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Academic Degrees for Monks: Sera Je and the Challenges of Integrating Tibetan Buddhist Monastic Education into the Indian University System

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Abstract: Although there have been concerted efforts to integrate Tibetan Buddhist monastic education into the Indian university system since the 1960s, the attainment of academic accreditation has tended to require significant curricular trade-offs. The majority of Tibetan Buddhist monastic colleges have therefore eschewed the potential advantages of academic accreditation—including greater opportunities for monastic graduates in universities and other secular contexts—in order to preserve the rigour of traditional scholastic programmes. However, through its affiliation to the University of Mysore in 2022, the Geluk monastery of Sera Je is now able to award accredited Bachelor of Arts (BA) degrees even without making significant changes in practice to its traditional curriculum and pedagogy. This article examines the structure and content of Sera Je's new programmes and contextualises what may prove to be a landmark development against the backdrop of previous attempts to negotiate the boundary between Tibetan Buddhist monastic education and university education in India. It suggests that the accreditation of research programmes raises further challenges in addition to those associated with the accreditation of taught programmes. Nonetheless, the urgency of solving these longstanding issues appears to have been heightened by a developing crisis in Tibetan Buddhist monastic recruitment. In investigating the topic of academic accreditation, this article throws light on an issue that has driven notable evolutions in Tibetan Buddhist monastic education in India but has previously received little scholarly attention.

Keywords: Tibetan Buddhism; monastic education; curriculum; academic accreditation; university affiliation

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1. Introduction

In October 2022, the re-established Geluk monastery of Sera Je (Se ra byes),[1] which is located in the Tibetan settlement of Bylakuppe, in Karnataka State in south India, officially launched three Bachelor of Arts (BA) programmes accredited by the nearby University of Mysore.[2] This constituted a notable development not only for Sera Je but also for the wider Tibetan Buddhist monastic educational community in India, which, given the political restrictions inside the People's Republic of China, is arguably the most important country for Tibetan Buddhist monastic education in the world today.

Tibetan Buddhist monastics have been awarded a variety of titles throughout history upon completion of traditional programmes of study, including but not limited to the various levels of *geshe* (*dge bshes*) (Tulku 2000, p. 18ff). However, in the decades since the Dalai Lama fled into exile in India in 1959, these traditional titles and programmes have never been directly granted academic accreditation in that country. The small number of Tibetan Buddhist monastic educational programmes that were successfully integrated into the Indian higher education system prior to the BA programmes at Sera Je were required to diverge in significant respects from traditional curricular models in order to receive accreditation. The majority of Tibetan Buddhist monastic leaders have tended to reject such trade-offs, preferring to forego the potential advantages of academic accreditation rather than to compromise on the rigour and focus of traditional approaches to study. The very

fact that such a dilemma exists has been a cause of considerable frustration in the Tibetan Buddhist milieu in India for decades.

As will be explained below, the creation of Sera Je's new BA programmes does not mean that those who complete the traditional Geluk curriculum and attain the title of *geshe* will automatically receive academic degrees. It remains the case that traditional monastic titles and programmes cannot be directly accredited in India. Indeed, on paper, it might seem that Sera Je has had to accept similar trade-offs to those faced by previous institutions in order to attain accreditation. However, in practice, and in no small part due to the bureaucratic imagination of those who designed the bespoke arrangements, the monks enrolled in Sera Je's BA programmes will in fact receive accredited academic degrees for studying sections of largely the same traditional programme as their forebears, with only relatively minor adaptations. While this statement might seem nuanced and caveated, it should not detract from what is an unprecedented development. Further adding to its significance is the fact that Sera Je is the largest and most historically prestigious monastery to have achieved affiliation to a university in India. It is therefore possible that Sera Je will serve as a trailblazer for an approach that may be popularised in the years ahead.

The challenges involved in gaining accreditation for Tibetan Buddhist monastic education in India have not received much attention in the existing academic literature. This is something of an omission given that the issues have been debated within the Tibetan Buddhist community in India since the early 1960s. Among academically published journal articles and books, the circumstances surrounding the foundation of the Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies, tracing back to the refugee camp of Buxa, are discussed by Brentano (2018). However, there has been limited discussion of the accreditation of other Tibetan Buddhist institutions, with an unpublished PhD dissertation by Ström (2001), based on fieldwork in the early 1990s, being one of the few works to touch upon some of the relevant issues.

However, this article's subject matter should also be understood as connecting to a broader field of study: how traditional Tibetan Buddhist educational models have been adapted in India since 1959 in order to incorporate aspects of modern learning or in order to engage new audiences. Topics within this wider area have received more extensive academic treatment. To give some examples, Pearcey (2015) has examined how the *shedra* (*bshad grwa*; "commentarial school") of the Nyingma monastery of Namdroling (Rnam grol gling), in Bylakuppe, balances traditional elements and recent adaptations in its curriculum. The likes of Sonam (2019) and Worthman et al. (2021) have discussed the introduction of science education at Geluk monasteries. Schneider (2022) has investigated the award of the *geshema* (*dge bshes ma*) title to Geluk nuns. Even though this article does not engage with those various developments directly, the specific reforms that it analyses should be understood as implicitly linking to them and complementing them. This is because a shared context underpins all of these changes: the encounter with an initially unfamiliar outside world forced upon traditional Tibetan Buddhism by the Chinese annexation of Tibet.

Finally, Sera Je itself has been addressed in several publications. Notably, its history from its foundation up to the present day has been studied in detail by Cabezón and Dorjee (2019) as part of their comprehensive work on Sera as a whole, which is one of the "three seats" (*gdan sa gsum*) of the Geluk order, and which comprises the monasteries of Sera Je and Sera Me (Se ra smad). The traditional system of education followed in the Geluk order—including at Sera Je—has been presented by Dreyfus (2003) in his seminal work on Tibetan Buddhist monastic education. Moreover, Sera Je has been examined in a number of anthropological studies, including a book by Lempert (2012). This article draws upon and supplements this previous research.

After a brief discussion of methods, sources and definitions, this article's first substantive section will describe how Sera Je's new BA programmes are structured and will explain how monastics can attain academic degrees while still focusing primarily on their traditional programme of study. In its following section, which constitutes an extended discussion in four parts, Sera Je's affiliation to the University of Mysore will be situated

within the longer historical context of Tibetan Buddhist institutions in India exploring university affiliation and either accepting or rejecting the trade-offs required. The first part will investigate why Tibetan Buddhist monastic education cannot be directly accredited in India and will suggest that the obstacles are often as much bureaucratic as ideological. The second part will examine the specific curricular changes required to affiliate to the Sampurnanand Sanskrit University, which was the only Indian university prior to the University of Mysore to have accredited Tibetan Buddhist monastic educational programmes.[3] The third part will discuss why the majority of monastic leaders have opted against making those compromises. Emphasis will be placed on how important the preservation of tradition is to the identity of Tibetan Buddhist monasteries. The fourth part will then consider the perceived advantages of accreditation. It will observe that the possession of accredited degrees could allow monks to move more easily outside of Tibetan Buddhist institutions and communities, including in academia. While the extent of these advantages remains contested, it appears that a worrying recent decline in monastic recruitment may have leant greater impetus to those who advocate for modernising reforms. In its final substantive section, this paper will argue that, in principle, Sera Je should be able to achieve accreditation for taught MA programmes as well. However, it will suggest that the accreditation of PhD research programmes raises an additional set of difficulties. These are due to obstacles raised by universities but also, significantly, by monasteries themselves.

2. Methods, Sources and Definitions

This article is based on material that is not always publicly available. Pedagogical documents outlining the likes of the curriculum and the examination structure at particular Tibetan Buddhist institutions can occasionally be found on official websites. However, such documents usually only exist in hard-copy form and are not widely shared beyond the confines of the institutions to which they pertain. Likewise, information relating to the history or mission of particular institutions is sometimes partially available on websites or in formally published books, but is usually only found in unofficial publications, such as pamphlets circulated within the institutions themselves.[4] Moreover, the internal discourse that shapes decisions within any given monastic institution is often not recorded in any written form whatsoever, and can only be understood through ethnographic research and interviews with relevant parties. Most of the materials for this article were therefore gathered during fieldwork in India in July and August 2022, and in June 2023. During that time, I visited over a dozen Tibetan Buddhist institutions in India, several of which were affiliated to a university or had investigated the possibility of such affiliation. These included monasteries or nunneries belonging to each of the four major Tibetan Buddhist orders, as well as institutions with no sectarian identity. While there, I gathered pedagogical documents and other pamphlets written in both Tibetan and English. I also conducted interviews with senior figures at each institution. These interviewees were people with direct knowledge of the matters under consideration and were thus able to speak authoritatively on them. Most of the interviews were conducted in English. However, in a small number of cases, the primary interviewee spoke in Tibetan and a second person—often another monk from the same monastery—translated into English. Many interviewees gave consent to be quoted by name, but a small number preferred to remain anonymous.

Since this paper examines how programmes of Tibetan Buddhist monastic education can be accredited by Indian universities, the references of both the former and the latter must be clarified. Beginning with the latter, it should be noted that the Indian higher education system is not identical to that in other countries. For example, it includes "Deemed Universities", which lack a clear international parallel, and "Sanskrit Universities", which award degrees that are formally recognised as BAs and MAs but have the traditional Sanskrit names of Shastri and Acharya, respectively. In this article, however, these complexities will not be parsed, and the assumption will be made that Indian universities—taken to be those institutions recognised as such by the University Grants Commission of the Indian Ministry of Education and accredited by the National Assessment and Accreditation

Council—constitute a coherent set of institutions that uphold shared academic values and standards, which in turn accord with international academic values and standards.[5]

As for "Tibetan Buddhist monastic education", Dreyfus (2003) has provided the most comprehensive treatment of this as it existed inside of Tibet before 1959 and as it continues to be preserved in certain institutions, such as Sera Je, to this day. This can be termed its "traditional" form and contrasted with its "modern" aspects, understood to be the adaptations to that traditional form introduced after 1959. This division into the traditional and the modern is a framing that is often employed by Tibetan Buddhist monastics themselves, and indeed by Tibetans in exile in general (Ström 1997, pp. 34–40). Given their widespread usage, these terms will therefore be frequently employed in this article. However, it should be noted that many scholars take care to problematise those terms and to avoid prejudicial connotations. Dreyfus himself (Dreyfus 2003, p. 9) cautions against conceiving of "traditional religious learning" as "something residual, an outdated leftover to be superseded as the world is inevitably secularized and modernized".

Dreyfus (2003, pp. 10–13), like many other authors, treats traditional Tibetan Buddhist monastic education as a form of "scholasticism". In the extended second section of his work (Dreyfus 2003, pp. 79–291), he explains that it is characterised by a number of standard features. Even if supplemented by other topics, including tantric texts, the basis of study is a common corpus of exoteric Indian root treatises (*bstan bcos*), which are often categorised into the Five Major Topics (*bka' pod lnga*) of Vinaya (*'dul ba*), Pramāṇa (*tshad ma*), Abhidharma (*chos mngon pa*), Madhyamaka (*dbu ma*), and Prajñāpāramitā (*phar phyin*). These are interpreted, in turn, through further layers of both Indian and Tibetan commentaries (*'grel ba*). A common set of pedagogical methods tends to be employed, among which he draws particular attention to the role of memorisation, commentarial exposition and debate.[6] That is not to deny variety within this general framework. Dreyfus (2003, p. 111ff) highlights, for example, that some institutions have tended to emphasise debate as the major pedagogy, while others have emphasised commentarial exposition. Moreover, the precise choice of commentaries studied often differs from one Tibetan Buddhist order to another, or even from one monastery to another within the same order.

