





# Himalayan Buddhist Nuns and Gender Equality

By DOMINIQUE BUTET | TRANSLATION By SUSAN MANEVILLE  
PHOTOGRAPHS By OLIVIER ADAM

Many people, particularly in the West, are unaware of the existence of women in the Buddhist tradition, often confusing their photos with those of male monks. For centuries their devotion and contribution to Buddhism has been overshadowed by their male counterparts, and they have lacked rights, access to education and financial support. But change is afoot.

**T**hroughout my travels in the Himalayan region since 2008, I have witnessed the gradual emancipation of Tibetan Buddhist nuns, themselves a microcosm of wider shifts in attitudes towards women and a need for greater equality. Educational infrastructure, changing social attitudes, more progressive perspectives on gender in the Tibetan monastic community, and financial support from associations and foundations dedicated to women are providing nuns, and women across the board, with new opportunities.

Buddhist nuns in the Himalayan region are now able to participate fully in the theological activities ordinarily reserved for monks, have their spiritual devotion and contributions to the community recognized, and live more sustainable and independent lives.

The importance of gender equality amongst the monastic community extends beyond the Himalayan monasteries. It is providing new role models and opportunities for women to work and support themselves without having to rely on marriage, or the charity of male relatives.

Here I document some of the changes I have encountered since I first visited the region eight years ago.

## DEBATING EQUALITY

Since Chinese troops invaded Tibet in 1959, Dharamsala has been the center for the exiled Tibetan government. Thousands of Tibetans—including monks and nuns—risked their lives to follow the Dalai Lama across the Himalayas and find refuge in Northern India.

His Holiness frequently stated, “You must also help the nuns,” and his sister-in-law, Rinchen Khando Choegyul, created the Tibetan Nuns Project (TNP) in 1987. At that time, there were only two rudimentary convents near Dharamsala, and numerous nuns continued to arrive from Tibet, having left behind their roots and communities. The TNP gave exiled women and nuns humanitarian aid in the form of accommodation, but also quality teaching.

With access to the TNP’s well-structured teaching program, the nuns started participating in the exercise of philosophical debate. These complex verbal sparring sessions mobilize all the knowledge acquired during their philosophical education, and combines a vast understanding of texts with logical thinking. Many years of study are needed to master the practice and, in the Tibetan world, the annual debating event between monasteries, “Jang Gonchoe” or “Winter contest” was traditionally open only to men.

Today, the situation has changed. Each autumn for the last twenty years, a debating contest has brought together several communities of Tibetan nuns. Numbers continue to rise: in 2013 more than four hundred nuns from eight convents in India and Nepal competed in the Dolma Ling monastery, near Dharamsala.

## TAKING A STAND

The Dalai Lama has not been alone in his support for nuns. Tsoknyi Rinpoche, a young Master born in Nepal in 1966, has

emphasized “the spiritual potential of women, their aptitudes and commitment” which pushed him to found Tsoknyi Gebchak Ling, a community for more than one hundred and fifty nuns in the south of Kathmandu. “I wanted to give the nuns a proper education so they no longer had to fight to prove what they were capable of. By giving them access to education, I’m offering them this power.”

In Nepal’s urbanized Kathmandu valley, His Holiness the Gyalwang Drukpa, head of the Drukpa Kagyu lineage, also describes his motivations for establishing educational opportunities for a large community of Tibetan nuns:

Throughout the eight hundred years of my lineage, during my previous incarnations, we never spoke of women. Traditionally in our society, we don’t consider women as being very important. Men have always been number one. Personally, I have never accepted that women be of secondary importance. And this, since I was very young. I love my mother very much and not only because she’s my mother but because I recognize her qualities. And her qualities are remarkable; they are equivalent to those of a Master. This understanding enabled me to say no to tradition, to say ‘what you have believed for generations is wrong.’ My positive perception of women has become stronger with age. And about twenty years ago I said to myself, it’s all very well to think but now I must do something for women. I must act. Let’s start with the nuns, then continue with the laywomen.

He created two convents, one in Ladakh, the other in Nepal. “When I started,” continued His Holiness, “there were only sixty nuns with me, [now there are over three hundred and fifty]. I’ve taught them how to meditate and offered lessons in philosophy, but that wasn’t enough to let them be heard. So, in 2009, I decided to make some noise by getting them to do Kung Fu. In this way they learned to defend themselves and most importantly, they gained self-confidence. I myself have great confidence in the future and I’m optimistic that these feminine voices are ultimately going to change the world and will definitely change the near future. The world will at long last realize the importance of respecting gender equality.”

As with all equality movements throughout history, change has relied on the bravery and courage of men and women prepared to take a stand. This is perhaps truer for rural communities.

At Yangchen Chöling’s school in Spiti we met Tseten, who became a Gelugpa nun in 1996 when she was thirteen years old. “It took a long time to find a teacher willing to teach nuns,” she remembers. “Finally, a kind monk who had been meditating in a cave agreed to come and teach at our monastery. For several months, we all studied happily together. Suddenly, however, the monks of his monastery arrived and told him he could no longer teach nuns. All the nuns and the teacher, too, became sad and distraught. Finally, he agreed to resign from his monastery and stay with the nuns.”

Her story is a reminder of the struggle women, and their

supporters, have faced to overcome discrimination. The outcome of their perseverance, however, is heartening. Tseten is bright and totally dedicated to studying the dharma every day. She speaks perfect English, and debates with other nuns with complete commitment and motivation.

## BUILDING THE FUTURE

Nuns aren't just participating in education: they're taking matters into their own hands.

