzin’s mother did not want to risk her son’s life, so they decided to let Tenzin go to Sera. The parents now call their son *rinpoche*. And when thinking back they are convinced that he is the real reincarnation. The mother tells another anecdote:

“When we were in Bodh Gaya, and he was only 2,5 years old, I called him Tenzin Lhondrup, but Tenzin corrected me and said his name was Tenzin Dhargye”

Tenzin himself likes being in Sera. During the interview, he makes funny faces and tries to make me and my interpreter smile, something his predecessor also used to do, we hear later. He likes reading and he will start second class soon. This he will only take for one year, after which his special scripture classes will start. Tenzin already made some friends and he has almost forgotten about his old friends. Now, everything is still new for him and so he has to get used to his life and learn and read a lot. Actually he just likes everything about living in Sera, he feels happy there.

As we now have read these short life histories it has become clear that each of the stories emphasised a different aspect of the lives of these childmonks. Life-history 1, for example showed how an external person and strong religious beliefs influenced the parents decision to send the boy to a monastery. In story 2, Lobsang told about the difficult and risky journey he had to undertake in order to get out of Tibet. Little Tenzin’s story showed how a very young boy can also become a monk and what the parents’ motivation for that can be. Thinlay’s story is the most average story, one which most of the childmonks can relate to. Life history 5 showed, however, that some children are very unhappy with their lives as a monk. And life history 6 told us the fascinating story of a reincarnate monk or *tulku*.

When I first started with this research I only heard negative comments of people on this habit of sending children to monasteries at a young age. Even though, as we saw in Chapter one (paragraph 1.11.), more or less the same thing happened to children in The Netherlands, who were sent to Catholic boarding schools. Besides, the people who were so negative about it, had actually never been to Tibet or even seen a real monk. So how could they judge these Tibetans?

Nevertheless I also come from this Western Society and I had also never lived among monks before, though I had experienced Tibetan culture already. To me it seemed, that if Westerners were about to give their opinion about childmonks, or monks' life in general, they should be people who actually have experienced this life more or less. And then of course it would definitely be interesting for me to talk with them because they were more experienced in this field than I, but still they have the same background as I have. From that point of view I decided to include Westerners in Sera in my fieldwork. One of them was a *thanka*-painting-student, one of them was a student of one of the *rinpoches*, one was an English teacher for monks and two of them were monks themselves. So all of them, even though they came from a Western background, were now living amongst Tibetans and even monks in Sera! Since they were all closely connected to the monks they were living with, they could give me a close report on how the children in their houses were treated, what their opinions on that were and how they experienced monastic life themselves.

All of them, from their Western point of view felt very uncomfortable with the fact that children are sent to monasteries, because children should live with their parents. This was the general thought. However, the most awful thing for children in the monastery was considered to be the beating, but according to one of the Western respondents this is changing nowadays. Monks do not only try to correct their students' behaviour by beating, but moreover by talking. Nevertheless there also seems to be a certain pride amongst monks in how much beating a person can take. A Western English teacher told me that the monks even expected her to beat her students if they had not studied well enough. One Westerner told me about a conversation he had with one of the monks in his house:

“The monk told me that his teachers had been the ones who had seen their culture being destroyed by the Chinese. So these teachers were very tough and would beat very quickly. For them that was probably the best way to preserve their culture. As children, the monks, would then not memorize all the lines of the text, because then they would get more next time, but they also would not memorize too few, because then they would get beaten. They would try to find the correct amount in order to avoid both.”

This preservation of culture is for Westerners, just like for the Tibetans themselves, an important reason to be positive about the monasteries. Besides, childmonks have some certainty in life as well. Although they do not have parents living with them, they do have other people fulfilling that role.

The fact that some Westerners decide to become monks themselves and even appear to be very successful in that, shows, according to a Western monk (who has 2 sons of his own), how capable the mind is to adapt to a different situation. For children, to his opinion, this would be the same. Besides he

says: “Westerners seem to think that they give their children so much freedom, but actually these children are in as much a routine as are the childmonks, without any free will. This Western routine will then only lead to free spirits that go everywhere. The discipline in Tibetan monasteries is indeed strict, but it protects the children from the dangers of society and directs them to become good and pure monks with a good mind in order to help everyone. This is a beautiful goal, which can not be achieved by those free spirits in the West.”

Another, young (21 years) Western monk shares the opinion of the older monk. By becoming a monk at a young age the conditions are created for a good life and a good future, he says. And children can adapt to the new situation easily.

The above information, given by Westerners in Sera, shows that from their experience their view on the life of childmonks has changed. They see the advantages and interpreted situations in a different way.

For me this shed a new light on how to compare Western children and childmonks. Even though this was not the objective of my fieldwork, it was of course the situation that I came from, so subconsciously this comparison was still made. Nevertheless, by collecting and analysing all the information the children themselves gave me, it became clearer how they experience their lives and if that conforms with the opinions of the Westerners. As we saw in the previous Chapters, childmonks see negative but also positive aspects in their lives and coming from a totally different background they interpret their experiences in a completely different way than the Westerners. The Westerners I have interviewed for this Chapter are more or less in between the Westerners-in-the-West and the Tibetans. Since they are Buddhists, they can explain things from a Buddhist point of view, but as Westerners they also understand the Western point of view. Even more so was a Western childmonk I spoke with in Nepal. He grew up in a Buddhist, though Western, family, saw monks walking around their Buddhist institute and decided to become a monk himself. Now, at the age of 12 he is totally accepted by his monastic community and thinks his monkhood is the most positive way of spending his life. Since Tibetan Buddhism is already being exported to the West, this might happen even more often. If then even Western parents decided to send their child to a monastery, this would add another dimension to a research like mine. And maybe that would make us, Western researchers, understand even better what processes lead to the child becoming a monk or nun.

