

The Karmapa Makes Nuns' History Tibetan Nuns Request Bhikshuni Ordination

In January of this year in Bodhgaya, India, His Holiness the 17th Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje, made history by instituting an annual Arya Kshema Winter Dharma Gathering especially for Karma Kagyu nuns. As he pointed out, this was the first nuns' winter gathering (*günchö*) in the 900-year history of the Karma Kagyu school that the Karmapa himself heads. But the nuns themselves may well have been the real history-makers: On the final day of the gathering, representatives of all seven nunneries present made three prostrations, knelt before the Karmapa and formally requested bhikshuni ordination. This marked the first time in recorded history that Tibetan nuns had come forward *en masse* seeking full ordination.

Their petition marks a major milestone in what has been a long, slow road moving tentatively towards bhikshuni ordination in the Tibetan tradition. To date a missing—and indispensable—condition needed for progress in that direction has been the active involvement of the Tibetan nuns themselves. For over 30 years, His Holiness the Dalai Lama has been expressing his wish to find a way forward to establish bhikshuni ordination for nuns in the Mulasarvastivada vinaya tradition that Tibetans follow. At present, women in the Tibetan tradition are only offered the opportunity to receive a lower level of vows, called *shramanerika*, rendering them effectively eternal novice nuns. Since the 1980s, committees have been formed, reports published and conferences convened to discuss whether and how to offer full ordination to women in the Tibetan vinaya tradition, but such discussions have taken place primarily amongst monks, and Tibetan nuns themselves have seldom had occasion to play an active role.

How, after a single 11-day gathering, were the Karma Kagyu nuns emboldened to make a formal and public request for bhikshuni vows? Clearly it was not the mere fact of establishing such a winter debate gathering for nuns, for in this regard, the Karma Kagyu lags behind other schools, as the Karmapa himself noted. Moreover, the Gyalwang Karmapa has been speaking out publicly in favor of bhikshuni ordination for several years. Rather, in convening this conference, he exercised his authority as head of the Karma Kagyu lineage to go beyond talk, and to create a space for nuns to explore a vision of themselves as full holders of the Buddha's teachings. Within that space, His Holiness the Karmapa made two major moves that surely helped inspire the Tibetan nuns to request full ordination. First, he made the goal of boosting nuns' confidence an explicit aim of the Arya Kshema Dharma conference. Second, he articulated several sustained arguments for the importance of bhikshuni ordination, all thoroughly grounded within the Indian and Tibetan Buddhist textual traditions.

Giving Nuns a Chance to Shine

In effect, the Arya Kshema conference was the Karmapa's summons to his nuns to come and take their seats as holders of the Buddhadharmā, and they answered the

call beautifully. To begin with, the Gyalwang Karmapa placed responsibility for organizing the event in the hands of senior nuns from the various Karma Kagyu nunneries together with two monks. From the very start of the conference, he entrusted all the ritual roles over to the nuns. Nuns served as chant-masters (*umzes*) for all the events, they served as ritual masters during the pujas, and they carried the incense and played the horns that accompanied His Holiness the Karmapa as he entered and exited the vast assembly hall. In a novel experience for the nuns as well as the monks seated behind them, nuns lined the front rows, donning the rich brocade hats worn during the ceremonies and played all the ritual instruments, including the massive puja drums several times their size.

Female voices were deliberately placed front and center right from the outset. At the request of His Holiness the Karmapa, his own sister Chamsing Ngodup Pelzom, was the very first person to take the podium, followed by two nuns. Chamsingla spoke openly of the obstacles faced by women because of their lower status in society. When she recounted the ridicule her father incurred from their neighbors in Tibet when he began teaching her to read—a wasted investment of time for a woman, in their view—the experience of disparagement clearly resonated with many of the nuns, and some were visibly moved to tears. *Speaking in support of bhikshuni ordination in the future and the opportunities they were being offered in the present, she urged the nuns to recognize the great value of these opportunities and seize them so they could fully support the Buddha's teachings.*

