





Nuns in the Tibetan Buddhist Tradition

by Venerable Lobsang Dechen and Elizabeth Napper

Buddhism has had a very long and rich history in Tibet since its arrival in the 7th century. Its establishment in Tibet is credited with spurring cultural development and a literate society. With Buddhism came monasticism and, from the earliest years, the tradition has included nuns as well as monks.

This is significant because in Tibet, unlike in many traditional societies, women have had an alternative to the expected pattern of marriage and motherhood. Tibetan women have always taken advantage of this opportunity to choose a life focused on spiritual endeavor, and many families count one or more nuns among their members.

While the history of Tibet includes numerous female luminaries who reached advanced levels of spiritual attainment, the norm has been ordained women who live quietly, often engaging in meditative retreat without attracting a great deal of attention. Monks, on the other hand, have been a far more visible part of public life and have been involved in the official trappings of power and authority in ways that the nuns never have been. Much of the explanation for this has to do with education. An elaborate system of education evolved in the monasteries of Tibet, culminating in the degree of *geshe*, comparable to the Western doctorate of philosophy. This system was based on many large monastic universities, which at their height in the years before the communist Chinese overran Tibet had up to 10,000 monks in residence in a single monastery.

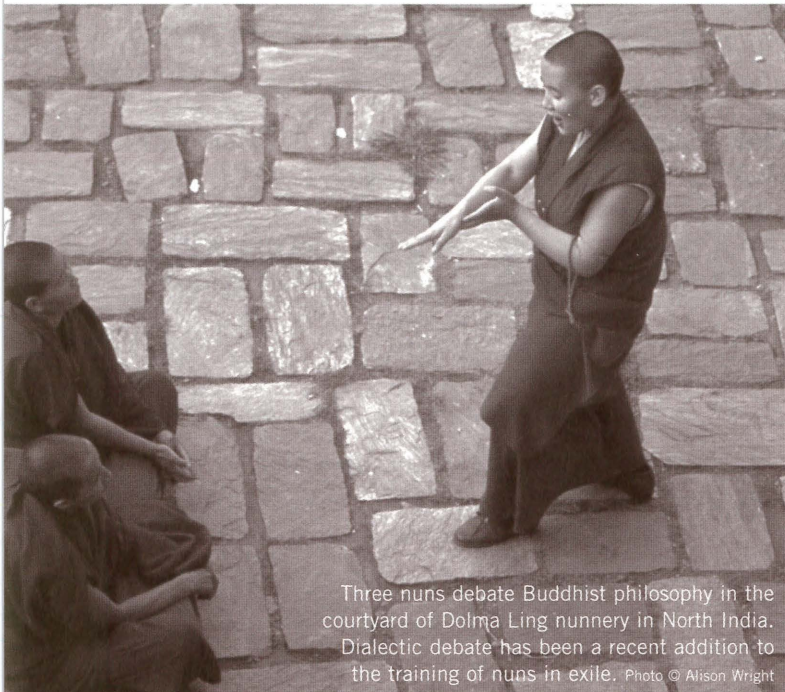
The nuns were never a part of this system.

Nunneries were smaller, less tightly structured institutions. After ordination, many nuns stayed near their families and built small retreat houses just outside the family compound. Their religious practice focused on meditation and prayer rather than advanced philosophical studies.

All this was radically changed by the communist invasion of Tibet and its repression of religion. Monks and nuns were imprisoned, forced to marry, and most of the monasteries and nunneries were physically destroyed. The years between 1980 and 1987 brought an easing of religious restrictions in Tibet and a slow re-establishment of the nunneries. Women flocked to them. Since 1987, however, severe constraints on the nunneries (and monasteries), such as limiting admission and ordination and instituting “patriotic re-education” to communist ideology, have been re-imposed in Tibet. In response to these coercive measures, large numbers of nuns have fled to Tibetan refugee communities in India and Nepal, and several nunneries have been established there to receive them.

In the refugee communities, a serious movement is underway both to draw upon the strengths of this ancient spiritual tradition for women and to develop and improve it, especially through adding more formal education. In all the Tibetan Buddhist schools, the traditional courses of study are being opened up to women, including those leading to the *geshe* degree. Since it is nearly a 20-year course of study, no women have yet completed it, but some have reached advanced





Three nuns debate Buddhist philosophy in the courtyard of Dolma Ling nunnery in North India. Dialectic debate has been a recent addition to the training of nuns in exile. Photo © Alison Wright

levels of the syllabus, and the day of the first woman *geshe* is fast approaching.

An interesting case in point is Shugsep Nunnery. The original Shugsep Nunnery is located several hours to the southwest of Lhasa. It was first established as a place of learning and prayer in the 11th century. Destroyed by the Dzunkar Mongols in the late 17th century, the site lay in ruins for more than 200 years. About 100 years ago, the site was re-occupied as a religious center, and the renowned woman teacher, Jetsun Rigzin Chonyi Sangmo, made it her home. Known as Shugsep Jetsun Rinpoche, she was one of the most famous teachers in Tibet during the first half of the century. She died in 1953 at the age of over 100. She was the holder of a number of important practice lineages. Noteworthy among these was the lineage of *chöd* (cutting-off ego) practice that dates back to Ma-jik-lap-dron, a renowned yogini (female yoga adept) of the 11th century. The Shugsep nuns received this lineage of practice from her and continue it to this day. They are known for their detailed and beautiful performance of rituals.

Fleeing the repressive environment in Tibet, a number of the Shugsep nuns have come to India

and Nepal. Some left Tibet having endured imprisonment and torture after they peacefully demonstrated on behalf of Tibetan independence, while others left to seek educational opportunities denied in Tibet. A group of about 20 Shugsep nuns live in Nepal, mainly engaged in meditative retreat. A larger group of over 50, including nuns at this year's Folklife Festival, have relocated to the Dharamsala area of North India. There they continue the meditative and ritual practices of their home nunnery. These nuns also have entered into the nine-year course of study that is undertaken by the monks of their Nyingma tradition. In doing this, they are complementing a long and esteemed tradition that stretches back to the greatest women meditators of Tibetan Buddhism, with educational qualifications that will enable them to take more active roles as teachers and representatives of their rich spiritual heritage in the future.

Suggested Reading

Khachoe Ghakyil Ling Nunnery

<<http://www.zamba.com/BuddhasVillage/causes/khachoe.htm>>.

The Tibetan Nuns Project <<http://www.angelfire.com/nt/tnp>>.

Lobsang Dechen was born in India in 1960, just after her parents escaped from Tibet. She became a nun at the age of 13. Because there was no education available at the one nunnery in the Dharamsala area at that time, she remained in the Tibetan schools established in India by the exile community to complete her secondary education. She then attended an Indian college, where she earned a B.A. and B.Ed. In 1992, she began working full time for the Tibetan Nuns Project, in order to advance its efforts to make educational opportunities available for nuns throughout the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. She and Elizabeth Napper are Co-Directors of the Tibetan Nuns Project.

Elizabeth Napper received a Ph.D. in Buddhist studies, with a focus on Tibetan Buddhism, from the University of Virginia. She has taught there, at Stanford University, and the University of Hawaii and has authored and edited several books on Buddhist philosophy and the Tibetan language. Since 1991 she has devoted her efforts full time to the Tibetan Nuns Project and the establishment of the Dolma Ling Institute of Higher Studies for nuns, the first ever of its kind. Through its sponsorship program, the Nuns Project supports approximately 500 nuns from all schools of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition.