

The Startling Phenomenon of the Western Tibetan Buddhist Nun: The Challenges Faced by Western Nuns in the Tibetan Buddhist Tradition Living Outside the Traditional Tibetan Buddhist Regions

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Abstract

This article investigates the recent manifestation of a number of Western Tibetan Buddhist nuns and the challenges they face living outside traditional Himalayan nunneries. The lives of these nuns have been researched mainly by insiders such as scholarly Western nuns and no reliable statistics are available about the number of Western monastics in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. This article uses a phenomenological perspective to determine the challenges of transplanting a Buddhist monastic community to the West and the difficulties experienced by the Western Tibetan Buddhist nuns in the process. The author concludes that despite the difficulty of adopting an ancient Asian religious tradition and transplanting its monastic institution to the West, these nuns have contributed significantly in transforming gender prejudice within the ranks of Tibetan Buddhism, and furthermore render a diversity of services in the lay and monastic communities.

Keywords: Tibetan Buddhism, Western Tibetan Buddhist nuns, Non Himalayan nuns, Buddhist monastics, monastic community, gender prejudice.

The Buddhist monastic in female form will make a startling impression on the world stage. People will be able to read in her demeanour an exceptional resolve and an exceptional accomplishment...she will represent a victory over patriarchy and misogyny (Gyatso 2010, in Mohr & Tsedroen 19, 20).

Introduction

Recent years have witnessed the ordination of a number of Western¹ women as Tibetan Buddhist nuns. They leave their cultures, families, and jobs, and seek ordination as nuns in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. Many of these Western nuns initially choose to live in Asia, but some eventually return to their countries and attempt to live there as monastics.

Western Tibetan Buddhist nuns face a number of difficulties which their Asian counterparts do not usually experience. What are these challenges met by Western Tibetan Buddhist nuns? The phenomenon of Western Tibetan Buddhist nuns is a subject that has not been extensively researched by outsiders (Ploos van Amstel 2005: 25). The difficulties with which these nuns are confronted have been researched mainly by insiders, i.e. by scholarly Western Tibetan Buddhist nuns such as Venerables Jampa Tsedroen², Karma Lekshe Tsomo³, Thubten Chodron⁴ and Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo⁵.

This article aims to establish how Non Himalayan Western nuns experience their own world. To this end, a phenomenological approach seemed

¹ Western in this context refers to Europe, North America, and Australia in particular. There are according to Venerable Kelsang Mila currently only three Tibetan Buddhist nuns living in South Africa. They are Westerners and belong to the controversial Kadampa order of Tibetan Buddhism.

² Jampa Tsedroen, also known as Dr. Carola Roloff, is a prominent German nun who is also a lecturer and research fellow at Hamburg University. She is the principal researcher concerning the full ordination of nuns in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition and is the recipient of the 2007 Outstanding Buddhist Women Award in honour of the United Nations International Women's day (<http://www.carolaroloff.de/index.php/AboutMe/CV>).

³ Karma Lekshe Tsomo is an American nun and an associate professor in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of San Diego. She was the co-founder of the Sakyadhita International Association of Buddhist Women (<http://www.sandiego.edu/cas/theo/faculty/biography.php?ID=296>).

⁴ Thubten Chodron is an American nun who is the founder and abbess of Sravasti Abbey in New Port, Washington. She is a central figure in the struggle for the reinstatement of full ordination for Tibetan Buddhist nuns (<http://thubtenchodron.org/biography/>).

⁵ Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo is a renowned Western nun, known for her 12-year

the most appropriate methodology as phenomenology begins with the study of a phenomenon rather than a theory (Simon & Goes 2011: <http://www.dissertationrecipes.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/.../Phenomenological-Research.pdf>). Since the researcher wished to establish what the lived experiences of these nuns are in entering the monastic institution of an ancient Asian religion and then transferring it to the West, phenomenology best serves this purpose. It was therefore essential to refer to experiences in the words of the nuns themselves, hence the use of literature which reflects first-hand the experiences of these Western Tibetan Buddhist nuns, some of whom are prominent academics themselves.

The Challenges of Transplanting a Buddhist Monastic Community to the West

Asian religious systems are one of the most prominent spiritual traditions that have ‘taken root on Western soil’ (Tsomo 1999: 291). This transference frequently entails a completely different cultural landscape with new custodians and influences. The traditions often mutate and fulfil significant needs for many people in their new environment (Tsomo 1999: 291).