Conclusion

My research subject, as set out in Chapter 2 was: “The life of children in the Tibetan Buddhist Sera monastery in South India, and their opinion about that life”. By investigating this subject I have chosen to expand anthropological (Tibetan) knowledge in two ways: first, since this subject has not been investigated before, it will add information to the list of Tibet-related subjects. Secondly, it has tried to demonstrate that children can and should be part of anthropological research, in contrary to what so far has been thought by the more traditional anthropologists.

Through operationalisation of the main subject I came to many subjects that I wanted to get answered or explained during my fieldwork. Some of these specific objectives, as we saw in paragraph 2.1., were simply factual background objectives. The initiation ceremony, the education of the children and the structure of the monastery in general, the history of Sera and SJS, the demography of the whole settlement and Sera and the way the TCV tries to preserve Tibetan culture have extensively been answered in the previous Chapters. Although these subjects do in one way or another influence the rest of the information, given by other respondents, they are simply facts and will thus not be further discussed in this conclusion. Of course I will discuss the more personal subjects (the second group of objectives in paragraph 2.2.) in the parts below.

The central theme in this research and hence this thesis was the life of the children in the monastery and their opinion about that. In the life histories I have demonstrated how the process is for a child when he is to become a monk, what exactly happens before and after his becoming a monk. In this conclusion I will also explain how children exactly feel about all that and thus how the Western opinion about their life is seems not to be correct.

1. Answers to specific objectives

The first of these subjects was “Where the children come from”. From the information in Chapter 8 we have seen that the childmonks mainly come from Tibet, whereas the majority of the lay-children at the TCV were born in India. In paragraph 8.1. I have therefore explained that the Chinese occupation in Tibet and the severe suppression of Tibetan culture there might be of influence to whether the parents decide for one of their children to become a monk. A minority whose culture is being destroyed or oppressed tends to place more importance on the preservation of that culture. One way of doing that is sending one child abroad to one of the refugee camps. However, it may be due to lack of knowledge about the TCV’s or maybe these parents simply want to express their identity in a more ‘extreme’ way that they decide to send their son to a monastery. There he can then study his own language, something that is almost impossible

in Tibet itself, but which is strongly associated with the Tibetan identity. As expressed in table 8.5. Tibet-Tibetan families seem to be larger than Indian-Tibetan families. Connected with the element of tradition it all makes sense. Tibet-Tibetans face the destruction of their culture everyday, and probably live a more traditional life than Indian-Tibetans, who seem to be quite wealthy, in contrary to the Tibet-Tibetans. This emphasis on tradition, if only to bother the Chinese, and the need for many children as an old-age insurance (thus having many children), creates the possibility of sacrificing one child to the religion and let him go abroad in order to preserve the culture and receive good (Tibetan) education. The *tsung gral* system as there used to be in Tibet, does not seem to play a role anymore. Only one third of the childmonks said he had an older brother and these might then be Tibet-Tibetans but also Indian-Tibetans. These Indian-Tibetans then, know that monasteries are not the only institutes anymore for good education and preserving Buddhism. They have seen the TCV's and other Tibetan schools and since they are in more contact with the Western world than the Tibet-Tibetans, they might find modern education and a little religion more important than a strong emphasis on religion, like in the monasteries. Therefore they might prefer to send their children to a regular Tibetan school than to a monastery. I think SJS applies to this need in a very good way. By providing modern education within the monastery, they make the monastery a modern education institute and renew the traditional system.

So, the preservation of Tibetan identity/culture and good education appears to be the most important reasons for sending the child abroad and in this case to a monastery, which at least for the Tibet-Tibetans seems to be the best way of giving their child both. Of course religion is the second very important reason for sending the child to Sera. At SJS children can not only study modern subjects, which are considered to be very important by children and their parents, but also religion, which then seems to be the perfect combination. By spending this life as a monk, a child has a good chance of a better rebirth and so do his parents. So even when the initial reason is the good education, or financial shortcomings religion always is a great factor for these religious people. These financial shortcomings seem to be the main reason for Tibetans in the North Eastern part of India, where living situations are not easy.

When the children then are sent to a monastery by their parents, but always with their own consent, at around the age of 8 to 12, the Tibet-Tibetans have to go through a difficult journey. From the drawings of the children and the group interviews we saw that most of them had to walk across the Himalaya with people who are not their parents. A journey like that, all the dangers it involves, that a child all too well realises, must affect the child in a certain way. How this is, I have not investigated, but knowing that the children will arrive in a *khangtsen* where everyone has the same background must help the children with their psychological luggage. These monks can understand them and help the child. Depending on the character of the *shagen* he will give the child some space, or immediately put it to study. After the initiation the child has to get used to the discipline and life inside the monastery. Being among people

from his own region and being able to speak his own dialect will probably help him to adapt to his new situation.

Besides, monkhood is not totally new to him. In his parental home he has probably met several relatives who are already monks or nuns. By talking and playing with them, maybe even visiting them in their monasteries he has get to know monastic life already a little. But what do the children really think about monastic life? This will be discussed in the last part of this conclusion.

2. The opinion of children

Looking at the information that the children gave me during my fieldwork and the opinions and prejudices that I heard from Westerners, before and during my fieldwork, I think it has become clear that these children are really the only ones who really know and who can really say what it is like to be a monk and if it should change. The Westerners in Sera itself have already changed their opinion (slightly) or at least view it from a different perspective. Although in the West monastic life, or as described in the Theoretical Orientation of Chapter 1 the Catholic Boarding schools, had been more or less abolished because of new ideas about a child's life, the Tibetans do not share that opinion with the Westerners. For Tibetans their religion and their language are the most important elements of their identity and monasteries traditionally are the institutes for that. Like the boys of the Catholic boarding schools, though, childmonks do not like the discipline and this is also what scares off lay-children from becoming a monk or nun. Especially the way in which this discipline is being preserved, mainly by beating, is what children hate most about monks' life (but this might change in the future and the *gegu* already explained that he does not only beat the children but also gives them oral advise). However the freedom of a child, time to play etc., something that has been emphasised a lot in the West, does not seem to be a problem for children. All of them see the educational and religious advantages of monastic life. Some of them actually really wanted to become monks themselves either because they were convinced of the Buddhist relevance of it, or because at home they had seen monks that looked happy, which attracted them.

