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# Hunger, Hard Work, and Uncertainty

## *Tashi Dondrup Reminisces on Life and Death in a Tibetan Village*

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Editor's Introduction

“Virtuoso spiritual seekers” are a distinct minority in any society and, for a balanced, more nuanced understanding of life in a Buddhist community, it is therefore important to consider the perspectives of all individuals – from venerated saints to humble farmers. In the case of Tashi Dondrup, we see how a poor, socially marginal peasant nonetheless tried his best to live according to the ethics he derived from Buddhist teachings. As in other biographies, this householder struggled with the issue of violence, in this case the inevitable killing of creatures living in the soil he tilled, culling a yak herd of useless males, and eliminating vermin: the lice that infested his body and the rodents that stole his scarce food. Reconciling his Buddhist tradition with the realities of survival as a farmer high in the Himalayas, he tried to remediate the demerit of violence with chants and karmic calculations. Again, Buddhist belief and practice is centered in making good karma and softening the accumulation of bad. Tashi’s poignantly rendered biography also illustrates that, in practice, Buddhists try to make final attempts to upgrade an individual’s karmic account – determining next-lifetime destiny – through support for old age as a time for more intense religious practices and then, finally, with massive merit-making ceremonies after death, in which merit is transferred to the dead.

**Background: Practicing Buddhism and the Complexities of Subsistence Farming**

Translating biographies of Tibetan religious practitioners is a common practice nowadays.<sup>1</sup> This is

not surprising given that Tibetans are prolific at scribing narrative accounts of their lamas, and Western fascination with Tibet centers disproportionately on Buddhism and Buddhist practitioners. Although the vast majority of Tibetans are versed in the basic tenets of their

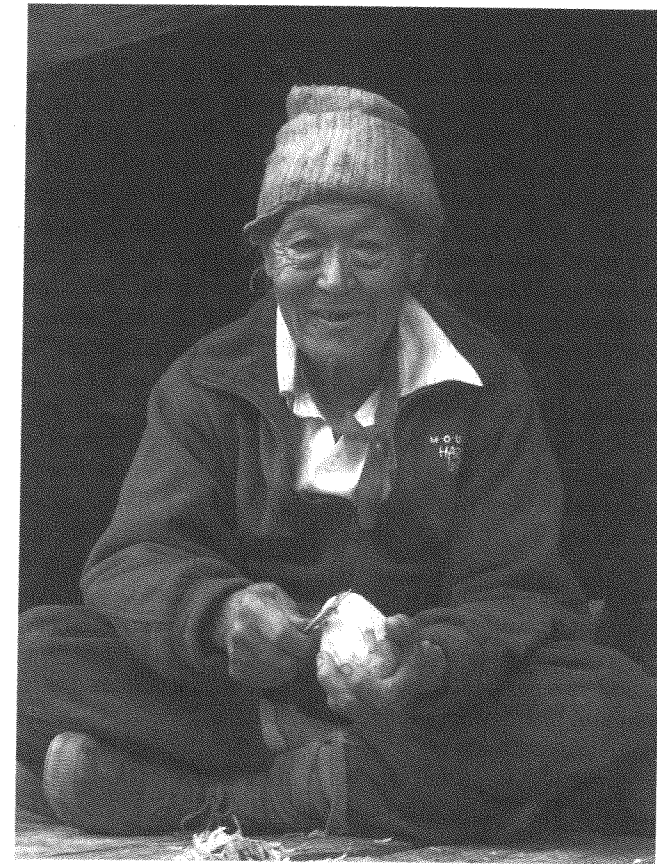


Figure 24.1 Tashi Dondrup. Photograph by Geoff Childs. Reprinted with permission.

religion, they regularly encounter predicaments stemming from the incongruity of cultural ideals with economic necessities. Like people in every society, Tibetans must sometimes transgress moral imperatives while side-stepping social reprobation. For example, Buddhism emphasizes nonviolence and consequently frowns upon the killing of any sentient being. However, farmers and herders must atone for the fact that they slaughter innumerable creatures during daily subsistence activities. Recognizing that plowing the earth obliterates soil-dwelling insects, a Tibetan farmer chants a prayer at the end of each furrow to moderate the negative consequences of his action. He is not supposed to harm sentient beings yet must do so in order to feed his family.