Perched between Ladakh and Kashmir, Zanskar's ten small monasteries sit atop rural, terraced slopes at nearly 4000m where winters are harsh and living conditions are difficult. It's no wonder that many young women are at risk of moving away to urban centers—a threat to the future of these older communities and the Tibetan monasteries. In recent years, schools have been an important part of retaining women in the region, and recruiting young nuns to sustain the monastic community.

During the summer of 2012, seven nuns—two of whom were over eighty years old—had the ambitious project of building their own school one hundred meters below their 14th-century nunnery. For weeks they tirelessly took part in its construction, shoveling and transporting sand, making earth bricks, cutting wood, and giving all their energetic sup-

port to the team of workers on site.

Two years later, we were overcome with emotion to discover that the school had been open for several months and that seventeen young nuns from the area were benefitting from the Tibetan, English, Hindi and mathematics lessons given by Thupten Zangmo, an extremely motivated teacher nominated by the Central Institute of Buddhist Studies in Leh. This same movement is continuing in other convents located in Zanskar. In Pishu and Tungri other projects are also springing up, often led by villagers with the support of associations dedicated to social change through education.

Aside from the immediate benefits of education, nuns are also being empowered to take more responsibility in running the day-to-day activities of their convent. In Dolma Ling, near Dharamsala, the nuns make tofu and are responsible for the entire production process. They vote each year to assign responsibilities, and take turns managing the convent's guest-house, grocery store, coffee shop, vegetable garden and the community kitchens.

## NEW HORIZONS

Education is undoubtedly driving a renaissance in gender equality in Tibetan monastic society. "Opening up education to women, particularly in conjunction with training in de-



"Until now you have relied on monks to teach you, but in the future it will be very important that there are also nuns to teach nuns..." — Dalai Lama

bate, has been transformative," says Elizabeth Napper, deputy director of the TNP since 1991. "Not only have [the nuns] been given access to the full intellectual richness of their Buddhist tradition but also, through debate, they have been trained to actively engage with it in a way that gives them confidence in their knowledge."

This movement is also inspiring progressive reform in Tibetan theological training. "I have witnessed nuns debating," said His Holiness in 2012, "and they do it very well. We have finally decided on holding Geshema exams for nuns from the Gelugpa tradition." This historical decision means a new horizon for Tibetan nuns.

The Geshema degree, the equivalent of a PhD in Buddhist philosophy, is awarded after seventeen years of philosophical study. Kelsang Wangmo, a Western nun, opened the way in 2011, becoming the first female Geshema student, completing studies in Prajnaparamita (the Perfection of Wisdom Sutras), Madhyamaka (the Middle Way), Abhidharmakosha (Treasury of Knowledge) and Vinaya (Discipline). In May 2016

twenty-seven nuns from five convents in Northern and Southern India, and two convents in Nepal, will take the Geshema examinations and become the first female PhD graduates.

Much is at stake: as Doctors in Philosophy, the nuns will be called on to teach for the first time and the Dalai Lama himself has been urging them to take up this new mission: "Until now you have relied on monks to teach you, but in the future it will be very important that there are also nuns to teach nuns. More than that, we also need nuns to teach in our secular schools. I request you, after your studies, to consider going into retreat, and after that resolve to teach others."

The ability to teach also provides nuns who decide to leave their orders with the means and self-esteem to participate fully and independently in society, rather than resigning themselves to marriage as the only available choice.

#### GOING GLOBAL

The condition of Himalayan Buddhist nuns has evolved in many positive ways over the last thirty years, but Jetsunma





Tenzin Palmo, an English nun committed to the feminist cause in Buddhism who spent twelve years in a cave meditating, reminds us that the work is not yet finished:

The Himalayan nuns are nowadays getting on very well: they have such good nunneries, and also excellent study programs; they have retreat centers and support. But those who have not moved at all are the non-Himalayan nuns. Not only the Western Buddhist nuns but also the nuns from Asian countries like Taiwan, Vietnam, Hong Kong or Singapore who joined Tibetan Buddhism and were cut off from their original support. And now they have no financial support at all. Most often, they are sent to run the Buddhist centers but they have to pay rent and electricity and give offerings to the lamas. But with what money? No Sangha supports them, nobody thinks of them. The lay devotees give money to the lamas but not to the nuns because they are not aware of the situation. Sometimes it is so difficult for these nuns that they are obliged to return to lay life.

In June 2015, during the last Sakyadhita conference, the International Association for Buddhist Women, which literally means “the daughters of Buddha,” Tenzin Palmo declared: “We are now starting the Non Himalayan Nuns Alliance to make people conscious of this overlooked part of the sangha. The same thing happened to the Himalayan nuns twenty years ago when I started the nunnery with them.

People said to me: ‘Nuns, did you say nuns? Oh, we never mentioned that there were any nuns in Buddhism.’ And after a moment, they began to ask me: ‘What can we do for the nuns?’ It is the same thing now for the Non Himalayan Nuns, it is time to look after them.”

Many Tibetan Buddhist Masters are becoming spokespeople for women throughout the world. Amongst them, the head of the Karmapas lineage, Ogyen Trinley Dorje announces that: “at the end of a long and slow evolution, the world is at last starting to understand today’s needs. With the unthinkable power of destruction by the weapons at our disposal, it is clear that in this day and age we can no longer get up and fight but must sit down and talk. We are invited to look at each other with the loving eyes of a mother and not with the hostility of a warrior. We need to recognize that the most important qualities of today are those that most societies consider as being ‘feminine’: communication, listening to the needs of others. It is time to realize that the age of the hunters has passed. The coming era will be more ‘feminine’ and women will make a greater contribution.”

Seeing the greater recognition of Himalayan Buddhist nuns has touched our hearts deeply. Rooted in education, this pathway to gender equality perfectly illustrates the great History of Humanity in progress. We hope to witness its evolution across the world.