As a Westerner said: "children adapt easily to new situations" and that is true I think. Most of these children came to the monastery at such a young age and have so rarely contact with their parents that their relationship with their parents totally changes, and they thus not really miss their home. Of course leaving the country and being so far away from all relatives is at first difficult, but for a child it is also exciting and the deep faith these children have in their parents and teachers, makes that they simply respect what is happening and believe in a good ending. So even though it is generally not their own decision to leave their home and become a monk, they do agree with the reasons parents and other relatives give and accept their fate. Though the reasons they would give if another child was to become a monk emphasise different aspects than the parents. Children appear to find education and the money they receive most important.

While talking with the children, they speak openly about the doubts they have about their lives, but they also speak enthusiastically about how they play with their friends and how they like learning English. Their doubts mainly involve their future as monks, since no one knows what will happen then and the openness of the monasteries makes it quite easy to become a lay-person. However since most of the children (especially the Tibet-Tibetan ones) do not have relatives nearby to rely on, it is not easy for them to leave the monastery, where all of their needs are taken care of for free, and start a lay's life. The children realise that and seem to put up with it. One of the reasons of course for sending the child to the monastery at a young age is that they "have not experienced material life yet". One could say, they simply do not know any better yet, so they will simply accept their life the way it comes, they do not really know what they are missing out on and I think that that indeed works quite well. And then, who are we, in the West, to say that it is not fair that these children do not have the same opportunities as lay-children. They simply have different opportunities. For the Tibetans it is very important that religious specialists exist.

The connection with lay-people is so intense that one group could hardly live without the other and children realise that. They already experience that they have a higher status when they visit their families, even though they are still so young. Everyone appreciates the fact that they are in a monastery and of course, for a child, that is very pleasant. Besides, the children realise, coming from their Tibetan culture, that spending one's life as a monk is the best way of spending it and it is not such a difficult life either. All of their needs are being met by the monastery. The food is free, they do not have to do hard labour, they get good education, they can play at certain times and they even get money. They also have a *shagen* who substitutes both parents and a lot of 'brothers' to play with. So what should they miss? Of course there is the beating, which they all hate, but they accept it too, because they are convinced that if a teacher finds it necessary then it must be for the child's own good.

The openness of Sera, tourists coming and going, and the three internetplaces, do not isolate them from the material world, but can actually attract them. Therefore the children remain open to the idea of maybe leaving the monastery one day, but they all wish to stay monks the rest of their lives. I think that that wish most explicitly answers the question of how childmonks think about their life and what the future would be for Tibetan monasteries. If these childmonks say they want to stay monks forever, that confirms the impression they make when I saw them in Sera. They simply like their life there! However, even though lay-children are not completely negative about monastic life, they also do not want to become monks or nuns themselves. Some stimulation from the parents then seems to be quite necessary in order to maintain the supply of new monks to Sera and other monasteries.

Thus since the childmonks are (part of) the future of Tibetan culture and religion, and they are positive about that future, I can say that I think that these monasteries will have some chance of survival for at least some time, but for them to stay forever it is definitely necessary that they are reformed in order to meet the

needs of future monks. I think SJS in Sera Je is a good example of that. This will then not only attract Tibet-Tibetans who want to preserve their religions and culture in a free and traditional way, but also the Indian-Tibetans (who's number still increase) who want to have good Tibetan education in combination with religion. The preservation of Tibetan culture and identity in the way of the monasteries will then remain a very important and popular one, at least as long as it is being oppressed in their own country. Besides, as one of the children said: "Monks need a place to live, right?"

3. Recommendations for further research

Since my fieldwork could only focus on the monks, it would be very interesting to compare my data with information that is collected among nuns. In the literature it seemed that nuns, in contrary to monks, more often decide for themselves to join the monastery, in order to escape the obligations they would have as a lay-woman. During 4 interviews I did with (child-)nuns it became clear too that nuns have a very low self-esteem. They consider themselves much lower than monks and do not think that they can ever really achieve equally important positions. I think it would be interesting to know where they get that idea and what could or is being done to take that view away. In such a research, again of course, the childnuns in this case, should not be left out!

Some childmonks I interviewed became a monk because they had certain expectations about monastic life. These expectations were created during their lives as a lay-person, but did not always come true. I think it would be very interesting to compare the views lay-people have about monks' life with reality, the real monks' life. The same goes for the expectations or ideas lay-children have of course. I have already paid some attention to this, by asking the TCV-children about their ideas of monastic life, but even only this subject could very well be the subject of a next research.

From the above written conclusion it becomes clear that there is a difference in the way Tibet-Tibetans and Indian-Tibetans try to preserve their culture. This difference needs to be studied in order to understand the situation in which the Tibetans nowadays live. While travelling through India, Nepal and Tibet, not only the difference between the settlements became clear, but it was also striking to see how different the Tibet-Tibetans were from the Indian/Nepalese-Tibetans. With the idea of a Free Tibet, these people would have to live together again in the future, but I am wondering how that will work, since both groups are clearly living in a different way. Part of this research could then be aimed at how the children then take over these ideas of the adults. And what is the idea of the Indian-Tibetan-children about their motherland Tibet? What do they think about that and how do they feel while thinking about Tibet?

One thing that I hope has become very clear from all this is that children, just like women in traditional Anthropological research should not be left out, because only by including them the whole culture can be studied.

A1. General field-experience

Working as an anthropologist in the field is, at first, a very lonely job. Nevertheless, being able to live among almost 5000 monks, joining the most special puja's, looking around in the homes of Tibetans and being welcomed by them with endless cups of buttertea makes it the most wonderful job there is too!!