Other actions require a bit more finesse to rectify inconsistencies between ethical directives and worldly deeds. I have heard people remark

upon learning that Tibetans are enthusiastic consumers of meat, “How is that possible? Aren’t Buddhists prohibited from killing animals?” The answer to this apparent cultural contradiction is that (a) Buddhist principles strongly discourage the killing of any sentient being but (b) Tibetans depend on livestock for survival in their arid, high-altitude environment so (c) they engage the services of butchers, a stigmatized class of people who accrue the sins of killing so that others can consume the flesh of domesticated animals.<sup>2</sup> As long as a ruse is maintained that an animal is not killed specifically to feed the meat’s eventual consumer, the contradiction is resolved. The rationale boils down to, “I didn’t kill it, and it wasn’t killed for me, but since it is dead I may as well eat it.”

Slaughtering animals to put food on the table is not the only way Tibetans terminate the lives

of sentient beings. Villagers need to manage herd sizes and herd compositions. They need animals to plow, transport loads, produce milk and wool, and reproduce the herd. A useful herd consists of yaks, cows, and various hybrids that serve various functions and are adapted to grazing at various altitudes. Whereas some hybrids are highly valued, others are economically useless and need to be culled. *Dzomo* (female cross between a yak and a cow) are a herd's main dairy producers, but their offspring are weak and do not yield much milk. Allowing *dzomo* to breed is important because pregnancy and parturition stimulate milk production. But, as one herder informed me, "There is no benefit if the offspring of a *dzomo* grows up because it will not produce any milk. We do not give milk to such an animal. That would be like giving it our own butter. It just dies."

Note how the man uses the intransitive verb "die" (*shi*) rather than the transitive verb "kill" (*so*) to deflect his own culpability in the demise of bovines. This lexical maneuver disassociates the action (not permitting the newborn animal to suckle) from the outcome (death by starvation). To violently dispatch a newborn calf is an unequivocal sinful act, but to restrict a calf's caloric intake so that it succumbs to a death that appears more natural is ethically ambiguous.

### Context and Early Life

I learned these lessons about how Tibetans navigate the complex and often contradictory matrix of moral ideals and economic necessities while living as an anthropologist in Nubri, Nepal, a border region situated on the southern slope of the Himalayas. It was settled at least 900 years ago and is now inhabited by roughly 3500 people. From the mid-seventeenth century until the 1840s, Nubri was controlled by the Tibetan government based in Lhasa, but following a war it was incorporated within Nepal, where it remains today. The people of Nubri adhere to the Nyingmapa and Kargyupa sects of Buddhism; religious life centers on married lamas and their village temples. Until the 1960s a lucrative trans-Himalayan trade route allowed Nubri's inhabitants to prosper. By the time I started conducting fieldwork during the 1990s, however, the decline in

trade and other factors had impoverished local communities.

Over the course of numerous visits spanning a decade, I was fortunate to reside with Tashi Dondrup. Born in 1929, he was the illegitimate child of a destitute mother and a father who denied all paternal responsibility. Although the Buddhist moral code condemns improper sexual conduct, Tibetans maintain a remarkably tolerant attitude toward illegitimate children. In an economic environment where labor is always in high demand, additional farm hands are welcome and can find a niche in society. Although Tashi did not bear any stigma associated with his circumstances at birth, he was economically disadvantaged because the basic needs to marry and establish a household – agricultural land, a house, and animals – are passed from a father to his legitimate offspring. Without such assets, people like Tashi Dondrup find it difficult, if not impossible, to marry and have their own families. Hence, he was a lifelong bachelor.

Illegitimacy creates other problems for the individual. Tibetans depend on family for social, economic, and political support. Lacking an extensive kin network renders a person vulnerable in the community. Should troubles arise, one can muster few allies to overcome a crisis or weather a time of need. Tashi's immediate family consisted only of his mother and half-sister (also illegitimate), so he had to carefully cultivate relationships with other people. At the time when Tashi was easing into old age, he even gained a new family member: a foreign anthropologist. We referred to each other using the kinship terms "elder brother" and "younger brother," and through an unstated contract I became the person who provided Tashi with economic support when he no longer had the capability to work for daily subsistence.