A large number of Tibetan Buddhist institutions offering monastic educational programmes have been established or re-established in India since the fourteenth Dalai Lama fled into exile in 1959. Some are monasteries upholding full ritual calendars, while others are monastic colleges with a specific educational focus (see Ström 1997, p. 42). Some are self-consciously traditional, while others define themselves as modern in certain respects.[7] Moreover, certain institutions, including the Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies, do not limit admission to monastics alone but also allow laypeople to join if they can meet entry criteria, such as proficiency in the Tibetan language and the prior attainment of required school certificates. This variety should not distract from the fact that the institutions under discussion in this article constitute a coherent set, united by the fact that they all likewise offer a core programme of Tibetan Buddhist monastic education. They can therefore be analysed collectively in order to throw light on the challenges of academic accreditation in India in general.

A further clarification must be made about the terms "accreditation" and "affiliation". "Accreditation" will be used to describe the formal academic recognition of educational programmes, whereas "affiliation" will be used to describe a relationship between a university and another institution. Thus, taking the case study at the core of this article, one would say that "Sera Je has achieved accreditation for its BA programmes through its affiliation to the University of Mysore".

Finally, a key limitation of this article is that it focuses primarily on curricular matters. The decision to adopt this focus is intentional. In our interview in June 2023, Geshe Jampa Chowang, who was a key figure involved in Sera Je's affiliation to the University of Mysore, explained that designing the model curricula for the BA programmes was the "most important" and "hardest" step in that process of affiliation. However, he noted that there were of course several other hoops that needed to be jumped through, begin-

ning many years before the affiliation was finalised. These included registering a name with the University of Mysore ("Sera Jey Monastic Institute"), agreeing to a Memorandum of Understanding, establishing systems of management and oversight, and making certain payments. To give an example from another institution, when the Sikkim Institute of Higher Nyingma Studies was assessed by India's National Assessment and Accreditation Council in 2019, seven criteria were considered, of which "curricular aspects" was just the first.[8] An interesting article could perhaps be written about the academic accreditation of Tibetan Buddhist monastic education from the perspective, for example, of the changes required to monastic governance. However, such issues are beyond the scope of what will be discussed in this article.

3. Finessing the Rubric: The Model Curricula for Sera Je's New BA Programmes

Sera Je has been accredited to offer three BA programmes in Ancient Philosophy, Ancient Psychology, and Ancient Tibetan Language. As explained to me by Geshe Jampa Chowang, philosophy, psychology and language are the three fields of modern academia into which the content of traditional Tibetan Buddhist monastic education can best be categorised.[9] A maximum of forty monks can currently be admitted to each of the programmes each year. The programmes were originally conceived as BA Honours programmes lasting four years. However, after a regulatory change in Karnataka in 2024, the plan for the fourth year has been abandoned, meaning that the programmes will last three years and result in simple BA degrees.[10]

For each of these programmes, the curriculum conforms to a standard rubric prescribed by the University of Mysore. This rubric can be seen in Table 1 below, which is the model curriculum for the first year of the BA programme in Ancient Philosophy. The original version of this table, as well as the model curricula for the other BA programmes at Sera Je, can be found via a link on the University of Mysore's official website (https://www.uni-mysore.ac.in/PMEB/pm_admin/syllabus.html—accessed on 8 September 2024).[11]

This model curriculum is written in English, as is required by the University of Mysore. It is, however, a translation of a Tibetan-language version used within Sera Je itself. The entire curriculum is taught in the Tibetan language, and even exams are prepared, taken and marked in Tibetan, albeit in accordance with an exam template and a system of impartial oversight approved by the University of Mysore.

As can be seen in the table, the University of Mysore prescribes that all of its undergraduate degrees must include both a Major and a Minor subject. Sera Je has designed its new curricula such that for the BA in Ancient Philosophy, the Major is in Ancient Philosophy and the Minor is in Ancient Psychology, while for the BA in Ancient Psychology, the Major is in Ancient Psychology and the Minor is in Ancient Philosophy.[12] As for the BA in Ancient Tibetan Language, the Major is in Ancient Tibetan Language and the Minor is in Ancient Psychology.[13] The University of Mysore also prescribes that undergraduate students must study further subjects within the categories of "Open Elective", "Ability Enhancement Compulsory Courses", and "Skill Enhancement Courses". For all of these classes, the number of credits available is related to the number of lectures, tutorials and practicals (L+T+P) conducted in a given semester.

Table 1. Model Curriculum for the First Year of the BA Programme in Ancient Philosophy.

Sem.	Discipline Core (DSC) (Credits) (L+T+P)	Open Elective (OE) (Credits) (L+T+P)	Ability Enhancement Compulsory Courses (AECC), Language (Credits) (L+T+P)		Skill Enhancement Courses (SEC)		Total Credits
					Skill Based (Credits) (L+T+P)	Value Based (Credits) (L+T+P)	
I	**Philosophy (Major) A1, A2** **A1:** Tenet System (PH101) 3 Credits **A2:** Omniscience Knower Chapter (PH102) 3 Credits **Psychology (Minor) B1, B2** **B1:** Mind and Mental Factors (PS101) 3 Credits **B2:** Stages on the Path to Omniscience—I (PS102) 3 Credits	**OEC-1** Signs & Reasonings (Logic and Epistemology LE101) 3 Credits	**L1-1** Tibetan Language 1: Composition, Letter-Writing and Grammar (TL105) 3 Credits	**L2-1** Tibetan Language 2: Poetry and Literature (TL106) 3 Credits	**SEC-1** Nine Mental States in Cultivation *Shamatha* (*navākārā cittasthitī*) YG101 (2 Credits)	**SEC-2** Yoga, Health and Wellness (2 Credits)	**25**
II	**Philosophy (Major) A3, A4** **A3:** Three Identityless Phenomena *trividhā-nihsvabhatā* (PH103) 3 Credits **A4:** Negation of two Extreme Views: Eternalism *nityānta* and Nihilism *ucchedānta* (PH104) 3 Credits **Psychology (Minor) B3, B4** **B3:** Refuge & The Altruistic Mind (PS103) 3 Credits. **B4:** Clairvoyances & The Path of Preparation (PS104) 3 Credits	**OEC-2** The three categories of logical evidence: *kārya-hetu, svabhāva-hetu* and *anupalabdhi-hetu* (Logic and Epistemology LE102) 3 Credits	**L1-2** Tibetan Language 3: Composition, Letter-Writing and Grammar (TL107) 3 Credits	**L2-2** Tibetan Language 4: Poetry and Literature (TL108) 3 Credits	**SEC-1** The Impeding factors of Laxity and Excitement in the Cultivation of *Shamatha* (YG102) 2 Credits	**SEC-2** Sports (2 Credits)	**25**

What may not be obvious when glancing at the above table is that the vast majority of the subjects listed are already studied as part of Sera Je's traditional monastic curriculum. The traditional programme has simply been repackaged to conform with the University of Mysore's rubric. Sera Je's traditional curriculum is discussed by Cabezón and Dorjee (2019, pp. 261–302). It has undergone some slight modifications over the centuries, including in recent decades. In its present-day form, as explained to me during my fieldwork, it begins with three introductory years (*bsdus chung*, *bsdus 'bring*, *bsdus chen*). The first year covers the collected topics (*bsdus grwa*) (see, e.g., Onoda 1996). The second covers the types of cognition (*blo rigs*) and signs and reasoning (*rtags rigs*) (see, e.g., Rogers 2009). The third covers tenet systems (*grub mtha'*), the overview of the seventy topics (*don bdun bcu*) of the *Abhisamayālaṃkāra* (*Mngon rtogs rgyan*), and the grounds and paths traversed in the Mahāyāna (*sa lam*). From this early stage, there is also an emphasis on developing literacy in the Tibetan language, though this is in fact an innovation introduced into the monastic curriculum that did not exist in Tibet before 1959 (Cabezón and Dorjee 2019, p. 278).

After these introductory years, the curriculum moves on to the study of the Five Major Topics. First are seven years focused on Prajñāpāramitā, for which the main Indian root text is the *Abhisamayālaṃkāra* (*Mngon rtogs rgyan*) by Maitreya ('Byams pa). The subsequent four years focus on Madhyamaka, for which the main Indian root text is the *Madhyamakāvatāra* (*Dbu ma la 'jug pa*) by Candrakīrti (Zla ba grags pa). Then come three years focused on the study of Vinaya, for which the main Indian root text is the *Vinayasūtra* (*'Dul ba mdo*) by Guṇaprabha (Yon tan 'od). Finally, there are two years focused on Abhidharma, for which the main Indian root text is the *Abhidharmakośa* (*Chos mngon pa mdzod*) by Vasubandhu. This adds up to nineteen years of study, though some monks may take slightly longer or shorter to complete the curriculum. Moreover, the traditional curriculum sees Pramāṇa taught during a special session each winter, for which the main Indian root text is the *Pramāṇavārttika* (*Tshad ma rnam 'grel*) by Dharmakīrti (Chos kyi grags pa). Upon completion of these nineteen years, the finest monastic scholars might then engage in a further six years of study in order to attain the highest level of the *geshe* title, *geshe lharampa* (*dge bshes lha rams pa*) (Cabezón and Dorjee 2019, pp. 275–81).

A key feature of this traditional curriculum is that each of its stages is structured around one major Indian root text, which is memorised and studied in its entirety from start to finish. The study of those root texts is supported by both Indian and Tibetan commentaries and by textbooks (*yig cha*) that vary from one Geluk monastery to another but which, in Sera Je's case, are those written by Jetsun Chokyi Gyeltsen (Rje btsun chos kyi rgyal mtshan, 1464–1544).

As can be clearly seen, however, the model curriculum for the first year of the BA in Ancient Philosophy is not structured around the complete study of any one Indian root text. Instead, in order to conform with the rubric of the University of Mysore, modules have been created by lifting extracts from the texts studied in the traditional curriculum and constructing thematic topics around them. The BAs in both Ancient Philosophy and Ancient Psychology mainly cover Buddhist content studied in the early portion of the traditional curriculum, namely the introductory topics and Maitreya's *Abhisamayālamkāra*.[14] To give some examples, the module named Tenet System (PH101) examines the tenet systems studied in the third introductory year of the traditional curriculum; Omniscience Knower Chapter (PH102) focuses on the first chapter of the *Abhisamayālamkāra*, and Mind and Mental Factors (PS101) addresses the types of cognition studied in the second introductory year of the traditional curriculum. The only modules in the above table that are not rearrangements of one or more aspects of the traditional curriculum are the Skill Enhancement Courses listed in the column entitled "Value Based", namely, Yoga, Health, and Wellness and Sports. For these modules, Sera Je has had to put together new courses, rather than just rearranging traditional courses.

Implicit in this transformation are two different conceptions of how knowledge should be organised. As Dreyfus (1997, p. 41) explains, quoting Foucault (1972, p. 222): "Modern cultures mostly rely on an anonymous and abstract organization of knowledge through

disciplines structured around "groups of objects, methods, their corpus of propositions considered to be true, the interplay of rules and definitions, of techniques and tools." This is quite different from the Indian and Tibetan commentarial mode of organization which is based on the principle of explication of a pre-given meaning found in basic texts, which are called root texts (*rtsa ba*)".

The division of traditional root texts into thematic modules is central to the design, on paper, of the BA curricula designed by Sera Je. However, if the likes of the *Abhisamayālaṃkāra* were in fact taught in the way implied by the curriculum table seen above, this would constitute a striking pedagogical innovation in the history of monastic education at the three seats of the Geluk order. It would reverse the system of studying Indian root texts one by one, from start to finish—with the interpretative support of Indian and Tibetan commentaries—which has been practised continuously at Sera Je for most of the six centuries since its foundation. However, what is interesting is that such an unprecedented pedagogical change is not in fact necessary. The way this works in practice is as follows.

