

Tibetan Nuns Project

Fall 2007

His Holiness the Dalai Lama Announces “Full Support” for Introducing Full Ordination for Women in Tibetan Buddhism

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**Bhikshuni
Conference in
Hamburg, Germany**

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**Good news
for Shugsep
Construction**

◆◆◆
**Dolma Ling nuns
graduate from
Rignay Ramjampa
and Madyamika
courses**



Participants from different countries

bhikshuni ordination in the Tibetan tradition. The Department of Religion and Culture of the Tibetan Government-in-Exile (DRC), after extensive research, has offered three possible methods: (1) by monks and nuns of the Dharmagupta lineage; (2) by monks of the Mulasarvastivada lineage together with nuns of the Dharmagupta lineage, and (3) by Mulasarvastivadin monks alone. The conference was also meant to serve as a forum for an exchange of experiences with speakers from countries where bhikshuni ordination is present.

Rinchen Khando Choegyal, Director of the Tibetan Nuns Project, addressed the opening session. She warmly thanked His Holiness the Dalai Lama for his unfailing support for the nuns and their overall development and acknowledged the DRC for their continuing work and support in this direction. She gave an introduction to the Tibetan nuns and Tibetan life in exile, explaining how the Nuns Project began and has been working steadily to educate and empower nuns. She made it clear that the nuns do want higher ordination, but they wish to take the vows with the full co-operation and support of the monastic sangha.

Prof. Samdhong Rinpoche, Kalong Tripa of the Tibetan Government-in-Exile, addressed the question of modernizing monastic rules. He said that many vinaya rules are not relevant to the modern situation. Hence there is some scope for change to accord with the current social situation, but the fundamental rules cannot be changed. Man is social, he needs to live in relation to others without which physical, mental and spiritual progress is impossible – therefore we need the sangha. The four types of sangha include both monks and nuns; therefore nuns are needed.

Sakyadhita President, Venerable Karma Lekshe Tsomo spoke on “Gender Equality and Human Rights,” highlighting the unequal distribution of resources and opportunities between the sexes and concluding that full ordination for women will encourage education and community support for nuns.

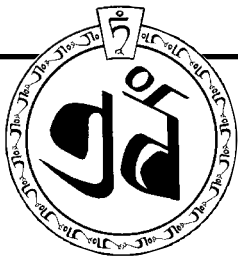
During the following opening day sessions, nineteen speakers presented papers. Among them, Ven. Tashi Tsering of the DRC gave an account of the research work undertaken and conferences organised by the Department since 1983. The second day schedule was even more hectic than the first, starting at 8am with eight papers on the history of the vinaya lineages. The next session covered the polarity between tradition and requirements. After lunch three parallel sessions were held. The final session, held in the main lecture hall, was begun by Bhikshuni Thubten Chodron who spoke in support of giving bhiksuni ordination with a dual sangha of Mulasarvastivada bhikshus and Dharmagupta bhikshunis.

An International Congress on Buddhist Women’s Role in the Sangha was convened at the University of Hamburg in Germany in July, 2007 to explore means to convey bhikshuni ordination to nuns of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. Around 400 people attended the three-day conference including scholars from all over the world and lineage holders from Taiwan, Korea, Sri Lanka, Cambodia, and Tibet. Rinchen Khando Choegyal led a group of 17 from the Tibetan Nuns Project including Ven. Lobsang Dechen and nuns and teachers from seven nunneries.

The conference was intended to be a continuation of the on-going discussion on establishing full



Rinchen Khando Choegyal
speaking at the conference



Tibetan Nuns Project

Established in 1987, the Tibetan Nuns Project provides education and support to more than 500 nuns in northern India. The Project is dedicated to:

Improving standards of food, sanitation, medical care, basic education and training in existing nunneries.

Working towards future self-sufficiency through innovative educational opportunities.

Establishing further facilities for refugee Buddhist nuns.

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All donations are tax-deductible in the U.S.

