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Female Agency in Buddhism and Hinduism: Methodological Reflections and Collective Commitments

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Introduction

In July 2018, Professor Ute Hüsken invited twelve scholars to the University of Heidelberg to participate in a collaborative three-day workshop on *The Dynamics of Female Agency in Buddhism and Hinduism*. The participants came from universities across Europe and North America, each with varied research specialisms and disciplinary backgrounds, and all with experience of different multinational field-sites. Although many of us did not know each other before attending, the workshop quickly developed into a vital and dynamic space for scholarly engagement, where lasting research relationships and critical friendships were born. More often than not, the discussions (in the paper sessions and in less public conversations) turned to method and methodology. Each of us openly shared the joy and the difficulty we had as researchers, both in terms of the practicalities of undertaking ethnographic or historical work on the topic of female agency in Buddhism and Hinduism, and in making scholarly sense of our participant's lives. In particular, specific questions arose about our relationships to participants, and the problems some of us were having in applying existing analytical and theoretical frameworks to our empirical data.

At the time of the workshop, I was in the process of completing a monograph based on several years' fieldwork with Buddhist women in Britain, particularly those who had taken ordination with various lineages and movements. In the book, *Women in British Buddhism* (Starkey, 2020), I gave attention to the methods I used to collect data, however I felt as if some of the complexities of my research were glossed over, presented as linear and tidy, and as if the problems that arose were neatly resolved over 200 pages. This was far from the reality and, at the Heidelberg workshop, I was given the space to air my methodological and theoretical concerns and to think more deeply and collaboratively about them. Following the workshop, collective conversations continued between a group of us who had attended, either over the phone or by email, sharing questions that we had about our findings and what they meant, and commenting on each other's works-in-progress. This chapter takes these

conversations on method and methodology, initiated at the Heidelberg workshop and continued beyond, as its starting point. It is a consciously reflective piece drawing on my research experience, woven together with insights from each of the other scholars featured in this edited collection. As part of our ongoing conversations and in preparation for this chapter, I discussed a series of questions I had about method and methodology with the other contributors[1.] They responded either by email, or over the telephone, and they also later commented on drafts of this chapter, furthering and deepening the analysis. The questions I asked centred on the principal methods each scholar employed in their research, their definitions of agency and any issues they faced in understanding their participants' perspectives on this topic. We discussed the theoretical and analytical frameworks we employed to make sense of our data, and whether we perceived any tensions between our scholarly assumptions and our participants' perspectives. Throughout these conversations, I was alert to points of similarity and difference between us, and in particular, I tried to establish whether we shared any specific methodological commitments, despite our range of disciplinary backgrounds, geographical foci, research areas and national academic habits and traditions. Reflecting this detailed and collaborative discussion of the research process, the purpose of this chapter is to untangle some of the key methodological issues we face in studying female agency in Buddhism and Hinduism. Throughout this chapter, I do not always offer definitive answers to the methodological questions or conundrums posed. Instead, I demonstrate how I and others have responded to issues as they have arisen in our fieldwork encounters, drawing our experiences together in dialogue with other scholarship on feminist method. Examining feminist discussions about method and methodology provides a fruitful starting-point to think through the process of research and the ways we might engage with participants, our own positionality and our politics. Each of the scholars I engaged in preparing for this chapter describes themselves as feminist and this personal political commitment inspired our choice of subject matter and the ways we approached our research. However, the impact of these choices and the ways in which they shift and change over the course of research and writing is a key consideration here.

I have structured the chapter in three main sections. The first explores how we as researchers have centred women's voices in our scholarship and some of the challenges we have

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[1] This distinction between method and methodology is inspired by Sandra Harding (1987: 2-3) where she distinguishes between epistemology as a theory of knowledge, method as the practical ways in which research data is collected, and methodology as 'a theory and analysis of how research does or should proceed'.

encountered in upholding this methodological and ethical commitment. The second examines the politics of feminism in the process of researching the lives of Buddhist and Hindu women, the tensions that arise in working with participants who may not share our political commitments, and the ways in which this has affected us. The final section focuses on the concept of agency. In particular, I am interested in what happens in our research process when the use of this term does not always neatly reflect our participants' realities and their soteriological aims, as we perceive them. To conclude, I outline a series of shared principles, developed through our collective conversations. These are brought together to form a broad methodological framework, designed to enhance our approach to research with and for women from Buddhist and Hindu traditions, but also beyond.

Throughout this chapter, I deliberately engage the language of emotion, employing terms such as 'I feel', 'I experience' or 'I wonder'. This is to counter what I, and others, see as the dominant rationalising tendency within the academy.[2] The emotions that arose over the course of my research shaped the encounters that I had, and also the ways I analysed and wrote about them. In navigating this sometimes tricky terrain, I have been influenced by the foundational work on emotions from within the discipline of anthropology, for as Svašek (2005: 1) argues, 'emotions have always been intrinsic to the production of anthropological knowledge'. 'Feelings' have been of particular concern to feminist scholars, and as Blakely highlights, 'emotions...are an untapped resource of information, lending insight into the research process (and) the findings of the study' (Blakely, 2007: 60-61).[3] Navigating emotions and balancing the practicalities and pressures of research interactions is an ongoing process, operating beyond the publication of the final, written piece. My aim is that this chapter should be seen as part of a developing, multi-disciplinary conversation reflecting on the business of research into female agency in Buddhism and Hinduism, and the ways that we, as scholars, engage emotionally and practically with the women whose lives we focus our attention on.

Centring Women's Voices

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[2] See, for example, arguments within the collection focusing on anthropology and emotions edited by Milton and Svašek (2005).

[3] See also a forthcoming chapter by Abby Day on the value of thinking carefully about researchers' emotions in the field, including the emotional responses of anxiety, dislike and distaste.

