

# Experience of being the Tibetan Buddhist teacher to convene and sponsor the first Tibetan initiated Bhikhuni ordination ceremony held in Canberra, Australia October 2003\*

By Lama Choedak Rinpoche

I am very grateful that the Buddhist studies department of Hamburg University has the vision and initiative to convene this conference to promote Bhikhuni ordination lineage into the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. First I would like to tell you my background, why and how I came to convene and sponsor a Tibetan initiated Bhikhuni Ordination ceremony in the world. I will then offer few points why I unconditionally support the introduction of Bhikhuni ordination in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition.

## ***Background***

I was born in Tibet, grew up in Nepal and became a monk after finishing my high school. I studied under the tutelage of His Eminence Chogye Trichen Rinpoche for 12 years in Lumbini, the birth-place of the Buddha. I also completed a three and half year solitary meditation retreat. Growing up in a Tibetan monastery has given me a commitment to promote the precious teachings of the Buddha which is one of the most expedient methods to alleviate sufferings and pain caused by “three I’ ignorance, injustice and inequality. Since coming to the West in the early 1980s I have been leading a life of a house-holder Buddhist teacher and have founded

number of Buddhist centres in Australia and New Zealand. Over the years an increasing number of my students have been ordained. Most of them were ordained as novices in Australia in 1997, 2001 and 2006.

### ***Problem***

By early 2000, a number of those novices expressed their wish to be ordained as Bhikhus and Bhikhunis. There is no problem for the men to receive Bhikhu ordination, but for the women there is no one who could ordain them as Bhikhunis in the Tibetan Buddhist lineage. Despite His Holiness the Dalai Lama's efforts, the Tibetan Buddhist leadership and its hierarchy appears to have been resistant to introduce Bhikhuni ordination lineage. It seems that the Tibetan Buddhist leadership was not only reluctant to recognise existing Bhikhuni ordination lineages but also appears to have held prejudicial views against the other Vinaya traditions. As a result it must have been out of the question to have the initiative to convene and sponsor an ordination ceremony by creating Council of Vinaya Preceptors from other traditions. Thanks to the Department of Religion and Culture in Dharamsala which at least succeeded setting up a team of scholars to examine the authenticity of existing Bhikhuni lineages. Many years have been passed and yet every meeting called by the Department attracts more staunch monks whose narrow minded views only created further obstacles.

### ***Objectives of the Conference***

After four decades of soul searching we are here at this university attending this historical conference to bring about an outcome that many of us hope will help to yield a good result. I can see the following as some of the main objectives of this conference: (1) to be able to open the eyes of those who are previously sceptical, (2) to inform them of the existence of the pan-Buddhist world where there are Buddhist traditions which have Bhikhuni ordination lineages, (3) to help them to recognise how Buddhism and its practices needs to be adapted to cater the growing need of modern world of 21st century, (4) to encourage and empower women Buddhist leaders to exercise equal opportunity to make a valid contribution to eliminate suffering in general and particularly those that are caused by inequality and discrimination against women, (5) and to let the compassionate teachings of the fully enlightened Buddha to speak for itself without being hijacked by traditions of the past that has no relevance in contemporary society.

After this conference, those who have opposed the introduction of Bhikhuni ordination can perhaps look into the future by whatever they may have learnt from the past and question the relevance of such traditions in contemporary society.

### ***The first Initiative to Introduce Bhikhuni in Tibetan Buddhism***

In the past, when women in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition wished to be ordained as Bhikhunis, they had to travel to Taiwan, Korea or China to receive the ordination. Even when this was done, there were many linguistic and cultural hurdles to

overcome. In the Tibetan leadership there appears to have no one who is willing to emulate the past great kings of Tibet to invite and create a Council of Preceptors of Bhikhuni and create a platform for this to occur. Just as King Trisong Deutsen invited Shantarashita to Tibet in 7th century and had the first seven Tibetans ordained, someone had to create the cause and conditions for Bhikhuni ordination to happen in the Tibetan tradition.