Geshe Jampa Chowang explained that Sera Je has established an internal rule for admission into the BA programmes. Monks can only enrol if they have already completed at least the first three of the traditional seven years of the study of the *Abhisamayālaṃkāra*. As a result of this rule, all the monks admitted into the BA programmes must have already studied some or all of the content of those modules that are drawn from the traditional curriculum and, moreover, must have studied that content in the traditional sequential manner. While they are enrolled in the BA programmes, Sera Je's monks continue to study the traditional curriculum, completing most topics in advance of when they appear in the BA curricula. Revision is then often all that is required to prepare monks for the examinations set through the University of Mysore.

The monks enrolled in the new BA programmes thus do not need to take a double load of classes but only a double load of exams. They continue to study in the traditional manner with their chosen teachers (*dge rgan*) while training in debate and taking the various examinations leading to the title of *geshe*. In addition, however, they now take a second set of exams, on largely the same content, only repackaged to conform with the University of Mysore's rubric. The small number of extra classes required to cover subjects that do not appear in the traditional curriculum at all—as well as any revision or exam-preparation classes—are not so great in number as to distract from the study of the traditional curriculum.

The University of Mysore also prescribes several further regulations beyond those mentioned above, all of which Sera Je has had to navigate. To give just one example, the University of Mysore specifies minimum attendance requirements if monks are to be eligible to take the exams at the end of each of the two semesters. Geshe Jampa Chowang explained that such attendance is indeed taken. However, it is recorded in the traditional educational settings of the monastery, such as teachers' homes and the debate courtyard, rather than in classroom contexts that directly correspond to the modules listed in the model curricula.

Those who designed the curricula for the BA programmes have arguably performed a masterclass in bureaucratic gymnastics. That is not to suggest that Sera Je has in any way deceived the University of Mysore, which of course fully understands and endorses the approach Sera Je is following. Moreover, the University of Mysore benefits from the arrangement. It receives payment, it can proudly list a great historical Tibetan Buddhist monastery as an affiliated institution, and it can also take satisfaction in the fact that, through Sera Je, it helps preserve India's Buddhist heritage. The fact that the curricular documents do not exactly correspond to the actual practice in the monastery says more about the limitations of such curricular rubrics than about any deficiencies in the education at Sera Je. In fact, at the point of receiving their BA degrees, the first cohort of Sera Je monks will have already studied in a rigorous manner for at least nine years. The structure of Sera Je's accredited BA programmes is thus not a trick designed to have monks receive academic degrees for doing less work than should be required. Rather, it is an imaginative solution to the in-

compatibility, on paper, between a traditional Tibetan Buddhist monastic curriculum and a standardised Indian undergraduate curricular model.

3.1. Why the Need for Such Bureaucratic Gymnastics?

The fact that such model curricula needed to be designed at all is itself revealing. From Sera Je's side, the primary goal is to have monks receive academic degrees for conducting their traditional monastic education. Would it not be far simpler if that education could be accredited directly, without having to resort to the ingenuity just described? While it would indeed be simpler, that option has never been available in India. Programmes of Tibetan Buddhist monastic education have only been able to receive accreditation upon acceptance of the tight requirements set by Indian universities. What is notable about Sera Je's new BA programmes is not that they have escaped this fundamental bind but that they have been designed with considerable finesse, thereby allowing Sera Je's traditional monastic education to be conducted as usual in practice even while conforming to a restrictive university template on paper.

But why is it that traditional Tibetan Buddhist monastic education cannot be directly accredited in India? Do the administrators of all Indian universities believe that there is an unbridgeable divide between traditional Tibetan Buddhist monastic education and academic education? In brief, the answer is no. The fact that at least some programmes of Tibetan Buddhist monastic education have achieved academic accreditation in India shows that there is not thought to be an unbridgeable divide. Nonetheless, there is a arguably a slight tension between the two educational approaches, which is worth considering at this stage.

In regard to its subject matter, Tibetan Buddhist monastic education, as already discussed, is concerned primarily with the study of ancient texts, whose content addresses, among other things, questions that relate to those asked within modern academic disciplines, such as philosophy and psychology. Taught degree programmes already exist throughout the world for the study of ancient texts with content of a similar kind. In many Western countries, for example, students enrolled in undergraduate degrees in Classics can take exams on comparable ancient texts by various authors, such as Plato or Marcus Aurelius. Moreover, the University of Mysore itself already offers a regular BA in Philosophy that covers ancient writings by both Indian and Western philosophical luminaries. It is thus hard to draw a clear distinction between many existing university degree programmes and Tibetan Buddhist monastic educational programmes on the grounds of subject matter alone.

But what of the religious context of Tibetan Buddhist monastic education? Phuntsho (2000, p. 99ff) observes that there is indeed a clear difference in orientation between Tibetan Buddhist monastic education and secular academic education, with the former primarily oriented towards a soteriological goal and the latter often oriented towards (Phuntsho 2000, p. 101) "acquiring knowledge and skills which in turn can contribute towards the development of individual or communal standards of life". Due to its soteriological orientation, Tibetan Buddhist monastic education includes elements that are not in themselves amenable to academic accreditation, including prayers (See Cabezón and Dorjee 2019, pp. 259–61). However, its core practices of memorisation, debate, and so forth are more straightforwardly intellectual.

Someone cautious about accrediting Tibetan Buddhist monastic education might nonetheless suggest that even those intellectual practices are compromised by the presupposed soteriological orientation, especially given Tibetan Buddhist assumptions about scriptural authority. This sceptic might contend that there is little scope for monastic students to engage in free critical enquiry, which is an ideal upheld by modern universities. This point arguably contains a kernel of truth. It is indeed the case that Tibetan Buddhists hold the path to enlightenment to have already been fully laid out in the words (*bka'*) of the Buddha and to have been further clarified in treatises (*bstan bcos*) by major Indian authors. These two categories of work comprise the two major canons of Tibetan Buddhism:

the Kangyur (*bka' 'gyur*) and the Tengyur (*bstan 'gyur*). As Cabezón (1998, p. 5) explains, these canons—and the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist tradition more generally—are held to be "complete" in that nothing "essential to the project of salvation" is omitted from them and "compact" in that everything within them has some soteriological efficacy. As a result, no Tibetan Buddhist monastic seeks to reject outright anything contained within those canons, nor to disclose completely new knowledge. As Dreyfus (2003, p. 98) discusses, scholasticism allows for the interpretation of canonical texts, but even this takes place "within the confines of [the tradition's] authority".[15] He writes (Dreyfus 2003, pp. 98–99): "Such interpretation is not free: a scholastic tradition tightly prescribes the methods to be followed and trains its followers in them". Moreover, when describing the classic triad of listening, reflecting, and meditating (*thos bsam sgom gsum*), Dreyfus (2003, p. 165) explains that it is through this process that "the content of the tradition is gradually internalized". This emphasis on internalisation applies even to the second part of the triad, reflecting (*bsam*), which is the stage of the process that comes closest to critical enquiry. As Dreyfus (2003, p. 166) explains, a key goal of this second stage is to bring about "a profound confidence in the validity of the tradition". Critical questioning of the tradition is encouraged mainly insofar as it is instrumental towards that goal.

It might, therefore, seem that Tibetan Buddhist monastic education does not encourage genuine critical enquiry of the sort that might lead a student to actually reject the tradition on rational grounds. Dreyfus (2003, p. 267ff), however, goes on to add nuance to this point and suggests that certain Tibetan Buddhist monastics do use the procedures of debate to go beyond mere internalisation. He highlights (Dreyfus 2003, p. 271) that this is often a matter of a teacher's personal disposition. One of his teachers saw debate "only as a tool aimed at internalizing the tradition" while another saw it "as a mode of inquiry into the tradition".

Dreyfus therefore shows that there is no single black-and-white answer to whether Tibetan Buddhist monastic education allows for free critical enquiry. Importantly, however, the same could be said of what takes place in practice in universities. Free critical enquiry may be the ideal, but in practice a great deal of learning in university contexts could equally be described as the internalisation of prescribed bodies of specialist knowledge. Often there is only limited scope for challenging the foundations of that knowledge or for generating new knowledge. This is especially true for lower-level, taught degrees, such as BAs, where examinations often primarily measure how well students have understood what has been taught by authoritative professors. The same characterisation could be said to hold, to a lesser extent, for taught MA degrees. However, this characterisation increasingly fails to hold for higher-level, research-based degrees, such as PhDs, where critical enquiry and the generation of new knowledge are expected, at least within the conception of "knowledge" held by a given academic discipline. This positioning of different university degrees on a spectrum according to the extent of free critical enquiry is of course crude. Every individual academic degree programme is different, as well as every student's experience even within the same programme. The only point being made here is that it is not easy to make an unequivocal distinction between Tibetan Buddhist monastic education as a whole and university education as a whole on the basis of the scope for free critical enquiry. Insofar as some such sharp distinction can be made, it becomes most salient when comparing Tibetan Buddhist monastic educational programmes to research degree programmes, as will be discussed further in the last section of this article.

As already noted before the outset of this brief discussion, the fact that at least some programmes of Tibetan Buddhist monastic education have become academically accredited in India proves that the divide between the two forms of education is not judged to be inherently unbridgeable. Nonetheless, difficulties have remained because of the specific regulations set by individual Indian universities. If one reads them charitably, such regulations are intended to guarantee academic best practice through enforcing standard requirements. The problem is that programmes of traditional Tibetan Buddhist monastic education, which evolved over centuries in a completely different cultural context, strug-

gle to fit within those requirements. It is often a case of trying to force a square peg into a round hole. A sample of the difficulties include that monastics often lack the high school certificates that are compulsory for admission to most BA programmes; that they often only speak and write Tibetan, which is a language that many Indian universities do not accredit; and that their traditional educational programmes do not divide up into the standard lengths of university courses. Thus, a status quo holds whereby, in principle, there might be no objection to granting academic accreditation to Tibetan Buddhist monastic educational programmes, even while, in practice, this proves almost impossible unless modifications are made to those programmes.

It should be noted that many Tibetans in India read the obstructive university regulations less charitably. They see them as protecting the privileges of certain groups, rather than as merely upholding impartial standards. Lacking their own nation state and holding only refugee status, Tibetans in India often find themselves shut out of the power structures that could give some manner of academic imprimatur to their traditional models of education.[16] In the words of Geshe Lhakdor, the director of the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives in Dharamsala, who I interviewed in July 2022: "This is a struggle between the haves and the have-nots… [between] those who have the power, say Indian universities, or American or British universities [and those who have not]. I mean the education you get is not necessarily better [at universities]".

In the few cases where Tibetan Buddhist institutions have received academic accreditation for their programmes via affiliation to an Indian university, they have done so by bringing their respective curricula into line with the requirements set by the accrediting university. As seen above, Sera Je did so by imaginatively conforming to the University of Mysore's regulations. Prior to that, however, only one other university in India had ever accredited programmes of Tibetan Buddhist monastic education: the Sampurnanand Sanskrit University in Varanasi.