The nuns' addresses were followed by that of Khenpo Kelsang Nyima, an abbot from the Karmapa's Rumtek Monastery, his main seat in exile, who concluded his speech by pumping his fist in the air and calling out, "Up with Nuns!" (or "Victory to the Nuns!" in Tibetan: "*Tsünma nam gyalo!*"). His gesture elicited a gleeful grin from His Holiness the Karmapa, and laughter and some tears from the nuns present. If anyone still doubted at that point that they were witnessing something extraordinary, their doubts were surely dispelled then.

As if driving that point home, His Eminence the 12th Gyaltzab Rinpoche (a heart son of the Karmapa and one of the senior-most Karma Kagyu lineage holders) delivered a speech that was punctuated with declarations of the equality of men and women—in terms of Buddha nature in terms of realization, in terms of their ability to hold vows. "What difference is there between men and women in terms of their dharma practice?" Rinpoche asked rhetorically. "None!" Rinpoche described many women who gained spiritual attainments and contributed vastly to the flourishing of the Buddhadharma, and he recounted having personally received initiation and instructions from female teachers himself, as had the 16th Karmapa.

The Karmapa personally composed a supplication practice for the flourishing of the nuns' sangha, and to dispel any harms, difficulties or obstacles to the nuns' dharma activities. The practice is centered on a supplication to Ananda, the attendant of the Buddha whose support for nuns was instrumental in attaining the Buddha's permission for women to become bhikshunis. Beyond the words uttered in the text,

his efforts to compose it were a palpable expression of the depth and sincerity of his commitment to personally act to bring about the flourishing of the nuns' sangha. *After performing the practice together with the nuns, the Gyalwang Karmapa then instructed the nunneries to include the practice on particular dates in their annual ritual calendars, to encourage the nuns' continued thriving.*

Also as part of the gathering, the Karmapa chose to include two rituals commonly practiced in Karma Kagyu nunneries, thus handing the nuns an assignment they could perform with great confidence: Green Tara and Chöd practice. In essence, he gave nuns the opportunity to shine—and made sure that the nuns as well as senior monks and lay public were all witnesses to their accomplishments. During a five-hour Chöd practice and tsok offering session, only nuns and a few yogis lifted their Chöd drums and bells, as the monks mostly looked on from the sidelines.

During the days that ensued, the nuns attended daily classes related to the debate topics their classes were studying, and held debates every evening. Most of the Karma Kagyu nunneries are at the early stages of establishing their study programs, and the winter gathering was established in part to place those programs on firm ground going forward.

On the whole, the Gyalwang Karmapa presented the Arya Kshema Gunchö as the inauguration of an annual event to provide nuns with greater opportunities for study and debate, and at the same time, to encourage them to make the most of those opportunities. Explaining his choice of the name Arya Kshema for the conference, he pointed out that Arya Kshema was the foremost among the Buddha's female disciples in terms of her wisdom as well as her confidence, and today especially both qualities are necessary in order for Tibetan nuns to take up roles as full holders of the Buddha's teachings. Naming the annual event for Arya Kshema highlights a fact too often overlooked: that nuns have been holders of the Buddhadharma from the very beginning of its existence, and were able to achieve high levels of spiritual attainment by virtue of the same qualities that monks had developed.

