

# Dalai Lama Urges Introduction of Bhikshuni Vows into Tibetan Tradition

*A Mandala special report*

*his* Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama has spoken out strongly in favor of introducing full ordination for women in Tibetan Buddhism. Addressing a packed audience of 1,200 people in July in Hamburg, Germany, His Holiness said, "I am 100% sure if Buddha were here today, he would certainly give us permission for bhikshuni vows."

In his statement, His Holiness the Dalai Lama said, "The four-fold Buddhist community (of bhikshus, bhikshunis, upasakas and upasikas<sup>1</sup>) is incomplete in the Tibetan tradition. If we can introduce the bhikshuni ordination, that would be excellent in order to have the four-fold Buddhist community complete. ... Given that women are fully capable of achieving the ultimate goal of the Buddha's teachings, in harmony with the spirit of the modern age, the means and opportunity to achieve this goal should be completely accessible to them."

The statement came at the conclusion of a three-day conference on the issue held at His Holiness' request, bringing together over sixty vinaya scholars and senior sangha members from various Buddhist traditions worldwide.

If Tibetans move in the direction His Holiness suggests, this would mark a major milestone in the history of Tibetan Buddhism. Although women can receive novice (getsulma) vows, full ordination (known as gelongma or bhikshuni ordination) is not currently available to them in this tradition. Indeed, a bhikshuni order was never fully established in Tibet, even though a number of individual bhikshunis (including Gelongma Palmo) visited from India, and some Tibetan nuns were ordained by monks in isolated ceremonies, according to exhaustive research undertaken at His Holiness the Dalai Lama's request by the Tibetan government's Department of Religion and Culture.

Because bhikshuni ordination *is* transmitted within Chinese, Korean and Vietnamese Buddhism through a

<sup>1</sup> Bhikshu/bhikshuni: fully ordained persons, male and female; upasaka/upasika: devout lay practitioners, male and female

vinaya lineage known as Dharmaguptaka, many Western nuns practicing Tibetan Buddhism have taken bhikshuni vows from these lineages. The Dharmaguptaka lineage of the vinaya is distinct from the Mulasarvastivada lineage that was transmitted to Tibet.

Until now, His Holiness's position on this matter was not clear to the wider public, and some senior Tibetan monks and lamas have hesitated to encourage nuns to receive bhikshuni vows from the Dharmaguptaka lineage or to attend such bhikshuni ordination ceremonies themselves. Others actively discourage nuns from taking such higher vows.

There could be a gradual change now: at the same conference, His Holiness officially recognized the bhikshuni ordination of women practicing Tibetan Buddhism who have already received their vows from the Dharmagupta nuns' lineage. "There are already nuns within the Tibetan tradition who have received the full bhikshuni vow according to the Dharmagupta lineage, and whom we recognize as fully ordained," he said.

In a further talk with conference participants, His Holiness said, "The Dharmaguptaka nuns' lineage should be Tibetanized." To that end, he called for the translation of the main texts of the Dharmaguptaka lineage from Chinese into Tibetan. During the conference, His Holiness also suggested that nuns who practice Tibetan Buddhism, and who are already fully ordained in that lineage, could gather in India to perform the major monastic rituals of the Dharmaguptaka nuns' lineage in the Tibetan language. "All these should be conducted in the Tibetan language," His Holiness said. "Then it would become a living Tibetan tradition."

His Holiness explained that the absence of a bhikshuni sangha in Tibetan Buddhism means that the place where Tibetan Buddhism is practiced cannot be considered a 'central land.' As such, practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism cannot be considered to have a precious human rebirth, since this is one of the required qualifications. His



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Among the conference speakers pictured here are (right) Bhikshuni Thubten Chodron, Abbess of Sravasti Abbey, and (left) Ven. Lhundrup Damchö, an FPMT teacher who is doing her Ph.D. on stories from the vinaya. With headphones lower right, Ven. Lobsang Dechen, Co-director of Tibetan Nuns Project.

Holiness dismissed the standard explanation given by many Tibetan monks: that the presence of fully ordained monks was the “most important factor,” and so the absence of nuns was not an issue. This is “not exact,” His Holiness said. “It doesn’t really qualify fully.”

“Actually the previous monks should have taken more effort in introducing the bhikshuni vow in Tibet for this consideration,” His Holiness told conference participants in a subsequent audience.