What was abundantly clear, from the very start of our collective conversations, was that each of us is deeply committed to putting our participants (who are mainly, although not exclusively, women) at the centre of the research and writing process. Although, as researchers, we are influenced by our specific disciplinary affiliations (history, religious studies, textual analysis, anthropology, sociology), almost all of us engaged in medium-long term ethnographic fieldwork, building relationships with individuals and small groups of participants, often over several years. This typically involved spending time within established (or establishing) religious communities (particularly monastic communities), both large and small, in the US/Europe or India and Nepal.[4] In our research, each of us used the technique of multiple formal and informal interviewing (ranging from structured to unstructured approaches), observations and participation, but (in particular for Amy Langenberg, Ute Hüsken, Shefali More, and Valeria Gazizova) it also involved bringing together textual, archival, media, and historical analysis with contemporary ethnographic fieldwork. Ethnography, as we understand it, is a process, 'in which the researcher is immersed in a social setting for some time to observe and listen' (Bryman, 2004: 267) and this idea of 'listening' featured in each of our articulations of how we gathered data, and how we ensured that our participants were at the heart of the analysis. This is by no means a new or original idea, and each of us have, no doubt, been shaped by the generations of feminist researchers who have prioritised women's voices in research, particularly since the 1970s (Kitzinger, 2004, Devault and Gross, 2012). Still, as Valeria Gazizova exemplified: 'my central focus, and the starting point of my research remains the local theorizing, the voices, and self-definitions of my interlocutors'. This was echoed by Ina Ilkama, who in undertaking research on the South Indian ritual practice of *kolu* stated: 'I seek to step back, and take for real, the worldviews of my interlocutors.' Given the types of ethnographic data gathering that we engaged with as a group of researchers, it is perhaps not surprising that centralising our participant's voices would feature so strongly in our description of the research process. Yet, as Kitzinger (2004) indicates, 'understanding what is involved in such listening is, for many of us, no longer so straightforward.' The aim of this section is to explore this process of centralising women's narratives, voices and experiences, and some of the challenges we encountered when doing so.

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[4] Although the term 'monastic' is typically used across Anglophone Buddhist communities, there is some disagreement as to what it means, as in practice it incorporates different levels of religious commitment and a range of vows, lifestyles and living situations (Starkey, 2014).

From our collective conversations, the idea of 'deep listening' as a method of gathering and analysing data with women, clearly emerged (DeVault and Gross, 2012). This approach involved an ongoing process of trying to understand and appreciate women's ideas and perspectives, attempting to really listen to what they were telling us about their lives, hopes and dreams, including in communication beyond words. More often, this meeting would start with a research question or questions, but we were open to these being changed as the ethnographic encounter progressed and what was important to our interlocutors was brought to the fore. At the very beginning, this typically involved meeting our participants where they chose, observing daily life (where we were granted access), as well as being part of more specialised ritual occasions and community events. For some of us, our research involved spending time in monastic or specifically bounded religious communities, taking part in the activities of daily living that occurred. We each varied between 'observer-as-participant' and 'participant-as-observer' during the fieldwork encounters, and certainly in my own research, this shifting positionality helped get a sense of the lives of my interlocutors, and the realities of communal monastic settings (Knott, 2005: 246). In centring participation as a means to pay greater attention to women's lives, I was not alone in offering something of myself to the research encounter. From our collective conversations, the idea that we might volunteer to support fledgling communities was a common experience. This might include helping with domestic tasks, practicing meditation or engaging in communal rituals, or even sharing our scholarly expertise about religious texts and histories with our interlocutors. Participant observation in the research field is a well-established anthropological method of encouraging in-depth learning about communities (DeWalt and DeWalt, 2010), and we often prioritised this across our scholarly encounters.

However, spending time in monasteries or nunneries (when one has not committed personally to that lifestyle) is a particular type of ethnographic encounter, and one that demands careful attention. I felt that practising 'deep listening' in this environment was impossible without participating, which I did to a greater or lesser extent at each of my field-sites in Britain. Although I did not take ordination myself, or live in a single monastic institution for long periods (a method which helped shape Joanna Cook's 2010 study of meditation in northern Thai monasteries, for example), I made sure to spend time with the various communities where I was allowed, doing daily chores and engaging in communal meditation and ritual practices, including eating together. In many ways, some of my most useful conversations occurred when I was not officially interviewing but when I had my hands in the washing up

bowl - cleaning pots and pans in the communal kitchens with other women.[5] I found this to be a reflective time with each of us focused on the repetitive and, indeed, meditative motion of washing, rinsing, drying, putting away - a familiar domestic task, even in a more alien, monastic environment. It was when some of my participants felt they could share quiet details of life, and where I was fully committed, with them, to the task at hand and the words they were saying. This was, for me, careful listening in action. Although I sometimes found it difficult to record the thoughts and responses that I had during these periods, it was a time to really engage and be present with what I was being told in that moment instead of worrying about whether I was recording interviews accurately, or what questions I was going to ask next.

Being an interviewer, particularly when you are starting out on your research journey, can be a stressful experience and one where you are keen to prove yourself to your participants in order to facilitate a smooth process. However, this pressure does not always create the most effective interview environment or generate the most useful data. In speaking to women in a more informal setting (such as whilst doing a quiet, repetitive task) I was able to ask questions as they naturally arose and I was able to respond more honestly, even if I had not envisaged these questions at the start of the research. As DeVault and Gross (2012: p. 220) identify, 'active listening means more than just physically hearing or reading; rather, it is a fully engaged practice that involves not only taking in information via speech, written words, or signs but also actively processing it. It means allowing that information to affect you, baffle you, haunt you, make you uncomfortable, and take you on unexpected detours'. Active, deep or even (to put a Buddhist spin on it) *mindful* listening, including at the kitchen sink, was one way of uncovering women's stories and narratives.

