

# A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE SITUATION FOR NUNS IN THE TIBETAN TRADITION IN EXILE

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Historically the bhikshuni ordination was never formally introduced into Tibet presumably because there was never a quorum of 5 Indian bhikshunis who made the hazardous journey across the Himalayan range.

However nuns did receive the shramaneriika or novice ordination and were treated with a certain respect within society. Traditionally nuns usually devoted themselves to meditation practice, ritual or often acted as servants for the lamas or their own family members. Many nuns did attain high levels of spiritual realisation but since they received little education they did not write books, teach extensively and consequently had no voice. Of course even in Tibet there were isolated cases of highly educated nuns studying under a learned Lama, but it was not the norm.

During the years from 1959 onwards when the Tibetans found themselves in exile in India and Nepal, one of the main focuses of this refugee community was to re-establish the monasteries and preserve the precious Dharma for the next generation of monks. So monasteries were built and young monks trained by the few remaining senior monks. Gradually money poured in from certain other Mahayana Buddhist

countries and from the West so many monasteries became again quite wealthy and secure. However almost nothing was heard or thought about the fate of the nuns.

Gradually in later years, the monasteries being now well-established, the concern shifted slightly to that other aspect of the monastic community: the female monastics. Slowly a few small nunneries were set up and in time the Tibetan Nuns Association was founded to look into and help the situation for some Nunneries, especially in the area of Dharamsala. However with a few notable bright exceptions, most Nunneries are still very overcrowded and under-endowed. Since they usually do not have high Lamas to represent them to the world and raise funds on their behalf, they are usually struggling just to exist. Often they cannot afford to pay the salary for a qualified Philosophy teacher and so there is no study program. The TNA is trying to help with this situation by offering funds for teachers.

However even modern nuns are still quite diffident and shy in the presence of male monastics, especially the Rinpoches and Geshes. They will naturally not oppose any male authority figure. In addition they are usually ignorant of the bhikshuni issue since it was never discussed. They accept their lower ordination without question since that is all they know. It is not something which until recently was ever even thought about.

The Lamas sometimes discourage nuns from considering bhikshuni ordination by assuring them that such an ordination is not necessary. In addition, they state, it

would be extremely burdensome for the nuns to have to keep so many rules. Their viewpoint is that education is sufficient to raise the status of nuns and they should be content with that.

In answer to the Lamas' position stated above intending to undermine the idea of bhikshuni ordination by saying that this ordination is not necessary or important, I say "Oh, so Rinpoche you are still a novice?" When he immediately insists that of course he is fully ordained, I reply that he had just stated that that ordination was not important, so why had he bothered? The point about the rules being too heavy for the nuns to bear is usually countered by the observation that the nuns will surely be able to keep the rules at least as well as the monks are presently keeping theirs!

However this pervading attitude has to be faced. Let us consider a few points. I first received my getsul or novice ordination from His Holiness the 16th Karmapa at Rumtek in 1967. This was an extremely joyful occasion of course, but yet I felt a deep regret that a novice was all I could ever be, since the Tibetan tradition did not allow me to receive full ordination. A few years later when I went to Hong Kong for the bhikshuni ordination, there was a tremendous sense of fulfillment that finally I could be a part of this precious monastic lineage stretching all the way back in an unbroken line to the Lord Buddha himself. Why should nuns be denied this deep monastic satisfaction which the monks take for granted as their right?

The Lord Buddha himself decreed the full ordination for nuns. He did not say that nuns should only receive a sramanerika ordination. Whatever the controversy over his reasons for His initial hesitation, the bhikshunis were definitely bhikshunis, so we are merely following the Buddha's own intention. In addition for a country or nation to be considered as a truly Buddhist Middle Country, there must be the fourfold sangha of bhikshu, bhikshuni, upasaka, upasika.

In those countries such as China, Taiwan, Korea and Vietnam where the bhikshuni ordination is still extant the status of nuns is high and they receive the support and respect of society almost on a level with monks. They are brothers and sisters in the Dharma. However the vinaya makes it clear the monks always enjoy a higher status so there is no cause for monks to feel concerned.

How does this relate to nuns in the Tibetan tradition? One point is the question of the Geshe-ma or Khenmo degree. Several Lamas of various traditions have stated to me that these degrees can only be given to one holding Full Ordination, since one of the subjects to be examined is the Vinaya which can only be studied by the ordained. Even if a nun received permission to study the bhikshuni vinaya (which they read when reciting the Kangyur anyway) without having herself received the bhikshuni vows, there would probably exist the stigma that she was not really a geshema but only allowed the title out of consideration for her scholastic efforts.

Also since they do not have bhikshuni vows, Tibetan nuns cannot take part in the monastic ceremonies such as full sojong or ordination ceremonies. They are therefore barred from important aspects of their lives as monastics.

It is my understanding that only on the acceptance of a novice by 10 fully ordained monastics during the Bhikshuni ordination, does the person become a part of the actual monastic sangha. In other words, as long as one remains a sramanerika one is only on the doorstep so to speak, and has not yet entered into the temple of monastic sangha. Why should a nun of 60 years ordination still be only a novice?

Since the nuns have only the novice ordination they are also not shown much respect within society in general. Many families, especially in the Himalayan border regions, regard their nun relation as a single woman without responsibilities who can therefore always be available to look after aging parents, take care of sick relations and so on. This attitude can still be a problem even when the nuns are engaged in a study or meditation program. Traditionally many nuns were nothing better than unpaid servants in their own household or that of their Lama teacher.

However nowadays a number of Nunneries are being founded that offer a program both educational and practical. Nuns are not only studying Buddhist philosophy but also learning the complex rituals, the drawing of sand mandalas, some ceremonial dancing and religious painting. Many nuns now enter the classic 3 year meditation

retreats. Occasionally the senior nuns are themselves the teachers in both philosophy and meditation.

Thus we are seeing the slow emergence of the new kind of nun, who exemplifies the confidence derived from learning and practice. These are not the same nuns as yesteryear who so often were devoted but lacking in understanding. Modern nuns often live in well-run Nunneries and can receive training as monastics, scholars and practitioners. They are gradually learning to believe in themselves as their innate potential develops.

At our nunnery of Dongyu Gatsal Ling the nuns study philosophy with a Khenpo from the Dzongsar College and with qualified nuns from the Nyingma Nunnery of HH Penor Rinpoche. In addition they are instructed in ritual by senior monks of our affiliated monastery of Khampagar in nearby Tashi Jong. The nuns also learn English and perform a strict 2 month retreat every year.

Our aim is not only to produce philosophy teachers (Khenmo) but also to re-establish in India a rare lineage of yoginis or togdenma. These nun yoginis, who follow the Milarepa tradition, dedicate their lives to meditation practice and hence can become masters and exemplars for others. There are very few qualified women teachers of meditation in the Tibetan tradition although many female practitioners.

Nowadays many of the most senior Lamas of the various traditions, including His Holiness the Dalai Lama of course, are very supportive of the cause for nuns and do what they can to help. For example the head of my own Drukpa Kagyu lineage, His Holiness the Gyalwa Drukpa, suggests that the future of the tradition may lie with women who have such a high level of dedication and devotion. Therefore they are urging others and are themselves implementing an increased equality between the monks and the nuns.

So this is the time for nuns to cease to be merely tight little buds of unfulfilled aspirations and to fully blossom into their own great intellectual and spiritual potential.