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Blossoms of the Dharma:  
The Contribution of Western Nuns in Transforming  
Gender Bias in Tibetan Buddhism

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# Blossoms of the Dharma: The Contribution of Western Nuns in Transforming Gender Bias in Tibetan Buddhism<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This article investigates the nature of gender imbalance in Tibetan Buddhism, particularly pertaining to the unavailability of *bhikṣuṇī* ordination, and the specific role Western nuns have played in contributing to transforming this imbalance. The article postulates that male privilege continues to dominate the institutional cultures of religious life in Tibetan Buddhism. However, fertile tensions have of late emerged between an underground tradition of highly accomplished female practitioners and the institutional preference for male practitioners. A revalorization process has been initiated in recent years by a number of Western female Buddhologists, some of whom are also ful-

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<sup>1</sup> Title borrowed from Chödrön 1999 (ed.), *Blossoms of the Dharma: Living as a Buddhist Nun*.

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ly ordained Tibetan Buddhist nuns. The article highlights the efforts of these accomplished nuns as well as a number of other prominent Western Tibetan Buddhist nuns.

### Gender Imbalance in Tibetan Buddhism

In recent years, a number of Western (European, North and South American, and Australian) women have chosen to become Tibetan Buddhist nuns. Among them is the notable British-born Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo, renowned for her twelve years of solitary meditation in a Himalayan cave and, more so, for her pointed statement disclosing her intention to attain enlightenment in a female body (Palmo, in Mackenzie 58). Presently the most senior Tibetan Buddhist nun, Tenzin Palmo was the second Western woman to undergo novice ordination as a Tibetan Buddhist nun (Mackenzie 43).<sup>3</sup> She founded and is presently the abbess of a Tibetan Buddhist nunnery in India.

Tenzin Palmo's vow to attain enlightenment in a female body remains an extraordinary and inspiring statement for Buddhist women. Her bold declaration is almost synonymous to saying that she intends to become a female Buddha—possibly, from a Buddhist perspective, the ultimate achievement in women's liberation (5, 7). Her statement is all the more significant because she is a *Western* woman in a traditionally Asian nuns' community.

However, earlier in her career Tenzin Palmo experienced just how restricting the world of Buddhist monasticism could be for women when she joined her root guru's monastery as a twenty-one year old

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<sup>3</sup> Palmo later sought full ordination in the Chinese Mahāyāna tradition in Hong Kong in 1973 (Mackenzie 74).

novice nun. She was the only nun amongst eighty monks and was not allowed to participate in any of their daily activities. She could only acquire the most basic teachings, while her male counterparts, the monks, engaged in serious Buddhist dialectics and philosophical studies (Palmo *Reflections* 14). The monastery she inhabited was visibly male dominated, as all the lamas, the lineage holders, and the *tulkus* were men. Although the twentieth century witnessed the emancipation of women in almost all areas of life, there were no female role models in Tibetan Buddhism for Tenzin Palmo to emulate (Mackenzie 6). Palmo felt that the “male voice” of Tibetan Buddhism was alienating and did not offer nurturing spaces for female practitioners (Palmo *Heart* 149). Furthermore, she noted that misogyny was encouraged through certain meditational visualizations which were used to cultivate aversion toward women’s bodies, and which led to the view that women constitute a danger to monks since it is the women’s bodies that are impure rather than those of the monks. She felt that the monks fail to see that their own impurity, rather than the presence of women in their monastic abode, is the real danger (Palmo *Reflections* 71).

Palmo argues that there appears to have been institutionalized bias against women from the inception of Buddhism (71). The council of five hundred *arhats* that was held after the historical Buddha passed away did not document attendance by any women. She thinks that the Buddha gave teachings to women but very few of the teachings were recorded due to the exclusion of women from the council (71). Centuries later, when the canon was committed to writing, men’s privileged education enabled them to read and write; therefore, they had the monopoly in choosing whose records to preserve for future generations (Haas 5, 9, 10). Consequently, the teachings and commentaries were recited and recorded from the male point of view and women were increasingly perceived as dangerous and threatening to the status of monks and to authority within the ecclesiastical hierarchy (Palmo *Reflections* 71).

Rita Gross asserts that male power in Tibetan Buddhism is maintained through the practice of discovering and installing successive reincarnations of great lamas (*Patriarchy* 88). No leaders in Tibetan Buddhism are more respected and honored, or possess more power and influence, than these incarnations, particularly those who are heads of major lineages and prominent monasteries. It is generally taken for granted that each successive incarnation will be a male incarnation (89). Although accomplished women practitioners existed throughout Tibetan Buddhist history, they did not enjoy the institutional support of their male colleagues. Inadequate androcentric record-keeping has deprived women practitioners from drawing inspiration from female role models (Haas 5, 9, 10).