In Buddhist monasteries, particularly during periods of meditation and formal silence, this was a useful time to begin to process, structure and observe my 'communities of practice' and how women operated within them (Wenger, 1998: 73). It wasn't always easy for me to undertake long periods of silent meditation, and there was a physical toll on my body, rising early, sitting in one place, watching my mind jump about, eating less than usual, or at restricted times, even if I was only engaging in these practices within a short time-frame.

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[5] In her work on Anglican lay women, Abby Day (2017: 167) deftly discusses the impact of working with women on routine tasks, including washing up, as an integral part of the research process.

Although I rarely left the field without craving fast food, the familiar drone of the TV, or a mindless scroll through my social media feeds, I distinctly remember that these immersive, communal experiences provided a glimpse into the challenges that my participants had faced, particularly in their early religious lives and when settling into the monastic routine. By engaging with long periods of silent meditation and the embodied ritual practices that one typically observes in Buddhist monastic environments, this was vital to help me appreciate my participants lives and choices, and also supported me to look beyond the words of an interview, which DeVault and Gross (2012) identify as an important component of 'deep listening'. As Amy Langenberg also discovered in conducting her research with young women in Nepal (this volume), it was making sense of her participants' laughter and embodied displays of physical, teenage closeness which helped give a greater understanding of their social positionality and cultural conditioning. This was not explained in words but in action, and it is only in spending time within communities, observing beyond the formal interview that we are able to really begin to get a sense of social and cultural realities. Critically, Melyn McKay highlighted in work on the MaBaTha movement in Myanmar, that focusing on women's roles allowed a greater comprehension of the group 'as a whole' and facilitated access to events and discussions that might ordinarily have been denied. This was also supported by Iselin Frydenlund. Therefore, women's experiences were 'a lens through which we (can) explore other phenomena —not only as a means of understanding the experiences of women'.

Following the initial ethnographic encounters on returning to the office, part of the deep listening for us all involved long and in many ways, painstaking, work with interview audio recordings and transcripts. Being in the field is not easy, but neither is retreating from it, and I ended up memorising large tracts of interview data and field notes that I can still recall several years later - not purposefully - but because I had listened, read and re-listened and re-read my interlocutors' words many times over. For many of my participants, most of whom had high levels of education, I also sent copies of transcripts and draft chapters, and these were annotated, amended and corrected by them. My intention was to allow the women to take some ownership of the writing process and the finished product, but also to help me correct any assumptions that I might have written in. This was a risk, and I was worried that my participants might edit out some of the more critical statements that they might have made in favour of a more circumspect 'party line.' Indeed, this did happen on occasion and I had to accept it, despite wanting to include some of the more radical 'off-the-cuff' comments

that they had made. Yet, sending transcripts or involving participants in the writing process may well stand only to validate existing perspectives, for not every participant will want to, or will feel able to comment on scholarly work, even if we have been genuine in our attempts to include them (Kitzinger, 2004). However, in this case, this interactive approach helped to deepen the trust that had developed between myself and several of my participants, leading to a more productive working relationship in the long term. This is especially important when you are working with women in smaller, sometimes more socially and politically vulnerable religious communities.

As valuable as this approach might have been, it does require ongoing critical attention. As Kitzinger (2004) states:

> As feminists, we know that women's voices do not always tell 'truths': memories can be fallible, stories can be embroidered, participants may be more interested in creating a good impression than in literal accuracy, speakers contradict themselves and sometimes deliberately lie.

She goes on to question whether there is always a direct link between women's 'voices', 'experience' and 'reality', and whether we always prioritise some perspectives over others (Kitzinger, 2004). In my experience, some ethnographic encounters are easier than others - they run more smoothly, we are welcomed, we get on well with the community and with individuals (including gatekeepers), and we are given open access. Others are prickly, rushed, we might not feel on top of our game, and have other things on our minds. Our participants may seem not to want to engage with us at any deeper level. In the latter case, we might feel like we have failed, and that we just cannot get to the heart of what our interlocutors experience is. As a result of this perceived negative research interaction, the data we collect might feel somehow thinner and weaker. Perhaps, even, these feelings of 'failure' are gendered in and of themselves. However, as Thwaites (2017: 5) cautions, 'equal and cosy sharing in interviewing' has been somewhat mythologised, particularly by feminist researchers. It may be setting us up for failure to consistently posit this type of interaction as the gold standard, for research realities are often far more complex.

The idea of whether our participants always tell the truth is one that I gave careful thought to in my research, particularly when I was asking women to discuss their experiences of religious conversion. Each of them had come to Buddhism in adulthood rather than being born into a Buddhist family and although I had originally taken a chronological approach to

question design, I quickly abandoned this when I realised that the specific details I was looking for were not forthcoming, either in formal interviews or in less formal conversations. Many of the women's stories sounded the same (despite some differences in biography) and they employed similar words, phrases, and narratives to tell me about their initial engagement with Buddhism and Buddhist groups. Instead of focusing on whether their stories contained 'truth' and trying to piece together a literal timeline that was not readily forthcoming, I decided to ask women to describe their 'spiritual journey.' In doing so, I was given a much more thematic story, focused around the specific Buddhist concepts of *dukkha*, *saṃvega* and *pasāda* (Starkey, 2020).[6] I followed Beckford (1978: 250) in assuming that the narratives that women shared reflected soteriological values that they held dear, both as individuals and as community members. This valorising of women's stories and narratives, whether or not they articulate an objective reality, was (to a greater or lesser extent) given priority across each of our ethnographic encounters. In this manner, I sidestepped striving to discern absolute 'truth' to emphasise instead the weaving together of a story. Furthermore, as Karen McCarthy Brown (1999: 352) explains:

> While I still care about factuality and freedom from bias, those standards are no longer the most demanding ones for my work. Over the years, I have come to understand anthropological fieldwork as something closer to a social art form than a social science. It involves a particular type of relationship, yet one that is subject to all the complexities and ambiguities of any other kind of human interaction.

