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Bhikshunis and Breaking Barriers: The Changing Status of Women in Monastic Life

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**Bhikshunis and Breaking Barriers:
The Changing Status of Women in Monastic Life**



Courtesy of Brian Harris

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Abstract

My research focuses on the recent changes in ideology and policy that have taken place in regards to the status of Tibetan Buddhist nuns and their monastic lives. I chose to focus on the nuns at Dolma Ling nunnery in Dharamsala, India who will be sitting for their geshema degree examinations in a few weeks time. These women are among the first nuns to be taking this examination because it was, until very recently, open only to Buddhist monks. This revolutionary change was accomplished in part by the efforts of the leaders of the Tibetan Nuns Project, who have also had a hand in several other changes concerning the status of nuns, including incorporating debate into the nuns' studies and striving toward the controversial issue of full ordination for Tibetan Buddhist women. Using data collected at Dolma Ling and interviews conducted with co-directors of the Tibetan nuns project, an official at the Department of Religion and Culture of the CTA, and several of the nuns themselves, I will be discussing the significance of the recent changes for women in monastic life and the role that the Tibetan Nuns Project has played in these changes.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Dolma Ling Nunnery for allowing me to stay and conduct research on their grounds, the nuns of Dolma Ling who took time out of their study schedules to answer my questions, and especially to Ven. Lobsang Dechen and Betsy Napper, co-directors of the Tibetan Nuns Project who were infinitely helpful and knowledgeable resources for me during my research period.

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Introduction

Since the time of the Buddha Siddhartha Gautama, women in monastic life have been viewed as second-class citizens in comparison to their male counterparts.

Originally refusing to let women even take vows and join the order, the Buddha finally consented after relentless persuasion attempts on the part of one of his most devoted followers, Ananda. It is not certain why the Buddha was so resistant to the idea when he is said to have acknowledged the fact that women are equally as capable as men of reaching enlightenment, but it is theorized that “the Buddha’s initial ambivalence about instituting the female order was primarily due to the perceived social threat women would pose to the male order” and that he “predicted that the monastic order would last only half as long as the result of admitting women.”¹

Because he allowed their ordination only begrudgingly, the Buddha also added the condition that all nuns must follow eight strict behavior rules, known as the Eight Garudhammas in Sanskrit (*lci-ba'i chos* in Tibetan). This list of regulations outlines different ways in which nuns must defer to and be supervised by monks, not only in day-to-day interactions but also when nuns go into retreat during the rainy season or during the ordination of new members. For example, it is written that “they cannot administer their own ordinations or confessionals, and the proscription against admonishing monks gave them little chance to become public teachers or ritual professionals.”² These rules and the account of the Buddha’s opinion on women in monastic life are laid out in ancient tales of the Vinaya (known as *dul-ba* in Tibetan), and some scholars have questioned the authenticity and legitimacy of these tales. Indeed, Nancy J. Barnes argues that

These accounts do not inform us about attitudes or practices prevailing in the second or first centuries B.C.E. But they do suggest that the monks who composed these stories, whenever they were composed, wanted to control the actions of nuns and curtail their inclinations toward independence.³

Regardless of whether or not the rules were truly laid out by the Buddha himself, their impact on the lives of nuns is no less real. Since that time, “exclusion and inferiority proved mutually reinforcing as nuns were left stranded on the margins of an intellectual and ritual hierarchy.”⁴ Fortunately, efforts have been made in recent years, and are still being made today, to try to level this inequality, especially in concern to the

¹ Kim Gutschow, "Novice Ordination for Nuns: The Rhetoric and Reality of Female Monasticism in Northwest India," *Women's Buddhism Buddhism's Women: Tradition, Revision, Renewal*, ed. Ellison Banks Findly (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000).

² Ibid.

³ Nancy J. Barnes, "The Nuns at the Stupa: Inscriptional Evidence for the Lives and Activities of Early Buddhist Nuns in India," *Women's Buddhism Buddhism's Women: Tradition, Revision, Renewal*, ed. Ellison Banks Findly (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000).