In the beginning of my fieldwork I totally devoted myself to my research. The first day I was in Sera I did my first interview and the days after I did as many as 3 interviews a day. This was all I could do, because since the school was closed (there was a special teaching by the Dalai Lama, to which a lot of monks attended and because of this the school had taken its summer holiday), there was not much to observe. But, even though I could not do my research in exactly the way I had planned it to do, in the end it only turned out to be an advantage, because the children and older monks now had more time for my interviews. Also Nyima, my interpreter, who is actually a teacher at the school, now spent all of his holiday working with me.

Because of the permission I had of the principal of SJS I had a good reference to approach the monks for my research. Nevertheless there was only one monk who refused being interviewed, because he had had a bad experience with a Westerner doing interviews and taking pictures, which were later published in a very negative way. Tibetans in general are at first very much afraid that the researcher, or any person who asks questions is a Chinese spy.

Tibetan monasteries and temples are very open places. Tourists and other visitors are always welcome to attend any kind of puja. I was even invited to attend a Long Life Puja, which is being held only once in several years for an old, but special, *rinpoche*, in order to wish him a long life, or to ask him to come back as a teacher, to continue teaching his students. Nevertheless I was not allowed to attend an initiation-ceremony, because I am not initiated myself. Fortunately I found two senior monks who could tell me all about it.

A2. Being a woman amongst monks

Before I came to Sera I had asked permission for my research to the principal of SJS. In this letter and several emails after that I emphasized that I am a woman, I even included a picture in the letter. He said it was absolutely no problem. They were actually happy about my "work for the Tibetan case" and he was mainly interested in my enthusiasm about Tibetan culture. I should, though, be serious about my work, because they had had some bad experience with Western women before. So, before I arrived to Sera, Nyima sent me a booklet with information about Sera, among other subjects was "Rules". In this list Westerners were asked to behave in a proper way, in order not to distract the monks from acting out their

discipline. We were not allowed to drink alcohol or smoke within the compounds of the monastery. We should be properly dressed etc. As a woman there were the extra rules that we can not invite monks into our rooms, and we should avoid any physical contact with the monks, because that would compromise the vows of the monks. Nevertheless, when I arrived in Sera I was welcomed by the principal who immediately shook hands with me. No Tibetan greeting, but a Western welcome. And this was the general impression I got from the monks. All of them are so used to Westerners, Sera has three guesthouses for tourists and they all know or even have sponsors, that they totally adapt to our habits. Of course I never invited any of the monks into my room, to avoid a bad reputation or gossip, but monks simply walked into my room out of curiosity and they invited me into their rooms for interviews. In short, there was absolutely no hindrance of my being a woman in acting out this fieldwork in the way it should be. The only thing that might have been better, but I could have had that as a woman as well (I saw Western female sponsors doing it) would have been if I had lived in a monks' house. This would have been easier to achieve for a man than for a woman.

A3. Working with an interpreter

As said, Nyima was a teacher at SJS. He was a young man and lay, which I preferred. The fact that he was young, made the gap between us and the children smaller and the fact that he was a lay-teacher, still gave him some sort of authority, but children knew they would not have to give socially-desired answers. Besides this he knew all the children and most of their parents or backgrounds. This made it easy for me to find the right respondents. At first he mostly took me to children of Tehor-*khangtsen*, because he is from that area himself and he knows most of the people there better than in any other *khangtsen*. So working with him from this point of view was a big advantage and I would not have been able to get all the information I wanted right from the beginning of my fieldwork if he had not offered to translate for me.

Nevertheless, it was MY research not his and this sometimes gave discussions. I, purposely, had left my questions very open, in order to let the children to their own talking. But, not being used to this technique, when a child had to think too long about an answer, Nyima started giving options, he made the question a multiple-choice one. So sometimes a child would only nod and then Nyima would come up with a translation of 2 minutes, telling what the child had said, when the child had actually said nothing. Of course we talked about this and once he started to get more involved in the research, he also started to develop his own curiosity about my subject and we totally complemented each other.

A4. Involving children in research

Working with the children was simply wonderful and very useful. Since, besides my study, I work at a kindergarten I have experience in how to approach children and reading their behavior. To my opinion

children are generally the same all over the world, so this experience also helped me in the field. I do not understand Tibetan totally, so I had to read the children's body-gestures to know if they were talking honestly or if they were comfortable. To get the answers I wanted we sometimes had to move from one place to another, to create a more peaceful, private atmosphere, away from teachers or other audience.

Probably being pressured a little by Nyima's presence (their teacher, who not only knows them as students but also as the naughty little boys) they honestly gave me their answers and explained their experiences. Most of them started very shy, but ended up telling me great stories and opinions.

Also with the classes of SJS and the TCV, I only encountered enthusiasm and curiosity about what this *inji*¹ wanted to know and why she was living there for 3 months! In the classes, sometimes, I could even speak English with them directly², and as shy as they were, they still came up with useful answers.

My most impressive experience was during the interviews with the classes of the TCV. One of my questions was: "Who is the most important person in your life". Since they all live apart from their parents, the answer could have been their home-mother in the TCV, one of their friends, but even the Buddha. Nevertheless all children called out at the same time: "Dalai Lama". At that point I realised how much being Tibetan in exile still means for them and how seriously they deal with preserving their culture. This only confirmed my idea that it is not only preferable but simply necessary to involve children in anthropological research because they are indeed the future of their culture!

A5. Losar

One of the reasons for the school holiday was *Losar*, Tibetan new year. This took place at the beginning of March and two weeks before and after. During this time the monks are allowed to do things they are never allowed to do. They could listen to the radio all day (not only the evening news), they went shopping to buy some new shoes etc. There were even real parties in Sera. Monks doing playback-shows, or performing traditional dances. All of this showed me another side of monkhood, which took away my idealistic view on monks even more. In this period it became clear that monks are just men who also like to party and partying with monks was actually quite nice!