### Fulfilling His Holiness’ Wishes

Even as he stated his unequivocal support for introducing a bhikshuni sangha into Tibetan Buddhism, His Holiness also made it clear that he needed to see broad support from the Tibetan monks, so as to avoid the possibility of dissent or splitting the sangha over this issue.

Vinaya specialists and senior members of the international Buddhist monastic community traveled from all over the globe

to participate in the conference. This worldwide gathering expressed its overwhelming support for the introduction of bhikshuni ordination into Tibetan Buddhism. On the final day, a panel of sixteen senior sangha members and vinaya experts from the major Buddhist traditions also gave His Holiness the green light to proceed, and offered suggestions for methods that would be valid according to the vinaya in general.

Among those was Bhikkhu<sup>2</sup> Bodhi, translator of large parts of the Pali canon and a highly-respected scholar and elder within Theravada Buddhism. His Holiness has particularly sought out the views of senior monks from Theravada Buddhism, which generally is the most strict among Buddhist schools in its observance of vinaya rules. During the panel Bhikkhu Bodhi said, “We all support His Holiness in the introduction of the Tibetan bhikshuni ordination, and in terms of ordination methods, the vinaya rules are quite flexible based on circum-

<sup>2</sup> Bhikkhu is the Pali word for bhikshu

stances. We feel all the options presented are valid and can be justified.”

### Warm Support and Fierce Resistance

At the conclusion of the conference, His Holiness requested that a similar conference be organized in India for about 100 Tibetan abbots and senior sangha members to meet and hear the views of the senior vinaya experts from other Buddhist traditions who were present at the conference in Hamburg and who had expressed strong support for a number of methods for validly establishing a Tibetan bhikshuni sangha according to the vinaya.

This upcoming conference may be needed to garner support for the new initiative. “I always favor the revival of the bhikshuni ordination,” His Holiness said, “but then resistance in some cases has been quite fierce, quite strong.” Commenting on some monks’ resistance to his measures, His Holiness emphasized that this was not due to “negative” thinking on their part, but simply because they were “not yet habituated to this line of thinking.”

Full ordination for women has already found firm support within the Kagyu and Sakya traditions. His Holiness the Seventeenth Karmapa, Sakya Trizin, Tai Situ Rinpoche, Thrangu Rinpoche, Drikung Chetsang Rinpoche, Drukchen Rinpoche and other leading figures in the Kagyu and Sakya lineages have expressed complete and emphatic support for

bhikshuni ordination for Tibetan nuns. [See panel below.] Support from senior Tibetan Buddhist monks, however, has been far from unanimous, as His Holiness the Dalai Lama himself made very clear during the conference.

His Holiness’ statements generally carry special weight for such monks in the Gelugpa lineage within which His Holiness the Dalai Lama has great spiritual authority. As such, His Holiness’ own statements in Hamburg – both his official recognition of the Dharmaguptaka bhikshuni lineage and his public support for full ordination for women in Tibetan Buddhism – could help pave the way for other monks and lamas in his lineage to come out in favor of women’s equal access to the spiritual opportunities offered by full ordination.

### Uniting Lineages: A Nalanda Tradition

A major concern in the discussions of introducing full ordination for women has been to ensure that such an ordination would be conducted in a way considered valid according to the vinaya. After nearly thirty years of exhaustive research, Tibetan vinaya experts found textual support for two possible methods for introducing bhikshuni vows into Tibetan Buddhism according to the Mulasarvastivada vinaya under current circumstances.

One option is to exercise an alternate method of ordination conducted solely by Tibetan bhikshus without the presence of their female counterparts, the bhikshunis. This

#### His Holiness the Seventeenth Karmapa (Ogyen Trinley Dorje)

##### Message of Support for Women’s Full Ordination

How to reestablish the ordination lineage of bhikshunis in various Buddhist traditions has been a challenging issue of vital importance in our era. A feasible solution in accordance with the Buddha Dharma has to be found to meet the needs of aspiring women in today’s world. ... Efforts to reintroduce it in our lineage have been initiated with strong support from our sangha. I am committed to the issue both as a lineage holder and as an individual who, in exile, regards nuns with the love and respect he owes his own mother.

In such a pursuit, we should look to history for inspiration, but not be limited by it. We should respect traditions, but should not hesitate to explore new possibilities. I am sure that, with pure motivation, perseverance, and imagination, a feasible solution in accordance with the

Buddha Dharma will be found. In the infinite ocean of Lord Buddha’s compassion, inconceivable means await us.