Graduation Day in Dolma Ling

On May 21, 2007, a graduation ceremony was held in Dolma Ling Nunnery. Venerable Tsering Phuntsok, Minister of the Department of Religion and Culture of the Tibetan Government in Exile honored the occasion, presenting thirty-six nuns from Uma (Middle Way philosophy), Rignay (Tibetan language & literature) and Pharchin (Perfection of Wisdom) classes with their graduation certificates. Seventeen nuns had completed the three-year study of Uma, or Madhyamika, and have now moved on to a further three year's vigorous study of the Abhidharma. Seven nuns graduated from Rignay, and all seven are opting for a teacher training program and will thereafter be teaching in their respective nunneries or other institutes. We are also happy to have the second group of twelve Dolma Ling nuns who have completed the seven-year course of study of Perfection of Wisdom, and will now move on to the three year Madhyamika course. We are proud of all the Dolma Ling nuns who are setting this example and encouraging all nuns to do better in their lives.



Ven Tsering Phuntsok speaks to the nuns



Nuns stand proud with their graduation certificates



New Projects at Dolma Ling

Dolma Ling Nunnery, one of the major projects of TNP, was officially completed in December, 2005. However, with the increasing number of nuns and development of new programs, we have three new projects: solar hot water, a new debating courtyard, and a retreat centre.

Over the last years, our nuns have faced all kinds of acute health problems, having come over the Himalayas in the most difficult manner. Both physical and mental health care have always been first on our priority list, and we are proud of how well we have dealt with the problems. However, there are ongoing skin problems, which could be greatly reduced by regular hot showers. Further, in the winters, our water, which comes from mountain rivers, is extremely cold and makes bathing difficult. Hence we are planning a solar facility with eight shower units, Solar collector cells work well here as our winter weather is mostly sunny.

With increasing number of nuns in Dolma Ling, the central courtyard, which is used for debating, is getting over-crowded, and the noise of debate makes it difficult for other educational programs to go on the same time. Providing the nunnery with the new courtyard in an adjacent field will give the nuns a larger space for debate.

Buddhist teachings are not just to be studied, but must be practiced in daily life as well and internalized in periods of focused meditation. Many nuns have expressed a wish to go on retreat for a time after finishing their course of studies. This has encouraged us to establish a small retreat centre just next to Dolma Ling on a beautiful piece of land. We need to purchase the land and then build simple retreat facilities.

How Our Sponsorship Programme Works

The Tibetan Nuns Project gives meaning to the lives of more than 600 nuns. It is with the help of all the sponsors and donors over the years that we have been able to provide the nuns a strong foundation of health and education to mold their futures. These nuns have made good use of the opportunities offered to them and have made remarkable progress in their studies.

We have worked with our sponsorship program in several different ways over the years, and at present have instituted a policy of assigning more than one sponsor to a nun. Knowing this will bring some questions, we would like to take this opportunity to explain our reasons. The sponsorship amount has remained at \$30 per month per nun for ten years. This is no longer adequate to cover all the costs of supporting one nun, but we are reluctant to increase the amount we ask from each sponsor because we know that many of our sponsors themselves have limited means. \$360 per year is a generous donation, and hence it seems better to seek to increase the number of sponsors. In addition, assigning more than one sponsor to a nun secures the flow of sponsorship money for each nun should a sponsor decide to discontinue. It gives us some time to find another sponsor. Often we are not notified and it can be some months before we realize that a nun needs a new sponsor. We also have many sponsors who pay only partial amounts. By doubling sponsors for some nuns we are able to meet the daily expenses of all the nuns and to avoid any difficulties.

The sponsorship money is used for the nuns' food and basic living expenses, medical costs, some clothing, and a pair of shoes once a year. At present we receive help with the educational costs from the Norwegian Tibet Committee Womens' Group, but sponsorship covers the remainder. The nuns receive Rs.200 month each for pocket money. All the nuns receive the same, irrespective of whether their sponsor has paid or not. No sponsorship money goes towards our administrative costs.

We are extremely grateful to all our sponsors for enabling us to sustain the nuns. Without your help it would be impossible. **Thank you!**

His Holiness the Karmapa at Tilokpur Nunnery



His Holiness the Karmapa with Tilokpur nuns

Tilokpur Nunnery was blessed by the presence of His Holiness the Karmapa for a week in February. He stayed there from February 19th, which was also the second day of the Tibetan new year, and gave teachings on the “Thirty-Seven Practices of a Bodhisattva” by Gyalsey Thokmay Sangpo as well as a Green Tara Initiation.

Many people from different countries attended the teachings, which has helped the nunnery to raise funds towards the completion of a new Institute for studies that is under construction. Tilokpur plans to begin a full course of studies for nuns in the Karma Kagyu tradition.

His Holiness the Karmapa spoke strongly about the importance of improving the situation for the nuns and assured them that he would support them with their work.