Classical Buddhism was essentially the religion and lifestyle of its monastic elite. Monastics adhered to the simple ethical code of Buddhism, and pursued the philosophical and meditational disciplines deemed fundamental to attaining enlightenment (Gross, in Tsomo 1999: 277). An important element in the transmission of Buddhism to the West is the development of a Buddhist monastic community (Napper, in Chodron 1999: xv). A small number of Western Buddhists have chosen to ordain as monastics, giving up family life, shaving their heads, donning monastic robes, and entering into a lifelong commitment in which their daily activities are guided by the *Vinaya*⁶ (Napper,

meditation retreat in the Himalayas and her statement that she will continue to take rebirth as a woman until she has attained enlightenment in a female body. She was the first Western woman to be fully ordained, albeit in the Chinese Mahayana school of Buddhism. She is the founder and abbess of the Himalayan nunnery, Dongyu Gatsal Ling. She is fiercely outspoken against gender bias and misogyny in Tibetan Buddhism (<http://www.tenzinpalmo.com>; Mackenzie 1999).

in Chodron 1999: xv). Venerable Thubten Chodron (1999: xxvi) agrees with Ploos van Amstel (2005: 25) that limited research has been conducted about Buddhist monastics living in the West. Currently there are no reliable statistics available about the number of Western Buddhist nuns and monks.

Nevertheless, these nuns and monks are presented by a number of obstacles. They enter into a monastic system which has until recently only existed in Asian societies where Buddhism and its culture are interwoven in the various communities. Western monastics' lives, like those of their Asian counterparts, are governed by a set of precepts that originated at the time of the Buddha more than 2 500 years ago. Although many of these regulations are timeless and relevant, there may be some that are difficult to abide by in our contemporary age. Furthermore, Western societies do not have a pre-existing role or place for women who wear monastic dress (Napper, in Chodron 1999: xv).

In addition to the above-mentioned challenges, Western Buddhist nuns face the more subtle predicament of terminology and appropriate behaviour (Tsomo 2008: xxiii). In Asian Buddhist languages a clear distinction is made between a woman as such and a nun. Asian nuns do not regard themselves as women because of the clear distinctions made between the identity and lifestyle of nuns and other women. In the Asian world nuns and laywomen observe different social protocols. They sleep in different areas, do not eat together, and behave differently. Westerners who transgress these social expectations may be deemed ignorant, selfish, inappropriate, or even arrogant. 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 2008: xxiv).

Buddhist monastics can live a variety of lifestyles and are not cloistered in the way that many Roman Catholic monastics are. A Tibetan Buddhist nun can live in a nunnery or in a city apartment. She can be engaged in social service, she may be occupied in intensive scriptural study, or she may be isolated in retreat. The only requisite is that she observes the monastic precepts to the best

⁶ The Vinaya contains the rules and regulations governing monastic communal life.

of her ability and that her day begins and ends with meditation and prayer (Chodron 1999: xxix). Currently there are dynamic and active Buddhist nuns living in the West as well as in Asia. Some are scholars, others are meditators living in retreat, some are translators of scriptures, and others do social service work in hospitals, prisons, and schools in war zones and poor areas (Chodron 1999: xxxvi).

You are Becoming a What?⁷

A *bhikshuni* is a fully ordained female religious mendicant who has renounced everyday worldly life to pursue the Buddha's path to enlightenment and liberation. She has no livelihood other than her religious life. She is sustained by donations of food, clothing, and shelter from the lay community. A *bhikshuni* (like her male counterpart, the *bhikshu*) undergoes a period of religious instruction as a novice nun after which she is ordained as a full-fledged member of the nun's order in a formal ceremony known as *upasampada* (Barnes, in Findly 2000: 17).

Nuns represent the *Dharma*⁸ in public. They wear monastic robes, shave their heads, and live according to certain precepts. Monastic robes and precepts are a tremendous support when encountering attachments and aversions that might arise in daily life (Chodron, in Findly 2000: 90). Men recognize that nuns are celibate and relate differently to them than they would to lay women. They usually refrain from initiating the subtle flirting games and self-conscious behaviour that people engage in when they are sexually attracted to each other. Furthermore, a nun does not have to consider a daily wardrobe and an attractive appearance. The robes and the precepts assist a nun in being aware of her actions and their results and makes her mindful not to act in unethical or impulsive ways (Chodron, in Findly 2000: 90).

Jetsunma⁹ Tenzin Palmo states that monasticism is not for everyone (Palmo 1993: [http:// www.thubtenchodron.org/BuddhistNunsMonastic Life](http://www.thubtenchodron.org/BuddhistNunsMonasticLife)). It is suitable only for a handful of individuals who are drawn towards a life totally dedicated to the *Dharma* by renouncing worldly concerns and

⁷ Chodron 2010.

⁸ The term *Dharma* refers to the Buddha's teachings.

⁹ Jetsunma is an honorary title meaning reverent, bestowed on revered Tibetan Buddhist teachers.

practising ethical purity. She continues to say that ‘the *sangha* is a group of monastics whose lives are based on renunciation, purity, restraint, and discipline which are aimed at reducing wants and desires’. Venerable Pema Chodron states that it is a general view that people choose to live in a monastery to escape from the world (Chodron 2011: <http://www.pemachodronfoundation.org>). She confirms that in reality the ‘intensity and simplicity’ of monastic life demand that one becomes more intimately involved with one’s life and life in general, a life ‘not motivated by personal concerns and habitual patterns’ (Chodron 2011: <http://www.pemachodronfoundation.org>). In the East the *sangha*¹⁰ has the role of preserving and transmitting the *Dharma*. The *sangha* is therefore usually supported and respected by these societies, and they take pride in their monastics (Palmo, 1993: <http://www.thubtenchodron.org/BuddhistNunsMonasticLife>). In the West, however, the situation is quite different. Many of the *Dharma* scholars and meditation teachers are lay people. Renunciation is often misunderstood and disparaged. *Sangha* members are characterised as escapists and neurotics unable to face the challenge of intimate relationships (Palmo, 1993: <http://www.thubtenchodron.org/BuddhistNunsMonasticLife>).