However, two inter-related questions follow from our commitment to centering women's views. The first is: how should we make public the things that our participants tell us, many of which are fundamentally personal and private? The second is: in what ways do we balance the need for critical and theoretical analysis without putting our participants (or the relationships we develop with them) at risk? I can remember a very long interview I had with one female Buddhist monastic, where she said that our dialogue had been like a therapy session. She had discussed very honest and personal thoughts about her relationship with the monastic community she was living within and felt it was particularly cathartic to talk through experiences of religious conversion and monastic ordination which she had not shared openly before. In this moment, we felt connected, in a single conversation that lasted well over two hours. She was aware she was being interviewed for research but in the process

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[6] *Dukkha* usually translates to suffering or dissatisfaction, a cornerstone of the Buddha's teaching (Lopez, 2012: 108). *Saṃvega* refers to the upset that is experienced on observing *dukkha*, and *pasāda* is the sense of confidence in the pathway outlined by the Buddha to alleviate suffering (see Thanissaro, 1997).

of the interview, our interaction and relationship shifted. Her words and the meaning behind them most certainly directed how I presented the issues facing women in Buddhist monastic life, particularly in relation to their adaptation to communal living and tight disciplinary schedules.

Although she had given permission for me to record and write about her experiences in a public way, I had to consider very carefully how to include what I had learnt when it might expose her too much within a small and very identifiable community. In the subsequent published works, both to keep her safe and, so doing, to also preserve a longer term research relationship, I left some details out, wrote more generally (about 'a monastic' rather than pseudonyms), and shared some of the writing with her before it was finalised, offering the chance to change certain aspects. Yet, this inclusive and participant-focused approach is not always possible or desirable, not least because, arguably, we are not our participants' mouthpiece at the risk of scholarly criticality (Kitzinger and Wilkinson, 1997: 568). When relationships in the field develop and connections happen (which Ionescu (1998) calls, 'accelerated friendship'), it can feel uncomfortable to expose them in all their gory details. It is not easy to be critical when this might risk offending or alienating people we have connected with, grown to like and respect, and whom we want to have ongoing research relationships with.

While these affective relationships may develop (either in the short, or longer term) it remains our job to theorise and translate individual experiences in the field into critical analysis. From one feminist perspective, whilst women's experiences are the fulcrum of our work, they are 'insufficient in themselves' (Luff, 1999: 690, see also Day, forthcoming). For Tarini Bedi, however, working closely with the women of Shiv Sena, 'the story is theory.' Instead of perceiving the development of theory and critical analysis as somehow separate from the lived experiences of our participants, we should instead view our participants' stories as 'fundamentally theory building.' She explained further: '... the women I work with do not just tell me stories, but instead they have been building and reflecting theoretically and analytically on their lives long before I get to my site and long after I leave. So I feel as a feminist ethnographer that I have to pay attention not just to their voices but to their ability to push theoretical concepts like agency beyond what I, as the ethnographer believe to be agency.'

That being said, we often participate in a difficult balancing act between our participants' world and our scholarly world. In articulating her particular approach to this balancing act, Antoinette De Napoli explained:

> It is not that I advocate an approach of letting the data speak for itself, because it doesn't. But I do feel that we need to give as much space as we can, to bringing the voices and critical insights of the people with whom we work into our work, to make it a conversation, rather than the scholar analyzing the researched.

Indeed, as part of this 'conversation' and the connections that we make with participants, we also have to acknowledge our role in shaping the field that we are researching. In my 'therapeutic' research encounter, and particularly as I became more comfortable with my participant, I raised issues in relation to gender inequality in her religious community that she had not thought about before. She told me, as a result, our discussion had shifted her thinking. Cotterill and Letherby (1993: 77) highlight that 'the research process may make the participants of the research think about things they have never thought about before or indeed think about things in a different way'. Our 'facts' may well be produced by our individual engagement in the field, and whilst this may be inescapable, it is necessary to be more open about this in our writing.

Despite the potential and actual difficulties of centering women's stories and narratives in our research, we remain committed to this approach in our research praxis. Yet, there were moments, particularly when we were faced with challenges to our feminist politics and the concept of *agency* as we perceived it, which produced specific methodological pressure points. As a result, it was not always easy to form a comfortable balance between our participant's voices and our scholarly analysis.

The Politics of Feminism

I began my paper at the Heidelberg workshop with a quotation from one of my participants, a British nun in the Tibetan tradition.[7] In a frank interview, after she had raised concerns about gender inequalities in contemporary Buddhist communities, I asked her about whether she was a feminist. She told me, on no uncertain terms, that 'feminism' and 'Buddhism' were two distinct things. When deciding how to engage in social issues, she said: 'I have to ask myself, am I after doing feminist politics, or am I after doing (Buddhist) practice'. This conversation

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[7] This paper was drawn from one of the chapters in my monograph, entitled 'Loaded Words: Attitudes to feminism and gender equality' (Starkey, 2020).

brought into sharp relief a methodological issue that I had been grappling with since the start of my fieldwork a year or so earlier. I had begun my project committed to a feminist analysis and research methodology. I saw my feminist-inspired research to be, as Fran Porter (2017: 83) aptly describes, 'an emancipatory endeavour. It seeks to liberate girls and women from the socio-political, legal and religious constraints that keep them subordinated to men.' Contemporary Buddhist communities, including in the UK, do not all offer parity of ordination between women and men. This is particularly an issue for those groups connected to the Thai Theravāda tradition and certain Tibetan lineages, where the female order (*bhikkhunī/bhikṣuṇī/dGe-sLong-ma*) is thought never to have been established (Mrozik, 2009). Within these groups, women are offered the opportunity to further their spiritual ambitions by taking ordinations that do not contain as many vows or precepts as the male ordinations (*bhikkhu/bhikṣu/dGe-sLong*). At present, there are both local and global movements to reinstate 'full' ordination for women where this is not available within different Buddhist traditions (Kabilsingh, 1988: 228, Mrozik, 2009: 364, Tomalin, 2006: 387, Lindberg Falk, 2007: 8).