3.2. Curricular Trade-Offs Required When Affiliating to the Sampurnanand Sanskrit University

The first Tibetan Buddhist institution to follow this route was the Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies (henceforth, CIHTS), which is located in Sarnath, Varanasi. Its first classes were held in 1967, and it was formally inaugurated on the 1st of January 1968, at a time when Tibetan Buddhist monastic education was still in a perilous position. As Brentano (2018, p. 36) describes, one of the underlying goals behind CIHTS's foundation was to protect traditional Tibetan Buddhist monastic education by bringing it within the wider Indian university system, which would offer institutional stability and also give it access to sustainable funding.[17] However, CIHTS did not just re-establish a programme of education that had existed inside Tibet. Instead, as Ström (1997, pp. 43–44) discusses, a new curriculum was designed in coordination with the Sampurnanand Sanskrit University (henceforth, SSU), of which CIHTS was a constituent wing when it was first founded (Samten 2018, p. 20).[18] SSU, the oldest of India's Sanskrit Universities, is in one sense quite well-suited to overseeing programmes of Tibetan Buddhist monastic education given that its own specialty is in a related field, namely, the study of Sanskrit language and of the extensive spiritual and secular knowledge contained within Sanskrit literature. However, its regulations still impose curricular constraints on the programmes that it accredits, which had no precedent in Tibet before 1959.

Even after CIHTS received academic accreditation in its own right in 1988 as a "Deemed University", it retained much of the curriculum structure that it had designed when part of SSU. As can be seen in official documents in use today,[19] the curriculum for its Buddhist Philosophy programme, which covers the topics of traditional Tibetan Buddhist monastic education, lasts nine years, which is far shorter than the length of the traditional programmes at the major Geluk monasteries.[20] The first four of the nine years correspond to last four years of the Indian secondary school system: Classes 9 to 12. The next three years lead to an accredited BA degree known as Shastri, and the final two years lead to an accredited MA degree known as Acharya, both of which are traditional Sanskrit titles still

used in the Indian higher education system. CIHTS's academic calendar conforms, with some flexibility, to the Indian academic calendar rather than to the Tibetan lunar and ritual calendar observed by most Tibetan Buddhist monasteries.[21] Exams mainly follow standard academic practice, meaning that there is a particular emphasis on written exams.[22]

The curriculum's core subjects, classified as Moolshastra and Sampradayashastra—the Indian root texts and the Tibetan commentaries of the different orders, respectively—correspond to the contents of traditional monastic education.[23] Unlike in Sera Je's new BA curricula, the root texts are not broken up into thematic modules. However, CIHTS's Buddhist Philosophy curriculum substantively diverges from traditional Tibetan Buddhist monastic curricula for a different reason, namely, that students must study several further subjects beyond those that comprise traditional monastic education, especially in the years prior to the Acharya programme. For example, in the first year of the current Shastri programme, Sanskrit and either English or Hindi are compulsory, in addition to Moolshastra, Sampradayashastra and Tibetan Language. Moreover, students must choose from further optional subjects, which include Political Science, Economics, Tibetan History, Asian History and Pali. One rationale for the study of a broad range of subjects is that university students should receive a well-rounded education that broadens their minds and gives them transferrable skills beyond their specialist subject matter.[24] By contrast, traditional Tibetan Buddhist monastic curricula tend to include only a narrow range of subjects. They focus on the intensive study of Buddhist philosophy to the relative exclusion of other topics, even allowing for the slight variation within this general pattern discussed by Dreyfus (2003, p. 132). It will be remembered that Sera Je's new BA curricula also require the study of a small number of further subjects beyond those found in traditional monastic education. However, the further subjects required at CIHTS are both greater in number and more challenging, resulting in a heavy additional workload. The daily schedule for many years of CIHTS's programme is structured into seven periods of forty-five minutes to allow for all of these classes.

SSU's particular agenda—and perhaps also the agenda of the Indian Ministry of Culture, under which CIHTS is constituted—is seen in the fact that one of the subjects that is compulsory for several years of the programme is Sanskrit.[25] There is arguably some value in a subset of Tibetan Buddhist specialists studying Sanskrit, given its status as the language from which the texts of both the Kangyur and Tengyur were translated. However, it would be hard to make an objective case that all of CIHTS's students should become adept in it if the goal of the programme was only to uphold traditional Tibetan Buddhist monastic education.[26] As Ström (2001, pp. 144–45) observed during fieldwork in the 1990s, the requirement to study so many other subjects, and especially the difficult task of learning so much Sanskrit, in turn limits the time available for the study of the major Buddhist subjects. In an interview with me in July 2022, Khenpo Palzang Dargye, a teacher in the Nyingma department at CIHTS, likewise suggested that the knowledge of his students in these core subjects was relatively weak. He contrasted this to the higher standard of erudition at the *shedra* of Namdroling Monastery, where he had received his own training. However, he did observe that his students at CIHTS were often more knowledgeable in other subjects even than himself: "If I don't know what something is in English or Sanskrit, I can ask them".

As the *shedra* of Namdroling also follows a nine-year curriculum, in part because of being influenced by CIHTS's curricular structure (see Pearcey 2015, p. 456), the number of texts studied in its monastic educational programme can be compared directly to the number of similar texts studied at CIHTS.[27] This makes it easy to corroborate Khenpo Palzang Dargye's point in a quantitative manner. Those enrolled at CIHTS do not study the texts on Vinaya (*'dul ba*) and Tantra (*rgyud*) that fill much of the last three years of the curriculum at Namdroling's *shedra*. Moreover, they do not study as many texts even within those topics that are taught at both institutions. For example, the curriculum at Namdroling's *shedra* prescribes that each of the five treatises attributed to Maitreya be sep-

arately taught and examined in designated classes, whereas CIHTS's curriculum only lists the *Abhisamayālaṃkāra*.[28]

A small number of Tibetan Buddhist educational institutions have followed in CIHTS's footsteps since the 1960s and become affiliated to SSU. The following are those of which I am aware. The Central Institute of Buddhist Studies in Ladakh was granted affiliation to SSU in 1973 before successfully achieving what CIHTS had accomplished previously and becoming a "Deemed University" in its own right in 2016.[29] The Sikkim Institute of Higher Nyingma Studies (henceforth, SIHNS) was granted temporary affiliation to SSU in 1983 and permanent affiliation in 1995, as is described by Ranjan and Tshering (2020, p. 7). Also in Sikkim, the Karma Śrī Nālandā Institute, the *shedra* of Rumtek Monastery (Rum theg), was granted affiliation to SSU in 1987.[30] The Central Institute of Himalayan Culture Studies in Arunachel Pradesh was granted affiliation to SSU in 2003.[31] All four institutions follow a variant of the same nine-year curricular structure described above, although the precise texts studied can differ from one institution to the next.[32] At each institution there is a requirement to study a range of further subjects in addition to the core subjects of traditional Tibetan Buddhist monastic education.

It is notable that all of the institutions in the above paragraph are located in India's Himalayan regions. With the exception of the Karma Śrī Nālandā Institute—which was established by the 16th Karmapa Rangjung Rigpai Dorje, as is discussed by Gurung (2019, p. 51)—none were founded primarily by or for Tibetan monastics who had fled into exile in India. Lacking any direct predecessor inside of Tibet, these institutions have not been strongly obliged to preserve a traditional programme of study created before 1959.[33] Moreover, they have often been founded at least in part to serve the people of specific Himalayan regions and to uphold their local identities within the context of the Indian nation.[34] These priorities are not identical to those of historical Tibetan institutions re-established in exile. This context can perhaps help to explain why the leaders of these Himalayan institutions have often made different decisions than Tibetan exile leaders when faced with the advantages and trade-offs of academic accreditation.

For example, SIHNS has always been involved in the preservation of Sikkimese cultural identity. As described by Ranjan and Tshering (2020, pp. 1–2), its foundation was first mooted in 1959, and it came to fruition in 1964, thanks in large part to the support of the last king (*chos rgyal*) of Sikkim, Palden Thondup Namgyal. Even since the annexation of Sikkim by India in 1975 (see Datta-Ray 1984), it has continued to play a role in upholding Sikkimese identity within the context of the Indian nation. SIHNS's present-day curriculum includes texts on the religious history (*chos 'byung*) and royal lineage (*rgyal rabs*) of Sikkim.[35] Since the appointment of Dechen Dorjee in 1979, its head *khenpos* have always been Sikkimese. As Lopon Jigmee Wangchuk, a teacher at SIHNS, explained to me in an interview in August 2022, many graduates of the institute—both monastics and laypeople—have gone on to play important roles in Sikkimese intellectual and public life. He listed examples of religious leaders, teachers of Sikkim's traditional Bhutia language, government officials and even local radio broadcasters. SIHNS's ability to offer accredited academic degrees since its affiliation to SSU in 1983 appears to be one factor that has allowed it to serve as the alma mater for such a range of Sikkimese cultural figures.

3.3. Why Most Monasteries Have Opted against Accreditation

The institutions discussed in the previous section have been the exception rather than the norm in the wider Tibetan Buddhist landscape in India. In all of the decades prior to Sera Je's accreditation—during which time affiliation to SSU was the only tried and tested method of receiving accreditation—the vast majority of Tibetan Buddhist monasteries remained outside of the Indian university system.

This included all of the largest and most historically important Tibetan Buddhist monasteries. The choices of monastic leaders may not always have been active; inertia may have played a role in some cases, with certain monasteries doubtless unable to summon up the necessary administrative energy to seriously explore the process. However, certain

monasteries did consider the options proactively, and yet ultimately baulked at the trade-offs required.

Dreyfus (2003, p. 328) describes an example of this thinking in relation to the possibility of the major Geluk monasteries following the CIHTS model, which, as has been seen, would probably have involved affiliation, at least initially, to SSU. He writes that some younger monks wanted "to transform [their] monastery into a modern university where many subjects are taught and students are free to choose their subjects, like the Central Institute for Higher Tibetan Studies… Their elders strenuously disagree with this model, for the alteration would eliminate the central element of Tibetan monastic education, the dialectic of commentary and debate, and would greatly diminish the strength of its focus". Indeed, as Cabezón and Dorjee (2019, p. 275) discuss, many monks belonging to the major Geluk monasteries had already experimented with the academically oriented pedagogy later institutionalised at CIHTS while at Buxa refugee camp in the 1960s. However, they ultimately abandoned the experiment, "fearing that the traditional system of education would be lost".

Not content with the limitations of the model at CIHTS, a number of monastic leaders explored other options. Most soon discovered that the requirements imposed by other universities were also restrictive. During my fieldwork, I was told that administrators at Sera Je itself had previously looked into affiliation to Tumkur University, another university in Karnataka State. An interviewee at the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics in Dharamsala told me of unsuccessful efforts by that institution to affiliate to the University of Delhi.

Moreover, Ström (2001, p. 347) records that leading figures at the *shedra* of Namdroling Monastery looked into affiliation to the University of Mysore in the early 1990s. However, they decided against pursuing the process, in part because the study of Kannada, the native language of Karnataka, would have been required at the *shedra*. As well as serving as further evidence of monastic leaders deciding against an onerous curricular trade-off, this particular example shows that the University of Mysore's requirements have changed over time. Sera Je is not required to teach Kannada in its new BA programmes, despite that language still being a standard requirement in regular programmes at the University of Mysore. This is because Sera Je's accreditation has been achieved through the Specialized Programmes scheme of the University of Mysore.[36] During our interview, Geshe Jampa Chowang explained: "In the specialised course we [i.e., Sera Je] have more power. Although we basically have to follow the model structure… the textbooks and the syllabus are all things that our own monastery can implement itself". This option was presumably not available at the time when leading monks from Namdroling enquired in the past. This highlights that the question of how to achieve affiliation to a given university is not a static one; universities change their requirements over time.