There is a deep contradiction between a hidden tradition of extremely accomplished female practitioners and the institutional preference for male practitioners. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the *yoginī-tantras* of Tantric Buddhism. Miranda Shaw notes that in Tantric Buddhism the male principle is the consort to the female (199). Nevertheless, there is a great disparity between what ancient texts reveal and what some current Tibetan lamas articulate. Tantras have a gynocentric world view which focuses on women as worthy of honor and respect. Those desiring to practice Tantra must follow and accept this philosophy (199, 200). Shaw concludes that people who pronounce upon the inferiority of women are generally monks who have built up a psychological resistance to women (205).

Notwithstanding the favorable doctrinal attitude towards women, as illustrated by *yoginī-tantras* and the profusion of female deities (for example, Tārā, Vajrayoginī, and Kurukulla) in Tibetan Buddhist iconography, ambiguity still characterizes the Tibetan Buddhist approach toward females, especially in connection with their monastic status. Gross notes that Tibetan Buddhism includes a profusion of

positive female images and symbols, and accommodates a number of highly regarded and respected female practitioners (*Patriarchy* 80).<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, this symbolic and mythic veneration of the feminine coexists with a social reality that strongly limits women's potential and opportunities. Those who benefit from the system do not perceive this ambiguity (81).

The liability of a female birth is still emphasized in many parts of the Buddhist world where male dominance and gender hierarchy persist (Tsomo, in Mohr & Tsedroen 288). This misogynistic attitude has been especially devastating for nuns, who face reduced economic support, inferior education, and, in some parts of the world, even the extinction of their ordination lineages because of long-established monastic rules that are excessive in the way they favor monks over nuns (Gross *Inquiring* 19). Palmo (in Chopra) states that when she made the vow to attain enlightenment in a female body, she was "fed-up with the male attitude."

Gross notes that every form of Buddhism adheres to teachings of egolessness, affirming that there is no permanent enduring self beneath the current of experience (*Inquiring* 18). Buddhism also teaches that much of our suffering is a result of attachment to the non-existent self. Despite this, gender has become the supreme organizing principle of traditional Buddhist institutional life (18). Although the most commonly invoked "slogan" is that the enlightened mind is neither male nor female, Buddhist monasticism finds it very difficult to enter into the dialogue of transforming gender bias and of granting nuns full ordination in the Tibetan traditions, clinging stubbornly to the existing gender hierarchy. Gross speculates that perhaps such ego-grasping is the result of an

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<sup>4</sup> Such as Yeshe Tsogyel (787-817), Machig Lapdron (1055-1149), and, currently, for example, Tenzin Palmo (1943-) and Tsultrim Allione (1947-).

ego that is deeply conditioned by its residence in a male body, and for many people the maleness (or femaleness) of that body might enjoy precedence over its humanity (32).

### A Revalorization of Buddhism

Feminist scholars of religion such as Gross (*Patriarchy* 3) and Karen Armstrong (x) argue that most religions are dominated by patriarchal structures, situating women in subordinate positions. Gross states that a “revalorization” of Buddhism is necessary to challenge and deconstruct the sexism that underpins many Buddhist religious discourses. She contends that “revalorization” can repair and restore religion, bringing it more in line with its original values and vision (3).

Gross (*Patriarchy* 126) and a number of Christian and Jewish feminist theologians (Christ & Plaskow 131-192) postulate that the core symbols of religious traditions are not inherently sexist, misogynist, or patriarchal, but are essentially egalitarian and liberating for all human beings. However, they argue, these egalitarian symbols have been contaminated by established androcentric cultural practices that marginalize women. If the religion contains a pristine, but tainted, core of egalitarian teachings, it not only allows but also requires reconstruction of the tradition (Gross *Patriarchy* 126). Gross argues that Buddhism is reconstructible because of the fundamental Buddhist teachings and symbols that carry emancipatory potential for all.<sup>5</sup>

In light of the women’s liberation movement and the fact that a number of Western women have been ordained as Buddhist nuns, Janet

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<sup>5</sup> However, she questions whether those currently in positions of authority in Tibetan Buddhism will have the courage to undertake such reconstructions (127).

Gyatso maintains that surely “the best path and the best values in the world favor gender equality and the elimination of patriarchy and misogyny” (47). She also points out that the Buddhist *saṅgha* was intended specifically as an example of the optimum religious way of life (47). However, its survival depends on the generosity of the lay community. The lay community’s support of the monastic community in turn depends on its conviction that the monastic community is sustaining its purity and supreme standards of behavior and wisdom. If the monastic community continues to resist affording its female members gender equality, it may alienate its female adherents and lose membership, possibly to the more liberated school of Taiwanese Buddhism in which full ordination for nuns is available.