⁴ See footnote 1.

issue of equal education for nuns. One organization that has made a substantial impact on the status of women in monastic life is the Tibetan Nuns Project.

Tibetan Nuns Project (TNP) and Dolma Ling

The Tibetan Nuns Project, hereafter referred to as TNP, was founded in 1987 by Rinchen Khando Choegyal, former Minister of Education of the CTA and the founding president of the Tibetan Women's Association. The project began in order to provide facilities and educational opportunities for the many nuns who were fleeing Tibet in search of religious freedom away from the oppressive Chinese regime. To this day, higher education and empowerment for nuns remain the chief aims of the project, and they have made great strides in this direction since their establishment. Other goals of the organization are to "contribute to the preservation of Tibetan cultural and religious traditions," "improve the health and living conditions of Tibetan nuns in exile," "provide traditional as well as modern education for Tibetan women," "provide highly educated female teachers for the Tibetan Buddhist community and the world at large," and to "establish self-sufficient Buddhist nunneries."⁵

According to TNP co-director Betsy Napper, the main goal of the project has always been to give nuns access to the full educational range of their tradition, which they are finally getting close to accomplishing now. Whereas before the organization focused primarily on aiding Tibetan refugee nuns, as the inflow of refugee nuns has slowed in recent years, they have now expanded their aid to nuns living in the border areas of India or even Nepal who have the desire to study at a higher level but whose small nunneries lack the necessary facilities and resources.

Napper believes that the most important contribution that TNP has made has been to act as an advocate for Buddhist nuns in general rather than focusing on a particular tradition or nunnery. As a representative of all Buddhist nuns, they have been able to act on behalf of a united front of women in order to more easily facilitate events such as Jang Gönchoe and the Geshema examination, both of which will be discussed in greater detail later.

Dolma Ling Nunnery and Institute of Dialectics was the first nunnery built and fully financially supported by the Tibetan Nuns Project.

⁵ Tibetan Nuns Project Brochure



(Butter lamp house and surrounding snow mountains at Dolma Ling)

Located on the outskirts of Dharamsala near Norbulingka Institute, Dolma Ling is a non-denominational nunnery open to women of any Buddhist tradition to come pursue higher education in philosophical texts and dialectics, as well as other nonspiritual subjects. The institute offers classes in both Tibetan and English languages, mathematics, science, and computer technology. This curriculum is progressive and unique among nunneries because it gives nuns who choose not to pursue high degrees in Buddhist philosophy the opportunity to contribute knowledge or services to their surrounding communities. Those nuns who are not interested in studying the

philosophical texts in a more in-depth manner can, among other paths, focus on Tibetan language and literature or leave the nunnery to receive teaching certification that will allow them to share their knowledge with others. The education available to the women at Dolma Ling is life changing; never before have nuns had the opportunity to pursue so many degrees or choose the exact direction in which they want to take their education. Beyond establishing the institute itself and finding teachers for the nuns, the Tibetan Nuns Project also organizes and funds an annual inter-nunnery debate, and the impact of this cannot go unnoted.

Debate

The art of debate is used to deepen one's understanding of the Buddhist philosophical texts. Traditionally open only to monks, it was not until the 1990s that nuns were able to take part in this beneficial practice. During the debating process, one nun will select a quote from one of the philosophical texts and either propose a question about it or ask another nun to expound upon it. The second nun will then give her answer or explanation, and if it is not deemed sufficient by the first nun then the debate will begin. Back and forth they will discuss until one speaker has been declared to have the better point; in the event of a stalemate, the text will be consulted and the debate may begin again or be considered settled. As stated in the Tibetan Nuns Project Winter 2008 Newsletter:

The practice of debate cultivates deep logical thinking and leads to mastery of the complex philosophy of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. It is a difficult practice that takes many years to fully master, and it is critical to fostering the nun's ability to assume roles as full qualified teachers of their tradition.⁶

Because they place such a high value on debate, TNP has incorporated the practice into the daily studies of the nuns. Each weekday in the evening the nuns will gather in the courtyard to discuss and debate the texts they have been studying during classes.