¹ *Inji* comes from the Tibetan word for English (as a language) and is generally used to call Westerners

² I found it a big obstacle that I could not communicate with the children directly (in Tibetan). That might have added even more anonymity, privacy and trust to the interviews.

B1. Individual childmonksGeneral background-information

- A. How old are you?
- B. Do you have any siblings?
- C. Where do you come from?
- D. In which *khangtsen* are you?
- E. Where do you parents live?
- F. Who is your *shagen*?

I Age of entry to the monastery

- 1. a) At what age did you enter the monastery?
 - b) Why at that age?
 - c) Did you think that was a good age, or was it too young/old?
- 2. a) Do you think it is important that a child goes into the monastery at a young age?
 - b) What do you think is the best age?
 - c) Why?
- 3. a) What do you think about the fact that the Chinese government has decided to let children only join the monastery after the age of 18?
 - b) Why do you think that?

II Process of entry

- 1. Did you want to go to the monastery or did your parents tell you to go?
- 2. Who had the final decision in you joining the monastery? (parents, child, *lama* or relative?)
- 3. What were the reasons that you went to Sera?
- 4. Why did you go to Sera specifically and not to Drepung, Ganden or any other monastery?
- 5. If you had to send another child to a monastery what reasons would you give to convince him?
- 6. When was the initiation-ceremony?
- 7. Who took you to the abbot?
- 8. What exactly happened?

III Monastic life

- 1. In what class are you now?
- 2. What tasks do you have? What do you have to do in the monastery?
- 3. What is your day like? (What do you study and where, how and when? Do you have time to play?)
- 4. Do you like living in the monastery? Or would you rather go to a normal school?

5. What do you like most about life here in Sera?
6. What do you like least about life in Sera?
7. Do you feel like a real monk?
8. Do you only have monk-friends or also lay-friends?
9. Do you want to stay in the monastery forever?

IV The family

1. a) Do you see your family or any other relatives often?
b) If you see them, when is that? Where? And who exactly do you meet?
2. Would you like to see them more often?
3. In case the parents live far away:
 - a) Do you still have contact with your parents?
 - b) What kind of contact? (telephone/letters etc)

V Identity-question

1. Have you ever been in Tibet?
2. Do you feel like a Tibetan?
3. Do you think it is important that you get Tibetan education?
4. Do you think it is important that there are monasteries?

B2. The *shagens*

I General information

1. How old are you?
2. How old were you when you became a monk?
3. Where do you come from? (So what is your *khangtsen*?)
4. Why did you join the monastery?
5. Is monastic life what you expected it to be?
6. At what age/class did you start taking care of children?
7. How many children do you take care of?
8. What is their average age now?
9. How did you get those children?
10. Do you accept all children that are appointed to you?
11. What is it exactly you do for the children?
12. Do you feel like a father to them?
13. Do you have any *tulkus* as students? (If so, do you treat them any different than the other students?)

14. When you get new/young students, do they immediately start working studying as hard as the rest or is it built up slowly?

II About his students

1. Why did the children you look after, in general, join the monastery?
2. At what age did they join? (Do you think that is a good age?)
3. Why did your children come to Sera specifically?
4. Do you think that your students like their lives as monks?
5. If you see that one of your students does not like his life here, what do you do?
6. Do you think it is important a child-monk feels happy about his life?

III About one specific child

1. How did(name) get introduced to the abbot?
2. How did the initiation-ceremony go?
3. Was there any offering of the family?
4. Did you speak with the family when the child was to become a monk?
5. What reasons did they have to send him here?
6. Did(name) seem happy with this decision?

IV About being a *shagen*

1. What is the most important element of the education you provide?
2. Do you like being a *shagen*?
3. Do you think it is an important job?
4. Why?

B3. The parents

I Age of entry

1. Why did your son go to the monastery at that specific age?
2. Do you think it is important that a child goes to the monastery at a young age?
3. Why?
4. What do you think is the best age?
5. What do you think about the fact that the Chinese government has decided to let children only join the monastery after the age of 18?

II Process of entry

1. Was there a *lama* present at/before the birth of your son?
2. Who gave the child his name?
3. Who decided that the boy should become a monk?

4. What reasons were there to let him join the monastery?
5. Why did exactly this child become a monk?
6. Do you think it is important for a child to be a monk and receive that specific education in the monastery?
7. Do you think it is important that the child receives Tibetan education in general?
8. What do you expect of your child?
9. Why did you not ever join the monastery/nunnery?
10. How was the introduction of the child in the monastery?
11. What was your role in his initiation?

III The family

1. How often do you see your child? (where and when)
2. Is the family involved in the raising of the child?
3. Do you see your child as a child or as a little adult? (at what age is your child an adult?)

IV Identity-question

1. Are the monasteries important for the future of Tibet and its culture and religion?
2. Why?
3. Is it important that the Tibetan culture remains this way (with the monasteries) or can it also be preserved in a different way?
4. How important is the Tibetan education for children in exile?
5. Why do you think monastic education is better than a normal school? Do you think that at all?
6. How do you think about the future of Tibet? (Will it be free? And if so, will it be the same as before?)

Observation:

1. Are there any Buddha-statues, pictures of the Dalai Lama or other signs of religiosity?
2. How are the living conditions? Do the people seem poor or wealthy?

B4. Senior monks

Backgroundinformation

1. At what age did you become a monk?
2. a) What function do you have in the monastery?
b) Which vows have you taken so far?
3. Do you have any brothers/sisters?
4. Where do you come from? (Any monasteries before Sera?)
5. Is monastic life what you expected it to be?