Employing Gross’s notion of “revalorization,”<sup>6</sup> I argue that a process of revalorization has been initiated in recent years by a number of female Western academics working in the traditionally male realm of Western academic Buddhology, some of whom are also fully ordained Tibetan Buddhist nuns.<sup>7</sup> Also, nearly half of the converts to Buddhism in the West are women, many of whom are exceptionally dedicated lay women (Gross, in Tsomo *Realizations* 277). This has contributed to the establishment of certain values and practices that distance Western Buddhism from the predominantly patriarchal monastic frameworks in Asia (Sutin 520). I will return to this theme later in the article.

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<sup>6</sup> Revalorization/reconstruction here involves working with the categories and concepts of a traditional religion in light of feminist values (Gross *Patriarchy* 3).

<sup>7</sup> Vens. Karma Lekshe Tsomo and Jampa Tsedroen.

## Bhikṣuṇī Ordination

In order for a revalorization of Tibetan Buddhism to occur, steps must be taken to redress the gender imbalance that is symbolized by the absence of full ordination for women. *Bhikṣuṇī* ordination has developed into the central focus in the international Buddhist women's movement since it provides access to advanced individual spiritual cultivation as well as to the benefits of a collective administrative system. Buddhist nuns without full ordination are excluded from the center of authority, including the right to control their own spiritual training, and lack financial support (Li 178). Buddhist nuns in the Chinese tradition flourish in China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong because they have access to *bhikṣuṇī* ordination and benefit from a full monastic life. The vitality of Taiwanese nuns in particular is ascribed to their access to *bhikṣuṇī* ordination and the accompanying benefits of monastic life (178).

Institutionalized *bhikṣuṇī* ordination for women seems not ever to have spread to Tibet.<sup>8</sup> This was probably due to the difficulty of acquiring the required quorum of ordained nuns, who would have had to travel from India to Tibet across the Himalayas. Thus, monks performed the novice ordination for nuns in Tibetan Buddhism (Tsedroen and Anālayo 761).

Several prominent Tibetan Buddhist monks approve of allowing nuns in the Tibetan tradition to receive full ordination; however, the Tibetan religious establishment has not yet officially sanctioned it. Full ordination must be sanctioned by the Tibetan Government-in-Exile's Department of Religion and Culture, the Office of H. H. the Dalai Lama, and senior Tibetan *bhikṣus* (Chödrön "The Issue" CBO). Western nuns

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<sup>8</sup> Although there are records dating from the early 14<sup>th</sup> century to the early 16<sup>th</sup> century mentioning the existence of *bhikṣuṇīs* in Tibet (Tsedroen "Generation" 207), there is no evidence that they received their ordination in Tibet.

who wish to obtain full ordination usually receive it in the Chinese, Vietnamese, or Korean traditions where it is extant. Tibetan nuns face even greater difficulties in obtaining *bhikṣuṇī* ordination; as members of the Tibetan community they are more susceptible to social pressures. Because the Tibetan ecclesiastic community has not yet officially sanctioned full ordination, Tibetans disapprove of those nuns who might seek full ordination abroad (Chödrön, in Findly 85).

According to Li (in Tsomo 168), the impetus to set up an order of fully ordained nuns is motivated by three primary factors. First, Buddhist organizations that are attempting to establish themselves in the West need dedicated nuns. A subtle competition for Western Buddhist nuns has already surfaced between the Tibetan and Taiwanese traditions. Second, various Buddhist traditions in the West, particularly the Tibetan and Theravādin traditions, want to demonstrate their dedication to social equity by recognizing women's equal right to full ordination. Third, the *bhikṣuṇī* orders in Taiwan and the People's Republic of China (PRC) are competing to demonstrate their legitimacy and lineage. This rivalry between Tibetans in exile, Taiwanese, and the PRC Chinese is intimately associated with political concerns that may be far removed from Buddhist doctrines and ethics. However, most nuns are primarily motivated in their wish for *bhikṣuṇī* ordination to be admitted to teachings that are restricted to fully ordained monastics (169).

The ceremony that transforms a female Buddhist practitioner into a *bhikṣuṇī* is that of the *bhikṣuṇī upasampadā*. It is a "dual" ordination because it involves ten *bhikṣus* and twelve *bhikṣuṇīs*. Moreover, the three central *bhikṣuṇī* precept masters must have been ordained for at least twelve years (182). Hence, a dual ordination ceremony involving *bhikṣuṇīs* from other traditions becomes problematic and complex.

Although the debate over *bhikṣuṇī* ordination usually assumes the requirement of dual ordination (182), women have also been ordained by

*bhikṣus* alone from time to time and their *bhikṣuṇī* ordination was regarded as legitimate (183). The *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya* states that the dual ordination ceremony with ten male and twelve female precept masters present is the ideal; but it does not declare a single ordination ceremony as invalid.<sup>9</sup> Many ecclesiastics maintain that it is the *bhikṣus* rather than the *bhikṣuṇīs* who represent the concluding authority on the full ordination of nuns. One could therefore argue that if it is the monks who are authorized to perform *bhikṣuṇī* ordinations, it is monks who must be held responsible for the absence of *bhikṣuṇīs* (183).