As I discussed in my paper and, later, my book, when I began my research with British Buddhist women, I anticipated that my participants would want to champion the fight for full ordination, and that in the production and sharing of my research, I would be (nobly) assisting in this endeavour. What happened in actuality was that a proportion of my twenty-five interlocutors, from across the spectrum of Buddhist traditions in Britain, were not particularly supportive of the 'struggle' as I perceived it, and a number were actively against it. This was surprising as I had assumed that, given my participants had grown up in a cultural context where a commitment to equal rights between men and women has shaped legislation, they would be actively committed to fighting for equality of opportunity in their adopted religious traditions. How could they not? Yet, many of my participants saw the world, and their place in it, in a very different way. Some of them told me that *fighting* for equal rights for women was not *Buddhist*, given that the categories of 'men' or 'women' were not fixed, and that gender does not determine spiritual achievement. Many saw feminism as divisive and a threat to community harmony, which, in a context when communities are relatively young and had not been easy to establish, was hard-won. Others felt that structural gender equality was not particularly important, and the most appropriate response was to contribute to their Buddhist community, respect Buddhist tradition and to honour the spiritual paths as laid out by their teachers (who were, in the main, men). These kinds of perspectives

are, to a greater or lesser extent, shared by Buddhist women in different geographical locations (see, for example, attitudes within the work of Cheng, 2003, Cook, 2010, Kawanami, 2013, Salgado, 2013). For many of these women, Buddhist liberation and community relationships take priority over feminist liberation. As a result, and similar to Ionescu (1998: 301), what happened was that 'one by one, the expectations I brought with me in the field...were questioned, revised and sometimes dropped entirely'. This is an experience shared with many of the contributors to this volume, including Shefali More, who told me: 'When I started this, I was categorically against such practices which I feel treat women as subordinate to men. But at the end of this research (which is not necessarily the end of my journey), I think now I am more open towards understanding the other side of the coin'.

For me, what complicated matters further was the very real, and often stark, diversity of views on the topic of gender equality that my participants articulated. In my published writing, I grouped the different approaches to gender equality in Buddhist communities that women were taking into three modes of engagement - active campaigning, discreet concern and, purposeful distancing (Starkey, 2020: 145-148). In addition, I adapted a perceptual mapping technique, based on the work by Kim Knott and Sadia Khokher (1993) in order to better appreciate these differences in attitude. Here, I diverged from a more traditional thematic analysis, and I plotted my participants' perspectives on a map with two axes (one perceptual, one biographical). This was in order to establish whether there were any correlating factors with the feminist orientations of my participants, such as their living situation, or how central they were to the hierarchical structures of power of their specific Buddhist communities. This enabled me to immediately recognise, and visually represent, the subtle diversity between my participants, to identify possible correlating factors in their accounts, and make sure that they received balanced attention (Starkey, 2020: 137). Yet, in carefully representing nuance, I began to appreciate in doing so, perhaps more than in any other research encounter I had, that 'there is no place "outside" where we can stand' (Neitz, 2011: 63).

The reality was that my approach to the feminist project was challenged and changed in the process of the research - what Orit Avishai, Lynne Gerber and Jennifer Randles (2012: 406) have called, 'the feminist ethnographers dilemma'. I began to question my desire to alter the field I was researching in, not least because I felt, to my utter surprise, that I was emotionally drawn to the choices made by some of my participants who wanted to continue operating in

structurally unequal traditions for spiritual and communal reasons. Although I wholeheartedly supported those women who were fighting for parity of ordination, I also increasingly began to appreciate (and wanted to support) those who did not. They did not present as oppressed, at least not as I understood it, or even as making particular 'bargains with patriarchy', to use Kandiyoti's (1988) phrase. They had made strong spiritual commitments, and this shaped their worldviews in ways I did not envisage at the start of the research. I was moved both by those participants who were resisting religious patriarchy as well as those who stated they wanted to undertake spiritual work through existing hierarchical and communal structures, even if these did not offer full equality. The truth was, I began to see shades of grey, where previously there had only been black and white.

Yet, this complexity left me deeply torn, personally and academically. Was I ultimately reinforcing the unequal treatment of women by trying to centre (or, at least, give adequate airtime to) these 'non-feminist' perspectives? Was I letting down those participants who were championing women's rights within organisations, often coupled with risk to themselves, in order to share the voices of those who were not? I take seriously Anne Phillips, Fran Porter and Nicola Slee's (2017: 17) words, when they write: 'The process of research changes those who engage in it, either as researchers or participants; but it also has the capacity to change those who read about it and who take the insights and knowledge of ongoing research into the field in new studies and applications of knowledge'. Whilst I hope that a nuanced analysis inspires nuanced interpretations in the mind of the reader, there remained an impact on me, as a feminist researcher, in trying to balance this diversity of views with my own political position and agenda.