The Contribution of Western Nuns

Many people in the West continue to entertain preconceived ideas of monastics as innately selfish people who escape from society, making no contribution towards improving the world (Chodron 2000: <http://www.thubtenchodron.org/BuddhistNunsMonasticLife>). They accuse them of not being able to confront the difficulties of daily life. Venerable Thubten Chodron affirms that her own experiences and observations as a Tibetan Buddhist nun have not validated these prejudices (Chodron, 2000: <http://www.thubtenchodron.org/BuddhistNunsMonasticLife>). Although they spend a significant amount of time in study and practice, Venerable Thubten Chodron (2000: <http://www.thubtenchodron.org/BuddhistNunsMonasticLife>) lists a number of contributions that Western Tibetan Buddhist nuns are making to society:

- i. They demonstrate a life of simplicity and purity.

¹⁰ In this instance, the community of nuns and monks. The term may also be used to refer to the entire lay and monastic Buddhist community.

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- ii. In controlling their consumerist tendencies, nuns preserve the environment for future generations.
- iii. Nuns are celibate and therefore contribute towards preventing overpopulation.
- iv. They build cultural bridges between East and West.
- v. Western nuns offer many skills to the Buddhist community at large:
 - a. Teachers of the *Dharma*
 - b. Translators of sacred texts
 - c. Counsellors
 - d. Some work in day-care centres
 - e. Some nuns help in hospices for the terminally ill
 - f. Others work in refugee camps in their own countries and abroad
 - g. Some are artists
 - h. Others are therapists
 - i. Some are even professors at universities
- vi. Nuns offer an alternative to women's liberation by treating the body simply as a vehicle with which to practise the *Dharma*. They acknowledge that human beings are sexual beings, but women are more than just their sexual identity.
- vii. They set up *Dharma* centres in the West.

To these we can add Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo's statement that 'monastics remind us that we can live with few possessions and without sex, family, or security, and yet be happy and content' (Palmo 1993: <http://www.thubtenchodron.org/BuddhistNunsMonasticLife>). Although Western nuns may therefore face many challenges, Venerable Thubten Chodron believes that these challenges can become 'the fuel propelling them towards internal transformation' (Chodron 2000: <http://www.thubtenchodron.org/BuddhistNunsMonasticLife>).

Monastic Training

According to the traditional texts followed by most schools of Buddhism, a woman who wishes to join the nuns' order has her hair shaved off by an ordained nun as a symbol of her renunciation of lay life. She requests two senior *bhikshunis* to act as her instructors during her two-year training period. These two senior nuns will also present her to the entire local community of

nuns when she is ready for ordination. She will be asked a prescribed series of questions about her health, her legal status as a free woman, and her fitness to join the order. As soon as she has answered satisfactorily, she is presented with a nun's basic possessions: the five-part monastic robes in which she will dress henceforth, and an alms bowl. She formally accepts the rules of the *Vinaya* which will govern her conduct as a nun, and then proceeds to present herself to a quorum of *bhikshus* and *bhikshunis* of her local community for ordination. Once she has received this double ordination from both the *bhikshuni* and the *bhikhsu* communities, she is recognised as a *bhikshuni*. The ordination of a monk is relatively similar to that of a nun, except that he is ordained only by the *bhikshu* community (Barnes, in Findly 2000 17, 18).

The beginning of the *bhikshuni* order is well documented (Kabilsingh, in Chodron 1999: 17– 33). However, modern scholars are questioning the accuracy of the historical texts in which the foundation of the nuns' order is recorded. Very few Buddhist texts extant today can be accurately dated to earlier than the fourth and fifth centuries C.E. Some oral traditions about the teachings of the Buddha and the early years of the *sangha* were committed to writing in the first century B.C.E, a few hundred years after the death of Siddhartha Gautama. Nevertheless, these written texts were probably revised before reaching the state in which we have them today. It is therefore possible that what they now represent is a carefully constructed interpretation of what Buddhism originally resembled. The history of the founding of the nuns' order is an example of such a process of revision and refinement. It was written by monks at an unidentified time for the sole purpose of determining the status of monks and nuns within the *sangha*. Nonetheless, since the mid-nineteenth century excavations of a number of ancient Buddhist sites in India paint quite a different picture about the status of nuns than the one presented in the texts (Barnes, in Findly 2000: 18, 19). Inscriptions found at these sites, principally at Bodghaya, Sarnath, Amarvati, Bharut, and Sanchi date from the third century B.C.E. to as late as the second century C.E. The largest and best-preserved body of inscriptions were found at Sanchi which produced more than 800 inscriptions providing detailed information about the Buddhist *sangha* and the condition of Buddhism not long after the Buddha's death (Barnes, in Findly 2000:19). The records at Sanchi attest to the importance of the role of nuns in the *sangha*, namely as equal to that of the monks. Nuns seemed to have been active and influential to the extent that monks continued promulgating rules to

control and limit the lives and activities of the nuns (Barnes, in Findly 2000: 29).