Tibetan scholars are currently engaged in research and discussions concerning three possible methods of establishing *bhikṣuṇī* ordination for Tibetan nuns: (1) a ceremony consisting of ten *Mūlasarvāstivāda*<sup>10</sup> *bhikṣus* and twelve *Dharmaguptaka*<sup>11</sup> *bhikṣuṇīs*; (2) ten *Mūlasarvāstivāda* *bhikṣus* performing the ceremony alone; or (3) ten *Dharmaguptaka* *bhikṣus* and ten *Dharmaguptaka* *bhikṣuṇīs* conducting the initial ceremony (Chödrön, in Mohr & Tsedroen 183-194). However, Tsedroen and Anālayo argue that there is irrefutable canonical evidence that under certain circumstances, *Mūlasarvāstivāda* *bhikṣus* can ordain women in all the stages of ordination (765).

The current movement to establish full ordination for Buddhist nuns involves a considerable reconstruction of religious traditions, requiring changes in long-held attitudes and institutions in various monastic communities. Some traditional ecclesiastics struggle with the idea of introducing full ordination for women because full ordination in the Tibetan and Theravādin traditions has been an exclusively male privi-

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<sup>9</sup> For further clarification of the complexities involved in the full ordination ceremony for Tibetan nuns, see Tsedroen and Anālayo.

<sup>10</sup> Tibetan Buddhist *Vinaya*.

<sup>11</sup> Chinese Buddhist *Vinaya*.

lege for centuries (181). It is commonly assumed, and stated in some canonical texts,<sup>12</sup> that women are incapable of achieving Buddhahood (Sunim 123-139). However, monastic status is no guaranteed path to achieving Buddhahood. If women are incapable of achieving Buddhahood,<sup>13</sup> whether they are lay practitioners, novice, or fully ordained nuns, why deny them the opportunity to full ordination? What possible threat can *bhikṣuṇīs* pose to these monks? It is therefore difficult to understand the reluctance of some senior monks to agree to the revival of full ordination for nuns.

His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama and His Holiness the Seventeenth Karmapa, as well as other high-ranking leaders of Tibetan Buddhist traditions, have publicly expressed their unequivocal support for transforming gendered practices within Tibetan Buddhism and for the instatement of full ordination for nuns in the Tibetan tradition.<sup>14</sup> In fact, the Dalai Lama has specifically requested Western women to spearhead this task, leading to the establishment of The Committee of Western Bhikṣuṇīs/The Committee for Bhikṣuṇī Ordination in the Tibetan Buddhist Tradition in 2005 (Haas 7). He has even declared that his next incarnation might be as a woman (Johnson 148). However, His Holiness has also pointed out that it is not within his power, as a single monk, to formally recognize the *bhikṣuṇī* lineage (Gyatso, in Mohr & Tsedroen 254, 279). Cumbersome decision-making procedures within the Tibetan ecclesiastic system demand that decisions concerning monastic law require formal consultations among senior monks of the Tibetan Buddhist community.

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<sup>12</sup> *Nagadatta Sutra, Saddharmapundarīka Sutra, Suryajihmidaranaprabha Sutra.*

<sup>13</sup> Lama Zopa, at the 2007 Hamburg Congress, encouraged women to achieve enlightenment as quickly as possible for the sake of all sentient beings (Zopa Letter).

<sup>14</sup> See their letters of support at [http://www.bhiksuniordination.net/letters\\_support.html](http://www.bhiksuniordination.net/letters_support.html).

The Karmapa has gone further than the Dalai Lama, announcing that he is willing to take the first step in ordaining nuns as *bhikṣuṇīs* (Damcho; Goodwin 207). He pointed out that the majority of Buddhists in the West are women and furthermore that the status of women within Tibetan Buddhism affects the entire body of Buddhist teachings. To illustrate the gender asymmetry, the Karmapa used his famous analogy of a house with four pillars, one of which is missing, symbolizing the absence of women's full ordination in Tibetan Buddhism. A Buddhist community has four pillars: monks, nuns, lay women, and lay men (Chödrön *Precedent*). Without one of these pillars, the community is, strictly speaking, not a Buddhist community. The Karmapa therefore argues that in order for a Buddhist community to call itself truly a *saṅgha*, all four pillars should be intact (Damcho).

The Karmapa is of the opinion that outdated views and ways of thinking within the ranks of Buddhist monasticism are not insurmountable obstacles to the instatement of full ordination for nuns. What is simply needed, he argues, is for a leader to move beyond conferences and discussions and to take action, i.e., to instate *bhikṣuṇī* ordination (Damcho). However, the Karmapa is still a junior monk and an ordination ceremony may only be conducted by senior *bhikṣus* (Palmo, in Swanepoel 2012).<sup>15</sup> Tenzin Palmo states that the leaders of all the lineages are in favor of *bhikṣuṇī* ordination and that “the rank and file” is the problem; many of the older monks cling to the status quo. What is indeed needed, in her opinion, is a brave senior monk to take the initiative (Swanepoel 2012).

