

BUDDHIST NUNS NEED A LOBBY

The struggle for the equality of women in Buddhism continues. The author reports on the latest developments in matters of nuns' ordination and Geshema title.

BY BHIKṢUṆĪ JAMPA TSEDROEN (CAROLA ROLOFF)

For the first time, H.H. the Dalai Lama has publicly advocated the revival of the nuns' ordination in the Mulasarvāstivāda tradition. "From the start, I have wished and supported the revival of the Bhikṣuṇī lineage in the Mūlasarvāstivāda tradition. But I cannot act like a dictator and say, 'You have to do this!' I'm sure eventually there will be some kind of agreement," he said as the keynote speaker at the closing ceremony of the *Global Buddhist Congregation* (GBC), held at the end of November 2011 in New Delhi, in front of 900 guests from 46 countries. However, that goal is still a long way off.

60 international buddhologists and Buddhist teachers were invited to the conference, which commemorated the "2600th anniversary of the Buddha's enlightenment", to discuss current issues: are the increasing globalisation and commercialisation a threat to Buddhism? How can Buddhism contribute to pressing questions of modernity, which stand does it take on right livelihood, on ethics and values, conflict and violence, and where does it stand on the role of women in Buddhism?

Concerning the issue of the role of women, the organizers were criticised. Two of the four groups of Buddha's followers dominated the opening ceremony: monks (bhikṣus) and male lay followers (upāsakas). Not one nun (bhikṣuṇī) or laywoman (upāsikā) was on stage. The chairwomen of the big nuns orders from Korea, Taiwan and Vietnam had not even received an invitation. Among the invited participants were neither Theravāda nuns nor Tibetan nuns.

Several times similar patriarchal structures in Buddhism became evident during my visit to India: at the conference of the *International Network of Engaged Buddhists* (INEB) in Bodhgaya and at the 11th Conference of Religious Leaders of Tibetan Buddhism in Dharamsala. During a workshop on gender issues at the INEB conference, bhikkhunīs

from Sri Lanka reported that the nuns order had been revived successfully there and that women are now allowed to study in Buddhist monastic universities. But unlike monks and lay men, they are not allowed to teach there, despite equal qualifications. They are also forbidden to establish their own university. Furthermore, like in Thailand, they are not allowed to register their bhikkhunī order name on their identification documents. Thus an act that is common international law is impeded by the intertwining of politics and the bhikkhu saṅgha.

THE DALAI LAMA EMPHASISES AGAIN AND AGAIN THAT THE CHANGE MUST COME FROM WITHIN THE TRADITIONS THEMSELVES

Studying Buddhist philosophy and full ordination of nuns were also the subject of the 11th Conference of Religious Leaders of Tibetan Buddhism and the Bon tradition, held from September 22nd to 24th 2011, in Dharamsala. Here again, only monks and laymen met. The request by the *Tibetan Nuns Project* and the *Committee for Bhikṣuṇī Ordination in the Tibetan Buddhist Tradition* to be admitted, at least as observers at the two agenda items specific to nuns, was rejected by the exiled *Department of Religion and Culture* of the Tibetan government. My request was countered as follows: are not all nuns adequately represented by the leaders (men) of their respective traditions?

28 male dignitaries were invited, among them five delegates of the Tibetan Buddhist traditions in the Parliament and the Minister of Religion and former Tibetan Prime Minister Samdhong Rinpoche. Not even high-ranking female lamas such as H. E. Sakya Jetsun Chimey Luding Rinpoche and H. E. Mindroling Jetsun Khando Rinpoche had been invited.

MEN DECIDE ON WOMEN

At the conference in Dharamsala, after only a short discussion concerning the ordination of nuns a decision was reached: "For the past many years, research has been done on the bhikṣuṇī lineage. The outcome has been published in a series of books [by a single researcher and author - author's note]. As it is clear from this [researcher's outcome] the Mulasarvāstivāda Bhikṣuṇī lineage does not exist. Also with regard to the bhikṣuṇī lineages of other schools, doubts with regard to a pure source have not been utterly overcome or demolished [In fact, Chinese historical documents available since the

1980s have not been considered - author's note]. Based on this, in order to settle the matter, the *Department of Religion and Culture* will form a subcommittee of experts with Vinaya holders, representing all the traditions, in order to reach a final conclusion as to whether there is or is not a method to revive the bhikṣuṇī lineage, and to make a clear statement."

The studies of a Tibetan scholar, who takes a different position on the matter, were ignored, although Samdhong Rinpoche and other Geshes think they are excellent. A statement of Western nuns filed in Tibetan was not taken into consideration, neither were publications by leading experts around the world. Both historically and from the perspective of the three living Vinaya traditions, Mūlasarvāstivāda (Tibet), Dharmaguptaka (Taiwan, China, Korea, Vietnam) and Theravāda (Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma, etc.), a revival is possible.