I was fortunate enough to be able to witness several of these practice debate sessions during my time at Dolma Ling. The nuns were spread throughout the courtyard, either in groups or pairs with the questioner standing above the seated answerer. In the groups there may be either one or two nuns seated, doing their best to answer the questions hurled at them by the group standing above. With each point that the questioners want to emphasize, they will add a wide-armed clap, so that the sound of clapping and yelling fills the grounds of the nunnery.

⁶ "Nunneries Meet to Debate." Tibetan Nuns Project Newsletter, Winter 2008.

The environment of the practice sessions can be playful, with everyone good-heartedly yelling over one another with smiles on their faces, or even pushing each other aside in some cases so as to make their own point heard more clearly. Under the watchful eye of a monk teacher, however, the tone is much quieter and more serious. The younger nuns are separated into different wings of the courtyard, debating different texts than their elder counterparts.



(Nuns getting enthusiastic while practicing debate)

The culmination of these daily practices comes during the annual Jang Gönchoe inter-nunnery debate. The event is so named for Jang, the region in Tibet west of Lhasa where the month long inter-monastery debate originated, and Gönchoe, which is Tibetan

for “Winter Prayer.”⁷ The first debate session for women took place in the Fall of 1995 when women from four nunneries in India came together at Jamyang Choeling Institute in Dharamsala to discuss and broaden their comprehension of the philosophical texts together. TNP recognized the importance of learning from the opinions and thoughts of those from different traditions and nunneries, so they decided to take on the responsibility of organizing, expanding, and fundraising for the event each year.

Not only does debating help the nuns to further understand the texts and feel more confident in their knowledge, but it also gives the women an opportunity to openly demonstrate that knowledge to the Buddhist community at large. The TNP Winter 2008 Newsletter says it well when it states, “as senior monks and scholars observe their growing skills, opposition to their full inclusion within the monastic sangha is steadily reduced.” After a rare opportunity to demonstrate their debating skills in front of the Dalai Lama at the Great Prayer Festival in Dharamsala last year, “His Holiness expressed his joy at the nuns’ high level of knowledge and recommended strongly that it was time to include them in the degree granting process.”⁸

Geshema Degree

The degree to which the Dalai Lama refers in the previous quote is the Geshema degree, the female equivalent of the Geshe degree that is awarded to monks of the Gelug tradition after passing an examination following nineteen years of Buddhist philosophical studies. Up until very recently, nuns were completing the nineteen-year program of studying the Five Great Canonical Texts but were still not allowed to take the examination to earn the degree. In order to properly empower the nuns, they must be given the opportunity to “achieve equal academic standing with the monks, proving their qualifications by earning the highest degrees.”⁹ The degree itself is important for the women because “once she obtains a Geshema degree, besides being in possession of a treasure of knowledge, a nun will be eligible to assume various leadership roles in the monastic and lay communities.”¹⁰ It is a clear and objective way to prove to the sangha that she is qualified to take on the same responsibilities and roles that a monk would.

The historic pronouncement to allow Tibetan Buddhist nuns to sit for the examination came finally in 2012 after years of discussion and deliberation within the sangha. On May 19, 2012 the Department of Religion and Culture of the Tibetan government-in-exile held a meeting to discuss the issue. Among the attendants were representatives from each Tibetan Buddhist tradition, high-ranking members of different dialectical institutions, and two delegates from the Tibetan Nuns Project. After some consideration, a unanimous decision was reached in favor of the nuns sitting for the Geshema examination. TNP had been involved in the deliberation process at several other conferences and gatherings in the past, so this was a monumental success for them

⁷ “Jang Gönchoe: Tibetan Philosophical Debate.” Tibetan Nuns Project Newsletter, Fall 1999.