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<sup>15</sup> For recent comments by the Gyalwang Karmapa regarding the importance of *bhikṣuṇī* ordination, see <http://kagyuoffice.org/gyalwang-karmapas-teaching-during-the-1st-arya-kshema-nuns-gathering-why-bhikshuni-ordination-is-important>.

### Living as a Western Tibetan Buddhist Nun

Classical Buddhism is commonly characterized by the religious practices and lifestyle of its monastic elite. The development of a Buddhist monastic community is an important element in the transmission of Buddhism to the West because without it a true four-fold *saṅgha* is incomplete (Napper, in Chödrön xv, xvi). The transplantation of spiritual traditions often involves a completely different cultural environment, new adherents, and new influences. The traditions frequently transform in commendable ways and fulfill important needs for many people in their new environments (Tsomo *Realizations* 291).

However, Western Buddhist monastics face a number of challenges when they enter into a monastic system that has until recently only existed in Asian societies where Buddhism and its culture are interwoven. For instance, although many of the monastic precepts are timeless and relevant, there may be some, such as “not sitting on a high bed,” that are difficult to abide by in contemporary Western society. Furthermore, there is no pre-existing role or place for women in Western culture who don Buddhist robes (Napper, in Chödrön xv). How are nuns to be addressed? Western Buddhist nuns face a subtler predicament of terminology and appropriate behavior as nuns and laywomen observe different social protocols in terms of how nuns are addressed (Tsomo *Global* xxiii). In Asian Buddhist countries the decision to become a monastic is highly respected and is reflected in the language used to address nuns and monks. Monastics are not addressed by name without a qualifier such as “venerable” or “teacher.” To do otherwise would be considered rude. However, in the West, due to the ideal of social equality, addressing a nun as “venerable” may sound pretentious (Tsomo *Global* xxiv).

Some Western Buddhist nuns and monks do not live in nunneries and monasteries and follow various lifestyles. They must observe the

monastic precepts to the best of their ability and begin and end the day with meditation and prayer (Chödrön *Blossoms* xxix). Currently there are such dynamic and active Buddhist nuns living in the West as well as in Asia.

Western Tibetan Buddhist nuns substantially contribute to society by rendering social services, delivering *Dharma* talks, and setting up *Dharma* centers in the West, thereby building bridges between East and West. They also translate sacred texts, counsel lay people, and serve in hospice centers, refugee camps, animal shelters, and prisons. Some are accomplished artists, therapists, researchers, and academics at universities. They also demonstrate a life of simplicity and purity (Chödrön *Western*).

There is very little institutional support for Western nuns in the Tibetan tradition. This is due largely to a deficiency in resources but also because the inability of nuns to receive full ordination deprives them of the necessary institutional recognition and support (Tsomo, in Mohr & Tsedroen 285). Resources are generally channeled to refugee monasteries in Nepal and India, i.e., mostly to monks. Most Western Tibetan Buddhist nuns have neither a Western Buddhist religious community nor a suitable place in the Tibetan religious community (Li, in Tsomo 185).

The introduction of Buddhist cultures to the West has highlighted traditional patriarchal patterns in some Asian cultures and has raised questions about sexist attitudes within Buddhist and Western societies. I think that before Western women can wholeheartedly accept Buddhism, a number of issues need to be addressed. Buddhism creates the impression that it is egalitarian, yet the myth of male superiority continues to thrive in Buddhist societies. Although Buddhist saints are supposed to be enlightened, these men refrain from challenging the assertion that good karma leads to a male rebirth and bad karma to a female rebirth (Tsomo *Realizations* 294). And although Buddhism purports to affect the welfare

of all, it has failed to address discrimination against women adequately, especially in connection to the availability of full ordination.

Findly identifies four areas in which Buddhist nuns have historically faced obstacles in their spiritual lives (3). The first problem area is in religious practices, including lifestyle customs, instructional opportunities, meditational forms, and institutional structures. The second area of discrimination against nuns is in the disciplinary rules that govern their lives, especially The Eight Weighty Rules (Ploos van Amstel 218). These rules unmistakably make nuns second-class citizens. Thirdly, although doctrinally women are fully capable of reaching enlightenment, recognition of their achievements by title and status has often been withheld. Lastly, female renunciants have habitually been refused the same material support to which their male counterparts are privy.