I am certainly not the first person to feel divided when faced with women who do not conform to our feminist expectations, particularly when they are operating within patriarchal, conservative religious groups. Indeed, this has become a popular theme for academic work on women and religion in contemporary societies (see, for example, Avishai, 2008, Brasher, 1998, Cook, 2010, Davidman, 1991, Mahmood, 2005, to cite just a few). Yet, the feeling of disloyalty (either to feminism, or to particular groups of participants) remained very real throughout my research encounter, continuing even now. Although this issue may still be unresolved in my work, I endorse Orit Avishai, Lynne Gerber and Jennifer Randles (2012: 404) claims that, 'Feminist researchers can easily get in a position where they feel the need to choose between competing political and analytical impulses rather than using the tension

between the two to fuel more innovative feminist analysis'. Re-adjusting my perspective to tease out what might be an opportunity for deeper research is helpful. Indeed, paying close analytical and methodological attention to the tensions and differences allowed Amy Langenberg to develop an analytical phrase - 'parafeminism' - to describe her participants who operated in a liminal space between liberal understandings of social action and those of conservative, patriarchal Buddhist and Nepali hierarchies (Langenberg, 2018).

In our collective conversations, each of the other scholars reasserted that trying to see things from our participant's perspectives was the solution to my quandary, despite the personal and political feelings we harbour. Devalt and Gross (2013: 13) identify that, 'research relations are never simple encounters, innocent of identities and lines of power' (Devault and Gross, 2012: 13) but that being attentive to our own views through reflexive practice, and the ways in which our participants diverge and converge with them, remains a key task of the ethnographer, feminist or otherwise. It remains a methodological work-in-progress to find the best ways to reflect on and critically analyse the different approaches that religious women have within highly charged and sensitive contexts. It is a difficult task to effectively centre divergent participant voices and maintain a feminist political approach, as well as bringing appropriate scholarly critique to the table. I am left with the concern that perhaps simply trying to *air* these differences is not *enough*, but it does feel the most respectful way to honour our participant's experiences, even when they differ markedly from our own. Looking in more detail at the concept of agency and its place in our work with women in Buddhist and Hindu communities gives a further example of the balance that we undertake as researchers in order to hold closely participants, politics, and critical scholarly analysis together.

Envisaging Agency amongst Buddhist and Hindu Women: Methodological Considerations

One of the key talking points in our collective conversations, both at the Heidelberg workshop and beyond, was the ways in which we employed the concept of agency as an analytical tool. Many of us had struggled with the definitions of agency presented to us in (feminist) scholarship, and wanted to push at the boundaries of its analytical potential within our various fieldsites. In order to honour Avishai et al's (2012) recognition that points of tension should be reinterpreted as opportunities, in this section, I explore the problems that we had with certain depictions of agency and how this shaped our ethnographic interactions

and theoretical analysis. Although each of the chapters in this volume explore ideas of agency (explicitly, or implicitly) as they relate to specific field sites and communities, as I build to the conclusion, I argue that there is value in coming together as a collective to think more broadly about the application of core concepts to our situated ethnographic experiences. For me, this value was principally found in the opportunity to talk across disciplinary borders, and to reflect on the ways in which individual case studies might be read together, identifying similarities and differences that challenge our assumptions, including disciplinary ones, and seeing potential connections across time and space.

As a concept, 'agency' is frequently used within scholarly work on gender and religion to think about the ways in which women and men have responded to limitations and opportunities within religious communities. Particularly over the past two decades there has emerged a wave of scholarly (often feminist) work examining the boundaries of individual agency in different religious traditions, particularly within those that promote more conservative ideologies (Bracke, 2003: 335-336).[8] As Burke (2012: 122) highlights, an often-cited definition of agency is offered by Lois McNay (2010) as 'the capacity for autonomous action in the face of often overwhelming cultural sanctions and structural inequalities'. However, alongside other scholars (such as Avishai, 2008, Brasher, 1998, Bracke, 2003, Cook, 2010, Davidman, 1991, Mahmood, 2005, to cite just a few) the valorisation of autonomy and resistance against authority and hierarchy, writ large within this definition, felt awkward in relation to our Buddhist and Hindu field-sites and participants. As it turned out, none of us used the term 'agency' in our conversations with participants in informal settings or in more structured interviews. Antoinette De Napoli explains:

> I never use the word agency in my interactions with the women and men I work with, because the very Sanskritized Indian language term does not correspond to the dominant western usage of that term. And, I don't think many of the women I know in India would understand that term.

Similarly, Ina Ilkama informed me that whilst investigating the *kolu* ritual:

> I have never used the word 'agency' in an interview setting (would in most cases be via an interpreter, from English to Tamil). First, I am very unsure what the Tamil equivalent would be (neither is there a straightforward translation into my native language Norwegian), but more importantly, I never felt the need to do so. I

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[8] For example, see the useful overview article from Kelsy C. Burke (2012: 124), who (drawing on Avishai, 2008) and on evidence from various empirical studies, distinguishes between different types of agency that are practiced by women in conservative religious groupings which she categorises as: 'resistance', 'empowerment', 'instrumental' and 'compliant'.

conversed with the women using different terminology (for instance we talked much about *changes* in the ritual)...

Moving beyond the difficulties of translation, many of us felt that the behaviour we observed from participants was not always 'agentic', if we follow the particular definition of agency provided by McNay (2010). Furthermore, our participants were sometimes very willing members of gender unequal religious communities (as well as nationalist religious organisations), and they did not always display behaviour which could be seen as resisting hierarchies or religious norms. As Ina Ilkama explains:

> From early on it was apparent that I could not work with a definition of agency as resistance to patriarchal structures or autonomy. Most of my informants would indeed conform to a patriarchic culture. Even the *kolu* ritual which I investigated, is performed to support this world view.