⁸ “Historic Decision to Grant Degree.” Tibetans Nuns Project Newsletter, Fall 2012.

⁹ “Geshema and Khenmo Degrees.” Tibetan Nuns Project Newsletter, Fall 2009.

¹⁰ “Historic Decision to Grant Degree.” Tibetan Nuns Project Newsletter, Fall 2012.

after years of advocating for the nuns. This meeting also saw the creation of the Geshema Examination Controller Board, a committee in charge of monitoring the creation and standards of the exam.¹¹

When I met with D.N. Choedak, the Religion Secretary of the Department of Religion and Culture of the CTA, he was resolute in emphasizing that the Geshema examination would not be relaxed or made more lenient than the Geshe examination for monks. He explained that the degree is viewed with such prestige that to “dilute the renowned system” by making exemptions or exceptions for the nuns would diminish the fame of the degree. The Geshema Examination Controller Board was concerned with this precise issue and made sure that the exam had the same traditionally high standards.

Mr. Choedak was also kind enough to explain the examination process to me so that I had a better idea of what the nuns would be facing in several weeks time. All twenty-seven nuns who will be taking the exam, including ten from Dolma Ling, will gather in Garo, India outside of Dharamsala on May 1st. They then have twenty days to do last-minute preparations and review of their studies before the actually testing process begins. The examination will consist of ten days of individual written tests over a multitude of subjects: Philosophy, including its three subcategories of compassion, the middle way (*Uma*, in Tibetan) and Tsema; Tibetan religious history; Tibetan written language; and Science, including evolutionary studies. In addition to the written portion, the exam also consists of debate sessions. The candidates will debate amongst themselves as teachers walk around listening and awarding marks to each. All of the practice and studies of the last nineteen years of the nuns’ lives come down to this ten-day period, and the pressure is immense.

I was incredibly fortunate to be able to have a brief interview with two of the nuns taking the exam, who were able to give a first-hand account of what the examination means to them. Delek Wangmo and Tenzin Palmo are cousins who fled their village in the Kham region of Tibet together in 1990 when they were both just thirteen years old. Both women had taken vows to become nuns in their small village at the age of twelve, and they decided to take the month-long walking journey to India in search of a place where they could practice their religion freely.

¹¹ Ibid.



Delek Wangmo (left) and Tenzin Palmo (right) at Dolma Ling Nunnery

When asked how they feel about finally being able to take the examination and potentially earn a Geshema degree, Delek Wangmo reported feeling very lucky and excited to be among the first in Tibetan history to have this chance, and Tenzin Palmo was also feeling happy but also a little nervous for the exam itself. Both women have been able to contact their families back in Tibet, who are incredibly proud and happy for them, to tell them the good news.

I asked Delek and Tenzin whether or not they have attended a Jang Gönchoe debate before and, if so, whether or not they believe it has helped them on their way toward a degree. Having debated at Jang Gönchoe sixteen and thirteen times, respectively, Ani Delek and Ani Tenzin can say with confidence that the debating is a huge help in preparing for the exam. In regards to any difficulties they may have faced along the way, I was surprised to hear them say that they have not encountered many obstacles during their pursuit for higher education. Delek Wangmo feels that if she can make it through an arduous journey to India and years of difficult study without obstacles, she will not have to face any in her whole life. The only obstacle that Tenzin Palmo is worried about, now that the difficult studies of deep philosophy are concluding, is the potential of becoming ill before the exam.

The vision of establishing a Geshema examination has finally been realized. With this impressive historic milestone under their belt, the Tibetan Nuns Project directors have no intention of stopping their progress there; they now turn their attention to a controversial issue that is still being disputed within the greater Buddhist community: full ordination for Tibetan nuns.