Returning, however, to the central point, most leaders of Tibetan Buddhist monasteries have chosen, over many decades, to remain outside of the Indian university system because they are unwilling to weaken traditional programmes of study. As has been seen, Sera Je took great care when designing its BA programmes not to undermine its pre-existing curriculum. In light of this, it is worth delving deeper into why preserving traditional programmes is considered such a non-negotiable requirement by most Tibetan Buddhist monasteries. Gyatso (2004, p. 237) articulates the essential point, which is that the act of preserving traditions is in some sense the very purpose of Tibetan Buddhist monastic life, perhaps taking precedence in practice even over the soteriological goals of the Buddhist tradition as a whole: "The principal task that monks set themselves is self-perpetuation of their traditions and the institutions that safeguard them… Everything is geared towards this almost genetic urge for self-preservation and replication". This characterisation rings particularly true for the major Geluk monasteries. However, that is not to suggest that there is no space for change in those institutions. For one, Gyatso (2004, pp. 236–39) distinguishes the "traditional core activities" that monasteries are loathe to change, which include upholding an annual cycle of ritual practices or preserving a particular system of education, from those areas that are considered amenable to adaptation, including matters

relating to the practicalities of life, such as the adoption of certain technologies. Moreover, Gyatso (2004, p. 238) observes that changes to the traditional core activities can be made, but that they "must, by the employment of some sleight of hand, be transformed (or at least presented) as an extension of preservation". Through such means, notable reforms have in fact taken place in recent decades. As Cabezón and Dorjee (2019, p. 492) summarise: "Monasteries like Sera are very conservative; change comes very slowly, if at all. And yet change—even significant change—has occurred and is still occurring".

To give some examples, firstly, it was made compulsory in 1999 that the highest Geluk title of *geshe lharampa* could only be awarded to monks upon completion of six further years of study and examinations, even after they had graduated from the traditional monastic curriculum at the individual Geluk monasteries. As Cabezón and Dorjee (2019, pp. 276–81) discuss, the impetus for these developments can be traced back to the modernising reforms trialled at Buxa in the 1960s. One aim of the change was to make the process for the awarding of the highest Geluk titles more comparable to the standardised process for awarding academic degrees, with *lharampa* equated to a PhD and the two preliminary titles of *karampa* (*bka' rams pa*) and *lopon* (*slob dpon*) equated to a BA and an MA, respectively (though even after the examination reforms, the titles were not actually accredited by any university). However, the reform was also justified partly on the grounds that it would in fact improve the standards of traditional Geluk monastic education, rather than weaken them. Ström (2001, p. 302) quotes the leading Gelukpa, Samdhong Rinpoche: "His Holiness [the Dalai Lama] advised the abbots of the monasteries to improve the examination system and raise the standards for the *geshe* degree, since many of the monks who had been awarded the degree in recent years had not been up to the mark. Due to the autonomy of the monasteries, they had awarded this degree indiscriminately".

Secondly, many Tibetan Buddhist monasteries have now founded schools at the primary and secondary levels for novice monks, where modern subjects are often taught. The establishment of the schools at Sera Je and Sera Me is described by Cabezón and Dorjee (2019, p. 492) as "arguably the most radical educational reform of all" in the exile period. However, once again, such schooling does not significantly weaken the traditional monastic education because the schooling precedes the age when monks begin the traditional programme. Indeed, a case can be made that such schooling improves the young monks' intellectual capacity.

Thirdly, as is discussed by Sonam (2019), many Tibetan Buddhist monasteries, especially Geluk monasteries, have now introduced basic science learning into their compulsory programmes. This was done on the explicit urging of the Lama (2005, p. 3). There can be no denying that this takes time away from the study of the traditional curriculum (see Worthman et al. 2021, p. 5). However, this problem is mitigated by the fact that monks tend to join the science programmes only when they have reached roughly the last three years of the traditional Geluk curriculum and are thus already senior, well-developed scholars.

This emphasis on the preservation of traditional monastic educational programmes can be frustrating for those who want to see monasteries embrace more thoroughgoing reforms. This was highlighted in my interview in August 2022 with a Tibetan teacher who had agreed to conduct an optional English course at Sera Je monastery as part of a distance-learning programme accredited by the Indira Gandhi Open University. He had eventually quit the job, however, because even those monks who had chosen to enrol were routinely absent. Whenever there was a scheduling conflict between his English class and the traditional monastic programme, they prioritised the latter. While this disappointed the teacher, it did at least prove where Sera Je's priorities continued to lie.

3.4. The Advantages of Accreditation

The above discussion has explored what might be termed the "negative condition" of Sera Je's recent affiliation to University of Mysore: the changes that Sera Je, and most other Tibetan Buddhist monasteries, have *not* been prepared to accept in return for academic accreditation, namely, any adverse impact to the depth and breadth of their tra-

ditional monastic educational programmes and to their time-honoured pedagogies. This "negative condition" helps contextualise the artful design of the curricula for Sera Je's BA programmes. However, what has not yet been addressed is what might be termed the "positive condition". What motivation drives monasteries to seek secular academic accreditation for their programmes in the first place? This answer is not self-evident. After all, contemporary Tibetan Buddhist monasteries already award certain titles, such as *geshe* and *khenpo* (*mkhan po*), that are recognised within the religious communities in which monastics are expected to spend their lives, as well as in several secular institutions within the Tibetan exile community and the Himalayan regions.

Geshe Jampa Chowang gave the following reason for why Sera Je in particular sought its recent affiliation. However, what he said has general applicability to the Tibetan Buddhist monastic community in India: "Although we are learning very extensively on Buddhist philosophy for many years, with debate, analysis, memorisation, all these things, other universities do not recognise what we are learning… [But] if the students get the University of Mysore certificate showing they have learnt about the Buddhist Philosophy as a Bachelor of Arts, then, even if they go [abroad] or even to other universities around India, and want to give a talk on Buddhist philosophy, they will have the certificate. The world now is run by paper".

Thus, while traditional monastic titles are recognised only within the Tibetan and Himalayan communities, academic degrees open doors in the wider world, both at universities and beyond. Conversely, the lack of those degrees tends to leave those doors closed.[37] This has been an issue for decades. In his interview with Ström (2001, p. 303), Samdhong Rinpoche said: "The *geshe* degree is not recognised by academic institutions in Europe and elsewhere, and some of our outstanding *geshes* who have worked in universities outside India have met with great difficulties as regards the regularisation of their tenure due to their [lack of] academic qualifications". One way that a number of Tibetan Buddhist institutions have tried to overcome this barrier, short of actually receiving academic accreditation, has been to include language like "equivalent to a BA" on the certificates that they award, such that monastics can more easily present those qualifications to universities or other secular institutions.[38] In a similar vein, certain monastic educational institutions have chosen to render their English names in language that mimics secular, academic terminology, such as "Institute" or "University" (See Lempert 2012, p. 189 n. 9).[39] Such verbal choices may have made a small difference in helping outsiders better understand Tibetan Buddhist titles, but they have not solved the underlying problem. As remarked to me during fieldwork by a recent graduate of the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics: "My certificate says it's equivalent to a PhD, but I can't get a job at a university".

But why would a monastic want to teach at a secular university? Or, indeed, why would a monastic want to work in any other secular context where an academic degree might be of use? This is a contested matter even within the Tibetan Buddhist milieu in India. On one side are those who sometimes take the Dalai Lama as their figurehead, and who believe that, in the contemporary age, Tibetan Buddhist monastics, and Buddhists in general, must engage with the wider world, rather than closeting themselves only within traditional religious communities.[40] The Dalai Lama often argues that, in the 21st century, Buddhists should aspire to bring about positive change in society more broadly.[41] In regard to universities in particular—the context in which academic degrees are most necessary—many Tibetan Buddhist monastics want to play a greater role in shaping academic discourse about the religion in which they are expert, as Ström (2001, p. 307) observed in the 1990s and as I likewise found during my own fieldwork.

The Dalai Lama's vision is anchored in the ideal of the bodhisattva who devotes himself or herself to the benefit of all sentient beings. However, it also links to his analysis of the Tibetans' current political plight. He sees this as partially caused by the fact that Tibetan society in general, and the Tibetan monastic establishment in particular, were too insular before 1959 and too disconnected from the wider world. While the Dalai Lama has profound respect for traditional monastic education (see, e.g., Jinpa 2009, p. 216), he strongly

advocates that monastics learn new knowledge and skills, such as science and languages, that can allow them to better engage with people beyond their monasteries. According to Geshe Jampa Chowang, the Dalai Lama was personally briefed upon Sera Je's affiliation to the University of Mysore, and expressed strong support for it, conforming as it did with his wider vision.

Opposing the approach associated with the Dalai Lama, however, there have also been many monastic leaders in India who have resisted any changes to the monastic education that existed inside of Tibet, and have maintained the belief that monastic life, grounded in renunciation, should be clearly differentiated from secular life. While there is no single figurehead for this attitude, it is a common refrain in Tibetan Buddhist monasteries of all orders. When it comes to academic degrees, those of this more sceptical disposition worry that monastics who aspire towards degrees risk becoming entangled in the eight worldly preoccupations (*'jigs rten chos brgyad*).[42] A criticism that is occasionally heard is that monks who desire degrees might ultimately wish to attain a well-paid academic post abroad. Indeed, a common problem in Tibetan Buddhist monasteries today, and not only in India, is that many monks disrobe in adulthood in order to try their chances at secular life. The causes of this phenomenon are complex and relate in part to the wider social and cultural situations of Tibetan and Himalayan people and their perception of the changing opportunities available to them as a result of recent economic development. However, within monasteries, it is not uncommon to hear monastics—usually older monastics—suggest that one cause of this is that young monks have been too exposed to the secular world and have been corrupted by it. Conversely, I have heard others suggest that providing a richer range of opportunities within monastic life might in fact diminish the lure of disrobing. Moreover, as Warner (2023, p. 144) discusses in relation to Nepal, there are also those who argue that monasteries should take responsibility for providing secular education, especially at the school level, so that monks will have other opportunities if they choose to disrobe, even while efforts are simultaneously made to encourage them not to do so.

Although no individual's views can be neatly categorised in such a binary way, the model of a perpetual struggle—albeit a well-intentioned one—between outward-facing reformists and inward-facing conservatives can be a useful heuristic for understanding much of what has played out within Tibetan Buddhist monasteries over recent decades (see Dreyfus 2003, p. 326ff). It seems to me, however, that the balance of power between the two camps may have subtly changed in recent years due to a looming demographic crisis that is being felt most acutely in the major Geluk monasteries. The flow of monks out of Tibet to monasteries in India, which caused monasteries like Sera to "[explode] in size" (Cabezón and Dorjee 2019, p. 502) from the late 1980s, has dried up in the last decade or so. One factor behind this is the stricter policies imposed along the Himalayan border by the Chinese government after the mass protests across the Tibetan plateau in 2008. It is also partially due to the improved options for monastic education inside of Tibet itself. The reduced number of monks coming out of Tibet has exacerbated the problem associated with a longer-term trend discussed by Lempert (2012, pp. 160–61) whereby Tibetans from the exile community rarely send their children to monasteries.

It has proven difficult for the major Geluk monasteries to make up the shortfall with new recruits from the Himalayan regions.[43] In an interview in August 2022, Geshe Thabke—the director of the Educational Department at Sera Je through which the affiliation to the University of Mysore is administered—explained that a recently admitted cohort contained roughly forty monks. By contrast, when he first joined the monastery in the late 1990s, his cohort contained roughly two hundred and fifty monks. Faced with this crisis, those who oppose outward-facing reforms, lest monks subsequently be tempted to disrobe, arguably find themselves on weaker ground. The obvious reply is that the status quo is unsustainable, that soon there might not even be monks in danger of disrobing, and that reforms—including, but not limited to, giving monks the chance to gain academic degrees—might perhaps encourage more people to become monks to start with, regardless

of any choices they make later. Geshe Thabke summed up the issue: "In order to preserve the Tibetan culture and the Tibetan monastery studies, are you going to be more conservative or more [open]? We are always struggling [with this question]. Which one is good, in order to preserve? I really want to preserve my Buddhist tradition of studies. But in which way can I preserve them for longer? If I do the traditional way, obviously there will be less people who join [the monastery]".