For most of us, as Ina details, the key problem was with the idea of *autonomy.* Amongst many of the women (and men) we spent time with during the course of our ethnographic work, individual 'autonomous action' was not prioritised or even conceptualised. Instead, women placed concepts of *kamma/karma* and/or divine action as the most significant forces shaping their lives. Communal and relational ties were prioritised over the idea of the individual; something that Sharon Wray (2004: 23) argues has been common in our theoretical conceptualisation of agentic action. In discussing this as a group of researchers, we were all, to a greater or lesser extent, shaped by the foundational work on agency undertaken by scholars such as Saba Mahmood (2005) and Orit Avishai (2008), who seek to trouble a liberal and wholly resistive account of social and structural freedom. Although Mahmood was writing about Muslim women in Cairo and Avishai about Israeli Jewish Orthodox women, we identified parallels with our understanding of Buddhist and Hindu women's perspectives, across geographic and cultural locations. Ina Ilkama highlighted this in her conceptualisation of agency:

> Power also comes in many forms; inner spiritual power, divine power, prestige/influence in the community, increased autonomy, and so on, and Hinduism does indeed acknowledge women's power (śakti). Isn't is Mahmood who says that a religious conservative may feel empowered by practices that a secular feminist finds dis-empowering? I have tried to keep this in mind while writing, in order not to project my own worldviews upon my interlocutors.

By way of further specific examples, as I described in the previous section, not all of my participants wanted to challenge Buddhist hierarchies. Instead, they prioritised working to maintain community relationships and to practice Buddhist discipline as it was taught to them. This would be, in Avishai's (2008: 427) terms, agency that is 'grounded in observance' but it could also be given a more Buddhist slant, as agency 'grounded in practice'. In her chapter in this volume, Amy Langenberg clearly describes how difficult it was to assume a resistive and autonomous agency amongst young women at Peace Grove nunnery in Nepal as their modes of social interaction did not neatly map onto a binary analytical frame. As she explained to me, although she did not use a specific working definition of agency, she preferred to:

> ...pay attention to how the girls and women talk about their own freedoms and constrictions and sources of power/happiness/pleasure, their ambitions for themselves, their victories but also frustrations at not being able to fulfil them, and their feelings of confidence/vulnerability.

So, too, with Antoinette DeNapoli's work with Mataji, who operates between traditional and alternative structures of religious authority, even in her radical claims to be a female *shankaracharya*. While she did not use the term 'agency', she did:

> ...ask *(participants)* about why they do certain things, or why they don't do certain things; I ask how they come to making decisions about their lives, why they chose X instead of Y, and, perhaps most significantly, I ask if they feel they are choosing their lives.

Each of us as scholars had become interested in different types of social action and engagement beyond the resistive, including the importance of preserving memories, the aesthetic, the role of *karma* and the divine, and communal duty, devotion, and the cultivation of discipline, as well as political engagement. Valeria Gazizova talked about the importance of *energy* in maintaining the histories and stories of repressed Buddhist communities in Soviet Kalmykia, and the power that women had in taking on this role. With perhaps the most defined notion of agency amongst her participants, Antoinette De Napoli explained:

> I understand agency to be women's capacity to move and act, and interact, to think and speak, to engage life, its beauty, and its challenges, in ways that are culturally shaped, culturally subversive, and culturally significant. I suppose not all agency is the same, but simply being alive is a form of agency that I feel scholars have yet to look at seriously; that so much of human action involves micro decisions that are not always subject to awareness.

Although the term agency was never used with her participants, Antoinette places emphasis on the balance between 'cultural subversion' and 'cultural shaping', highlighting the potential for different types of agency that might arise, including in the very small, 'micro decisions' that are made subconsciously in every-day activity. Iselin Frydenlund, working with women involved in nationalist movements in Myanmar, furthered this discussion by questioning a simplistic view of 'agency', asking: 'How far do we go in sympathizing with nationalist, or even racist voices? How can we defend the human when we study illiberal nationalism'? For Iselin, there was a complicated balancing act that occurred during the process of research to appreciate and reflect women's voices in nationalist movements (such as the one's she studies in Myanmar), whilst struggling with the very real challenge of the social impact of these views.

It is clear, then, that a singular and reductive definition of agency, posited solely as autonomy or resistance to dominant religious and cultural norms, is not a useful framework in order to understand the complex micro details of Buddhist and Hindu women's spiritual and social lives. Yet, I note here a potential for methodological disconnection. Most of us did not employ the direct term - agency - with our participants (in English, or translated), and we questioned any established frameworks which saw resistance and autonomy as the only valid action. However, we still used the concept of agency in scholarly spaces, and, in many ways, the desire to identify resistance continues to shape the kinds of questions we ask our participants. For example, in my work with Buddhist ordained women, many of whom practised multiple disciplinary rules that regulated dress, hair, deportment, the use of money, sexual behaviour, eating and drinking, and sleep, I regularly asked (or thought about) the ways in which they might resist these rules. Did they use perfume, even when they were not supposed to? Did they adapt their monastic robes in ways that made them stand out as individuals? I can remember being asked, by another academic, whether Buddhist monastic women might even wear more unique underwear as a means of subtly challenging the rules - a question that I found difficult to posit in all good propriety to my participants. Whilst looking at the varied ways in which individuals break social and religious norms can be a useful tool to help heighten our awareness of what is held sacred within specific cultures and social groups, positing resistance as the primary variable remains problematic.

Whether or not these acts of individual challenge occurred, the issue I have, methodologically, relates to the dangers of consistently prioritising questions about resistance in our interactions with Buddhist and Hindu women - as if resistance is the only sensible response to religious discipline and regulation. As Avishai (2008: 429) maintains, 'sociologists are reluctant to think of agency as a pursuit of religious ends or as nonstrategic action—hence the focus on inadvertent empowerment, wilful resistance/subversion, or strategic compliance'. We might not be explicit with this judgement, but it remains. In fact, one of my participants challenged me quite vociferously on this issue. Even though I had intended my questions to be as open and non-judgemental as possible, she asked me why I was so concerned with the assumed oppressiveness of religious discipline and her levels of compliance with hierarchies and practices. She said to me, 'If you were to say to a loving mother, 'why do you care for your child when you could be out doing what you want' the response would likely... be wordless astonishment' (Starkey, 2020: 128). She argued that through my line of questioning and the assumptions that I brought to the table, motherhood was imagined as a socially acceptable form of renunciation of freedom, whilst her religious choices were not. Of course, in the contemporary British cultural context, motherhood is a far more common form of renunciation than monastic ordination, but the point remains that beginning our questions with assumptions (explicit or implicit) about inherent difficulties in particular social choices leads to a particular type of knowledge being produced and reproduced.