Besides the questions I have given other 4 classes drawing assignments. These assignments were:

Class II: Draw yourself and the thing you like most about living in the monastery

Class IV: Draw yourself and how you will be in 20 years (Where, what do you do, etc)

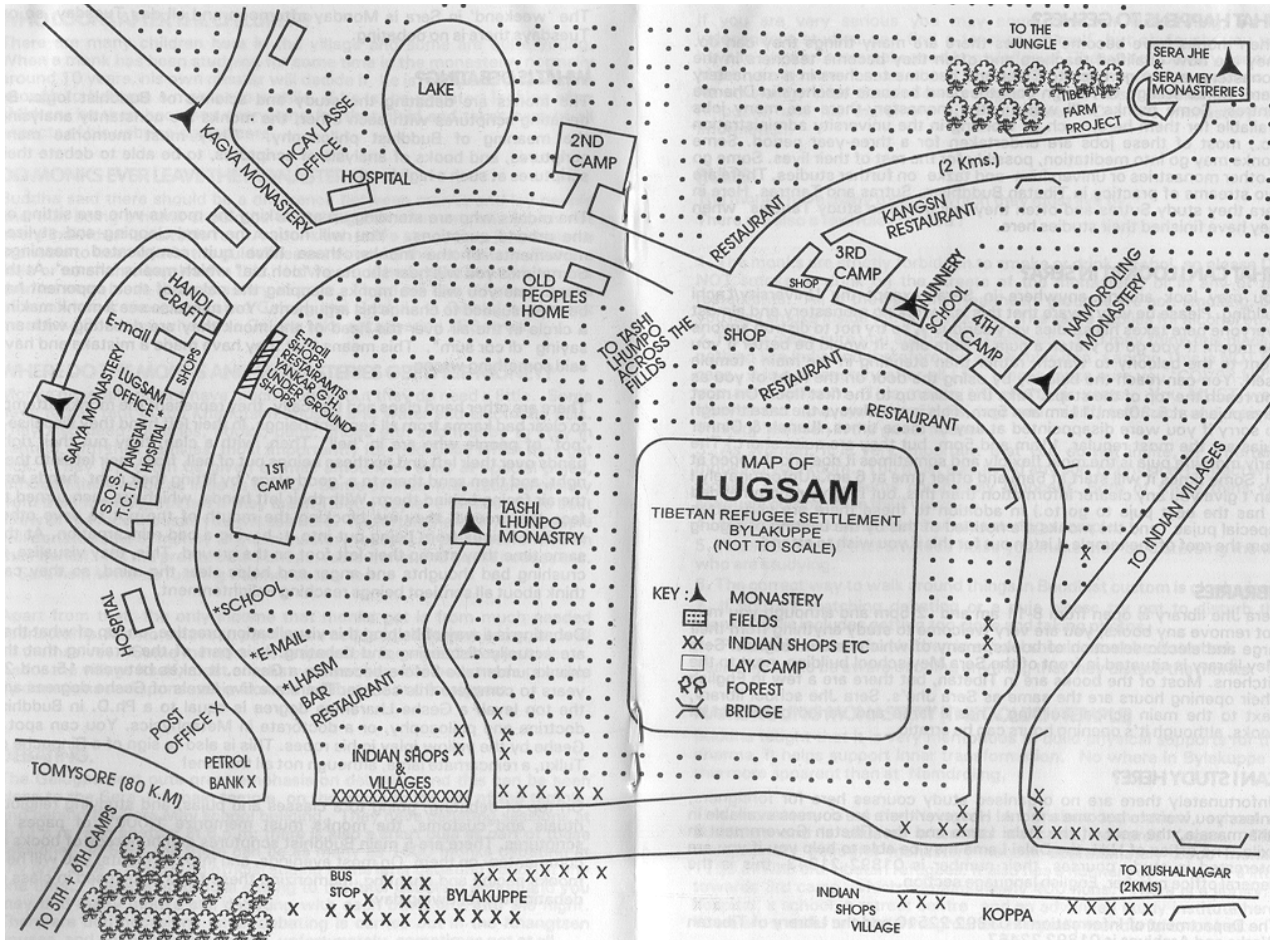
Class VI: Draw yourself and the thing you like least about living in the monastery

Class VIII: Draw yourself on your way to Sera (how was your journey and with whom etc.)