##### At the Conference:

#### Dr. Janet Gyatso, Professor, Harvard University, USA

... Buddhism is seen as one of the few alternatives in an increasingly violent world caught up in power struggles, sectarian violence and competition for scarce resources. Buddhism is seen in many parts of the world as the religion that can help us live happily with less. ... Buddhist monastics represent self-discipline in arguably the most self-indulgent global society that mankind has ever known...

Given the increasingly egalitarian sentiments in many parts of the world today, for the Buddhist sangha to maintain an inappropriate bias against women’s ordination or status would mean to grossly undercut the credibility of Buddhism altogether in the modern world. I think that this motivation alone is a decisive reason for the bhikshuni order

would result in a valid ordination, according to the vinaya, but bhikshus conferring the ordination incurs a *nyeja* or minor fault that can be fully purified during sojong (the confession ceremony held twice a month). However, in a paper presented during the conference, Lharam Geshe Rinchen Ngodrub also cited texts stating that according to the vinaya, monks would actually incur a fault if they do not give full ordination to qualified women who request it.

A second option entails inviting bhikshunis ordained in the Dharmaguptaka lineage to participate in full ordination ceremonies alongside bhikshus from the Mulasarvastivada lineage transmitted in Tibetan Buddhist tradition. This would allow the ordination ceremony to comply with the rule requiring groups of both bhikshus and bhikshunis, but would involve bringing together two vinaya lineages.

After decades of research, the Department of Religion and Culture described the results of its findings in a letter dated June 20, 2007: "No sources have been found which state that a dual sangha of different Vinaya traditions is allowed to bestow the vows of bhikshuni to women. Neither have sources been seen which state that bhikshuni ordination is not accomplished (*las ma chags pa*) if performed by a sangha of different vinaya traditions. However, there are sources stating that there were many bhikshus of different Vinaya traditions living together in monasteries such as Nalanda and Vikramashila."

to be restored and supported at the highest level. Without it, there is little chance for Buddhism to take up the role that it is poised to assume in the world today.

**At the Conference:**  
**Venerable Lobsang Dechen, Co-director of Tibetan Nun's Project, Drolma Ling Nunnery, Dharamsala**

It is commonly held that Tibetan nuns are not interested in receiving Bhikshuni ordination. They seem to be very content with the way things are. This is not the case. We are also human beings. We do not want suffering and seek happiness. If there is a better way to escape from suffering, we would like to go for it.

**After the Conference:**  
**Bhikshuni Thubten Chodron, Sravasti Abbey, USA**

During His Holiness the Dalai Lama's teachings on Aryadeva's *Four Hundred Stanzas* that followed the

Bhikkhu Bodhi voiced a position echoed by numerous others at the conference when he commented: "In my opinion, in dealing with this issue, the question that should be foremost in our minds is this: 'What would the Buddha

want his elder bhikkhu disciples to do in such a situation, now, in the twenty-first century?' Would he want us to apply the regulations governing ordination in a way that excludes women from the fully ordained renunciant life, so that we present to the world a religion in which men alone can lead the life of full renunciation? Or would he instead want us to apply the regulations of the Vinaya in a way that is kind, generous, and accommodating, thereby offering the world a religion that truly embodies principles of justice and non-discrimination?"

During an audience held the day after the conference concluded, His Holiness said, "Those things which as an individual monk I can do, we have done. Now certain things that are not in my power have to have consensus. That is now necessary." ❀

*Full text of His Holiness the Dalai Lama's statement, and the messages from His Holiness the Karmapa, can be read at [www.congress-on-buddhist-women.org](http://www.congress-on-buddhist-women.org). Proceedings of the conference will be published by Wisdom Publications.*

conference, a sramanerika (novice nun) offered lunch to some of the Western bhikshunis. I found myself sitting at a table with a group of extraordinary women: Bhikshunis Tenzin Palmo, Lekshe Tsomo, Jampa Tsedroen, Jotika, Khenmo Drolma, and Tenzin Kacho. Ven. Tenzin Palmo has been ordained for forty-three years, two others for thirty years, and the rest over twenty years. Each one was learned, good-hearted, and actively involved in benefiting others by establishing monasteries, teaching the Dharma, running Dharma centers, and so on. This is indicative of how much the Buddhadharma in general, and the Tibetan community in particular, would benefit if Tibetan nuns were able to become bhikshunis and geshemas. I left feeling grateful and inspired by the joyous effort and abilities of these remarkable nuns and hopeful for the future of nuns and monks working together to spread the Buddha's teachings for the benefit of all. ❀

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