Why Tibetan Buddhism Needs Bhikshunis

For eight days of the conference, the Karmapa gave several hours of teachings daily on Gampopa's *Jewel Ornament of Liberation*, the first major lamrim commentary by a Tibetan master. As he worked his way through the commentary, the Karmapa took numerous opportunities to speak on nuns' issues and bhikshuni ordination, taking as his point of departure the various lamrim topics as they arose, from Buddha nature to precious human rebirth and onward. In the third teaching session,¹ when

¹ All the teachings given by the Gyalwang Karmapa during the Arya Kshema conference are available for viewing on the Karmapateachings youtube page. His exploration of the meaning of the terms 'central land' and 'fourfold community' can be watched on the video of Session 4 of those teachings, from minute 1:20:00 forward.

the Gyalwang Karmapa arrived at the topic of the precious human rebirth, he took the occasion to stress the importance of establishing bhikshuni ordination in the Tibetan tradition. Being born in a central land is a condition required in order for a human rebirth to be considered precious, and a 'central land' is generally defined as a place where the fourfold community is extant: bhikshus, bhikshunis, upasakas (lay male precept-holders), and upasikas (lay female precept-holders). As such, the presence of bhikshunis is needed in order for the fourfold community of Buddhist disciples to be complete, and for the Buddhadharma to thrive in a given land.

Although Tibet lacks a bhikshuni sangha, Tibetan monastic scholars have generally argued that having bhikshus is "good enough," the Karmapa explained. These scholars do so on the basis that bhikshunis in any case are dependent on the bhikshu community or that having novice nuns was adequate to consider the fourfold community to be complete. Such people claim that it makes little real difference whether there are bhikshunis or not, the Karmapa noted, underscoring that this is not the stance taken by His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

The Karmapa responded to these arguments with an analogy. He described some treatments within Tibetan medicine that called for certain medicinal herbs that were not available in Tibet, and which people therefore tried to improvise an alternative by using available ingredients. This ersatz concoction, the Karmapa said, might appear to produce a comparable effect, but had less potency and was clearly an inferior substitute for the real thing. Now that Tibetans have come to India, where it is possible to procure the authentic medicine, it would be absurd—"childish" was the term he used—to continue using the ersatz concoction. *"In the past, we have had to make do with what we had," he said. "If it is feasible to attain the real thing and the opportunity exists to do so, it makes no sense to content ourselves with a substitute of less potency and less benefit just because we have the custom of doing so in the past."*

The Karmapa additionally stressed the importance of bhikshuni vows both for the nuns' own spiritual development and for the sake of the Buddhadharma as a whole. On an individual level, he said that bhikshuni ordination is important in allowing women to engage fully in the higher training of ethics, which is the foundation for the subsequent trainings in concentration and wisdom. On separate occasions, the Gyalwang Karmapa cited canonical statements by the Buddha to argue that only where the vinaya was practiced fully could the Buddhadharma be considered to be complete—and that this meant that there needed to be communities of bhikshunis engaging in the three major monastic practices associated with the biweekly confession and the annual rains retreat.

Not only did the Arya Kshema gathering provide the nuns with a powerful vision of themselves as full holders of the Buddhadharma; during the eleven days of the conference, the Gyalwang Karmapa also addressed the textual sources that can be discouraging to nuns and that are often cited to justify the lesser place of nuns in the Buddhadharma. He contextualized the lesser place of women in the sangha as a

result not of any inferiority in women themselves, but of the “strange” social views in prevalence at that time. Referring to an oft-quoted prediction by the Buddha that the duration of the Buddhadharma would be shortened by 500 years due to the creation of a bhikshuni sangha, the Karmapa pointed out that according to the vinaya, the Buddha only said that the teachings would remain for 1,000 years, but that milestone has long passed, so this prediction should no longer be made an issue. “Times have changed and society has changed,” he said. “In fact, I do not think it is going too far if I say that if we give full opportunities to women and especially to nuns, and if they use those opportunities well, this could have the effect of *extending* the Buddhadharma by 500 years rather than diminishing it.”

Throughout the Arya Kshema conference, the Gyalwang Karmapa presented himself not as a trailblazer on this issue, but as a follower of the Buddha—who had first offered full ordination to women—and of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, who has long been seeking to offer full ordination to women in Tibetan Buddhism. The Gyalwang Karmapa repeatedly told the nuns that it was the wish of the buddhas and the great masters of the past that they become holders of the Buddhadharma. In fact, he described his own role as comparable to that of a magnifying glass, merely serving to refract the powerful rays of light coming from others.