The Tibetan Nuns Project helps Tilokpur Nunnery through its sponsorship program and in running their educational programs efficiently. The nuns have regular classes in Tibetan and English. The project has also helped the nunnery with costs for its construction work.

News from Geden Choeling

Academic work in Geden Choeling has been progressing steadily, and the nuns are doing well in their studies. The Khenpo (head of the nunnery) is changed every three years in Geden Choeling Nunnery. This year Sera Jey Monastery appointed the nuns Buddhist philosophy teacher, Geshe Lobsang Tsultrim, as their new Khenpo. He has been teaching in Geden Choeling since 1998, and has great interest in educating nuns. Since his appointment as head of the nunnery, he has formed a five-member committee of nuns who will assist him in managing all the official work and taking care of all the other activities of the nunnery. This will help the nuns to get experience in running their nunnery by taking on more responsibility. We have great expectations that he will do his best towards the development of Geden Choeling Nunnery in every field.



Nuns in Tibetan class

Geden Choeling nuns are progressing steadily academically. In December 2007, two levels of nuns will be graduating—from the Prajnaparamita course (Pharchin 7) and Rignay (Tibetan Language and Literature class).

Great Progress at Shugsep!



Three story nuns housing block standing complete



Second housing wing in progress



Kitchen area

We are extremely happy to announce that we are now in the second phase of construction of the new Shugsep Nunnery, with funding to complete the whole project in hand. We were blessed this year by a single large donation from the Betsy Gordon Foundation which has made this possible.

A three story nuns housing wing, the dining hall and kitchen with workshops and offices above, the institute building with classroom, library, and lecture hall, and one four unit teachers' house are now standing complete. The second phase which includes two more housing wings, the temple, and another small building of housing for teachers and staff is well underway.

Furnishings are not yet fully funded, but Betsy Gordon has taken on the project, and so far has been able to raise more than \$50,000 of the \$70,000 that is needed. Our gratitude to her is immense!



Flooring in lecture hall and library



Carpenters making window shutters



Nuns' dining hall

The nuns are also very happy to see the progress of the construction. We had hoped to move them into the new nunnery before this year's monsoon, but this proved impossible as the monsoon came early and has been very heavy, preventing completion of the septic system and installation of the electrical transformer. Now the new transformer has arrived and the monsoon is receding so we will be able to complete the work in the first phase and install the electricity and water.

Regarding their education the nuns are doing well. About thirty nuns have already received their Lupon degree (the second highest in Nyingma tradition). Two senior nuns are also teaching the junior nuns.



Temple pillars coming up



Classrooms, library, and lecture hall



Unloading furniture at Shugsep



Furniture stored in classrooms

Tibetan Nuns Project Visit to Korea



TNP group with the heads of host organizations

Tibetan Nuns Project Director, Mrs. Rinchen Khando Choegyal wished to visit Korea several years ago, but due to visa problems it did not materialize. This year, with the help of some of our Korean friends to whom we are very grateful, the trip took place from August 25th to September 8th. To accompany the Director, we sent one nun and a member of our office staff, for whom it was a great exercise in leadership development.

Three organizations, the Buddhist Women's Development Institute (BWDI), the Buddhist Solidarity for Reform (BSR) and Won—Buddhist Women's Association (WBWA) combined efforts and invited us. Mrs. Rinchen Khando Choegyal has expressed her deepest appreciation for their kindness. She was highly impressed and touched by their heartfelt

hospitality and care for Tibet and the Tibetan people. The trip, she says, was very hectic with public talks, television and press interviews, and visits to various monasteries. However she is very grateful to the Korean people who were so kind to be interested in the issues of Tibet and Tibetan people, and very generous in offering financial support. Like any other donors, the moral and financial support that came from the monasteries, organizations, and individuals will be ever appreciated and remembered by the Tibetan nuns in the history of Tibet.



Rinchen Khando Choegyal in a tv interview

Full Ordination for Nuns, continued from page 1

Other speakers gave valuable insights into the bhiksuni sanghas in other communities. Finally Lama Choedak Rinpoche spoke of his experience initiating a bhikshuni ordination in Canberra, Australia.

The Tibetan nuns expressed their views regarding bhikshuni ordination during the final question and answer session. Five nuns were able to read speeches in which they asserted interest in bhikshuni ordination, but emphasized that they favour following the Mulasarvastivada tradition and stressed the importance of having the support of the lamas and the community. They also made it clear that their intention in discussing full ordination is not to redress any perceived gender imbalance but rather to be better able to tame their minds and work effectively for the benefit of all sentient beings.