B6. TCV group

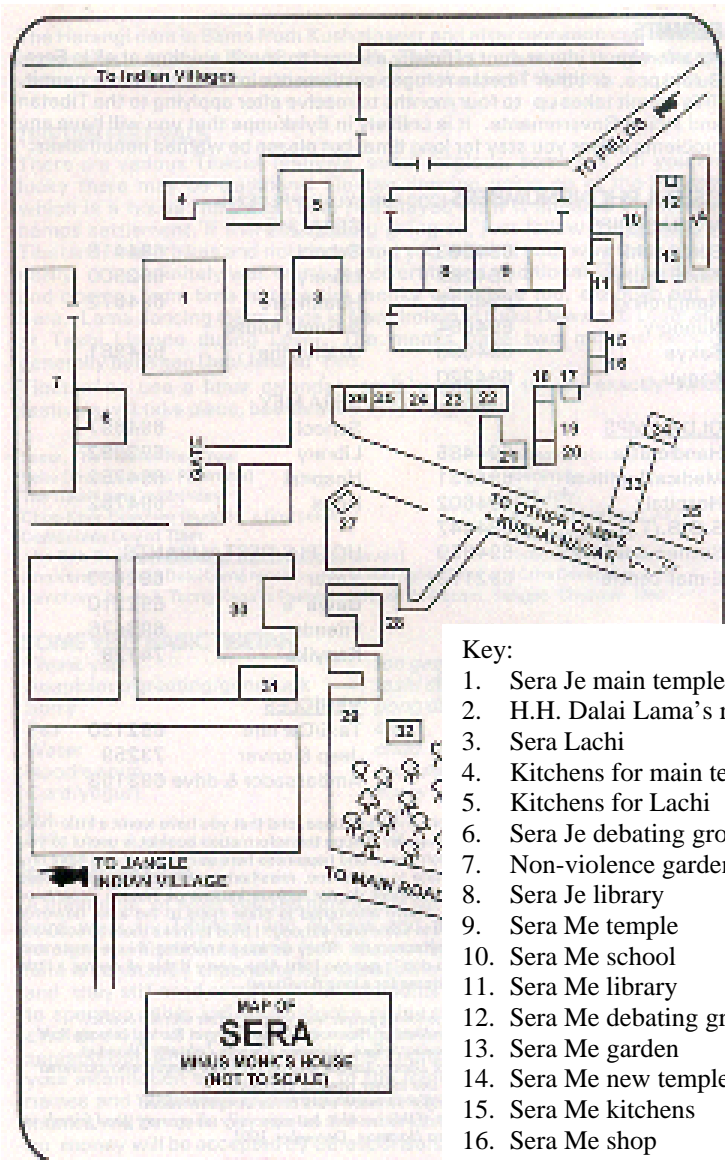
1. Class
2. Number of children: a) boys b) girls
3. Average age (and youngest and oldest)
4. Country of birth: a) Tibet b) India c) Other
5. Where do your parents live? a) Tibet b) India c) Other
6. How old were you when you came to the TCV? a) <6 b) 7-12 c) >13
7. How many siblings do you have? a) 1 b) 2 c) 3 d) >4
8. How many of your relatives are in monasteries or nunneries? a) 0 b) 1 c) 2 d) 3 e) >4
9. Would you want to be in a monastery or nunnery? Boys: a) Yes b) No
Girls: a) Yes b) No
10. Why? Yes, because...
 No, because...
11. What do you think about the fact that children of your age are in a monastery or nunnery?
a) Good, because... b) Bad, because...
12. So you think your school is better than monastery-schools? a) Yes, because... b) No, because...
13. What is good/bad about being in a monastery as a child? a) Good: b) Bad:
14. Who is the most important person in your life?

Map C1. Tibetan Settlement of Bylakuppe



Source: Hartman, 1999

Map C2. Sera Monastery



Key:

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| 1. Sera Je main temple | 19. HCC shop and vegetable stall |
| 2. H.H. Dalai Lama's residence | 20. HCC hospital and dispensary |
| 3. Sera Lachi | 21. HCC guesthouse and restaurant |
| 4. Kitchens for main temple | 22. Sera Je restaurant |
| 5. Kitchens for Lachi | 23. Shops |
| 6. Sera Je debating ground | 24. Norling restaurant |
| 7. Non-violence garden | 25. Sera Me STD |
| 8. Sera Je library | 26. Rickshaw stand |
| 9. Sera Me temple | 27. STD |
| 10. Sera Me school | 28. Siddharta guesthouse, restaurant |
| 11. Sera Me library | 29. Sera Je carpet factory |
| 12. Sera Me debating ground | 30. Sera Je Secondary School |
| 13. Sera Me garden | 31. Sera Je school library and kitchens |
| 14. Sera Me new temple | 32. Sera Je school hall |
| 15. Sera Me kitchens | 33. Sera Me gueshouse and restaurant |
| 16. Sera Me shop | 34. Sera Me medical centre |
| 17. Lachi restaurant | 35. Sera Me carpet factory |
| 18. Sera Je Health Care Committee | |

Source: Hartman, 1999

Note to the source: All pictures displayed in this Appendix belong to my own collection

Fig. D1. The old Sera Je temple near Lhasa



Fig. D2. The old prayer hall in Sera near Lhasa



Fig. D3. A view of Sera, Bylakuppe



At the horizon there are 3 larger buildings. From left to right these are Sera Je temple, Sera Mahayana university and Sera Me temple.

At the bottom there is a monks' house of one of the *khangtsens*.

Fig. D4. Sera Je temple, Bylakuppe



Fig. D5. and D6. Two streets in Sera monastery, Bylakuppe



Fig. D7. The prayer hall of Sera Mahayana University (Sera Lachi)



E1. List of *khangtsens* and their region

1. Dema Khangtsen		Gaba; Rega; Zaba; Taango; Tao; Daya; Dakpo
2. Dakpo	„	Dakpo
3. Drati	„	Domo; Phare; Moemba (Arunachal Pradesh) and Sikkim
4. Gomde	„	Nangchen
5. Harmdong	„	Lhasa; Nomad; Mongolia
6. Jadel	„	Sechu; Khana; Kargue; Shuma; Boomne; Boomsha; Thashu
7. Lawa	„	Kontse Raba; Gyueba
8. Lhopa	„	Chamdo
9. Ngari	„	Thoepa; Ladakh
10. Samlho	„	Amdo; Mongolia
11. Teho	„	Khaantse; Dhergey; Zaba; Taango; Tao; Daya
12. Tsangpa	„	Shigatse; Lhatse; Jiangtse
13. Tsawa	„	Tsa-rongpa
14. Tsethang	„	Tsethang
15. Sera IMI		International monks (Westerners)

Source: Administration of Sera Je University

Table F1. Courses and subjects at Sera Je University

Stage	Path to...	Equivalent Degree	Course	Subject	Duration (years)
1			Dus-chung	Basic Dialectics I	1
2			Dus-ding	Basic Dialectics II	1
3			Dus-chen	Basic Dialectics III	1
4			Shung-sar	Higher Dialectics I	1
5			Shung-nying	Higher Dialectics II	1
6			Sur-sar	Basic Philosophy I	1
7			Sur-nying	Basic Philosophy II	1
8		Sr. Secondary school	Phar-chin	Advanced Philosophy I	2
9		BA	Uma-sarpa	Advanced Philosophy II	2
		BA	Uma-nyingpa	Advanced Philosophy III	2
10		MA	Dulwa Sarpa	Advanced Philosophy IV	2
10		MA	Dulwa nyingpa	Advanced Philosophy V	2
11		MA	Zod sarpa	Advanced Philosophy VII	2
11		MA	Zod nyingpa	Advanced Philosophy VIII	2
12		MA	Karam	Advanced Philosophy final	
13	Geshe	Master in Philosophy	All above	Entire	
14	Lharam Geshe	PhD	All above Zod & Dulwa	Entire	Min. 6

