

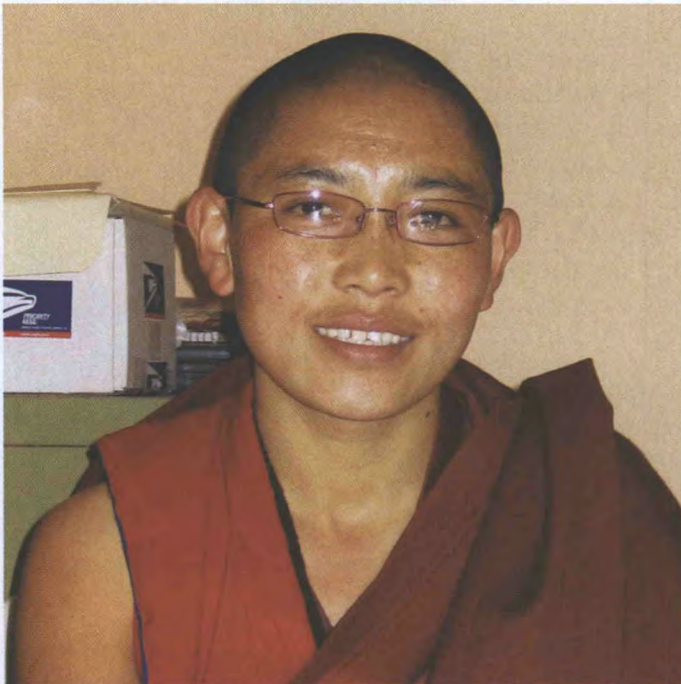
The Rise of the Geshe-ma

His Holiness has made the call: He wishes for there to be a Geshe-ma degree for Tibetan Buddhist nuns. This stunning appreciation of the benefits to be had by offering advanced educational opportunities to nuns has only recently found a few outlets for its reception. The Institute of Buddhist Dialectics in Dharamsala, a monastic institute started by His Holiness, now offers a new Rimé Geshe degree to its students, among whom are several nuns, including a Western Tibetan Buddhist nun named Ven. Kelsang Wangmo. Ven. Wangmo is in her fifteenth year of study at the Institute; if she passes her exams, she may become the first to obtain a Geshe-ma degree. Fast on her heels are a number of Tibetan and Himalayan nuns at nunneries in Nepal and India.

Contributor Camilla Corona offers her experience of the education of nuns while spending a day at Kopan Nunnery ...

We happened to arrive on the day of the month of the speech competition, so instead of the regular classes, all the nuns were in the main Assembly Hall. Students from different classes with pre-prepared speeches stood at the podium in front of the throne of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, whose life-like photo gave the

Jangchub Gyalmo, one of the top students at Kachoe Ghakyil Ling Nunnery. PHOTO: Camilla Corona



impression of him actually being present, looking down on the proceedings. To the right was Khenrinpoche Geshe Lhundrup, seated on a low throne, listening and encouraging the nuns as they read their speeches in Tibetan or English, on topics as varied as friendship and the environment.

I thought because Geshe Lhundrup was present it must be a very special occasion; after all, not only is he Abbot of the nunnery, but also of one of the largest, busiest monasteries in Nepal, Kopan Monastery, just up the hill. I was to be further surprised as he returned in the afternoon, as he does every afternoon, I learned, to teach Buddhist philosophy to the nuns.

After the speech competition, the nuns dispersed from the Assembly Hall to their rooms, splashes of maroon spreading though the nunnery. From the outside, the nunnery looks large and impressive, but once inside it is easy to understand that the premises were originally designed for only a few hundred nuns, and are now filled to the brim and overflowing. The rooms for the juniors, designed to hold three nuns, now have mattresses on the floor and house five. When all the nuns are in residence, there is not enough room for everyone in the Assembly Hall nor the Dining Hall.

Most of the current 380 nuns come from the mountain regions of Nepal and Tibet, many from the regions of Solu Khumbu and Tsum. We were surprised by the nuns who came all the way to Kopan from Ladhak in India, given the choice



All eyes are on the challenger – debate at Kopan. PHOTO: Nick Dawson

of monasteries in Ladhak itself and all over India. It seems the reputation of the study program offered at Kopan has spread. Another huge draw has to be the fact that once a nun is admitted into Kopan, everything – food, lodging, and education – is free, for the most part paid by generous sponsors.

It was the same old story that made the nuns from Tibet trek illegally across some of the most rugged terrain in the world to come to Kopan: young girls and women not being given permission by the Chinese authorities to enter a nunnery, no teachers, or simply a minimum education, and

programs imposed by the local authorities inside the nunneries.

With Kopan Nunnery bursting at its seams, the logical step would be to refuse any further applicants, but this is not the way of the Abbot. Some of the young nuns would arrive with terrible stories of how their mothers had died and there was no one to look after them, so how could Lama Lhundrup refuse? Others arrived with a letter from Lama Zopa Rinpoche – in this case rejection is simply out of the question. All of this explains the plans that the nunnery has for expansion.



The packed dining room. PHOTO: Nick Dawson

As we came to the end of our day at Kopan, it began to dawn on us that we were witnessing something very special, some great fundamental change that was taking place. Traditionally in Tibet, prior to the Chinese takeover, nuns performed pujas in their nunneries and in people's houses in the vicinity. This was the main activity of the nunneries and that which made them economically viable. Only rarely did one hear of learned nuns who had studied, or even more exceptionally, who had written texts.

In 1970, Lama Thubten Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche established Kopan Monastery and invited nuns to study with the monks. This was not traditional, but they were also unconventional times, and by all accounts Lama Yeshe was also a very unconventional Lama. The ball kept rolling and thanks to the constant pressure of far-sighted, modern-thinking members of the establishment, headed by no less a figure than His Holiness the Dalai Lama himself, great strides have been made to encourage nuns to study on a par with their male counterparts. Under His Holiness' direction, the prerequisite to be a gelong (fully-ordained monk) before becoming a Geshe has been abolished. Put in layman's terms, a nun can now follow the full study program offered in the great Gelugpa tradition, take the exam, and become a Geshe or master of divinity.

To demonstrate how recent these changes are, although Kopan and several nunneries in India have had senior nuns following this intense study course in Buddhist philosophy for several years, no nun has yet taken the exam. The first nuns to become a Geshe, or perhaps it would be more correct to add the feminine article and call them Geshe-ma, should graduate after one or two more years. The actual details of how their examination and qualification will take place are still not clear, or still have to be decided by the Gelugpa authorities.

There is a Tibetan Government program to encourage nuns to study, which, among other things, sponsors nuns from the various nunneries with study programs to meet once a year for the Jan Koncho, a debate on logic. This year it is in South India, and currently thirty nuns from Kopan Nunnery and two of their teachers, Geshe from Kopan Monastery, have gone to participate. At the inception of this program, the nuns were too embarrassed to debate if a monk walked past. Now, such as at the most recent Monlam prayer festival at the Kopan gumpa, the nuns actually participated in the debate with the monks. How times have changed. ☸

Camilla Corona is a student of Lama Zopa Rinpoche who has lived in Kathmandu for many years with her husband and two children. Kopan Nunnery is actively seeking donations for its expansion program. For more information, go to www.kopanmonastery.com/nunnery.html