It should be clarified that during fieldwork I never heard anybody argue that academic degrees alone will make much of a difference to the demographic crisis. However, they were often presented to me as one aspect of a wider package of modernising reforms—including the aforementioned provision of accredited schooling for young monks, science education for older monks, and so on—that, it is hoped, might put the future of Tibetan Buddhist monasticism on a sustainable footing.[44]

The above discussion perhaps throws light on why Sera Je felt an increased sense of urgency in recent years to solve the long-running challenge of gaining academic accreditation. That positive condition was necessary. However, alone it was not sufficient. The negative condition also needed to be fulfilled, namely, that academic accreditation would not involve radical changes to its traditional programme of monastic education.

An open question, however, is whether Sera Je's affiliation to the University of Mysore might prove possible for other monasteries to imitate. Geshe Jampa Chowang suggested that the other monasteries of the Geluk three seats might indeed be able to follow the same approach. If that comes to pass, Sera Je's affiliation to the University of Mysore might in hindsight be seen as a watershed moment in the history of Tibetan Buddhist monastic education in India. However, it is also possible that Sera Je's accreditation will prove too bespoke to be easily repeated and that attention within the Tibetan Buddhist monastic community may switch back to solving the root problem that traditional monastic titles cannot be accredited directly.[45] Indeed, Geshe Tashi Tsering, the abbot of Sera Me, mentioned in an interview in August 2022 that there are ongoing negotiations behind the scenes with the likes of India's University Grants Commission to have monastic degrees accredited en bloc, perhaps through the establishment of a specialist Buddhist University. As this manner of negotiation has been going on for years, however, it is hard to foresee an imminent breakthrough. At this point in time, Sera Je's model for offering accredited BA degrees is the best solution yet devised in response to the accreditation dilemma.

4. The Additional Challenges Associated with Research Degrees

Now that Sera Je has received accreditation for BA programmes—and assuming that the programmes are successful enough to continue after their initial trial period—there are, according to Geshe Jampa Chowang, tentative plans to design and receive approval for accredited MA programmes, likely structured around the main topic studied in the next stage of Sera Je's traditional curriculum: Madhyamaka. As already suggested earlier in this article, there is perhaps little in principle to distinguish the accreditation of taught BA and taught MA programmes. Indeed, in the case of institutions affiliated with SSU, monastic educational programmes have long been accredited up to the MA level, resulting in the degree of Acharya.

Given that one motivation even for the accreditation of lower-level degree programmes is that they could allow Tibetan Buddhist monastics to participate more fully in academic discourse, the awarding of PhDs at Tibetan Buddhist monasteries would clearly constitute an extension of the same vision. However, two issues come into play here that do not apply so strongly in the case of taught BA and MA degrees. The first is that traditional Tibetan Buddhist monastic education does not contain any element that corresponds to academic research. As such, unlike for taught degree programmes, where the challenges have been described above as analogous to squeezing a square peg into a round hole, in the case of research degree programmes, there is no square peg from which to begin.

This point was made by Geshe Tashi Tsering in our interview: "The current Geshe Lharampa degree… is difficult for outside educational institutions to recognise… as a PhD,

because there is [a] standard… In some ways… [the Geshe Lharampa degree is] more advanced. But on the other hand, [measured against the] standard of how to structure and standardise a PhD, it is very different. For a PhD you have to research a particular topic and write just on that. The Geshe Lharampa, for example, [includes] a huge [range of] subjects, but is not really precise on one topic".

However, even if monastics were given the opportunity—after the completion of their traditional course of studies—to focus on and write about only one topic for a lengthy period of time, that would not in itself solve all of the difficulties. The second issue is that the tension between the competing values of free enquiry and of faith in the tradition come more to the fore in the context of high-level research degrees. Research programmes require students to employ critical methodologies that yield, in theory, new knowledge within the parameters of the disciplines to which those methodologies belong. What if contradiction is found between what academic findings—grounded in such methodologies—suggest about some aspect of Tibetan Buddhism and what the tradition itself holds to be the case? Such issues can perhaps be more easily avoided during taught degree programmes, but they become unavoidable in the context of original academic research. A hypothetical monastic enrolled in a PhD programme cannot but go beyond the limits sanctioned within the scholastic enterprise and begin to question the foundational assumptions of the tradition, at least to some extent.

With these two issues in mind, let us survey some notable developments that have taken place in recent years. In the Geluk order of which Sera Je is a part, for example, there is increasing interest in conducting research. However, the application of critical research methodologies to the Tibetan Buddhist tradition continues to meet with some resistance.

This is illuminated by the case of the Geluk monastery of Tashi Lhunpo (Bkra shis lhun po). A few years ago, its abbot was keen to establish a research centre. He approached a Tibetan scholar who had received academic training to help found it. That scholar, together with another academic colleague, started to make plans about how to run this centre in accordance with modern research methodologies. However, their plans soon came up against the obstacle of regulations promulgated by the Geluk International Foundation.[46] These regulations are binding on all Geluk monasteries and prescribe how research on the Five Major Topics can be conducted within the order.[47] The Tibetan term used for "research" in the document is *nyams zhib*, which can also be rendered as "study in detail". It is the latter understanding that pervades the regulations, rather than any conception of research as a process through which pre-existing intellectual paradigms might be challenged.

To give two examples highlighted by the Tibetan scholar, when he was explaining how these regulations made it impossible for him to lead an academic-style research programme at Tashi Lhunpo, one article of the regulations states that those enrolled in the scheme must submit fifteen pages of completed writing or, alternatively, a report on their work every three months, from the very beginning of their research. The intention is clearly to ensure that those enrolled are working hard. However, as the Tibetan scholar highlighted, this rule demonstrates that those who designed the regulations have little experience of conducting academic research in practice. No time is designated for constructing a research methodology or for finding and critically analysing sources, even though that process might last for several years within a conventional PhD programme. Instead, the assumption seems to be that those enrolled in the scheme already have the only intellectual framework they need—the framework inculcated during their traditional training—and that they can just proceed from the outset with writing.

Another article of the regulations, which discusses the supervisors of each project, states that they must be *geshe lharampas*. However, with the exception of the rare few who have subsequently gone on to study at universities, *geshe lharampas* tend to have little or no training in academic research. This manner of supervision is therefore incompatible with establishing a system of research that could bring Geluk monastic scholars into dialogue with international academic discourse. As a result of these regulations, the Tibetan

scholar concluded that it would be impossible for him to supervise monks at a research centre at Tashi Lhunpo. He explained to me that his prospective monastic students would have been hopelessly confused by the contradictions between the guidance that he would have wished to give and the guidance that they would have received from the supervising *geshe lharampas*.

Thus, while there is a desire to conduct research in Geluk monasteries, several obstacles remain that hinder genuine engagement with international academic discourse. There continues to be some misunderstanding of what research actually involves, as well as reflexive wariness of any novelty that might challenge the tradition. Such attitudes constitute a significant obstacle to the awarding of PhDs at Tibetan Buddhist monasteries. Even before coming to the bureaucratic hurdles that might be raised from the side of universities, these barriers from the side of those who oversee traditional Tibetan Buddhist monastic education must be overcome.

In this context, a notable pioneer is the Academic Research Program Initiative (ARPI), which has been overseen for the last decade by two professors from the Khyentse Center of Tibetan Buddhist Textual Scholarship at the University of Hamburg: Dorji Wangchuk and Orna Almogi. As Almogi (2020, p. 3) explains, ARPI was initially launched as a pilot programme in 2014 at Namdroling Monastery, which is home to the largest Nyingma *shedra* in India, where Dorji Wangchuk himself completed his monastic education as a young man. As it proved a success, ARPI research centres were also set up at the Dzongsar Institute (Rdzong gsar), a leading Sakya *shedra* in northern India, and at the Nyingma monastery of Shechen (Zhe chen) in Nepal.

The monastics, including nuns, who enrol in ARPI are senior scholars who have already completed their traditional programmes of monastic education. They are free to choose their precise topics of research, but they all receive systematic training from the two supervising professors in the methods of academic textual studies. As of 2022, the monastics involved in ARPI had published, collectively and individually, a total of five monographs. As Almogi and Wangchuk (2022, p. ii) observe in the introduction to the fifth volume, co-written by four scholars: "It is a remarkable piece of academic work that bears testimony not only to their ability to pursue research but also to the great potential for developing a strong community of researchers in traditional Tibetan Buddhist monastic seminaries".

In a large part due to the manner of their supervision, the Tibetan Buddhist monastic scholars involved in ARPI produce PhD theses in all but name. Several of them presented aspects of their research in an academic setting at the 16th Seminar of the International Association of Tibetan Studies in July 2022. This highlights not only that academic engagement can be of benefit to Tibetan Buddhist monastic scholars themselves and to their monasteries but also that monastic scholars have the potential to enrich academic Buddhist Studies itself. Collectively, monastic scholars uphold a vast reservoir of knowledge about their religion. Indeed, a great deal of academic research conducted even by international scholars often depends in part upon the support of monastic informants.[48]

That being said, during my fieldwork, I heard a Tibetan scholar from another institution suggest that the output of ARPI monastic scholars at Namdroling might be tainted by a slight bias towards upholding Nyingma positions. When I put this query to a group of ARPI scholars at Namdroling in August 2022, they said that they had heard such criticism of their projects before, including from certain academics at Western universities. However, they defended the impartiality and rigour of their work, explaining that their supervising professors had taught them to always follow the sources rather than to trust traditional authorities. They noted, in addition, that within their own monastery they had in fact received the opposite criticism. Certain *khenpos* had expressed displeasure with their work precisely because they had challenged traditional Nyingma understandings.[49]

The experience of the ARPI scholars suggests a possible trajectory for other monasteries in the wider milieu. At Namdroling there was, admittedly, high-level support for the research programme from the time it was founded. This was in part due to the regulations

written for the *shedra* in 1987 and endorsed by Penor Rinpoche (1932–2009), the founder of Namdroling Monastery, which specified that graduates of the nine-year programme should engage in research as a condition of receiving the title of *khenpo*.[50] Nonetheless, even allowing for the support that existed from the outset, I was told during fieldwork that certain senior figures at Namdroling remained suspicious of the research programme at first, not least because they were concerned that traditional understandings were being questioned. However, they were gradually won over when they saw the quality of the new academic books being published in the name of the *shedra*. They also may have observed that, contrary to their worries, the research projects were not in fact undermining the religious faith of the monastic community. As such, although the monasteries of the Geluk order have not yet taken the decisive steps pioneered at Namdroling, Dzongsar, and Shechen, this anecdotal evidence suggests that the internal opposition to taking those steps might dissolve soon after they do so.

Even if the stage is reached when genuine academic-style research is widespread in Tibetan Buddhist monasteries, variations on the same bureaucratic obstacles to accreditation already discussed earlier in this article will then arise. Indeed, there is currently no prospect of the ARPI scholars receiving accredited PhDs. As with the challenges associated with accrediting BAs and MAs, however, these challenges may in theory be surmountable in India if trade-offs are carefully navigated. Some of the Tibetan Buddhist institutions that are independently accredited in India—or that are affiliated to SSU—already offer PhD programmes, including CIHTS.[51] Moreover, in 2023, a first batch of candidates was awarded PhD degrees at the Dalai Lama Institute, which used to be affiliated to the University of Mysore and is now affiliated the University of Bangalore. The Dalai Lama Institute does not offer programmes on the Buddhist subjects of traditional monastic education, but it does focus on Tibetan language and literature, among other fields. This shows that it is not in itself impossible for Tibetans to receive PhDs in India, even for theses that are written in Tibetan and that relate to areas in which monastic scholars might be able to gain academic expertise. Of course, just as for taught degrees, universities might have all manner of rules and regulations governing the conduct of PhD research, but monasteries could in theory conform to these requirements, just as some have already done for taught degrees. It is therefore not inconceivable that a monk in the early years of his education at Sera Je today may, in a few decades' time, be a leading figure in Buddhist Studies, bearing the titles of *Geshe Lharampa*, BA Hons, MA, and PhD (Sera Je, University of Mysore).