Gelongma Full Ordination

In Tibetan Buddhism, there are different levels of ordination that a woman must pass through before reaching the level of a fully ordained nun. At the first level of *shramaneri*, she is considered a novice nun (*dge-tshul-ma*) and adheres to either eight or ten precepts, depending on the school to which she belongs. The next level is known as *dge-slob-ma* ordination; this two-year “probationary period” was originally put into place to ensure that nuns attempting to enter the order were not pregnant. Once this two-year period is complete, the next step laid out in the Vinaya is to proceed to full ordination, the final level in which Tibetan nuns take up 364 vows – the number varying depending on the school – after answering a series of questions meant to determine whether or not she will be capable of maintaining her vows.¹² Due to a controversial clause in the ordination rules, however, Tibetan Buddhist nuns are not currently allowed to receive ordination at this final level.

The issue that has caused so many disputes on this subject stems from the rules regarding ordination written in the Vinaya. To receive full ordination, regardless of gender or which school one follows, the lineage of the person giving the ordination must have an unbroken link that traces all the way back to the Buddha himself. However, an extra obstacle was put in place for nuns; in the Eight Garudhammas mentioned earlier, the Buddha declared that nuns must receive ordination from both the *bhikku* (male) and the *bhikshuni* (female) sanghas. The trouble for Tibetan nuns is that “there is no concrete evidence that the *bhikshuni* ordination was ever introduced into Tibet.”¹³ It is theorized that this was due in large part to the geographical constraints that the mountains surrounding Tibet posed for travelers. Indeed, *Bhikshuni Thubten Chodron* asserts that

The *bhikshuni* lineage was not established in Tibet due to the difficulties of crossing the Himalayan Mountains. A sufficient number of Indian *bhikshunis* did not go to Tibet, nor did a sufficient number of Tibetan women go to India to take the ordination and return to Tibet to pass it on to others.¹⁴

The male *bhikku* lineage in Tibet, known as *Mulasarvastivada*, was also in danger of disappearing for this reason, but efforts were made throughout history to revive the teachings before they became extinct. Unfortunately, the same efforts were not made for the *bhikshunis*. In addition to geographic restrictions, the economics of Buddhism also played a role in the dissolution of female lineage. This is because “during periods of declining economic support, nunneries suffered more than monasteries because they

¹² Alexander Berzin. The Berzin Archives: The Buddhist Archives of Dr. Alexander Berzin, "A Summary Report of the 2007 International Congress on the Women's Role in the Sangha: *Bhikshuni* Vinaya and Ordination Lineages." Last modified August 24, 2012. Accessed April 27, 2013.

http://www.berzinarchives.com/web/en/archives/approaching_buddhism/world_today/summary_report_2007_international_c/part_1.html.

¹³ “*Bhikshuni* Ordination Update.” Tibetan Nuns Project Newsletter, Winter 2006.

¹⁴ *Bhikshuni Thubten Chodron*. Venerable Thubten Chodron's Home Page, "The Present Status of the *Bhikshuni* Ordination." Accessed April 27, 2013.

http://www.thubtenchodron.org/BuddhistNunsMonasticLife/the_present_status_of_the_bhikshuni_ordination.html.

could not command the same institutional prestige and scholarship that monasteries could. As monasteries continued to receive most of the available patronage, female ordination lineages disappeared one by one throughout South and Southeast Asia.”¹⁵

Because the Vinaya requires the presence of a non-existent bhikshuni lineage at the ordination, “Tibetan nuns have remained permanently in the novice (*dGe tshul ma*) state, living in nunneries, which were generally poorer than monasteries and where education opportunities were severely limited.”¹⁶ The Dalai Lama, who has expressed continuous support for somehow reestablishing the Tibetan bhikshuni lineage, explains the importance of attaining full ordination when he says, “full ordination for women will enable women to pursue wholeheartedly their own spiritual development through learning, contemplating, and meditating, and also enhance their capacities to benefit society through research, teaching, counseling, and other activities to help extend the life of the Buddhadharma.”¹⁷