Western Tibetan Buddhist nuns are also faced with other, subtler, difficulties. Because they have physical and intellectual habits that have been well honed through years of living in the world outside the nunnery, they tend to be more individualistic than their Asian counterparts (Chödrön *Western*). They tend to be more self-sufficient and more self-motivated, which sometimes makes it difficult for them to live in a monastic community (*Western*). (Paradoxically, Western women need strong personalities in order to become Buddhist nuns.) As first generation Western Tibetan Buddhist nuns they often lead a homeless life, as there are very few nunneries in the West and there is no umbrella institution on which they can rely (*Western*). They are often reproached by their families for leaving well-paid jobs and careers and for not having children. Others accuse them of repressing their sexuality and of avoiding intimate relationships (Chödrön, in Findly 82).

### Prominent Western Tibetan Buddhist Nuns

Five prominent Western Tibetan Buddhist nuns have made exceptional contributions toward the transformation of gender inequality in Tibetan Buddhism. These nuns, exasperated by the stalling tactics of the patriarchal Buddhist clergy, have fearlessly and selflessly moved ahead and have precipitated change themselves by studying the canon and its commentaries, obtaining full ordination in other traditions, setting up their own nunneries, founding Buddhist women's organizations, and initiating conferences. Two of these nuns are academic scholars, most of them maintain current and informative websites, and almost all of them publish prolifically. All five of these nuns are fully ordained and were founding members of the Committee for Bhikṣuṇī Ordination.

The most renowned and respected of this group is Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo. She was also the first Western woman to be fully ordained, albeit in the Chinese Buddhist tradition (Mackenzie 35). She is in the unique position of being the only Westerner who is the founder and abbess of a Tibetan Buddhist nunnery located in India, Dongyu Gatsal Ling (DGL), which is comprised of nuns in the Himalayan regions. Tenzin Palmo has made an enormous contribution in highlighting the plight and status of Tibetan Buddhist nuns by her honest and fearlessly outspoken campaign against gender prejudice and misogyny within the ranks of Tibetan Buddhism (54-55). She is in high demand as a speaker internationally, has been interviewed frequently in the popular press and by academics, and to date has published three books (149, 150; *Dongyu Gatsal Ling Nunnery*). Her nunnery serves as an example and inspiration to many Buddhist institutions due to its study program, its administrative system, and its self-sustaining environment. The bestowal of the rare title of Jetsunma (Sherrill 149-151) has given her, and by implication, all Buddhist women (The 12<sup>th</sup> Gyalwang Drukpa), recognition for

attaining spiritual advancement within the ranks of a patriarchal religious system.

The German nun, Carola Roloff, better known as Venerable Jampa Tsedroen, is a lecturer and research fellow at Hamburg University. She holds a doctoral degree (*summa cum laude*) and is conversant in German, English, Latin, Pāli, Sanskrit, and Tibetan. Jampa Tsedroen is an exceptionally active nun, both as a Buddhist scholar and as an organizer and speaker, especially in the field of equal rights for Buddhist nuns. Roloff is a prolific researcher and has published three edited books, two research monographs, nine chapters in collected volumes, and a number of research articles; she has presented in excess of forty conference papers, university symposia, lecture series, and other public events between 1987 and 2011. She is a member of the *Bhikṣuṇī* Ordination Committee of the Ministry of Religion and Culture of the Central Tibetan Administration in Dharamsala, and is the recipient of the 2007 Outstanding Buddhist Women Award in honor of the United Nations' International Women's Day (Carola Roloff). Furthermore, Venerable Jampa Tsedroen is the principal researcher regarding the full ordination of nuns in the Tibetan tradition as represented in the Tibetan Buddhist canon and its commentaries.

Venerable Karma Lekshe Tsomo is an associate professor in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of San Diego. She is the editor of more than eight books, and has authored a book on a comparative analysis of the *Dharmaguptaka* and *Mūlasarvāstivāda Bhikṣuṇī Prātimokṣa* lineages as well as one on Tibetan Buddhism, bioethics, and death (*Karma Lekshe Tsomo*).

Venerable Thubten Chödrön is the abbess and founder of Sravasti Abbey in New Port, Washington. She holds a B.A. degree and a post-graduate teacher's qualification. Thubten Chödrön maintains two very active websites that offer audio teachings, transcripts of articles and

talks, as well as Internet teachings (*Sravasti Abbey; Thubten Chödrön*). She has written ten books and has edited eight others, all on aspects of Tibetan Buddhism.

Venerable Pema Chödrön is an American nun in the Shambhala tradition and resident teacher at Gampo Abbey in Nova Scotia, Canada. She is a qualified primary school teacher, the author of nine books, and is exceptionally active in conducting Internet teachings and retreats (*Pema Chödrön*). Two other Western nuns who have distinguished themselves in various Buddhist fields should also be acknowledged. Venerable Robina Courtin is an Australian nun who has worked tirelessly supporting the spread of Tibetan Buddhism in prisons, and has founded the Liberation Prison Project, which supports the Buddhist practice and studies of thousands of prisoners in the USA and Australia. She is the co-editor of three books, for a long time was editor of *Mandala*, the magazine of the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahāyāna Tradition, and maintains a lively and up-to-date website (*Robina Courtin*). Venerable Geshe Kelsang Wangmo became not only the first woman but also the first Westerner to earn the Gelugpa Geshe degree (*Kelsang Wangmo*). However, Kelsang Wangmo seems to be in a difficult position now that she is the only female, Western recipient of the degree and is keeping a low profile at the moment (Palmo, in Swanepoel).

