

What's new, Nancy Scherl ? Interview by Nadine Dinter

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Nadine Dinter August 27, 2025



Nancy Scherl's photographs immediately captivated me when legendary curator Elizabeth Avedon introduced us. Nancy's lens reveals the profound rhythms of Tibetan monastic life, capturing sacred rituals, quiet contemplation, and everyday activities. The story behind these remarkable images proved every bit as compelling as the monastery walls they illuminate.

Nadine Dinter: Your recent book *Challenger Defender: The Great Tradition of Tibetan Monastic Debate* offers fascinating insight into the culture of Tibetan Buddhist monks living in India. How did you enter this world, and who connected you?

Nancy Scherl: I was fortunate to be a guest at the Sera Mey and Sera Jey Monasteries – both part of the Sera Monastic University complex in Karnataka, southern India – during the 2019 Emory Tibet Science Initiative (ETSI), a program established in 2006 by Dr. Negi (co-director of the Emory-Tibet Science Initiative and the Emory Collaborative for Contemplative Studies at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia) and His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama. The aim of the program is to bridge Eastern and Western science and philosophies by opening a discourse between Tibetan Buddhist monks in India and Emory University. I was invited by ETSI to join my long-term partner, Richard K. Raker, who had been invited to teach a neuroscience class during the 2019 program.

ND: How long did you stay at the monasteries, and how did you gain the monks' trust to photograph their unique debate practice?

NSch: I spent a week and a half living at the complex. As a guest, I first walked around the monasteries and became acquainted with the library at Sera Jey, the living quarters, the classrooms, the temples, and the monastic courtyards where

debates took place morning, afternoon, and into dusk. I spoke with many monks and initially thought I'd make general portraits of them engaged in daily life, chores, and spiritual moments. After a couple of days, I knew I had found my subject when I became mesmerized by the monks during their debates.

What caught my full attention and absolutely blew me away was that, even without understanding their language, Tibetan, I felt the powerful impact of the visual and theatrical quality of the debates as a very passionate form of communication and an ancient tradition. I was drawn to the classic "clap and hold" gestures that challengers (standing) use to punctuate their points, while defenders (seated) listen and then respond.

I believe I gained the trust of many monks because I asked beforehand if my photographing would distract them. I was impressed by their grace in welcoming me and even more so by their ability to concentrate completely on each other, without becoming distracted by my presence, especially as a photographer with a camera in hand. My focus became photographing debates throughout the day and evening. I also had the privilege of getting to know many monks who spoke English and learned so much about their perspectives and why debate is important to them. My introductions during the ETSI orientation and personal communication with the monks made me aware of my purpose and my goals. I think Tibetan Buddhist monks are unusually trusting people.

ND: The book is called *Challenger Defender*. How did this title come about?

NSch: In Tibetan Buddhist monastic debates, monks focus on specific topics, usually from their scripture studies. The purpose of debate is to develop critical thinking skills and explore topics that interest them from very different perspectives. Two divergent points of view are often what plays out. I felt the title captured the essence of these debates. It drives the point that two opposing points of view often exist simultaneously and that there isn't only one answer that the opponents can agree upon.

Challengers (standing) present their hypothesis, and defenders (seated) respond with their own, opposing, viewpoints. Sometimes a topic is discussed between two monks, while other times there are multiple challengers and defenders. I found the larger groups especially intriguing because the dynamic itself is more complex than that of a one-on-one debate. What impressed me the most was that, at the end of each debate, both challengers and defenders shook hands – an appreciation of each other's hard intellectual work.

ND: How did your first encounters with the monks unfold? Was there a set procedure you had to go through?

NSch: There was no specific procedure. It's always important for me to obtain permissions for photographic projects. Sometimes those permissions are initially very loose, as a verbal agreement or a generic release from a representative. Later these permissions might become more formalized with individual people agreeing to the terms.

When I visit a place, it is usually very important for me to connect with the people who live there. I try to speak their language, even if it requires getting the help of an interpreter. Once a connection is established, everything flows naturally. It's important that people understand my purpose, be comfortable being photographed, and know how to reach me afterward. It's very important for me to stay in touch. I try to become familiar with key aspects of the culture. It's also very important to me to be respectful of protocol. I never push too hard – I ask, listen, and try to leave something behind, providing my email address and phone number on a release form or a business card.

ND: Your photographs give the impression you had full access to where the monks live, work, pray, and study. Was that so, and where were you housed?