5. Conclusions

This article has described Sera Je's BA programmes and contextualised their accreditation by the University of Mysore within the longer history of efforts to gain academic accreditation for Tibetan Buddhist monastic educational programmes in India. It has shown that the norms of the Indian university system in general, and the requirements of specific universities in particular, make it impossible for those programmes to receive academic accreditation directly. Accreditation is only possible when major curricular changes are adopted that bring those programmes in line with standardised curricular rubrics. Since 1959, most Tibetan Buddhist monasteries in India have judged that the advantages of gaining accreditation are outweighed by the disadvantages of accepting such changes, given that the preservation of traditional programmes of study is often a core part of their institutional identity and mission. This was the status quo before Sera Je's accreditation. However, Sera Je has managed to walk a fine line and has seemingly gained the advantages of accreditation without many of the attendant trade-offs. This has been achieved mainly through bureaucratic finesse. While Sera Je's BA curricula appear on paper to entail substantive changes to its traditional programme of monastic education, little will in fact change in practice.

The significance of this development has been discussed from various perspectives. For one, if Tibetan Buddhist monastics can attain accredited degrees even while studying their traditional programmes of education, they may find it easier to play a central role in

the academic and public discourse relating to their religion. This has the potential not only to benefit the monastics themselves and the Tibetan Buddhist religion but also to enrich academic discourse, not least in the field of Buddhist Studies, where rigorously trained monastics could bring to bear their wealth of knowledge. Second, the provision of such degrees may even play a role in ensuring the sustainable survival of traditional Tibetan Buddhist monastic education. Although it is not certain that Sera Je's affiliation to the University of Mysore will be replicable, there is at least a chance that other monasteries may succeed in following the same route and that Sera Je may come to be seen, in hindsight, as having pioneered a template that changed the status quo for Tibetan Buddhist monastic education in India.

After discussing Sera Je's BA programmes and suggesting that similar principles apply to the accreditation of MA programmes, this article has lastly examined PhD programmes. Such programmes will be necessary if Tibetan Buddhist monastics are to play a significant role in academia. However, a number of further challenges exist to the establishment and ultimate accreditation of such programmes. These arise in part due to the tension between the critical methodologies that underpin academic PhDs and the intellectual assumptions that ground traditional Tibetan Buddhist monastic education. It has been shown that there continues to be resistance to genuine academic research in certain Tibetan Buddhist monasteries in India. However, the example of ARPI suggests that such opposition may fade in the fullness of time. It is therefore possible—if bureaucratic obstacles can also be negotiated—that increasing numbers of Tibetan Buddhist monastics may start to receive accredited doctorates in their monasteries in the decades ahead.

Although this article has focused on India, several of the issues discussed have parallels in other countries where Tibetan Buddhist monastic education is widespread. In Nepal, as in India, it is currently impossible for traditional programmes of Tibetan Buddhist monastic education to be accredited directly. The Rangjung Yeshe Institute offers academic degrees, accredited by Kathmandu University, upon completion of programmes that include several modules corresponding to Tibetan Buddhist monastic education. However, these programmes are currently examined in English rather than in Tibetan, and the majority of students are international. Nonetheless, similar programmes may soon be accessible to Tibetan Buddhist monastics. During fieldwork in Kathmandu in May 2022, Khenpo Gyurme Tsultrim, a leading figure at Shechen Monastery, showed me the course materials for a prospective BA programme—examined in Tibetan and covering many of the same texts as traditional monastic curricula—to be offered at the Lumbini Buddhist University. In Bhutan, as Gyeltshen and Lopez (2021, p. 19ff) discuss, some effort has also gone into recognising Tibetan Buddhist monastic titles as formally equivalent to secular degrees. Meanwhile, in the People's Republic of China, there are currently no pathways for Tibetan Buddhist monastic educational programmes to receive full academic accreditation. However, a handful of Tibetan Buddhist institutions have the designation of "Buddhist Academy" (佛学院, *foxueyuan*) (see Terrone 2021, pp. 3–5). This allows some of them to offer quasi-academic qualifications that are recognised within the institutions overseen by the Buddhist Association of China.

Future academic research could fruitfully compare the situations in these different countries and thereby throw light on how Tibetan Buddhist monastic education as a whole is likely to evolve in the years ahead. What is certain is that these issues are not going away. Despite the notable successes in rebuilding institutions in recent decades, Tibetan Buddhist monastic education remains in an underlyingly fragile state as a result of the Chinese annexation of Tibet. Efforts to put it on a firmer footing never cease. Given that universities are among the defining institutions of the modern world, possessing deep social legitimacy, Tibetan Buddhist monastic leaders are sure to keep trying to bring some of that prestige and stability to their own institutions. Indeed, these issues apply even beyond Tibetan Buddhism, as demonstrated, for example, by Dhammasami (2018, p. 171ff) in his historical study of monastic education in Thailand and Burma. The question of how

to negotiate the boundary between traditional monastic education and modern academic education continues to be one of the key challenges in contemporary Buddhism.

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Notes

1 Throughout this article, the *Treasury of Lives* system of transliterating Tibetan terms is used. This system can be found through the following link (accessed on 8 September 2024): https://treasuryoflives.org/standards-and-guidelines. In accordance with this system, "Sera Je" is written rather than "Sera Jey", despite the latter being the English transliteration used by the monastery itself on its official website.

2 A report about the launch of the programmes can be found on the official website of the Central Tibetan Administration (accessed on 8 September 2024): https://tibet.net/sera-jey-monastery-jointly-with-university-of-mysore-landmarks-beginning-of-ba-honorary-program-for-buddhist-monks/.

3 This university is also known as the Sampurnanand Sanskrit Vishwavidyalaya.

4 As these documents are not publicly available and often lack full publication information, they will not be listed in the references provided at the end of this article. Instead, the titles of such documents will be given in these endnotes.

5 See Datta (2017, p. 134ff) for the basic institutional structure of the Indian higher education system. See Sharma (2013) for a fuller history of India's University Grants Commission. Information about the National Assessment and Accreditation Council can be found on the following official website (accessed on 8 September 2024): https://www.education.gov.in/university-and-higher-education-1.

6 Dreyfus thus does not treat writing (*rtsom*) as a core scholastic practice in Tibetan Buddhist monastic education, despite it being incorporated into the renowned triad of "*chad rtsod rtsom*—exposition, debate and composition. The exclusion can be attributed to the fact that Dreyfus" focus is the Geluk monastic educational model, in which writing was historically marginalised, as Dreyfus (2003, p. 120ff) himself discusses explicitly.

7 For example, Sera Je is more self-consciously traditional, which can be seen in how it describes itself on its official English-language website (https://www.serajeymonastery.org/monastery/1-monastery—accessed on 8 September 2024): "Sera Jey Monastery follows its centuries old tradition and culture dating back to its great period in Tibet, to this present day without much significant change. As such the monastery continues to exist in a typical Tibetan Gelukpa monastic tradition to this day". In contrast, on its official website, the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics in Dharamsala affirms that it was founded with the purpose of combining both traditional and modern education (https://ibd.instituteofbuddhistdialectics.org/about-us/purpose/—accessed on 8 September 2024): "Before the founding of the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics (IBD), children in Tibetan schools in exile mainly focused on modern education, while monks and nuns in exile engaged only in religious studies and activities. There was no Tibetan institute providing a combination of traditional and modern education aimed at addressing the new educational needs that arose for many young Tibetans in the upheaval of exile. Our innovative purpose has been to offer both traditional Tibetan disciplines and modern subjects, combining the inner and outer sciences".

8 The full list, given on a certificate reproduced in Ranjan and Tshering (2020, p. 115), is (1) Curricular Aspects, (2) Teaching–Learning and Evaluation, (3) Research, Innovations, and Extension, (4) Infrastructure and Learning Resources, (5) Student Support and Progression, (6) Governance, Leadership, and Management, and (7) Institutional Values and Best Practices.

9 However, no equivalent emic distinction exists between philosophy and psychology. Classic works of Indo-Tibetan Buddhism, such as Śāntideva *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, include both, without any sharp distinction between them.

10 https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/bengaluru/karnataka-reverts-to-3-year-ug-course-scraps-neps-4-yr-degree/articleshow/109961046.cms (accessed on 8 September 2024).

11 This webpage was accessed on 8 September 2024. Official documents relating to the three BA programmes at Sera Je can also be downloaded directly through the following link (accessed on 8 September 2024): https://uni-mysore.ac.in/PMEB/pm_admin/coursepdf/Sera%20Jey-B.A(Hons.)%20Ancient%20Tibetan%20Language,%20Ancient%20Philosophy,%20Ancient%20Psychology.pdf.

12 The texts listed in the model curricula for the first year of the Ancient Philosophy and Ancient Psychology programmes are actually identical, with the only difference being which texts in the column labelled "Discipline Core" are classified as Major or Minor. In the first year of the Ancient Psychology programme, "Mind and Mental Factors" etc. are therefore listed as Major, whereas "Tenet System" etc. are listed as Minor. However, the model curricula for the second year of the two programmes do not share all of their modules in common.

13 The BA in Ancient Tibetan Language is not considered in detail in this article, as its core subject matter is not the canonical Buddhist topics that are central to traditional Tibetan Buddhist monastic education.

14 At the time of publication in September 2024, only the model curricula for the first year and second years of the BA courses had been completed.

15 Probably the most important interpretative method employed in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition—and in the Buddhist tradition in general—is to distinguish between canonical texts of definitive meaning (*nges don*) and those of provisional meaning (*drang don*).

16 Bhutan, for example, as a sovereign nation, offers a formal status to Tibetan Buddhist monastic education that eludes it in India, albeit not full academic accreditation. The Bhutan Accreditation Council has designed the Bhutan Qualifications Framework in order to recognise religious and academic degrees in parallel (see Gyeltshen and Lopez 2021, pp. 21–22).

17 However, this was not the only goal. As Samdhong Rinpoche, the former principal of CIHTS and former Kalong Tripa of the Tibetan Government in Exile, recounts in a letter reproduced in the front matter of souvenir book celebrating CIHTS's 50th anniversary (Samten 2018), CIHTS had four specific objectives when it was founded: "preservation of Tibetan culture, restoration of the lost Indian ancient texts from Tibetan sources, offering alternative opportunities to Indian Himalayan-region students for higher studies who used to go for education centres in Tibet in the past, and to bring ancient monastic education into modern universities' academic system".

18 That is not to suggest that this new curriculum was imposed upon the Tibetans. Many reformers in the Tibetan Buddhist milieu thought the new curriculum improved upon traditional programmes from pre-1959 Tibet, especially due to the inclusion of modern subjects like English and due to the fact that students from all of the four major orders of Tibetan Buddhism studied alongside each other.

19 Curricular documents for CIHTS can be found on the following webpage (accessed on 8 September 2024): https://cihts.ac.in/syllabus-course/.

20 The monastic education of the other Tibetan Buddhist orders was not quite as standardised before 1959, and the length of programmes varied.

21 The first semester of the academic year at CIHTS thus begins in July. In contrast, most Tibetan Buddhist monasteries begin their monastic educational programmes at some point after the holiday taken for the Tibetan new year (*lo gsar*), which tends to fall in February or March.