The debate surrounding the unavailability of full ordination for Tibetan Buddhist nuns has been raging for the past thirty years and has highlighted gender prejudice within the ranks of Tibetan Buddhism. Hand-in-hand with this was the exclusion of nuns from earning the prestigious *geshe*¹¹ degree. After years of studying and analysing appropriate texts and commentaries by various high-ranking predominantly male monastics¹², endless conferences¹³, and careful diplomatic discussions about the issue by mostly Western, female Buddhologists and prominent nuns¹⁴, His Holiness the Karmapa, a young outspoken monk and second only in rank to HH the Dalai Lama, has at last announced that enough is enough. He announced that he will start the process towards restoring *bhikshuni* ordination for nuns in the Tibetan tradition by ordaining a group of carefully selected nuns as novice/*getsulma* nuns in 2016 (<http://kagyuooffice.org/gyalwang-karmapa-makes-historic-announcement-on-restoring-nuns-ordination/>). Furthermore, HH the Dalai Lama gave permission for nuns to be awarded the *geshema* degree, and the first group of nuns sat for the first part of the four-part examinations in 2013 (<http://tnp.org/tag/geshema-degree/>). Significantly, the first nun to receive the *geshema* degree was in fact a young German nun, Venerable Geshe Kelsang Wangmo (Mandala Magazine 2012: <http://fpmt.org/mandala/archives/>

¹¹ The *geshe* (*geshema* in the case of nuns) degree is the equivalent of a PhD in Tibetan Buddhist philosophy and takes approximately sixteen years of study.

¹² Mostly under the auspices of the Department of Religion and Culture of the Tibetan Government-in-Exile.

¹³ The *First International Buddhist Women's Conference* in Bodhgaya, India in 1987; *Sakyadhita International Association of Buddhist Women* founded in 1987; *Life as a Western Buddhist Nun* in Bodhgaya, India in 1996; the *Committee of Western Buddhist Nuns*, now known as the *Committee for Bhiksuni Ordination* formed in 2005; and in 2007 at the University of Hamburg, the *International Congress on Buddhist Women's Role in the Sangha: Bhikshuni Vinaya and Ordination Lineages*.

¹⁴ Refer especially to Rita Gross, Thubten Chodron, Karma Lekshe Tsomo, Jampa Tsedroen, Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo, Janet Gyatso.

mandala-for-2012/october/the-joy-of-study-an-interview-with-geshe-kelsang-wangmo/).

Training for Western Nuns

Western women who wish to ordain as Tibetan Buddhist nuns are faced with a number of obstacles. Some Western nuns remain in Asia as long as possible but eventually experience visa and language problems. Tibetan nunneries are usually filled to capacity and Westerners are expected to pay in order to live in a guest room. Tibetan nuns receive their training in Tibetan, which includes memorising Tibetan texts. Furthermore, the rituals are performed in Tibetan. The majority of Western nuns do not speak Tibetan and memorising texts in Tibetan are usually not meaningful for them. Western nuns have different intellectual needs and questions than their Tibetan counterparts. Tibetan nuns grow up within Buddhist communities where certain concepts and traditions are a given, for instance the Three Jewels¹⁵. Western nuns may want to analyse and intensify their study of the Buddha, the *Dharma*, and the *Sangha*. Western nuns in India and elsewhere in Asia may therefore find that they do not readily fit into established Tibetan Buddhist institutions (Chodron 2000, in Findly: 82, 83).

Tibetan and Taiwanese nuns for instance, receive very different treatment in their endeavours (Li, in Tsomo 2000: 184). Foguangshan monastery in Taiwan recognises the productivity of the nuns, and gender equality is one of the central pillars of what Master Xingyun calls ‘humanistic Buddhism’ (Li, in Tsomo 2000: 184). Foguangshan offers foreign students free education and monastic positions after graduation. It provides its nuns with opportunities for education and career advancement that few other Buddhist organisations can equal. Great care is taken when choosing ordination candidates and precept masters, and traditional monastic structures replace well-known family structures and traditional patterns of behaviour (Li, in Tsomo 2000: 185). Similarly, the nuns of the Ciji Buddhist Compassion-Relief Foundation are highly educated, self-reliant, and empowered. In contrast to the misogynistic attitudes in Tibetan Buddhism which stresses negative female traits and female karmic hindrances, limiting women in their study of the

¹⁵ The Three Jewels commonly refer to the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha.

dharma, the Ciji Foundation confirms that the so-called feminine and maternal virtues of compassion, nurturance, empathy, selflessness, self-sacrifice, reconciliation and warmth precisely reflect the essence of Buddhist virtues (DeVido 2010: 75, 76).