Being uneducated and illiterate did not prevent Tashi from comprehending basic Buddhist teachings. After all, he grew up in a Buddhist community, regularly attended a host of rituals, and lived next door to an important lama. Tashi believed in reincarnation and expressed his understanding that we had been brothers in a previous life. He also understood the principles of cause (through a thought or action) and effect (a future consequence of that thought or action), a relationship that is generally termed "karma."

Tashi articulated his understanding of karma by musing that our past actions had brought us together in the present, and that our current sibling-like relationship would make certain our paths would cross in the future. However, similar to his fellow villagers, Tashi's daily religious observances were not geared toward attaining enlightenment or understanding esoteric Buddhist philosophy.

Tashi's devotional activities instead were dedicated to achieving health and economic security in the present and near future. For example, to appease local protector deities, every year Tashi raised a banner inscribed with prayers on the roof of the house. Whenever we departed on a trip he lit a butter lamp and beseeched his *pho lha* (man's god)<sup>3</sup> to guide and protect us. He always made sure to honor the village's mountain-dwelling protector deity by offering a silk scarf, butter, and liquor. Tashi self-identified as a Buddhist and habitually repeated Buddhist prayers in which he vowed to benefit all sentient beings. Yet he never hesitated to crush lice and fleas plucked from his clothing or to kill home-invading rats by enticing them to feast upon poisoned morsels of food. When I asked Tashi whether he should consider adopting a more compassionate demeanor toward these nocturnal visitors, Tashi chortled, "I am a poor man. The rats should take pity on me instead of the other way around!"

Tashi had an unimaginably rough childhood. Yet, despite a disadvantaged position in life, he always maintained an immense capacity for generosity. I surmised that he endured hardships by taking solace in the basic tenets of Buddhism – for example, the knowledge that performing good deeds in this lifetime can help ensure less suffering in future lives. On the other hand, I was always struck by Tashi's pragmatism. He never blamed bad karma for his present predicaments. Rather, he faced obstacles with stoic determination. Here are some details from the life story of Tashi Dondrup, a humble Tibetan villager from Nubri, Nepal.<sup>4</sup>

As a child I had nothing. You know, I am a *nyelu*, a bastard. My parents never married, and my father never even claimed me as his legitimate son. So my mother and I lived alone, without a home, without fields, and without cattle. Oh, how I suffered as a child! You can never imagine the hardships! But let me start from the beginning.

When I emerged into the world after spending nine months in my mother's womb, there was nothing to eat, nothing to drink. Food was scarce, so we often ate just boiled vegetables with our *tsampa* [the Tibetan staple, flour made from roasted barley]. When mother worked for other families, they would make corn mush for us. She would eat half, and I would eat half.

Even though my mother worked hard, I didn't have proper clothing to wear. I wore the old, cast-aside clothing of other people. I wandered about the village looking for whatever scraps could be worn. When it came time for sleeping, I had nothing to cover me beyond the rags that I wore. I didn't even have shoes, so I would pull my knees into my chest and sleep curled up like a ball. Even during the winter I often had no shoes. If I found only a single shoe, I would wear that. It snows a lot during the winter, so my feet were always blistered and cracked. I suffered very much when festering sores developed and bled. With my feet in such a condition, it was difficult to carry salt and barley up and down the valley. But I did so anyway, for this little bit of trade gave us some food.

We stayed at other peoples' homes, sometimes working as their servants, sometimes living alone if a house was empty. One time we even lived beneath a house in the stable for cattle. Mother was a good weaver, so while she did weaving for other people we would get a place to stay. But living in the homes of others meant that my mother and I always had to sit farthest from the fire, farthest from the warmth. It was not our home, after all. We had no home of our own.

Most memories [from my youth] are of hunger, hard work, and uncertainty. If only you knew how much I had suffered. Everybody used to say, "Poor Tashi, he is such a good person, but he is so unfortunate." I learned how to work hard, that is why things got better with time.

My father gave me no inheritance, and beyond that he would not even look at me when we met. When I got older things gradually changed. He told me I was a good worker. Everybody knows this, I always have been one. I asked him for money, barley, or even salt – anything that could be used for bartering. I told him, "If you give me something to trade with, I can do business. How can I do any business without any wealth?" One day he promised to give me some inheritance.

My mother and I never saw the coming of the other woman into his life. When I was 17 or 18, my father married another woman.<sup>5</sup> They had a son, you know him, he is the guy we call Balang [Ox].<sup>6</sup> When Balang was four, his mother died, and when he was eight, our father died. I felt sorry for him, so from that time onward I did much for Balang. Despite my help I still got none of our father's estate. All of the fields, all of the animals, the house where he still lives – all of it went to my half-brother. I received nothing!