While the benefits are openly recognized, the debate over the possibility of reestablishing a lineage for Tibetan nuns still continues with a seemingly slim chance of being settled in the near future. This is because

according to scripture, Vinaya issues, such as concerning the re-establishment of this ordination, must be decided by a council of sangha elders and Vinaya-holders. It cannot be decided by one individual alone, even if that individual is a Dalai Lama...Many scriptural passages, however, seem to contradict each other concerning the possible methods. Since the Tibetan Geshes are experts in debate, the arguments for and against each possible method can be and have been presented convincingly.¹⁸

The different methods of reestablishment mentioned in the quote above have been proposed at various conferences and meetings over the last decade. Because it is only the

¹⁵ Kim Gutschow. “Novice Ordination for Nuns: The Rhetoric and Reality of Female Monasticism in Northwest India.” *Women’s Buddhism Buddhism’s Women: Tradition, Revision, Renewal*. Edited by Ellison Banks Findly. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000.

¹⁶ Serinity Young. “Women Changing Tibet, Activism Changing Women.” *Women’s Buddhism Buddhism’s Women: Tradition, Revision, Renewal*. Edited by Ellison Banks Findly. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000.

¹⁷ Studienstiftung für Buddhismus (Foundation for Buddhist Studies) in collaboration with The University of Hamburg, Germany, “Statement of His Holiness the Dalai Lama on Bhikshuni Ordination in the Tibetan Tradition.” Last modified July 20, 2007.

Accessed April 27, 2013. <http://www.congress-on-buddhist-women.org/index.php?id=142>.

¹⁸ Alexander Berzin. The Berzin Archives: The Buddhist Archives of Dr. Alexander Berzin, “A Summary Report of the 2007 International Congress on the Women’s Role in the Sangha: Bhikshuni Vinaya and Ordination Lineages.” Last modified August 24, 2012. Accessed April 27, 2013.

http://www.berzinarchives.com/web/en/archives/approaching_buddhism/world_today/summary_report_2007_international_c/part_1.html.

Tibetan Mulasarvastivada bhikshuni lineage that has been broken, bhikshunis who have been ordained through different lineages have offered to be present at the ordination of Tibetan nuns in order to satisfy the requirement of a bhikshuni presence when the vows are being taken. One lineage in particular, the Dharmagupta that survives in countries such as Taiwan and China, has been offered as an alternative option for the Tibetan nuns. These Dharmagupta nuns could be joined by Mulasarvastivada monks at the ordination ceremony, but the lineage being transmitted would not be 100% Tibetan.

Another option proposed at the International Congress on Buddhist Women's Role in the Sangha, which took place in Hamburg, Germany in July of 2007, was for Tibetan Mulasarvastivada monks to preside over the ordination alone; however, this goes against the rules written in the Vinaya and would result in a "minor infraction" for the monks, which some view as "an acceptable price to pay."¹⁹ When questioned, the Tibetan nuns themselves "emphasized that they favour following the Mulasarvastivada tradition and stressed the importance of having the support of the lamas and the community."²⁰ Tibetan Nuns Project co-director Ven. Lobsang Dechen stated that although they do, of course, want full ordination, the validity of the Tibetan lineage takes priority for the nuns over the title of being fully ordained.

In response to the great variety of opinions and proposed solutions throughout the Buddhist sangha, the Department of Religion and Culture of the CTA put together a Gelongma Research Committee to examine the spectrum of ideas in its entirety. The committee, made up of representatives of all schools of Tibetan Buddhism and several representatives from the Tibetan Nuns Project as well as several Vinaya scholars, compiled a 240-page report outlining the pros and cons of each potential solution. D.N. Choedak, Religious Department Secretary at the CTA, informed me that this report will be given to the heads of the various schools of thought at their next meeting. He also wanted to emphasize that while the committee was formed by the Tibetan government-in-exile, the issue is for the entire international Buddhist community to decide, not just the Tibetans. This statement is congruous with the sentiments of the Dalai Lama who has said that

the re-establishment of the Mulasarvastivada bhikshuni ordination, although extremely important, must be carried out in strict accordance with the textual tradition of the Mulasarvastivada Vinaya. It is essential to avoid the judgment of history that the Tibetans reinstated this ordination in an invalid manner.²¹

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ "His Holiness the Dalai Lama Announces 'Full Support' for Introducing Full Ordination for Women in Tibetan Buddhism." Tibetan Nuns Project Newsletter, Fall 2007.