In comparison to this there is very little institutional support for Western nuns in the Tibetan tradition. This is due to a deficiency in resources as well as the lack of full ordination which would provide the necessary institutional recognition and support (Li, in Tsomo 2000: 185). The monastic role of nuns is more often than not restricted to a supportive role and preference is given to the needs of the monks and even the male laity above that of the nuns (Li, in Tsomo 2000: 185).

While Taiwanese Buddhist temples serve as important social institutions abroad and accord their monastics, male and female, respect and support ensuring that they are protected from financial difficulties, the same cannot be said about Tibetan Buddhist institutions in the West (Li, in Tsomo 2000: 185). Although the Tibetan Buddhist tradition has grown rapidly in the West in the last three decades due to the accessibility of many of its programmes, especially in meditation, it has not yet developed adequate support to budding monastic communities in the West (Li, in Tsomo 2000: 185). Available support is generally channelled to refugee monasteries in Nepal and India, and then mostly to monks. Western Tibetan Buddhist nuns are currently deprived of the Western concept of religious community and in addition there is no suitable place for them in the Tibetan religious community.

As Tibetan Buddhism becomes more established in the West, it is important that the Tibetan Buddhist authorities facilitate the integration of Western nuns into their monastic communities (Li, in Tsomo 2000: 185). One of the most effective strategies for accomplishing this task would therefore be the endorsement of *bhikshuni* ordination (Li, in Tsomo 2000: 185).

The Precepts

The function of precepts is to assist monastics in their spiritual pursuit and to help them to refrain from living in harmful, dysfunctional, and inconsiderate ways (Chodron, in Findly 2000: 86). Novice nuns have ten precepts which can be subdivided to total 36; probationary nuns have six precepts in addition to the novice precepts; and *bhikshunis* have 348 precepts as listed in the

*Dharmagupta*¹⁶ school of the *Vinaya*, which has the only extant *bhikshuni* lineage today (Chodron, in Findly 2000: 86). The precepts are divided into different categories, each with its own method of dealing with transgressions. The most serious precepts are the root precepts and must be adhered to in order to remain a nun. These mainly include no killing, no stealing, no sexual misconduct, and not lying about spiritual attainments. Other precepts include regulations concerning nuns' relationships with other nuns, with monks, and with the lay community. There are also precepts prescribing daily behaviour such as eating, walking, dressing, and residing in any given place. Infringement of the precepts are purified in a variety of ways according to their severity, for example confession to another *bhikshuni*, confession in the presence of the assembly of nuns, or relinquishing of a possession obtained in an inappropriate manner (Chodron, in Findly 2000: 86).

Observing the precepts in the West in the twenty-first century is not always easy. The precepts were established by the Buddha in India in the sixth century B.C.E. Although monastics in the Theravada tradition try to keep the precepts literally, other traditions might permit more flexibility. A careful study of the *Vinaya* and the background to the precepts enable nuns to understand the purpose of each precept. This enables them to adhere to its purpose although they may not necessarily be able to follow it literally (Chodron, in Findly 2000: 87). Venerable Thubten Chodron presents the example of one of the *bhikshuni* precepts which forbids nuns from riding in a vehicle. She explains that in ancient India vehicles were drawn by animals and even human beings and was preserved for the wealthy. The Buddha's intention was to prevent suffering to other sentient beings and to avoid arrogance in monastics. Today, this precept is no longer practicable and nuns have adapted it to mean that they should avoid riding in expensive vehicles or developing pride when driven around in luxury cars. In this way monastics have to adapt themselves to modern conditions (Chodron, in Findly 2000: 87).

There might be diverse interpretations and implementations among the different traditions and even among different monasteries within the same tradition. Variations in observing the precepts may also be encountered in different cultures. For example, Asian nuns do not usually shake hands with men, whereas most Western nuns in the Tibetan tradition do. Nuns simply have

¹⁶ Dharmagupta refers to the Chinese Mahayana school of Buddhism.

to be mindful that attraction and attachment do not arise when shaking hands (Chodron, in Findly 2000: 87).

Western Tibetan Buddhist Nuns: A New Phenomenon in an Ancient Tradition¹⁷

Venerable Karma Lekshe Tsomo writes that '[f]eminists look at the role of women in Buddhist cultures and blink' (Tsomo 1999: 294). She continues to say that the introduction of Buddhist cultures to the West has 'occasioned a ripening of feminist awareness' (Tsomo 1999: 294). It has highlighted certain traditional patriarchal patterns in some Asian cultures and has engendered questions about sexist attitudes within Buddhist and Western societies. However, she argues that before Buddhism can be 'wholeheartedly embraced' by Western women, a number of issues need to be addressed. Buddhism purports to affect the welfare of all, yet it has failed to address actively discrimination against women. Buddhism claims to be egalitarian yet the myth of male superiority continues to thrive in Buddhist societies. So-called Buddhist saints are supposed to be enlightened, but they refrain from challenging the assertion that good karma leads to a male rebirth and bad karma to a female rebirth (Tsomo 1999: 294).