We say that my half-brother is a son of the summer, the season of abundance. If that is so, then I am a son of winter. Nevertheless I felt sorry for the boy. I helped him all the time, fed him from our meager supplies, and acted like a true elder brother, or even a father. Yet how has he repaid such kindness?

Since the death of his parents Balang has not accomplished a single virtuous deed. He squandered his entire inheritance; now there is nothing left. Not only that, but you should see the way he treats me! Remember the first months when you lived here? He used to come by all the time, sit there silently like the bovine that he is, and act as if he were king. He ate all our food and treated me like his servant. He never cleaned the dishes or did anything helpful. He treats me like a lowly servant. I acted as his guardian when he was a child. But these days I no longer even speak to him. I have no use for a brother like that.

### A Life of Struggle, New Opportunities, Tragedy

Ties of kinship are very important in Tibetan society; family members are supposed to support each other in times of need. That is why Balang's dismissive treatment of his elderly half-brother is such an egregious breach of social ethics. Despite receiving no assistance from his closest kin, Tashi managed to improve his living conditions.

I had neither cattle nor fields, but by working hard I could buy a house. In addition to doing some small trade up and down the valley and working as a servant for others, I once went to Calcutta. I went with a man from Tsum [a valley to the east of Nubri]. Not only did he pay my expenses, but he also gave me about 200 Indian Rupees as a loan so I could do some business on the side. In Calcutta,

we stayed with traders from Nyeshang [Manang District, Nepal]. These people had rented a house on the other side of the big bridge over the river. The bridge, this is what I remember most of Calcutta. I heard that there were English people in Calcutta. I never saw them, only scores and scores of Indians. I had never seen such a crowded place in my life!

Anyway, I bought many things in Calcutta, especially precious stones. I brought these back to Nubri, and for a few weeks I went from village to village, from house to house, selling my wares. The profit was very good. I was only about 18 years old at that time, but I understood how to do business. I bought my house with the profits. Yet the house was very dilapidated. Because nobody had lived in it for many years much of the wood was rotting and needed to be replaced. The floorboards were dangerously weak, and all the storage chests were useless. I did much of the work myself. When people helped, I paid them some wages and served food. Wages were low at that time because money had more value. I got the wood for one storage chest from Li, and for those others from Sho.<sup>7</sup> People still make comments when they see these storage chests. They say, "Ah, Tashi Dondrup, where did you get such good wood? How did you build such good chests?" If you do something, you may as well do it right and make it last.

Tashi worked hard to ensure that his mother and sister could live under a roof of their own. But their happiness was short lived, for tragedy soon struck the family.

My sister and I have the same mother, but different fathers. Although much younger, like me she was a *nyelu*, an illegitimate child. Her father was a monk who broke his vows. It was my mother's decision to make her a nun. She was sent to Dagkar Taso Monastery<sup>8</sup> for training. Lupon Zangpo donated some clothing and other items for her. After her ordination at Dagkar Taso, she usually lived with my mother and me in the village.<sup>9</sup> But she had to go to Pungyen during the first month of the year. In the past people still went to Pungyen Monastery<sup>10</sup> for a winter religious retreat. Nowadays they only go during the warmer seasons. Perhaps the monks and nuns are not as dedicated as in former times. Who knows, but at that time people went every winter for a religious retreat during the first month of the

year [usually February according to the Tibetan lunar calendar]. The elder ones went to pray and meditate, while the younger ones went to learn reading and writing. When I was 24, she was 13 and was staying at Pungyen Monastery. Eleven people in all were there that winter [1953] when a snowstorm struck.

Among the 11 people staying at Pungyen Monastery, three nuns were killed by an avalanche. My sister was one of them. Of course, at the time we knew nothing, since the monastery is hidden behind that ridge over there. In the afternoon Dawa Tenzin and I were playing dice in the courtyard. A man came running into the village and called to me, "Your sister the nun, she is dead!" I was stunned, not ready to believe what he had said. My mother began to cry.

Several men and I grabbed digging tools and headed up to Pungyen Monastery. We climbed and climbed, anxious to see what had happened and what we could do. The trail is so high and so cold and so difficult to get through due to snow. But now we had to go – we had to see if we could save my sister.