At least everyone agreed that in the Karma Kagyu tradition, as the Karmapa told me, full ordination for bhikṣuṇīs in the Mūlasarvāstivāda tradition is possible and wished for. Kyabje Ling Rinpoche also assured me: "The bhiksuni ordination will certainly come about in my lifetime!"

Photo: Nuns are committed to gender equality: three nuns from Dharamsala and three Western nuns from the Committee for the Bhiksuni Ordination. www.bhiksuniordination.net

Concerning the decision about the Geshe title for nuns, the Dolma Ling Institute and the Jamyang Choling Nunnery, both representing eleven nunneries handed in an application. For each of the nunneries involved, one teacher and two nuns unanimously declared themselves in favour of granting a 'small' and a 'big' Geshe title, *TsoGRAMPA* and *Lharampa*. But the request was rejected: "On the part of the Riwo Gelukpa in order to obtain the rank of a geshe, definitely the main texts, the so-called five scriptures (pustikā) need to be studied." This includes the *Vinayasūtra*, a text about monastic discipline. Traditionally, this may only be studied by fully ordained monks (and nuns). The statement goes on: "Unless the communities of nuns have studied Vinaya and Abhidharma, -- especially if they have not studied the main Vinaya text, there is no way to confer on them the rank of a geshema. The opinion was expressed that titles such as *rabjamma*, ['holder of all texts'], should be conferred."

Also in the Nyingma tradition the title of *khenmo*, female equivalent of *khenpo*, can not exist without full ordination and without having studied the complete Vinaya. Nuns have to be content with the title of a *kalyāṇamitrā*. In the Sakya tradition three titles can gradually be awarded, like a bachelor's, master's and doctor's degree. It is only in the Kagyu tradition that nuns can acquire the *khenmo* title. The Bon tradition, in which bhikṣuṇīs have always existed, has no objection as to granting the geshe title to nuns.

In respect to awarding nuns the title of Rime Geshe (see *Tibet und Buddhismus* No. 4/2011), the follow-up conference will consider, which texts form the foundation of this new curriculum. The Dalai Lama supports both the awarding of the Rime Geshe title and the Geshe title in general. In Delhi, to thunderous applause, he stated: "What I can decide and have already decided, is that studying in the nunneries now has the same level as at the great monastic universities. Some nuns have already completed their degrees. They become Geshe-mas, good scholars!" When this point was discussed by the heads of the traditions, however, neither the Dalai Lama nor the Karmapa were present.

In 2011, another 15 nuns from Jangchub Choeling Nunnery in southern Indian Mundgod, completed their "geshe" studies. Since 2006, there have already been 47 nuns alone in this nunnery who qualified for at least the small geshe title. But after 17 years of studying, they will still only receive the title of a *rabjamma*. Even for their monk teachers, it is not clear why the 11th Conference of Religious Leaders did not follow the request of the eleven nunneries. Great indignation was caused when the participants at the conference ignored the fact that many nuns have already completed their studies of the Abhidharma and the Vinaya studies as far as their novice vows are concerned.

The resistance against establishing equality for nuns is decreasing as more and more monks are supporting the nuns. In Mundgod, where I conducted part of my research, for one whole day I was able to discuss the issues of the ordination of nuns with twelve geshes sent by the monasteries of Ganden and Drepung. The atmosphere was good, the monks seemed to be supportive towards my work.

At Sera Monastery (South India), a two-day Vinaya seminar was organised and proved to be a resounding success. The abbot Geshe Lobsang Palden had invited ten leading

Lharampa Geshes from Sera Jhe and Sera Me. His student Geshe Rinchen Ngodup, who has been researching on the subject of nuns' ordination for many years and published several articles and a book, spontaneously decided to join me. At the end of the seminar, all geshe present unanimously found that the sources speak in favour of the full ordination of nuns in the Mūlasarvāstivāda tradition; conferred by either the monks of this tradition alone or together with Dharmagupta nuns. Shortly after this conclusion had been drawn, Geshe Lobsang Palden reported in person to the Dalai Lama on the successful outcome of the seminar.

The Dalai Lama emphasises again and again that change must come from within the tradition. It is important that more monks openly support the nuns and exercise pressure on the responsible authorities.

The nuns, in turn, have an important role to play themselves as by continuously claiming their rights. Like every movement, the nuns' movement needs a lobby. Dharma centres and Buddhist teachers in the West are particularly called for here. They should concentrate their influence and impact traditional teachers and institutions.

It is after all enriching for everyone when women finally can learn, practice and transmit Buddhism as they did during the Buddha's time. In many areas of society it can be seen how important it is, especially in this day and age, to include woman-specific perspectives. After all, half of the world's population is female and they do not always think or act as men would.