Shaw states that,

the religious lives of women unfold within a matrix of beliefs about women's capacities and the nature and value of femaleness. Beliefs and attitudes shaping women's self-perception, such as the symbolic content and interpretation of their religious practices, are just as important as the objects they wield and the physical actions they perform (Shaw 1994: 35).

However, historically Buddhist women have faced obstacles in their spiritual lives in at least four areas (Findly 2000: 3). The first area presenting obstacles is in religious practices, including lifestyle customs, instructional opportunities, meditational forms, and institutional structures. These are routinely available to monks and lay men but are rarely or never accessible to

¹⁷ Chodron, in Findly (2000: 81).

lay women and nuns. Canonical texts, despite the misogynistic tone of some of their rhetoric, clearly state that women can achieve enlightenment (Findly 2000: 3). The essential processes, through which they can advance to this experience are however, often curtailed. The complete and irreversible transformation of Buddhist enlightenment is attained above all through extensive and strenuous disciplines which are intended to move the practitioner to a position of non-attachment and compassionate activity within the world. Women practitioners have been hindered in their efforts to realise the fullness of their spiritual lives by restricted access to the customary disciplinary opportunities (Findly 2000: 3).

The second area of discrimination against nuns is in the disciplinary rules that govern the lives of monastics in which nuns have unmistakably been delineated as second-class citizens in relation to the monks (Findly 2000: 3). This is painfully illustrated by the eight disciplinary rules for nuns which were laid down at the time of Gautama Buddha when the first nuns were admitted into the monastic order. The eight rules for example, require all nuns to pay homage to all monks, regardless of the seniority of the nun or the junior rank of a monk. The rules also require nuns to be instructed by monks but not vice versa. Furthermore, nuns should refrain from criticising or reprimanding monks although the reverse is not required of monks. Nuns have to be ordained by the orders of both nuns and monks, but the reverse does not hold true. The inequality of institutional governance places nuns' daily lives directly under the authority of monks and curtails any possibility of full self-governance for the nuns (Findly 2000: 4). The establishment of Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo's nunnery however, is a step in the right direction. *Dongyu Gatsal Ling* is run by the nuns themselves without any interference from Khampagar Monastery (<http://www.tenzinpalmo.com>). Venerable Thubten Chodron's nunnery, *Sravasti Abbey* is an example of one of the few nunneries in the West with an abbess and where the chanting is in English and not in Tibetan (<http://www.sravastiabbey.org>).

Thirdly, although doctrinally women are fully capable of reaching enlightenment, recognition of their achievements by title and status has often been withheld (Findly 2000: 4). The status of nuns within the Buddhist community seems to correspond with ordination status (Tsomo 1999: 9). In a community where full ordination is available to nuns, such as in the Taiwanese nuns' community, their level of education and status also tends to be high. Where only novice ordination is available they are recognised as members of

the Buddhist *sangha* but are not afforded equal treatment (Tsomo 1999: 9). However, full ordination does not necessarily result in equal status. Even nuns who enjoy full ordination, as in China, Korea, and Vietnam, often find themselves marginalised and in subordinate positions in the religious power structures of their traditions (Tsomo 1999: 9).

Lastly, female renunciants have often been refused the same material support that their male counterparts are privy to (Findly 2000: 4). Donor support of nuns' communities has lagged well behind those of monks and their communities. This has resulted for instance in the disappearance of the nuns' order in India (Findly 2000: 4).

Currently many nuns, Western as well as Asian, are challenging years of traditional obstacles (Findly 2000: 2). They are laying claim to forms, practices, and institutions that had hitherto been open only to men. Buddhist women, lay as well as monastic, are reshaping these forms, practices, and institutions 'not only to suit their own needs and concerns but also to respond to the particular demands of life in late-twentieth-century culture' (Findly 2000: 2). One of the most prominent organisations in support of Buddhist women, and in particular of the reinstatement of full ordination for nuns, Sakyadhita International Association of Buddhist Women, was founded by Western women (<http://www.sakyadhita.org>). At its 2015 conference its current president, Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo, in addition established the Alliance of Non Himalayan Nuns in support of ordained Tibetan Buddhist nuns living outside the traditional Tibetan Buddhist regions (<http://www.nonhimalayannunsalliance.com>).

Western Tibetan Buddhist nuns are also faced with other, more subtle, difficulties. They bring with them habits, physical as well as intellectual, that have been well-honed through years of living in the world outside the nunnery, and they therefore tend to be more individualistic than their Asian sisters (Chodron, 2000: <http://www.thubtenchodron.org/BuddhistNunsMonasticLife>). They furthermore tend to be more self-sufficient and more self-motivated which sometimes makes it difficult for these very individualistic nuns to live in a monastic community (Chodron 2000: <http://www.thubtenchodron.org/BuddhistNunsMonasticLife>).