When we got to the temple we found the buildings had been buried under huge chunks of ice. It was a disaster. We started digging furiously – I have no idea where my energy came from. Eventually we found the rubble of the temple, and we found the bodies. Three nuns were dead, including my only sister. That was the saddest day of my life. With heavy hearts we brought the bodies down to the village for a proper cremation. My mother and I sold everything we had in order to perform a merit-making ceremony on her behalf. We were poor, but we had to do this to honor our kin. Later some people managed to dig up most of the statues and other valuable items housed in the temple. The temple has since been rebuilt, but it will never be the same.

People wondered why such a tragedy struck our monastery. Some said that the protector of our village who lives on the mountain must have been angry with us, and even blamed the Japanese mountaineers who had tried to climb Mt. Pungyen during the past autumn, saying that the climbers must have defiled the sacred slopes of the mountain. I don't know if this was the reason. But when the climbers came back the next year for another attempt, we refused to let them go up.

A few years later Tashi's mother passed away. Tashi took pride in the fact that he had provided food and shelter for his mother in her old age, just as she had sustained him through infancy and childhood. With virtually no resources, Tashi had nevertheless fulfilled his filial obligations.

### Elder Years and Religious Orientation

When I met Tashi in 1995 he was in his sixties. Although still spry and able to work for other households in exchange for food, he was anxious about the future. For Tibetans, old age is a time that should be dedicated to meritorious acts. In multigenerational households, elderly members do relatively simple chores such as feeding the animals and watching grandchildren. They are freed from more burdensome tasks so they have more time to recite prayers, circumambulate sacred places, and perform other actions that increase their storehouse of merit and enhance their chance of attaining a positive rebirth. Tashi did not have adult children to care for him in old age. Therefore, he had neither the requisite time to prepare for death in a culturally appropriate manner nor people to support him as his physical capabilities declined. But Tashi was a proud man who was reluctant to ask others for favors. He often told me, "I have never been a beggar. Why should I start now?" For a man of principle, death is preferable to the humiliation of beggary.

I once asked, "Tashi, are you afraid of death?" He replied:

Everybody is afraid of death. I am no exception. It is ridiculous for anybody to think he will not die soon. As an old man, I must think about death constantly, for my time is certainly drawing near. Nobody can hold off against death.

We grow old, and meanwhile our time in life expires day by day, month by month. When you are 20 you can look forward to being 30, and when you are 30 you can look forward to being 40. But when you reach 70 there is no longer anything to look forward to. At this point in life I have to wonder what will happen if I become ill again. Who will cook for me? Who will get food for me? Who will light my fire? And what will happen if I go blind? My eyesight is getting worse and worse these days. I am alone. With nobody

to care for me, I will die quickly if I go blind. This is my greatest fear – being blind and incapable of taking care of myself. If things get too bad, I will stop eating and just fade away. That would be far better than clinging to the last breath of life and having to endure the indignity of suffering like a helpless child.

I was fortunate to visit Tashi one last time the year before he died. I arrived unannounced, yet Tashi did not seem surprised. He merely shrugged and remarked, “I knew you were coming. I dreamed about it the other night.” Proof of his premonition was the vat of spirits distilled to celebrate my arrival.

As was our custom, Tashi sat on one side of his hearth while I sat on the other. We conversed about the usual topics: local culture, politics, and the wellbeing of mutual friends. We recounted past adventures and discussed ways to guarantee he had adequate resources to sustain him after I left. As time passed and the date of my departure grew near, Tashi became morose. During our last evening together we could not bring ourselves to turn in. We chatted deep into the night. Shortly before dawn Tashi asked to see, once again, a

video of my daughters. He squinted at the small screen of the camera, watching as two little girls repeatedly bubbled, “Kam sangbo agu Tashi?” (“Are you well, Uncle Tashi?”). After viewing the video one last time, Tashi broke down in tears. He removed a necklace that he had worn since an infant, enfolded it in my hands with his gnarled fingers, and said, “Please give this to your girls.” The significance of Tashi’s gesture is unfathomable. By giving away the amulet that had protected him over a lifetime, Tashi conveyed that his end was near.