At the end of this session, it was agreed that the conference was in favour of re-establishing the bhiksuni lineage in the Mulasarvastivadin tradition and would request His Holiness to exert his leadership in making the choice as to how it should be done, by whichever means he feels will be most acceptable to the community.

The final day programme was attended by His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Dr Roland Sachow and Prof. Dr. Monika Auweter-Kurtz, President of the University of Hamburg, addressed opening speeches to a gathering of around 1100. Bishop Maria Jepson, gave the first keynote speech about the religious competence of women. She was followed by His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama, who spoke at length about women's rights saying that inequality is created by social habits. Regarding the monks and nuns vows, His Holiness pointed out that the highest vow is the bhikshu vow which was given as the bhikshu vow to males and the bhikshuni vow to females – it is the same vow. In effect, it already exists and needs only to be re-activated in accordance with the vinaya.

At the afternoon session chaired by Dr. Thea Mor the resolution compiled by the research committee was presented to His Holiness. His Holiness responded that he was greatly encouraged by the support shown by all the bhikshus and bhikshunis from the different traditions and reiterated his personal concern about this issue for the past 30-40 years. He said "I am a hundred percent sure that if the Buddha were here today he would give the ordination. However, I cannot act as the Buddha. I have to consult and gain the agreement of the sangha community." He went on to reassure those bhikshunis who have been ordained in the Dharmagupta tradition that they are unquestionably recognized and accepted as bhikshunis and said that he can act to institute for them to meet in groups to perform the three required sangha rituals, which would be a new step for the nuns. He then suggested that a meeting of vinaya holders be convened to take this discussion further. The following morning His Holiness further clarified his position by asking for an endorsement from the leaders of the main Buddhist countries who represent the majority of the sangha community and for a further international conference on this issue to be organized in India, to which one hundred of the top leaders of the Tibetan sangha community should be invited.

Following the conference, back in Dharamsala, TNP Director Rinchen Khando Choegyal met with Kalon Tripa Ven Prof. Samdhong Rinpoche, who expressed his full support for a convocation of vinaya holders in the winter and agreed that he would work to impress upon



Nuns speaking at the conference

TNP USA - Seattle, Washington

Staff Changes in the U.S. Office

2007 will close with TNP celebrating two and a half years in the Pacific Northwest. We have settled happily into our Seattle home and continue to expand locally with the help of a wonderful array of volunteers.

One of our first volunteers in Seattle was Annie Wilson. As of June 2007, Annie has accepted the position of Development Officer, and Jennifer Jackson has taken on the roll of Project Administrator. Debi Goldman has now moved to our Board of Directors, while continuing her vital work with women artisans around the world. TNP thanks Debi for her many years of service and wishes her well in her new endeavors. Annie looks forward to working with TNP as we move into our next phase, globally and locally.

Another Way to Donate

Give TNP a percentage while you do your holiday shopping! Orbitz, Travelocity, Alaska Airlines, Macy's, and amazon.com all participate with FreePledge.com. It costs you nothing and raises funds for TNP.

FreePledge lets you shop online from prominent retailers, pay the normal prices, and have a percentage of your purchases donated to the nonprofit of your choice at no cost to you. FreePledge hands over to the nonprofits a large portion of retailer commissions that are essentially marketing expenses. Check it out at www.freepledge.com.

Products

Don't forget to purchase our new 2008 calendars! Fabulous stocking stuffer! Our 2008 calendar is filled with beautiful color images of nuns and Tibetan daily life accompanied by insightful quotes by His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama. We include the full Tibetan lunar calendar with special ritual days for Tibetan Buddhist practice. Each 6.25" x 7" Calendar costs \$10.00 USD/CAD (WA residents \$10.89) Please include \$1.25 per calendar for shipping and handling.

The products handmade by the nuns have been a great success. In addition to the beautiful mala beads and prayer flags, the nuns are sewing dolls out of recycled robes. Another very popular item is cloth shopping bags. The colorful and durable bags are seen all around Seattle!



Popular products from the nuns

You can purchase these items on our website or by phoning us.

You Can Help!