As first generation Western Tibetan Buddhist nuns they often lead a homeless life, as there are very few nunneries in the West. In Buddhism there is no umbrella institution that cares for its monastics. They are not

provided for financially and many live on their life's savings which dwindle away year after year. Some nuns find sponsors, often family and friends, or live in great poverty in *Dharma* centres in the West. Tibetan nunneries in Asia are frequently quite overcrowded with no room for foreigners, and visa problems and the language barrier can become problematic (Chodron, 2000: <http://www.thubtenchodron.org/BuddhistNunsMonasticLife>). Furthermore, Western nuns are not an integral part of the Tibetan religious community, whose hierarchy consists of Tibetan monks (Chodron, in Findly 2000: 85).

Despite some Asian women choosing ordination when they are elderly and their families are grown, most are usually ordained when they are still young and impressionable with little life experience. Ordained Asian women are supported by their families and communities. Becoming a nun in Asia is acceptable and respectable. Furthermore, cultures in the East focus more on group rather than on individual identity, which makes it easier for nuns to adapt to community life in a monastery (Chodron, in Findly 2000: 81, 82).

In contrast, most Western women are ordained when they are adults, are highly educated, have experienced careers and married life, and have raised children. These women have talents and skills which they bring to monastic life, but they also bring habits and expectations 'that have been well polished' by years of contact with the world (Chodron, in Findly 2000: 81). Western nuns grow up in a culture that emphasises the individual over the group often resulting in strong, individualistic personalities. Paradoxically, Western women need strong personalities in order to become Buddhist nuns. Often, they are reproached by their families for leaving well-paid jobs and careers and for not having children. Their communities brand them as 'lazy parasites who don't want to work', and they are accused of 'repressing their sexuality and of avoiding intimate relationships' (Chodron, in Findly 2000: 82).

Current first-generation Western Tibetan Buddhist nuns are pioneers in many fields. There are few nunneries in the West, and nuns are generally expected to make some sort of financial contribution as there is not sufficient financial support from a surrounding lay community to sustain the nunneries. This presents the nuns with a number of problems. According to their precepts, they are expected to shave their heads, wear monastic robes, and not to engage in commerce or touch money. Some of the nuns have sponsors or family and friends who assist them with a small stipend. Yet others are forced to take jobs in the lay community to support themselves, which interferes with their

observing the ordination precepts and may prevent them from studying and practising intensely (Chodron, in Findly 2000: 82). However, His Holiness the present Dalai Lama has stated that in certain cases adaptations may be made. He emphasises the importance of considering the adaptations carefully before applying them, as every effort should be made to follow the *Vinaya* teachings and precepts as carefully as possible (Gyatso, in Chodron 1999: 197).

Venerable Thubten Chodron, notes that obstacles can be experienced as the catalyst for a nun's practice, and through practise her mind can be transformed and can become peaceful (Chodron, in Findly 2000: 83, 84). She provides the examples of meditating on impermanence and death in order to come to terms with financial insecurity; contemplation of the disadvantages of the eight worldly concerns¹⁸ would assist a nun in remaining unaffected by praise and blame from others; and reflecting on karma and its effects when encountering difficulties in receiving a monastic education.

One of the biggest challenges for a Western nun is living as a celibate. 'Sexuality spills' from the Western media and Western culture pronounces romantic intimacy as the '*summum bonum*' of life (Chodron, in Findly 2000: 84). Venerable Thubten Chodron recommends that nuns look beyond superficial appearances and contemplate the deeply ingrained emotional and sexual patterns of attachments that keep one imprisoned in cyclical existence (Chodron, in Findly 2000: 84). Furthermore, she advises nuns and lay people alike to study the nature of emotions and to learn to deal with it in constructive ways without depending on outsiders to make one feel good about oneself.

The Daily Life of a Western Tibetan Buddhist Nun

Western nuns attract some interesting comments in their daily lives regarding their appearance. Comments vary from compliments on their 'outfits', to '[n]ot everyone can wear their hair like that, but [it] looks great on you', to '[d]on't worry, dear. After the chemo is finished your hair will grow back again' (Chodron, in Findly 2000: 88). Buddhist nuns are sometimes mistaken as

¹⁸ Experiencing pleasure in receiving money and material possessions, praise and approval from others, having a good reputation and public image, or experiencing pleasure of the senses. Experiencing an aversion to not receiving or to losing the afore-mentioned.

followers of the Hare Krishna movement, and are occasionally encouraged to '[h]ave faith in Jesus' (Chodron, in Findly 2000: 88). Thankfully, they are also recognised as Buddhist nuns and approached about how to learn meditation, or about where to find a *Dharma* centre.