### **Western Tibetan Buddhist Nunneries<sup>16</sup>**

Western Tibetan Buddhist nuns have been prompted to set up their own nunneries or monastic communities in the West where they can pursue their spiritual lives in their own countries and communities and where

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<sup>16</sup> The term nunnery is here to be understood in its widest sense as defined in the Concise Oxford English Dictionary: a religious house of nuns.

the cultural and financial constraints they often face in India and Nepal are eliminated. The following monastic communities are small but they nevertheless provide an important opportunity for Western Buddhist women who wish to become nuns.

Kagyü Samye Ling Monastery in Scotland was the first Tibetan study and meditation center to be established in the West in 1967 (*Kagyü Samye Ling*). There seem to be about 15 nuns associated with Samye Ling who live there from time to time (Ploos van Amstel 212).

Gampo Abbey is in Nova Scotia, Canada and was started by Venerable Pema Chödrön in 1984 at the request of her root teacher, Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche. The monastic community at Gampo Abbey currently consists of eight nuns and four monks (*Gampo Abbey*).

The Chenrezig Nuns Institute in Queensland, Australia, founded in 1987, is currently the largest Western Tibetan Buddhist nuns' community. Presently there are twenty nuns in residence at the institute. There are also a smaller number of monks living there (*Chenrezig Institute*).

Sravasti Abbey in Newport, Washington in the USA was founded by its present abbess, Venerable Thubten Chödrön, in 2003. The nuns' community currently includes seven *bhikṣuṇīs*, two *śikṣamāṇās* and one *anagarika* (*Sravasti Abbey*).

### **Leading Buddhist Women's Organizations and Conferences**

In the 1980s, the Dalai Lama asked the Department of Religion and Culture (DRC) of the Tibetan Government-in-Exile in Dharamsala to investigate the authenticity of the extant *bhikṣuṇī* lineages in the Chinese, Vietnamese, and Korean traditions, and to cooperate with leading monks of the Theravāda traditions regarding the possibility of reviving *bhikṣuṇī*

ordination for Buddhist women worldwide. However, years of investigation did not lead to any action.

What progress has been made is due to the organizational efforts of Buddhist women, monastic and lay. The first important development was the “International Conference on Buddhist Nuns” in Bodhgaya, India, in 1987. Sakyadhita International Association of Buddhist Women was founded at the end of this conference, and since its foundation has been instrumental in promoting the status of Buddhist women worldwide. According to Tenzin Palmo (in Chang), much of the credit for the movement toward the improvement of the status of Buddhist nuns must be attributed to the Sakyadhita organization. Since its foundation, Sakyadhita has continued to hold bi-annual international conferences, which have had significant outcomes, including acquainting the Buddhist community with the importance of access to full ordination, improved Buddhological scholarship, international educational exchanges, grassroots educational initiatives, and a body of published scholarship (Chang).

In 1996, a three-week educational program in Bodhgaya, “Life as a Western Buddhist Nun,” exposed many Tibetan nuns to the possibility of *bhikṣuṇī* ordination for the first time.

In 2005, on the recommendation of the Dalai Lama, the Committee of Western Buddhist Nuns, now known as the Committee for Bhikṣuṇī Ordination in the Tibetan Buddhist Tradition, was founded. The Dalai Lama expressed a wish for *Western* nuns in particular, rather than *Tibetan* nuns, to carry out the task of researching and promoting the reestablishment of *bhikṣuṇī* ordination in the Tibetan tradition. He charged the Western nuns with the assignment of discussing the full ordination of women with senior monks since those monks would be instrumental in changing the attitudes of the other *bhikṣus*. The Dalai Lama also established a fund, to which he donated a substantial amount,

to administer the resources that would make travel and research possible for the CBO.

In 2007, the Foundation for Buddhist Studies (Studienstiftung für Buddhismus), in cooperation with the University of Hamburg, convened the “First International Congress on Buddhist Women’s Role in the Saṅgha: *Bhikṣuṇī* Vinaya and Ordination Lineages.” At this meeting the delegates unanimously agreed that the *Mūlasarvāstivāda bhikṣuṇī* ordination should be instated. Reflecting upon both practical considerations and scriptural authority, the majority of delegates recommended that the most satisfactory method for instating the *Mūlasarvāstivāda bhikṣuṇī* ordination lineage would be the introduction of a dual *saṅgha* consisting of *Mūlasarvāstivāda bhikṣus* and *Dharmaguptaka* (Chinese) *bhikṣuṇīs* (Berzin).