When a number of my female students wished to be ordained as Bhikhuni, I had to choose whether to organise a Council of Preceptors of Bhikhuni Ordination or send female students somewhere where they perform Bhikhuni ordination ceremony. After much contemplation and consultation I was astonished by the lack of any initiative from those who are up in the hierarchy who are willing to provide any leadership. So I had to choose to create a Council of Preceptors. Of course, I first checked with my teacher, His Eminence Chogye Trichen Rinpoche, who was delighted to know the existence of Bhikhuni ordination lineage and kindly gave his blessings for initiative. With the help of Ven. Thich Quang Ba, a long time friend and Abbot of the Vietnamese Shakyamuni Buddhist temple in Canberra, we invited senior Bhikhus and Bhikhunis and established a Council of Preceptors of Bhikhuni Ordination from the Dharmagupta tradition. We first promoted the plan and invited women who wish to seek Bhikhuni ordination in Australia during the Dalai Lama's visit to Australia in 2002. Our planning and co-ordination took 18 months. Although we invited some senior Tibetan monks resident in Australia to be part of the Council of Preceptors all refused to attend, citing personal reasons. I also invited Tenzin Palmo to be at that

historic event, she too was unable to come. However, we had nineteen senior Vietnamese Buddhist Bhikhus and seven Bhikhunis from Australia and abroad, who kindly agreed to officiate the first Tibetan initiated Bhikhuni Ordination ceremony ever to be convened. The Council of the Preceptors included senior Bhikhus and Bhikhunis from all over the world including Vietnam, Germany, USA and Australia. The ceremony was conducted in Vietnamese and was translated into English and conducted over a three days period followed by an international media conference. The occasion was reported in major newspapers and radio. It is now history that under the auspices of Ananda Bhikhuni Ordination Council, nine women (including six Australian, one New Zealand Tibetan Buddhists and two Vietnamese) were ordained as Bhikhuni in October 2003 at Shakyamuni Buddhist Centre and Virupa Retreat Centre in Canberra.

Even though the first Bhikhuni ordination ceremony was conducted successfully in Australia four years ago, till this day I have neither heard from the Department of Religion and Culture in Dharamsala nor from the so-called "team of scholars doing research on Bhikhuni lineages" in Dharamsala who supposed to be doing research on this very topic. I would not be surprised if they never heard of it except at this conference. This might explain the nature of the problem.

***Argument against Obstruction***

I am full aware that there were as many as eighteen Vinaya schools but without being dismissive, little of their doctrinal differences amount to anything but may be a cause of sectarianism for those who had an attitude for it. I do not know what has been and will be achieved by examining the authenticity of other Bhikhuni lineages. Of course it is good to have the blessings from His Holiness the Dalai Lama on this initiative. All I know, from experience, is that you just have to create the causes and conditions for Bhikhuni Ordination to happen and just do it. There are now some senior Bhikhunis within the Tibetan traditions who have a significant role to play and make valid contribution to the spirituality of women in this world.

If thousands of Taiwanese, Singaporean, Malaysian, Chinese, Vietnamese, Korean and Japanese Buddhists have been initiated into Vajrayana Buddhist practices without needing to examine the authenticity of the Tibetan Buddhist lineages or without having to convene an international congress and make a declaration about a preferred lineage or tradition, why then do the Tibetan Buddhists have to examine the purity or traceability of Bhikhuni lineage of the other traditions. Tibetans should become humble students receive Bhikhuni ordination from the Chinese or Vietnamese without any political and racial prejudices. We know that pride and prejudices are obstacles to one's spiritual progress, no exception to the introduction of Bhikhuni lineage. The Buddha told Aniruddha, Mahanama and other Shakya youths before their ordination that they should bow down to Upali, formerly a barber. This was done in order to quell the pride of the Shakya youths. Furthermore, His Holiness Dalai Lama has clearly said that the "Tibetan tradition is junior and should

learn from other senior Buddhist traditions.” Buddhism spread to China as early as 1st century and we only had Buddhism introduced to Tibet in 7th century.

The fact that there is no Mulasarvastadin Bhikhuni lineage in Tibetan Buddhism does not mean that we cannot introduce other Bhikhuni Vinaya lineages. The lack of Bhikhuni ordination lineage of any Vinaya tradition in Tibetan Buddhism is not its strength but quite the opposite.

If not having Bhikhuni lineage is a strength, then why was Buddhism introduced in the first place, because then lack of Buddhism will be complete. 1300 years ago there was no Buddhism in Tibet and Tibetans brought from India without having to have an international conference and see a declaration from anyone.

### ***The Duality of Prayer and Practice***

In relation to the opposition to introduce Bhikhuni ordination from some among the Tibetan tradition, I would like to argue the contradiction between prayer and practice.