NSch: I consider myself very fortunate in that regard. Coming as a guest of the Emory Tibet Science Initiative (ETSI), a fully vetted program, made it possible for me to document the monks' daily life and debate practice. What was key for me was creating a production list to organize what I wanted to photograph so I could tell the story of their debate culture. I asked a lot of questions, built relationships, and kept a journal of notes and names of the many monks I met, as well as those I was advised to meet or introduce myself to. These relationships were important and allowed me to access places that interested me most.

I wanted to show scripture study, which is central to monastic education and forms the foundation for debate. Memorization is also a vital part of their studies, and later the monks learn to apply critical thinking skills through debate. It was imperative for me to photograph the different ways scripture study takes place throughout the day. I photographed young monks starting their day and senior monks having a Nutella breakfast with their students.

It was also important for me to get inside the monks' living quarters and to learn about the mentor-mentee relationship – and how it reverses at a certain point. I received permission to visit an elder monk's home and photographed his caregiver preparing a meal for him. Similar to eldercare as we know it, the mentee becomes a mentor to the elder who once mentored him as a young monk. I found the level of care, involvement, and concern to be extraordinary.

I wanted to see monks starting and ending their day, doing their daily chores, and carrying out their routines. And of course, as I walked around the premises, there were numerous serendipitous moments that piqued my interest and became part of this project.

Rich and I lived on the monastery grounds at Sera Mey, in regular monks' quarters, along with visiting faculty from Emory and other universities. The exchange between monks and western faculty was natural and trusting. Many monks are invited to participate in a two-year program at Emory University as Gyatso Scholars, which helps bridge geographic and cultural distance and build mutual trust.

ND: What was the most impressive moment and most beautiful memory you took with you?

NSch: I learned that the greatest difference between Eastern and Western science is cultural and that both can benefit from one another. Even within the same community, people can hold diametrically opposing views yet still respect them.

Through the 2019 ETSI Program that summer, I visited classes and was amazed by the discussions taking place. Each class had translators, and it was fascinating to witness how differently Eastern and Western perspectives approached the same topics. These classroom discussions and debates had a profound effect on me. It was amazing to be part of the dialogues between Western scientists and Tibetan Buddhist monks, each bringing very different viewpoints.

A great example of such a dialogue came from Arri Eisen (teaching professor of biology at Emory University), who contributed an essay to my book, titled "Are Bacteria Sentient? And Why You Should Care." Arri shares an experience from his first year as a visiting scientist among the Buddhist monks in Dharamshala. He described how challenging it was to teach concepts such as cells and genes and how he approached the topic by asking whether bacteria are sentient.

Over the course of a weeks-long class, he and his students – Tibetan Buddhist monks – conversed, conducted experiments, and learned about cells, genes, genotypes, and phenotypes, and how they all work together. The central question of whether bacteria are sentient became the focus of a debate. When the class ended, half of the students voted that bacteria are sentient and the other half voted that they are not. Arri concluded that the debate is not over yet. He noted that some Western scientists are incorporating Buddhist approaches, using beneficial bacteria to neutralize harmful ones. Clearly, when Eastern and Western minds come together, new possibilities open up for tackling complex scientific questions.

ND: How did this experience, which gave birth to your book, influenced you and your photography?

NSch: My experience at the monastery was a concentrated one that inspired me visually in three ways. First, it led me to create a special Collector's Edition of gilded vellum prints – four unique book-objects, each with 20 square images mounted in 4 x 8-inch mats and housed between hand-stained wooden panels with a gilded image affixed to the front. I see these as "objects of curiosity" that unite the imagery while alluding to ancient Tibetan Buddhist scriptures and their beautiful gilded text. To realize this vision, I took gold leaf workshops, did a tremendous amount of experimentation, and received invaluable input from Marcy Palmer, Charles Douglas, and Debra Klompching.

As a photographer, I work at the intersection of social commentary and social documentary. My documentary work seeks truth through direct visual observation, whereas my commentary work draws out my personal point of view. To express my perspective on this ancient Tibetan Buddhist custom, I used dramatic lighting to capture the monks' humanistic and passionate demeanor, both individually and collectively, as they engaged in debate. The nighttime debates were lit by floodlights suspended from the monastery buildings, illuminating the courtyards and casting shadows of the debaters as they moved. The cinematic lighting, combined with their theatrical performance under the dramatic night sky in Bylakuppe, allowed me to capture the essence of the debate in a highly stylized manner. It felt as though they had been both lit and choreographed specifically for me. I experienced a sense of synchronization with the monks through the visuality of their debates, the lighting, and the theatrical nature of the debates themselves.