One night I received a telephone call at my home in St. Louis from Purbu Tsewang, my friend who is the headmaster of a school in Nubri. Purbu informed me that Tashi’s health was deteriorating rapidly and that his end was near. After returning the phone to its cradle I placed the necklace Tashi had given me around the neck of my elder daughter as she slept with an angelic expression. The next morning, April 7, 2007, I learned that Tashi has passed away.

Tashi Dondrup often told me that we were brothers in a past life and will be brothers in a future life as well. I look forward to seeing him again.

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## Notes

- 1 Throughout history Tibetans have penned the vast majority of their biographical literature about venerated saints and lamas. Recently, members of Tibet’s former aristocracy have written biographies of laypeople (e.g., Taring 1986; Tsarong 2000; Taklha 2001). Although interesting to read, viewpoints conveyed through the lens of a privileged social class reveal little about the lives of commoners. Meanwhile, scholars have reconstructed the life of the peasantry prior to the 1950s. Such studies do not fit the genre of biography, but they do provide rich details about economic practices, systems of taxation, marriage and family life, religious observances, and the social structure of rural communities before these were dramatically transformed in the 1950s when China reasserted control over Tibet (Goldstein 1971a, 1971b; Aziz 1978; Dargyay 1982; Thargyal 2007; Childs 2008: chapter 3). Several Tibetans have narrated their life stories in recent years. The opening chapters of several works are equally valuable for depictions of life prior to the 1950s (Norbu 1987; Goldstein, Siebenschuh, and Tsering 1997; Goldstein, Sherap, and Siebenschuh 2004; Blo brtan rdo rje 2008; Khetsun 2008). My own book, *Tibetan Diary*, follows the life course of lamas and laymen in historical and contemporary Nubri, Nepal (Childs 2004).
- 2 Muslims in the large cities of central Tibet have for centuries filled this niche. Even today in rural Tibet, butchers carry considerable stigma. During fieldwork in China’s Tibet Autonomous Region, colleagues Melvyn Goldstein, Puchung Wangdui, and I encountered a household that reported no sources of income on our economic survey. Upon inquiry, we discovered that the family made their living by butchering animals for fellow community members. We subsequently invited the household’s head to our living quarters and served him tea from our own cups; both actions breach cultural prohibitions against social interactions with butchers. Our gestures put the man at ease and allowed us, through roundabout means, to ascertain how much income his family can derive from butchering animals.
- 3 The *pho lha* (literally, “man’s god”) is inherited through the patrilineage, resides on a man’s shoulder, and has a special place of worship within every household. By appeasing this deity through offerings, one ensures protection for the household and the lineage against harmful forces.
- 4 Most of the following autobiographical material is from *Tibetan Diary* (Childs 2004: 50–1, 118–19, 132, 167–8).
- 5 The timing here is significant. In Nubri a man inherits a portion of his father’s land and animals when he marries, usually during his late teens or early twenties. With the promise of an inheritance Tashi could have gotten married. His father’s subsequent marriage, and birth of a legitimate son, scuttled any such chance.
- 6 Tibetans are fond of giving each other nicknames. Balang’s nickname plays upon his combination of physical strength and intellectual weakness. His other nickname, Rinyel (“He Who Sleeps in the Hills”), implies that he is more comfortable in the company of wild animals than humans.
- 7 Li and Sho are two villages in Nubri renowned for their abundant forest resources.
- 8 This monastery lies high upon a cliff in the valley between Kyirong and Dzongga, Tibet. It was founded at a site where the great saint Milarepa meditated during the eleventh century. Dagkar Taso was an important training center for monks, nuns, and married lamas from the highlands of Nepal.
- 9 Although it is tempting to imagine that Tibetans become monks and nuns purely out of religious devotion, the reality is more complex. Many illegitimate children are given by parents to monasteries because, lacking economic resources, the clerisy represents one way they can attain a livelihood and social status. In the case of nuns, taking religious vows does not always allow them to fully escape the burdens of family responsibilities. Many girls in Nubri are designated to be nuns not only so they can help care for younger siblings but also in the expectation that they will one day be the primary caretakers for aging parents.
- 10 Pungyen Monastery is a small temple with meditation huts situated near the base of Mt. Pungyen, the local name for the world’s eighth-highest mountain (26,758 ft.), which is more commonly known by its Nepali name, Mt. Manaslu. The mountain is the residence of the local protector deity that the temple honors.