There is a prayer festival called “MONLAM” in Tibetan Buddhism during which we offer prayers for world peace and for the spread of Dharma. The spread of Dharma will be more effective with the existence all four members of the sanghas and that if their traditions of education and practices are promoted. If there is no Bhikhuni ordination lineage it is a set back for the spread of Dharma. It is not a question of how long the teaching will live even if thousands of monks prayed together for two

weeks or even for two decades but will there be a complete teaching at all, longevity of which they are supposed to be praying for? The lack of any of the four members of sangha is an obstruction to the spread of Dharma. What kind of good would just doing the prayers will bring if the spirit of the prayer is not practised? The dissuasion to introduce Bhikhuni ordination lineage only succeeds to discourage many female practitioners, who now make 80% of people who are entering into Buddhism. So what is the purpose of the grand prayer ceremonies held every year, if the spread of ordination of Bhikhuni lineage is prevented on technical grounds or otherwise? One can only hope that this International Congress on Bhikhuni Vinaya and Ordination Lineages will definitely promote mutual respect and co-operation between various Vinaya traditions. As Buddhists we may learn to respect the traditions that have Bhikhuni lineage and learn to be their disciples without prejudicial views.

### ***Recommendations***

The benefit of meeting so many of you here at this conference will only encourage people like myself to create and take a Council of Preceptors of Bhikhuni Ordination to India and Nepal, convene and sponsor a Bhikhuni ordination. Anyone who is interested in helping me to do this may contact me. I will be interested to assist the Department of Religion and Culture in Dharamsala and Tibetan Nun's Project to actualise the recommendations from this conference.

Now in the 21st century, the rest of the world is looking for inspiration from spiritual traditions. H.H. the Dalai Lama is actively promoting world peace through dialogue and by learning from other traditions. Our troubled world is badly divided by all kinds of prejudices without needing religious prejudices against one gender by the other. It is truly overdue to end the sad era of inequality by educating those who are opposed to the idea of introduction of Bhikhuni lineage. A land or a country in which where there is no Bhikhuni or any of the four members of the sangha community, cannot be regarded as “central land” unless all members of the sangha are present. This means that countries where all the four members of the sangha are not present do not have complete form of Buddhism. This makes that much harder for Tibetan Buddhism to claim itself as complete form of Buddhism even with its impressive combination of study, contemplation and meditation based on the glorious Nalanda tradition. Not having Bhikhuni lineage is not the strength of Tibetan Buddhism, so why should we try to keep a weak tradition. It is our responsibility to transform a weak tradition into a strong and one that is open, pragmatic and practical. If Bhikhuni ordination lineage were to be introduced into Tibetan Buddhism, it will enhance the need of innovation in making Buddhism accessible to a larger following in an ever changing world. The senior Tibetan Bhikhus who are opposing the introduction of Bhikhuni lineage into Tibetan Buddhism will no longer be wasting their time. The minor differences of the eighteen Vinaya schools in ancient India do not warrant to reject the existing traditions but to treat them with respect. In fact, it is matter of great rejoice for us all that there are Bhikhuni ordination lineages in other Buddhist traditions from whom one can receive the lineage and promote for the benefit many beings.

## *Conclusion*

In short, with the likely endorsement to introduce Bhikhuni ordination in the Tibetan Buddhist lineage from H.H the Dalai Lama's declaration, the fruit of many people including the organisers of this conference, who have worked towards realising this goal, the lack of Bhikhuni lineage in Tibetan Buddhism may now become a closed chapter. From now whether Bhikhuni lineage is introduced into Tibetan Buddhism or not should not depend on views of the old out-dated traditions and those who are stuck in the letter of the word but should depend on those who have the wisdom to interpret the spirit of the letter and cater the growing trend of the modern world.

Any team of scholars who may wish to help to see the actual practice of Bhikhuni ordination in the Tibetan tradition should include scholars with broad knowledge of the pan Buddhist world, not just few abbots of big monasteries.

I applaud our patient Dharma sisters Bhikhuni who have persevered for so long and making many to hear your cry for help. I urge all to come forward and develop a systematic procedure of a Bhikhuni ordination ceremony based on the existing Bhikhuni lineage practices and have it standardised, recognised and promoted for the benefit of all sentient beings without exception of any race or gender.

I am somewhat ashamed that even among Buddhists we may have some fundamentalists who may oppose this initiative. I thank the conference organisers for giving us all this opportunity so that we can learn to differ but for the benefit of all sentient beings including women.

May I be allowed to conclude with one final remark. Tibetan nuns are not seeking Bhikhuni ordination for the sake of their status to compete with monks. They have inspiring qualities of humility, devotion and contentment. These are not replaceable even by the highest ordination.

\*Presented at the 1st International Congress on Buddhist Women's Role in Sangha  
Bhikhuni Vinaya and Ordination Lineages  
University of Hamburg, Germany 18-20 July 2007