Nuns experience a variety of reactions to their monastic status even in Buddhist communities, and especially in the West where Buddhism is a relatively new religious experience. The public do not always know how to relate to monastics, and although some people may be respectful towards Asian nuns, Western nuns are often treated as 'unpaid labour' for the *Dharma* centres and expected to run errands, cook, and clean for the lay community (Chodron, in Findly 2000: 88). Yet others treat the nuns courteously. However, nuns sometimes have to remind people about the correct protocol in dealing with monastics. Thubten Chodron had on one occasion to remind a *Dharma* centre who had invited her to teach in their city that it was not appropriate to provide accommodation for her at the home of a single man with a poster of a Playboy bunny in his bathroom (Chodron, in Findly 2000: 88).

Ploos van Amstel confirms that Tibetan nuns are still expected to behave 'shyly in a subservient manner' whereas Western women are from societies that have been transformed to a large extent by the women's liberation movement (Ploos van Amstel 2005: 20, 21). Western women are more confident and outspoken, and have more freedom of movement than their Tibetan counterparts. In the last fifty years Western women have gained incredible freedom, able to enter almost any profession or vocation they wish (Ploos van Amstel 2005: 21). This could perhaps account for the Dalai Lama's request to Western nuns to take up the cause of establishing *bhikshuni* ordination in the Tibetan tradition¹⁹.

Conclusion

Western Tibetan Buddhist nuns enter a monastic system which has until recently only existed in Asian societies into which Buddhism and its culture are interwoven. Western nuns in Asia find that they do not readily fit into established Tibetan Buddhist institutions. Tibetan nuns receive their training in Tibetan, memorise texts, and perform rituals in Tibetan. The majority of

¹⁹ This led in 2005 to the establishment of the *Committee of Western Buddhist Nuns*, now known as the *Committee for Bhiksuni Ordination* (<http://www.bhiksuniordination.org>).

The Startling Phenomenon of the Western Tibetan Buddhist Nun

Western nuns do not speak Tibetan and memorising texts in Tibetan are therefore problematic. Some Western nuns wishing to remain in Asia as long as possible eventually experience visa and language problems. Tibetan nunneries are usually filled to capacity and Westerners are expected to make a financial contribution. As first generation Western Tibetan Buddhist nuns they therefore often lead a homeless life, as there are very few nunneries in the West. Since they are not provided for financially many live in poverty on their life's savings.

Western societies do not have a pre-existing role or place for women who wear monastic dress. The lives of monastics, Western and Asian, are governed by a set of precepts that originated 2 500 years ago and some of these precepts may be difficult to abide by in a contemporary age. Furthermore, Western Buddhist nuns face the predicament of terminology and appropriate behaviour. In Asian monastics are highly respected and this is reflected in the way nuns and monks are addressed, but Westerners are not used to addressing people, let alone Buddhist nuns, by a qualifier such as 'venerable' or 'teacher'.

One of the biggest challenges for a Western nun is living as a celibate in a cultural milieu where sexuality and romantic intimacy are the order of the day. Nuns find that monastic robes and precepts are nevertheless a remarkable support when encountering lay men as they recognize that nuns are celibate and relate differently to them than they would to other women. They usually refrain from initiating subtle flirting games and other self-conscious behaviour directed towards women they might be sexually attracted to.

However, renunciation is often misunderstood and disparaged. Nuns are sometimes characterised as escapists and neurotics shying away from the challenges of intimate relationships. Some Westerners continue to harbour preconceived ideas of monastics as innately selfish people who escape from society, making no contribution towards improving the world, unable to confront the difficulties of daily life.

Furthermore, Western nuns, and their Asian counterparts, are frustrated by the gender inequality in Tibetan Buddhism characterised by the current unavailability of full ordination for nuns. Hand-in-hand with this was the exclusion of nuns from earning the prestigious *geshema* degree. Hopefully, this is about to change with the upcoming ordination programme initiated by HH the Seventeenth Karmapa, and the permission granted by HH the Dalai Lama for nuns to sit for the *geshema* examinations.

Despite the challenges faced by Western nuns in adopting an ancient religious tradition and transplanting its monastic institution to the West, these nuns contribute in significant ways in the diversity of services they render to the lay and monastic community. They have been instrumental in establishing nunneries in the West and have adapted Tibetan Buddhist practices in such a way that it is less alienating for nuns who do not speak Tibetan. Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo has furthermore established a nunnery for Himalayan nuns which exemplify self-government by the nuns themselves. In addition, prominent Western nuns such as Venerables Jampa Tsedroen, Thubten Chodron, Karma Lekshe Tsomo, and Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo have been the leaders in setting up organisations and conferences that have focused on the lives of Western nuns, and have also contributed significantly in the debate surrounding gender prejudice in Tibetan Buddhism.

‘The world needs yoginis²⁰... We need women who are not just realized but very deeply stabilized in their realization, with real understanding and knowledge of the *Dharma* because they have studied...so that in time they can come out and also teach’ (Palmo 2009, in De Re, <http://www.northwestdharma.org/news/08NovdecIssue/yoginis.php>).

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²⁰ In this context yoginis are highly realized female Buddhist practitioners.

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