Taking Ownership of the Issue

The Gyalwang Karmapa tackled head-on a charge that has served to undermine support for bhikshuni ordination within Tibetan society—the widely held opinion that the issue was being driven by Western feminists, as a form of cultural imperialism or gender politics, rather than any real spiritual considerations.

“Some people think that the bhikshuni issue is just something coming from foreign nuns. They think that foreign nuns were promoting gender equality and made a lot of noise over it, doing all sorts of things, and made bhikshuni ordination into a big issue and gave it a great deal of attention, whereas before that it was quite fine whether there were bhikshunis or not,” the Gyalwang Karmapa observed. “From my point of view, this is absolutely not so. Although perhaps we were unaware of the issue before or did not understand it, it was still an extremely important issue. Moreover,” he added, “it was our fault that we had not recognized the importance of this fundamental issue before it was pointed out to us. Neglecting this was a failure on our part to live up to our own responsibility—the monks’ failure and also the nuns’ failure.”

With this last comment, it was clear that the Karmapa does not see nuns as passive recipients needing empowerment by monks, but rather envisions them as agents with shared responsibility for the Buddhadharma. This message, transmitted in various ways over the eleven days of the gathering, emerged as one of the unspoken themes of the conference.

The Karmapa has written and spoken publicly in support of women’s rights, and

has called on religious leaders to pay more attention to the particular sufferings of women. He describes himself as having many feminine qualities, and has pledged to work for the welfare of women and especially of nuns in this lifetime and in all his future lifetimes. His newest book *The Heart Is Noble: Changing the World from the Inside Out* (scheduled for publication in German this spring by Edition Steinrich) devotes a chapter to gender issues, arguing (among other things) that discrimination against women leads society to denigrate qualities that are seen as feminine and that are most urgently needed in the world today.

However, the Karmapa is clearly not simply embracing the issue uncritically. He has also cautioned it may not be appropriate for Tibetan society to follow Western agendas or timeframes for implementing gender equality. Speaking to Tibetan nuns in 2008, he said, “These days many friends from abroad with a modern viewpoint are giving help and direction to Tibetan nuns and laywomen, and I would like to thank them for their help. But I think we need to begin from within our own Tibetan society to find a particular Tibetan way of being modern,” he said. “As Tibetan culture is already endangered, insisting too strongly on imposing other ways of doing things could very well weaken what we are working hard to preserve.” Yet he then went on to quote canonical texts, reminding the nuns that Buddha had given them full opportunities to study, practice and uphold the Buddhadharmā.

This has been a hallmark of the Karmapa’s approach to the bhikshuni issue, and other issues he has championed, such as environmental issues: rooting his leadership firmly in the traditions, yet responding fully to the changing circumstances of modernity.

The Request

By the end of the conference, His Holiness the Karmapa had delivered a sustained presentation grounded entirely in traditional texts explaining reasons why bhikshuni ordination was needed not only for the sake of the nuns themselves but for the sake of the Buddhadharmā itself. He also made clear that other leading Karma Kagyu lamas—including His Eminence the 12th Gyaltshab Rinpoche and the 9th Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche, the 17th Karmapa’s main tutor—have expressed their willingness to support the plans to introduce bhikshuni ordination in the Mulasarvastivāda vinaya. As such, when the nuns did decide to come forward with their request at the close of the conference, they made it clear they were doing so with the full support of leading masters in the Karma Kagyu—and that their request was made not merely for their own sakes but with a far vaster, altruistic motivation.