Secondly, because scriptures and scripture study are so significant to Tibetan Buddhist monks, much of what I photographed focused on them. I spent hours in the Sera Jey library and was honored and delighted to be shown original ancient scriptures by Tsering Choeqyal. This sparked my curiosity to explore imagery of other Tibetan Buddhist manuscripts, even virtually. Some included gilded illustrations, intricate designs, and Tibetan script. Their unbound, oblong pages were wrapped in fabric and sandwiched between wooden panels. A tab of multi-patterned fabric was tucked over the bundle, hanging over the short end of each scripture set, which was then secured with ties around the protective wooden panels. These richly crafted scriptures inspired me as art objects in their own right. By applying gold leaf to my own photographs in the Collector's Edition, I hoped to enhance the visual experience and evoke the magical lighting that illuminated the monks while also referencing some of the beautiful covers of the gilded manuscripts I had seen.

Finally, I love the visual appeal of Tibetan script, which I regard as an art form unto itself. It was important to me to include Tibetan translations of all the essays and commentaries in the book. My hope is that the book will help preserve this beautiful ancient custom by finding its way into Tibetan Buddhist monasteries and universities, as well as Western academic libraries. While my Collector's Edition does not include Tibetan scriptures, as an object it alludes to them.

ND: Are you still in contact with the monks?

NSch: Yes! Forming bonds with people of a completely different culture is perhaps the greatest gift of all. I have kept in touch with many of the Tibetan Buddhist monks I met during my 2019 visit to the Sera Mey and Sera Jey Monasteries, as well as with Western friends I made during my stay in Bylakuppe. We stay connected through WhatsApp, email, and social media.

Recently, I met Rigzin Maxi Nurbu, who heads the Science Center at Tashi Lhunpo Monastery, while he was visiting the US for a conference, and we had a delightful lunch together. Rigzin, also a photographer, kindly allowed me to use his beautiful photograph of His Holiness for this book project.

Elizabeth Avedon, a valued advocate of mine, introduced me to her longtime friend Nicholas Vreeland, who contributed a beautiful essay to my book. I was especially honored by this since I greatly admire his photography (*Monk with a Camera*). I look forward to meeting Nicholas in the US or in India sometime soon.

I was so taken by the hospitality and generosity of so many of the monks during my visit to Sera Mey. When Kalden Gyatso attended Emory University through the 2019–2021 Tenzin Gyatso Science Scholar (TGSS) program (which trains Tibetan Buddhist scholars in modern science), I baked my grandmother’s thumbprint jelly cookies and sent a large cookie tin to Kalden for himself and his friends to enjoy.

Rich and I also meet up with many of the essay contributors – Carol Worthman and Paul Garcia, among others – who live near us in the New York metropolitan area. These relationships are invaluable to me.

ND: What’s next for you?

NSch: I’m working on completing a few bodies of work that are in progress and that I hope to bring into book form. One project, *CLOSED n’ COUNTERS*, explores the complexities of solitude from the perspective of the hospitality industry, focusing on restaurants and bars. Another ongoing project, *INNKEEPERS*, features portraits of hospitality professionals who work in the hotel industry.

I have visited India four times and have been fully immersed in each visit. My hope is to return to India to photograph nuns during their debates, something I was unable to do in southern India in 2019.

About the book:

Nancy Scherl – *Challenger Defender: The Great Tradition of Buddhist Monastic Debate*
Hardback, 5 x 8 inches, 232 pages, 95 color illustrations, ISBN: 979-8-9877845-6-3

Tibetan monastic debate is a traditional form of education and path to spiritual awareness performed by Buddhist monks as a series of dramatic, theatrical gestures (the signature “handclap and hold”) and is a total expression of body, mind, and spirit. Its purpose is to establish a viewpoint, conquer misconceptions, and understand the nature of reality. *Challenger Defender* makes the case for how Western societies can learn from this powerful educational tool for developing critical thinking skills and achieving empathy in the face of divergent views and beliefs.

A vibrant tapestry of text and images, *Challenger Defender* explores the practice of monastic debate and allows the reader entry into the fragile yet thriving Tibetan Buddhist diaspora, a communal and intimate world.

<https://mweditions.com/books/challenger-defender-the-great-tradition-of-buddhist-monastic-debate/>

For more information, see Nancy’s website at: www.nancyascherlfineart.com