²¹ Alexander Berzin. The Berzin Archives: The Buddhist Archives of Dr. Alexander Berzin, "A Summary Report of the 2007 International Congress on the Women's Role in the Sangha: Bhikshuni Vinaya and Ordination Lineages." Last modified August 24, 2012. Accessed April 27, 2013.

http://www.berzinarchives.com/web/en/archives/approaching_buddhism/world_today/summary_report_2007_international_c/part_1.html.

The Dalai Lama's emphasis on the importance of the public's perception of Tibetans seems to suggest that there are other forces at play in the ordination debate other than the lineage controversy. Politics, not only at the level of national governments but also within the Buddhist sangha, has had a huge impact on the progress of this issue. Although there is not supposed to be any discord between the different schools of Buddhism, one might wonder, "how does one tradition feel about taking on a lineage from another, thus acknowledging that their own tradition was lacking in some way?"²² Pride could be hindering the willingness of some to consent to the transmission of a different lineage. There is also the possibility of gender bias; if Tibetan nuns are fully ordained with the same vows as the Tibetan monks, this may affect the well-established social hierarchy, and it is certain that not everyone would be in favor of such an upset.

Politics on a global scale creates problems as well. Tibet's political position has left them with an immense population living in exile in other countries. As a result of this upheaval, the preservation of their native culture was given top priority; consequently, large-scale changes to religious traditions have been met with some resistance. The conditions under the rule of the Chinese regime in Tibet itself has left Tibetan Buddhists worried more about their religious freedom than anything else. Such as it is, "for them, full ordination is not an immediate issue of concern; political liberation is,"²³ and those still in Tibet are "less concerned with full ordination than they are with the necessities of daily subsistence."²⁴

When I asked Betsy Napper, co-director of TNP, if she felt that the monastic sangha is supportive of their efforts to reestablish a Tibetan bhikshuni lineage, she admitted that they are facing some direct opposition. She went on to offer an explanation: the first generation that left Tibet in the 1950's (those who are currently in leadership positions within the Buddhist community) have put such strong focus and efforts on conserving their culture in exile that it will not be them who support any kind of great change. Any radical thoughts or changes will have to come from the next generation. Indeed, in recent years there has been discussion about the modern-day relevance of some of the rules of the Vinaya and the idea that "Sangha instructional procedures in the monastic area lag some distance behind the reality of day-to-day Buddhist practice."²⁵ Although the possibility of progressive, fundamental changes to the Vinaya frightens some, TNP asserts that, overall, "support for full bhikshuni ordination seems to have grown."²⁶ Whatever the reasons or motivations may be for not granting

²² Ibid.

²³ Serinity Young. "Women Changing Tibet, Activism Changing Women." *Women's Buddhism Buddhism's Women: Tradition, Revision, Renewal*. Edited by Ellison Banks Findly. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000.

²⁴ Kim Gutschow. "Novice Ordination for Nuns: The Rhetoric and Reality of Female Monasticism in Northwest India." *Women's Buddhism Buddhism's Women: Tradition, Revision, Renewal*. Edited by Ellison Banks Findly. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000.

²⁵ Ellison Banks Findly. "Women Teachers of Women: Early Nuns 'Worthy of My Confidence.'" *Women's Buddhism Buddhism's Women: Tradition, Revision, Renewal*. Edited by Ellison Banks Findly. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000.

²⁶ "Debate Moves Forward on Full Ordination for Nuns." Tibetan Nuns Project Newsletter, Winter 2008.

full ordination to the Tibetan nuns, there is no doubt that the TNP will keep advocating for them and for the benefit of nuns the world over.