Even if we question the concept of agency (or empowerment, or liberation) and replace it with other, less potentially fraught, terms, the binary of resistance and compliance remains in how we design our interviews and research questions. If we are truly committed to holding our participants' views at the centre of our methodology, we need to resist asking questions that are dominated solely by our existing frameworks. This is not necessarily easy, not least because we were not all comfortable with karmic or divine explanations for social action. Yet, as Avishai et al. (2012: 398) argue, we must enhance our reflexivity as a collective, to begin to piece together how 'how feminist theoretical and methodological frameworks both constrain and enable particular interpretations'. This is a valuable offering from feminist scholarship, for careful and critical dialogue about positionality and motivation provides us with an excellent opportunity to confront our assumptions, in particular about the ways we envisage our role as researcher and our relationships with informants or participants (Sampson, Bloor and Fincham, 2008: 919). Whilst this sort of reflexivity does not, perhaps,

solve the tensions, it does bring them to the fore, offering the space to think through our methodological choices and commitments. Thinking about where we are challenged, personally, emotionally, during the course of research, might, in Luff's (1999: 697) words: 'act as a stimulus to new thoughts about the research process and the emerging issues'. However, this remains a work-in-progress between us as a collective of scholars of contemporary Buddhism and Hinduism, not least because we must not automatically assume inherent similarities exist between complex and diverse religious practices and traditions. Buddhism and Hinduism were brought together in the workshop and in this volume due to shared linguistic and cultural histories, but this must not obscure the differences within and between communities of women and groups of practices. Whilst there is value in coming together, as scholars, to try to situate our participants in wider debates about religious discipline, hierarchy and tradition, and as Neitz (2011: 64) argues, we must remain 'attentive to location *(to)* avoid abstract and decontextualised approaches when *(we)* collect and analyse.. data, qualitative or quantitative'.

Conclusion

Through bringing together our individual experiences, this chapter has opened up a space for collaborative reflection on fieldwork with Buddhist and Hindu women in order to highlight the possibility of shared methodological commitments. As Jenny Morgans (2017: 191) argues,

> Reflexivity enabled me to understand the implicit decisions that I had made, to analyse more deeply the experiences I had had, and to shape more intentionally the future of the project.

Each of us had engaged in a process of individual reflexivity throughout our research encounters, but thinking through the issues we had faced collaboratively extended this even further. This allowed for a more sophisticated engagement with the implications of our choices, despite some of the problems and tensions not being satisfactorily resolved. Through the issues presented in this chapter, it is clear that reflexivity is even more necessary when we, as women, seek to undertake research with other women. We might assume (and behave as if) we share experiences with other women, but this is not necessarily always the case. At different stages of the research and writing process, we should ask, as Blakely (2007: 64) does, 'who's experience(s) "counts" in the research, and whose is excluded' and, importantly,

why? We cannot fold our participant's life experiences into our own without sufficient awareness of the ways we are shaping the picture, even though this might give us more empathy or allow us to establish a stronger initial bond with our interlocutors. As a number of authors have highlighted (many of whom cited through this chapter), research by feminists on religious women can be fraught with difficulty, due to the potential for spoken and unspoken tensions to weave their way into the research design and written product. This is not to say at all that feminist research with religious women will always be limited, but only that we do require a greater level of awareness to be brought to our interactions with and analysis of participants who may well not share our political and social commitments. As Thwaites (2017: 5) indicates, 'this honesty about the research process remains a crucial part of what makes feminist research "feminist"'.

What has become clear over the course of our conversations, is that despite our varied field sites, there are a number of collective commitments that each of us seek to uphold in our research with women, and these can be brought together in a broad methodological framework. At the heart of these collective commitments is the priority that we continue to give to women's voices, stories and narratives. Despite some of the challenges we face in drawing together disparate perspectives and engaging in robust scholarly analysis with participants whom we have grown connected to, the importance of *putting the views of our interlocutors at the heart of our analysis* (even when this might challenge our own values) remains paramount. A question that arises from this is, do we, as women, work in a different way when we are researching with men? On the one hand, I would like to think that, as researchers, we look to understand all of our interlocutors' perspectives and offer an attentive and careful analysis, regardless of social and demographic category. At the same time, some of us highlighted that we *do* research differently with men, not least because, as women, we might have greater access to other women and groups of women (that we might not readily have with men), as well as possibly sharing some gendered experiences (although this should not be taken as inevitable, especially cross-culturally). Yet, each of us remained passionate about engaging with *women's* life stories and trying to re-balance a scholarly picture that has not always adequately included them. This may well be related to our own varied experiences of being marginalised on the grounds of gender and our desires to reshape the social world. This is why reflexivity remains key, as the voices that are more palatable to us are at risk of being prioritised over those that are less so.

In order to centre women's voices in our research, we each participate in a process of *active and engaged listening*, paying attention to what is said (but also what is not said) and working to appreciate the embodied realities of life for women as well as for men. Most importantly, and along with other (feminist) researchers, *reflexivity* remains a key commitment. In particular, we draw on its value in providing a good opportunity to *recognise when our own preconceptions and assumptions are being challenged;* allowing tensions to arise and using them for theoretical innovation. Our priority, as ethnographers, is to explore and analyse the *micro, the everyday, and the local*, but importantly, we uphold the value of *collective working*, especially across geographical and disciplinary boundaries. Although it can be challenging, particularly in the competitive world of the academy, maintaining a supportive, yet critical space is something towards which we all strive.

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