◆ **Make a donation:** Your donation will be used for education, medical care, and basic living expenses for the nuns. Donations can be made by cash, check and Visa/Mastercard and are tax-deductible in the US and Canada.

◆ **Donate assets:** An alternative to cash donations is to give assets, such as stocks, mutual funds, or real estate, which have appreciated in value. When you sell an appreciated asset the gain is taxable to you. But when you give that same asset to a 501(c) 3 non-profit, you get a tax deduction and you do not pay any income tax on the gain. The non-profit can then sell the asset and they do not pay any income tax on the gain either since they are tax exempt.

◆ **Sponsor a nun:** Thirty US dollars (\$30) a month provides basic necessities for one nun living in exile (for more than 600 nuns living in six nunneries: Dolma Ling, Geden Choeling, Shugsep, Tilokpur, Sherab Choling, and Sakya Nuns College, representing all Tibetan traditions as well as nuns living on their own and in retreat). Sponsors are asked to commit to at least one year. They receive a photobio of a nun and are welcome to correspond with her.

◆ **Help us with our wish list for this year:** air miles to extend our outreach to further venues, Macintosh software, color laser printer, rotary cutting board, always office supplies (especially toners!).

◆ **Distribute our products:** Become a calendar distributor or sell the handmade products made by the nuns at Dolma Ling.

◆ **Volunteer or intern at our office:** The US office keeps costs low by keeping our staff to a minimum and relying heavily on volunteers to help and contribute pro-bono services and in kind donations. If you are able to volunteer, or would like to intern with the TNP USA office, or if you know any school or community programs that offer credit for volunteer hours, please contact Annie at 206-652-8901.

We also have second Wednesday volunteer work parties, and we are always in need of PR/Marketing advice, event planning, technology (Mac wizards welcome!) advice, or endowment development.

conclusion of Full Ordination for Nuns, cont. from page 6

the community that His Holiness wishes that they find a means to convey the bhikshuni vow to those novice nuns who wish it.

On August 10, a meeting of the abbots of the nunneries was held at the TNP office at Dolma Ling during which the proceedings of the Hamburg conference were discussed. It was agreed that since novice nuns are unable to study the vinaya themselves, the abbots should encourage and inform the nuns in their nunneries regarding bhikshuni ordination. Although only a few may at this time choose to take this ordination, the possibility of doing so should be provided for nuns throughout all times and places, for the perpetuation of the Buddha dharma and the benefit of all beings.

A Meeting of the Nuns' Committee attended by 11 nuns representing six nunneries was held four days later. Those nuns who attended the Hamburg conference gave reports and this was discussed. It has been established that it is possible, and moreover that it is His Holiness' wish that full ordination should be made available to the nuns. In the afternoon, nine nuns along with Rinchen Khando Choegyal visited the Department of Religion and Culture of the Tibetan Government-in-Exile where they met with Ven. Kalong Tsering Puntsok and the department secretary to apprise them of the Hamburg conference and the plans to fulfill His Holiness' wish to convene a meeting of vinaya holders in India this winter. The Kalon responded sympathetically and agreed that his department would play their part.

The Tibetan Nuns Project will continue to give undivided service to this most meaningful issue of full ordination for nuns in the Tibetan tradition and throughout the Buddhist world.

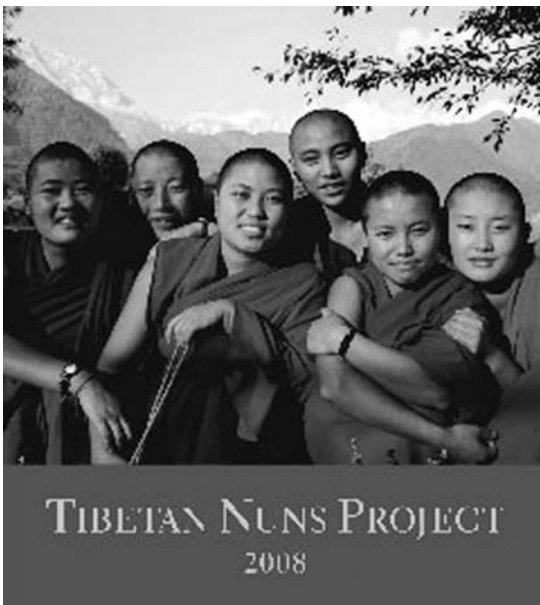


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☐ Annually (\$360, €272, Rs.14,400)

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☐ I am interested in volunteering. Please send me information.