Conclusion

Despite the Buddha's initial hesitancy about letting women join the ranks of monastic life, nuns today have proven themselves more than worthy and continue to strive for higher standards in all areas of their lives. Many organizations exist to aide them in their efforts, but the Tibetan Nuns Project stands above and beyond the rest in its advocacy for and assistance to nuns. Although TNP's existence was born out of the tragic invasion of Tibet by China and the consequential exile of thousands of people, the progress and positive changes that they have helped to facilitate have had an immeasurable impact on the lives of women in monastic life. These changes, including the establishment of higher educational institutes for nuns and the creation of the Geshema examination, may prove to be just the beginning as further advancements are made in the struggle for full bhikshuni ordination.

An interesting question that arose during my research was whether or not such revolutionary changes would have taken place in Tibet if the Chinese had never invaded. In the face of the many adjustments necessary to live successfully in exile, the environment was right to discuss improvements in the education and rights of Tibetan nuns. Betsy Napper speculates that the educational reforms would not have happened in Tibet because the necessary force to get the ball rolling would not have existed. I suppose that in this small way, there is a silver lining to the immense hardships that Tibetans have had to face since the Chinese invasion.

Appendices

A. Methodology

Upon my arrival at Dolma Ling Nunnery and Institute of Dialectics on April 14th, I was planning to conduct a series of in-depth interviews with as many of the nuns as possible that will be sitting for the geshema examination. Shortly after my arrival, however, I learned that the examination was much sooner than I had realized; the nuns would be leaving within two weeks of my arrival to begin their final preparations and review before the exam begins on May 20th. As such, they were incredibly busy with their studies and had next to no time to sit down for an interview with me. As a result of these unforeseen circumstances, I was forced to shift the focus of my research away from the individuals themselves and look more at the changing status of Tibetan women in monastic life in general.

Fortunately, two nuns were able to give me fifteen minutes of their time for an interview, but I soon discovered another obstacle. Tibetan nuns, in their infinite modesty, do not like to acknowledge their extraordinary accomplishments and also insist that their English language abilities are too poor for an interview when, in reality, they are fully capable of conversing. This problem was solved when the more confident of the two women agreed to act as a translator for the other.

For my project, I used a combination of short face-to-face interviews and printed resources for my data, supplemented by online sources. While I would have preferred in-depth interviews in order to better understand how the nuns feel about the changing status of women, these resources proved sufficient and useful.

B. Advisor Biography

Dr. Susan Chase is a Sociology professor at the University of Tulsa in Tulsa, Oklahoma. She did her undergraduate work at Dickinson College and earned both her masters and her doctorate from York University in Toronto. Dr. Chase specializes in

qualitative research, especially concerning personal narratives and has published several works concerning diversity and gender issues.

C. Photos



(Small-scale model of Dolma Ling Nunnery grounds)



(Nuns' housing at Dolma Ling)

Glossary

Vinaya = a code of monastic disciplinary rules in Buddhism; Sanskrit for discipline; '*dul-ba*' in Tibetan

Sangha = the Buddhist community of monks, nuns, novices, and laity; Sanskrit for assembly or company; '*dus sde*' in Tibetan

Eight Garudhammas = the eight behavioral rules that the Buddha supposedly required nuns to follow after joining the order; '*lci-ba'i chos*' in Tibetan

Dialectics = the art or practice of arriving at the truth by the exchange of logical arguments

Mulasarvastivada = the male Tibetan bhikku lineage

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Suggestions for Future Research

Because new changes are taking place on the issue of Gelongma full ordination all the time, future up-to-date research on this topic is possible. It would be best to contact the Department of Religion and Culture of the Central Tibetan Administration in Dharamsala or Ven. Lobsang Dechen at Dolma Ling Nunnery if this topic is of interest. One could also look more closely at the history of the transmission of the Tibetan bhikshuni lineage and the reasons for its disappearance or non-establishment. Finally, I think it would be interesting to research what social changes, if any, were taking place in Tibet before the Chinese invasion in order to examine whether or not such changes for women would have taken place on their own in Tibet.