As I mentioned previously, the Committee for Bhikṣuṇī Ordination (CBO) was established in 2005 on the advice of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. The committee members currently are Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo, Venerable Pema Chödrön, Venerable Karma Lekshe Tsomo, Venerable Thubten Chödrön, Venerable Jampa Tsedroen, and Venerable Kunga Chödrön. The CBO is currently preparing three educational booklets in both English and Tibetan, researched and written by leading academics in the field, many of whom are also *bhikṣuṇīs*. These booklets explain the *bhikṣuṇī* ordination issue and justify providing an opportunity for full ordination for Buddhist nuns practicing in the Tibetan tradition (Committee for Bhikṣuṇī Ordination in the Tibetan Tradition).

## Conclusion

Buddhist monastic life offers women alternatives to conventional domestic roles and affords them the opportunity to realize their spiritual

potential unencumbered by the stereotypes, burdens, and responsibilities of lay life. However, I believe that the ideal of spiritual equality remains an empty claim as long as there are inadequate structures to support women's practice (Tsomo *Innovative* xvii). Incongruities such as gender inequality in societies where Buddhism is the main religious practice, gendered interpretations of Buddhist doctrines, and discriminatory authority structures in traditional Buddhist institutions demand an on-going investigation into Buddhist women's history and practice (xviii).

Inadequate consideration has been given to the implications of Buddhist doctrines to issues of gender (Gross *Patriarchy* 125) and existing literature is deficient in its treatment of the reconstruction of the Buddhist world in accordance with feminist values (Gross *Obstacles*). A female birth is still considered unfortunate by some die-hard, fundamentalist Tibetan Buddhist lamas. Buddhist feminist thought has, by now, deconstructed this doctrine, and has proven that it is theoretically unsound.<sup>17</sup> The same scholars have shown that there is a denial and a repression of female presence in the iconography and practices of Tibetan Buddhism by the Tibetan Buddhist ecclesiastic community. There are deeply embedded exercises of control and secret practices in Tibetan Buddhism, especially in the monastic realm and its Tantric practices that have amplified and supported assumptions about women's inferiority (Wangmo).

Inadequate and androcentric record keeping has deprived women of the opportunity of looking to highly accomplished female spiritual practitioners of the past for guidance and inspiration (Gross *Patriarchy* 90, 91). We need to excavate texts about or by *yoginīs* (Torrens). It is consequently highly inspirational and supportive for present female Bud-

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<sup>17</sup> Shaw, Gross, Simmer-Brown, Klein.

dhist practitioners to be able to refer to the biography of a present-day *yoginī* such as Tenzin Palmo. Her efforts to transform the male face of Tibetan Buddhism, her own spiritual achievements, and the formal recognition she has received from the Tibetan Buddhist religious community, the establishment of a progressive nunnery and the resurrection of the *togdenma*<sup>18</sup> tradition, as well as her outspoken determination to achieve enlightenment in the female form have been immensely inspiring to other women on the spiritual path (Torrens). Tenzin Palmo's achievements as a Western woman are doubly significant in the development of women's recognition within a deeply rooted patriarchal tradition, as well as further testimony that Westerners are also capable of steadfast commitment and considerable accomplishments on the Buddhist path (Schwab 51).

Nuns play a vital role in communicating Buddhist teachings and attracting female followers. Even though the most renowned Buddhist scholars are still elderly monks, young nuns are increasingly more educated, especially Taiwanese and Western nuns (Li, in Tsomo 178). However, the gender bias still prevalent in Tibetan Buddhism, as is evident in the status of nuns and the unavailability of full ordination, is holding them back. For instance, even though they technically may now be awarded the *geshema* degree, novice nuns are excluded from studying certain modules available only to the fully ordained (Tsedroen 2013). Also, nuns face many obstacles in obtaining sufficient funds to manage their nunneries. The gender discrimination that manifests in the unavailability of *bhikṣuṇī* ordination could possibly result in alienating the Western female adherents of Tibetan Buddhism.

There is no sound reason to delay the instatement of full ordination for nuns in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. It is not clear why

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<sup>18</sup> Advanced female yogic practitioner of the Kagyu lineage.

Tibetan Buddhist religious authorities are dragging their feet on the issue; they seem to be hiding behind the claim that there has not been detailed study of the canon and its commentaries and the need for consensus among its clergy. The Western nuns and Western female Buddhologists mentioned in this article have highlighted the gender imbalance prevalent in Tibetan Buddhism, which may have influenced His Holiness the Dalai Lama to support full ordination for nuns (*Dignity* 254, 277). The time has come for the Tibetan Buddhist ecclesiastic community to set aside its procrastinating tactics and to afford its nuns equal status, thereby putting an end to the marginalization of women within its religion and bringing Tibetan Buddhism in line with the more accepted outlook of contemporary thinking.

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