In the days preceding their formal petition, senior representatives from each of the nunneries present met several times. After a first meeting called by the head nun of Thrangu Tara Abbey in Nepal, it became clear that there was unequivocal enthusiasm in favor of placing the formal petition before the Karmapa. Some of the nuns present had been novices already for decades, but even the younger among them expressed a wish to help open a path forward for future generations of nuns. Here is the text read

by the head discipline master of the Arya Kshema Winter Dharma Gathering, representing the 200 nuns from 7 nunneries in attendance on that morning:

The Greatly Compassionate Teacher granted women the opportunity to receive full ordination and to thus engage fully in the practice of the three higher trainings. However, due to historical factors, nowadays the opportunity for us to ordain fully is extremely scarce. Therefore the fourfold community of Buddhist disciples is incomplete, and so the power to uphold, protect and spread the precious teachings is diminished and is but a fraction of what it once was. Upon hearing this advice again and again from Your Holiness, we nuns have been deeply moved and have found the courage to make this request.

We nuns do not know whether we would be able to serve the precious teachings of the Buddha as the monks do, but with all the strength we can summon, we have a very great wish to receive the bhikshuni vows, for the sake of the precious teachings and in order to complete the four circles of disciples. Thus, if Your Holiness sees that in general the teachings which are the medicine for beings and if in particular there is a share of the practice of the three higher trainings for us nuns, and each have a portion in the attainment of its temporary and ultimate fruits, we make the single-pointed request that, without much time passing, please grant us very soon the great fortune of full ordination, by whatever means possible. Please forgive our boldness in making this request, and consider it in the vast expanse of your great compassion.

In reply, the Gyalwang Karmapa thanked the nuns for their courage, and emphasized that the petition for full ordination came entirely at the nuns' own initiative, and that in fact he had been initially unaware what they intended to request. *He then outlined the various options for ordaining that have been determined through the years of research initiated by His Holiness the Dalai Lama. The two main methods are either to have the ordination ceremony conducted solely by bhikshus from the procedure according to the Mulasarvastivada vinaya texts that are followed by Tibetan Buddhists, or what is called dual ordination, which entails an ordination ceremony conducted by Tibetan bhikshus from the Mulasarvastivada vinaya, and bhikshunis invited from the Dharmagupta vinaya lineage transmitted in China, Korea and Vietnam. In either case, he explained, the women ordained would become bhikshunis holding Mulasarvastivada vows.*

"If the ordination were conferred by the male sangha," the Karmapa said, "it is hardly necessary to say that the lineage of the vow would be from the Mulasarvastivada, because the bhikshus themselves would give it. Even if the vows were conferred by a dual sangha, if the male sangha were from the Mulasarvastivada tradition, the lineage of the vow that the supplicants would receive at this time would be from the Mulasarvastivada tradition. The reason is because the actual vow is received from the sangha. In the dual ordination," the Karmapa explained, "there are two sanghas, the

male and the female. Since there are two, the actual vow is received from the male sangha. This is extremely clear in the Buddha's words as well as in the treatises of the Indian masters. Thus the lineage of the bhikshuni vow that is received in that situation is the Mulasarvastivada lineage. It would not be too bold to say that this is basically decided."

He pledged to seek out the approval of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and to confer also with the heads of other Tibetan Buddhist schools, so that the bhikshuni vows could be given "at the right time"—neither too soon nor too late. His final words on the matter were clear enough:

"I have said this before, and I say again today that it is my responsibility to do as much as I can for this. This is because I have the title of the Karmapa, so this is a task that I must undertake. So I will do as much as I can."

On the final day of his teachings during this first annual Arya Kshema Winter Dharma Gathering, the Gyalwang Karmapa acknowledged that the nuns could face criticism and encounter social resistance. "People may get wrong ideas," he said. "Do not let this discourage you." He likened the nuns' efforts to prepare themselves for fuller responsibilities as holders of the teachings to climbing a tree that could grant all their wishes.

In words of encouragement that the nuns will surely carry in their hearts in the years to come, the Karmapa quoted a Tibetan saying for them:

"So what if you rip your silk clothes and your sheepskin while climbing the wish-fulfilling tree."

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