22 There are also some memorisation exams at CIHTS, just as in traditional Tibetan Buddhist monastic colleges. However, for most of CIHTS's history, formal debate has not been emphasised despite its central role in traditional monastic pedagogy. When I visited CIHTS in July 2022, Mehar Singh Negi, who teaches in the Kagyu department, explained that a debate class had recently been introduced but that there was not yet any formal debate examination.

23 The students of the four major orders attend the Moolshastra class together and then break off into separate classes to study the commentarial texts of their individual orders. CIHTS also offers a programme for students of the Bon religion.

24 The study of English or Hindi, for example, can help the students of CIHTS not only to engage in academic exchanges with people at other universities but also navigate Indian society and the Indian economy more effectively after graduation.

25 When it grants affiliation, the Sampurnanand Sanskrit University makes explicit that its goal is to propagate Sanskrit study. For example, in a letter reproduced in Ranjan and Tshering (2020, p. 104) that discusses the granting of affiliation to the Sikkim Institute of Higher Nyingma Studies in 1983, the Registrar of SSU writes that the "University [i.e., SSU] feels that affiliation of this Institute would be helpful in promoting Sanskrit studies in that state".

26 While the study of Sanskrit was promoted by Sakya Paṇḍita (1182–1251) (see Gold 2007, pp. 12–13) and has continued to be studied by certain figures even in the early 20th century (see Jackson 2003, p. 45ff and Pitkin 2022, p. 97ff), throughout Tibetan history, it has never been emphasised at the heart of monastic education. Many of Tibetan Buddhism's greatest scholars and practitioners have had little knowledge of it.

27 An English version of the curriculum can be viewed on the following webpage (accessed on 8 September 2024): https://namdroling.net/Portal/Page/Academic-Curriculum-NNI.

28 The other four treatises attributed to Maitreya are the *Māhayānasūtrālaṃkāra* (*Theg pa chen po mdo sde'i rgyan*), *Madhyāntavibhāga* (*Dbu dang mtha' rnam par 'byed pa*), *Dharmadharmatāvibhāga* (*Chos dang chos nyid rnam par 'byed pa*), and *Uttaratantraśāstra* (*Rgyud bla ma'i bstan bcos*).

29 A brief history of the Central Institute of Buddhist Studies is provided on its official website (accessed on 8 September 2024): https://cibs.ac.in/historical-background/.

[30] This is detailed on the fifth page of the preamble to an internal publication detailing the syllabus at the Karma Śrī Nālandā Institute. This publication was produced in 2016 and is entitled *Karma Śrī Nālandā nang don rig pa'i ches mtho'i gtugs lag slob gnyer khang slob tshan: Karmae Shri Nalanda Institute (For Higher Buddhist Studies) (Syllabus)*.

[31] Information about the Central Institute of Himalayan Cultural Studies and its syllabi can be found on its official website (accessed on 8 September 2024): https://cihcs.edu.in/syllabus.php.

[32] The Sikkim Institute of Higher Nyingma Studies is a Nyingma institution, while the Karma Śrī Nālandā Institute belongs to the Karma Kagyu order. This affiliation is reflected in the details of their respective curricula, with the former including several texts by Mipam Rinpoche (1846–1912) and the latter including several by the 8th Karmapa Mikyo Dorje (1507–1554). The Central Institute for Buddhist Studies and the Central Institute for Himalayan Culture Studies both offer classes for all four major orders, like CIHTS.

[33] Indeed, Gurung (2019, p. 51) notes that Tsurphu Monastery—the seat of the Karmapas inside of Tibet and thus the approximate predecessor of Rumtek Monastery—did not have a *shedra* before 1959, despite efforts by the 16th Karmapa to establish one in the 1940s. Thus, even the Karma Śrī Nālandā Institute has not been obliged to uphold the traditional curriculum of an antecedent institution. This can perhaps help to explain why its leaders have been prepared to accept the trade-offs required for accreditation even while many exile Tibetan monastic leaders have not.

[34] As can be seen on its official website (https://cibs.ac.in/mission-and-objectives/—accessed on 8 September 2024), the Central Institute of Buddhist Studies in Ladakh includes as one of its explicit objectives: "Making the Institute a Research Centre of Excellence and providing PhD programs in all the subjects available in the Institute in order to provide opportunity to the poor students of Ladakh". Moreover, the official website of the Central Institute of Himalayan Culture Studies records: "The then Department of Culture, Government of India took the initiative to establish an institute of Himalayan Culture Studies to help the people of the region in preservation and promotion of their cultural identity and the growth of traditional arts, crafts and sciences and other genres of indigenous knowledge" (https://www.cihcs.edu.in/history.php—accessed on 8 September 2024).

[35] This information is contained in an internally published booklet with the following title: '*Bras gzhung snga 'gyur rnying ma'i ches mtho'i gtsug lag slob gnyer khang: Prospectus/Syllabus Sikkim Institute of Higher Nyingma Studies*.

[36] Information about the "Specialized Programmes" at the University of Mysore can be found through the following link (accessed on 8 September 2024): https://www.uni-mysore.ac.in/PMEB/specialized%20programs.html. It was in fact the Dalai Lama Institute, an institution located south west of Bangalore, that first tested this model of affiliation with the University of Mysore via the Specialized Programme. The Dalai Lama Institute offers Tibetan-language degrees but does not teach traditional monastic education.

[37] Buddhist Studies departments at a small number of international universities, including the University of Hong Kong, sometimes accept monastic degrees as equivalent to BAs and allow monastics to directly enter MA programmes if other conditions are met.

[38] This approach can be seen, for example, on the website of the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics (https://ibd.instituteofbuddhistdialectics.org/educational-programs—accessed on 8 September 2024), where its programmes are described as "BA Level", "MA Level", and so on. This language is sometimes mimicked in the academic literature. For example, Schneider (2022), in the title of her article, describes the *geshema* as the "doctoral degree" in Buddhist studies.

[39] While there is no legal problem with the use of the word "Institute", which is the English nomenclature adopted by certain influential *shedras*, such as the Dzongsar Institute and the Ngagyur Nyingma Institute, the word "university" is regulated by Indian law, as CIHTS discovered when it briefly renamed itself the "Central University of Tibetan Studies" (CUTS) in 2009 despite only being a "Deemed University". In response, the Supreme Court of India issued a temporary ruling in 2010 forbidding institutions other than full universities from using the term "university" in their official names. Interestingly, on its official website (https://www.serajeymonastery.org/—accessed on 8 September 2024) and in its English-language publications, Sera Je skirts around this rule by describing itself as the "Sera Jey *Monastic* University for Advanced Buddhist Studies and Practice" (my italics). However, in its application to become affiliated with the University of Mysore, it named itself the "Sera Jey Monastic Institute".

[40] As Lempert (2012, p. 130) observes, there is a deferential convention whereby reforming efforts are often attributed to the Dalai Lama. This sometimes makes it difficult to be sure of the extent to which the Dalai Lama himself has been the driver of a given reform. That said, the Dalai Lama has indeed taken a notable interest in educational matters, both spiritual and secular, since coming into exile.

[41] The motif of "the 21st century Buddhist" has been a common refrain in the Dalai Lama's speeches, interviews, and writings, when he has spoken about the importance of engaging in the wider world. For example, in a speech given in 2009 (https://www.dalailama.com/news/2009/be-buddhists-of-21st-century-bring-reform-dalai-lama—accessed on 8 September 2024), he said, "Let us be Buddhists of the 21st century, acting as harbingers of positive change".

[42] Concern about the potential corrupting influence of degrees is voiced not only in relation to accredited academic degrees. During fieldwork, I spoke with a number of senior monastics who worried that younger monks were sometimes attached to the prestige associated even with their monastic titles.

[43] Geluk monasteries in India today sometimes succeed in attracting new monks from certain Himalayan regions, such as Ladakh and Arunachel Pradesh, that have a historical Geluk presence. However, the potential monastic novices in regions such as Bhutan and Sikkim tend to belong to other orders, especially the Nyingma and the Kagyu.

[44] Monasteries inside of Tibet also find it increasingly difficult to attract and keep monks, which shows that the issue is not only salient in exile monasteries in India. Caple (2019) discusses this extensively, especially in the fifth and sixth chapters of her book. She writes (Caple 2019, p. 140): "Although there is little they can do about macro-level changes such as demographic transition, the monastic leadership—reincarnate lamas and senior monks—is nevertheless perceived to exercise a degree of agency in maintaining monastic populations". The same could be said of the leadership of Tibetan Buddhist monasteries in India, who imagine that the taking of proactive steps—such as the gaining of academic accreditation—might play a role in arresting the decline in the monastic population.

[45] One advantage that Sera Je had when seeking affiliation to the University of Mysore was that it already had an accredited school up to Class 10, affiliated to the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE). Few Tibetan Buddhist monasteries have such an accredited school, and even those monastic schools that do have some form of accreditation usually only go up to Class 8.

[46] These regulations are titled *Rgyal spyi'i dge ldan lhan tshogs gzhung chen bka' pod lnga'i rigs gcig rkang 'dzin nyams zhib las rim gyi sgrig gzhi*.

[47] The Geluk order is run in quite a hierarchical fashion, meaning that individual Geluk monasteries feel obliged to conform with regulations that are disseminated by Geluk leaders and governing committees.

[48] Even beyond the disciplines of Tibetan and Buddhist studies, there is scope for traditionally trained monastic scholars to make substantive academic contributions. This is especially true in relation to the broad areas of philosophy and psychology, which, as has been discussed in relation to Sera Je's BA programmes, are two academic disciplines to which the content of Tibetan Buddhist monastic education closely corresponds. In regard to the former, there is increasing recognition that the classical Buddhist philosophy in which Tibetan monastics are experts can bring valuable perspectives to contemporary philosophical debates. To give just one recent example, *Knowing Illusion* by The Yakherds (2021) attempts to bring a Tibetan debate on Madhyamaka into contemporary discourse. The Yakherds (2021, p. 1) argue that the questions in this debate "are relevant to the history of epistemology in the European tradition as well, and to contemporary epistemology". Notably, The Yakherds (2021, p. vii) are a collective of scholars that included traditionally trained figures, such as Tashi Tsering and Geshé Yeshes Thabkhas. As for psychology and mind sciences, the contributions that Buddhist thought can make to such disciplines has been one recurring subject in dialogues between the Dalai Lama and scientists organised by the Mind and Life Institute (see e.g., Jinpa 2010, p. 875). That being said, the likes of Samuel (2014, p. 563) have expressed scepticism about this dialogue, writing: "It can seem as if there is a limited potential here for generating a real encounter between Buddhism and contemporary science".

[49] They offered, as an example, a passage in one ARPI monograph in which doubt was thrown upon Mipam Rinpoche's interpretation of Rongzompa's views on the topic of whether gnosis (*ye shes*) is still present when one attains Buddhahood. See Almogi (2009) for a discussion of this very issue. A number of *khenpos* at Namdroling were apparently disgruntled that the ARPI scholars had ventured to diverge even slightly from Mipam Rinpoche's interpretation, given that he is treated as an enlightened authority in the present-day Nyingma order.

[50] These regulations are contained within a booklet entitled *Snga 'gyur mtho slob mdo sngags rig pa'i 'byung gnas gling gi sgrig gzhi rtsa khrims chen po*.

[51] As explained on its official website (cihts.ac.in/ph-d-awardees/—accessed on 8 September 2024), PhD research can be conducted in the following subjects at CIHTS: (1) Indian Buddhist Philosophy, (2) Tibetan Buddhist Philosophy, (3) Tibetan Language and Literature, (4) Tibetan History and Culture, (5) Tibetan Buddhist Philosophy (Restoration in Sanskrit), (6) Sowa-Rigpa, and (7) Tibetan Fine Arts.

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