Source: Administration of Sera Je monastery

Note to the source: All pictures displayed in this Appendix belong to my own collection

Figure G1: Reciting monks at Tsawa-khangtsen



Figure G2: Monks lining up in front of SJS



Figure G3: Childmonk serving tea to participants at the puja



Figure G4: Childmonk sleeping at puja

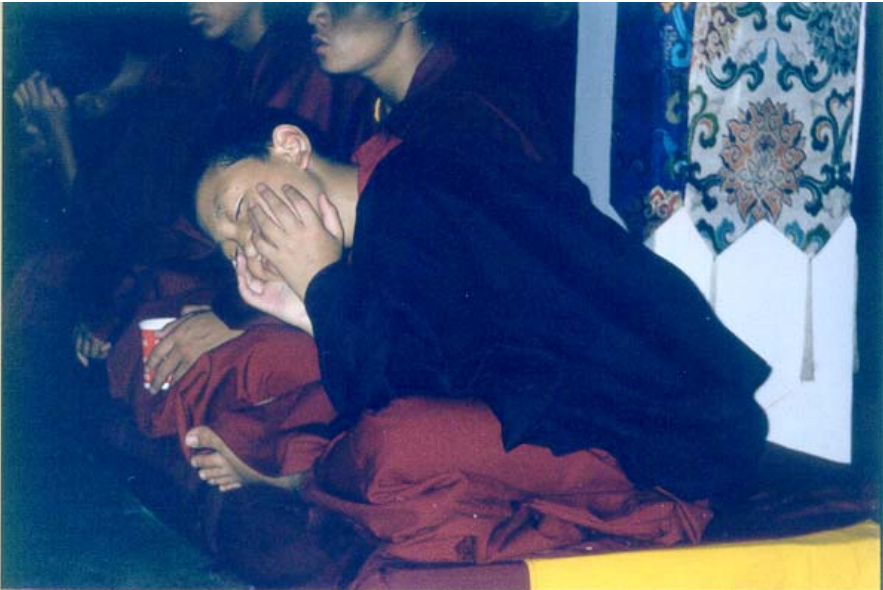


Figure G5: Childmonks and lay-children playing with the fire



Figure G6: Monk and his niece



Glossary

Abbreviations: T = Tibetan P = Pali S = Sanskrit

<i>Ama(la)</i> (T)	Mother
<i>Bhikku</i> (P)	Monk
<i>Bhikkuni</i> (P)	Nun
<i>Bodhisattva</i>	Person who postpones his own enlightenment to help others to reach enlightenment too
<i>Chorten</i> (T)	Stupa (S), monument in which relics or sacred objects or texts are being kept
<i>Chuba</i> (T)	Traditional Tibetan dress
<i>Dharma</i> (S)	Teachings of the Buddha
<i>Drapa</i> (T)	Monk
<i>Dulwa</i> (T)	Vinaya (S) section of the Kangyur (that lists monastic rules of conduct)
<i>Gegu</i> (T)	Disciplinary monk; disciplinarian
<i>Gelong</i> (T)	Monk who has taken the highest monastic vows (253)
<i>Gelug(pa)</i> (T)	“Yellow Hat-sect”, most scholastic of the 4 Tibetan Buddhist traditions
<i>Genen</i> (T)	Monastic level based on the same vows as taken by laymen
<i>Geshe</i> (T)	Degree given to monks who have finished higher university studies (comparable to PhD)
<i>Getsul</i> (T)	Monk with novice vows
<i>Kashag</i> (T)	Tibetan government in exile
<i>Karma</i> (S)	“Deed”, the cause of rebirth
<i>Khangtsen</i> (T)	Monks’ house connected to a region in Tibet
<i>Khatag</i> (T)	Ceremonial scarf
<i>Khenpo</i> (T)	Abbot
<i>Khora</i> (T)	Rounds that people walk on a path around a religious place
<i>Kuner</i> (T)	Attendant and person in charge of the assembly hall
<i>Labrang</i> (T)	House of a <i>rinpoche</i>
<i>Lama</i> (T)	Religious teacher; guru
<i>Lobpon</i> (T)	Teacher

<i>Losar</i> (T)	Tibetan New Year
<i>Mala</i>	Rosary
<i>Nerpa</i> (T)	Monk in charge of the purchases for the monastery
<i>Nyikha gi dagyul</i> (T)	Nearby initiation (for Tibetan lay-people from India, Nepal and Bhutan)
<i>Nyingma(pa)</i> (T)	(old) Tradition of Tibetan Buddhism that bases itself on the first texts that arrived in Tibet
<i>Potala</i> (T)	Winter residence of the Dalai Lama in Lhasa, Tibet
<i>Pratimoksa</i> (S)	Confession
<i>Pravrajya</i> (S)	Wandering forth
<i>Puja</i> (S)	Worship
<i>Rigchun</i> (T)	Early stage in monkhood
<i>Rinpoche</i> (T)	High <i>lama</i>
<i>Samsara</i> (S)	Cycle of rebirth
<i>Sangha</i> (S)	Group of devotees of the <i>Dharma</i>
<i>Shagen</i> (T)	Home teacher of a monk
<i>Tantra</i> (S)	Practice that focuses on deeds that are actually forbidden in order to attain enlightenment quicker
<i>Thak rin gi dagyul</i> (T)	Far away initiation (for lay-people and monks from Tibet)
<i>Tsung gral</i> (T)	System of monk-tax
<i>Tulku</i> (T)	Reincarnate <i>lama</i>
<i>Umze</i> (T)	Chantmaster
<i>Vinaya</i> (S)	See <i>Dulwa</i>

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