

# The Role Of Nuns In Contemporary Tibetan Buddhism

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## ABSTRACT

The role of women in Buddhism has been acknowledged by the Buddha throughout his lifetime. Traditionally, Tibetan women have often faced restrictions in both social and religious spheres. However, in the contemporary period, Tibetan Buddhist nuns have begun to assert their capabilities through knowledge, spiritual leadership, and social engagement. Despite living in exile, Tibetan Buddhist nuns have preserved their national cultural identity and continue to contribute to reforming traditional perspectives. Through studies of key figures such as Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo and Khandro Rinpoche, as well as the awarding of the Geshema degree to nuns, this article seeks to highlight the religious and social roles of Tibetan Buddhist nuns in the context of a rapidly changing and challenging world.

**Keywords:** Tibetan Buddhism, women, gender, exile, spiritual authority.

## A. Introduction

In the traditional structure of Tibetan Buddhism, spiritual authority and monastic education have long been dominated by monks. For centuries, nuns were largely excluded from access to scriptures and the means for developing a spiritual life. Although the Buddha permitted full ordination for women and established the Bhikshuni Sangha, institutional and cultural limitations within Tibetan society significantly hindered the recognition and development of female monastics.

Since the latter half of the twentieth century especially following the Tibetan diaspora in 1959 Tibetan Buddhist nuns have increasingly asserted their presence within both monastic institutions and broader social contexts. Through the intersection of diasporic identity, feminist discourse, and modernizing forces, many Tibetan Buddhist women have created new opportunities to redefine their roles. Today, they actively participate in Buddhist education, spiritual leadership, and social activism. The establishment of nunneries in India and Nepal, the founding of female-led Buddhist centers in the West, and the historic awarding of the Geshema degree in 2016 mark significant milestones in this ongoing transformation.

This paper focuses on three main areas: first, the revival and institutionalization of nunneries and monastic education for women. Second, the emergence of influential female nuns within Tibetan communities. Finally, the challenges and prospects that nuns face in contributing to the reshaping of spiritual roles and advancing a more inclusive vision of Tibetan Buddhism.

## B. Content

### I. Historical and Cultural Context

A comprehensive understanding of the position of women in contemporary Tibetan Buddhism cannot be achieved without considering the historical and cultural context of Tibetan society. Traditionally, Tibetan Buddhism has been predominantly male-dominated, with men holding the majority of religious and social leadership roles. However, this dominance stems not from the doctrinal essence of Buddhism itself, but rather from the cultural norms and specific historical circumstances of Tibetan society.

#### 1. The Role of Women in Tibetan Culture

Tibetan society was organized along feudal and clan-based lines, in which women's roles were largely confined to domestic responsibilities or supporting religious institutions through devotional practices and financial contributions. Although monastic life was regarded as the highest form of religious pursuit, Tibetan

women historically lacked access to full Bhikshuni ordination due to doctrinal limitations and issues related to lineage transmission.

Janet Gyatso pointed out that *Tibetan Buddhist culture has long portrayed women as both powerful and problematic, reflecting deeply rooted gender dynamics that are both spiritual and social*.<sup>1</sup> Tibetan society reflects a contradiction or more accurately, an injustice, when it comes to women's roles. Women are regarded as spiritually powerful and seen as embodiments of wisdom according to Vajrayāna Buddhist traditions. However, such spiritual potential has not been sufficient to overcome entrenched social prejudices and religious conservatism. Patriarchal structure remains a significant barrier in any society. The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu argued that patriarchy is an invisible yet powerful system. Sometimes, the power held by men becomes so normalized and institutionalized that women are forced to accept it unconsciously, failing to recognize it as a form of oppression. In Tibetan society, the close connection between life and nature has historically contributed to the marginalization of women. Patriarchy is a product of communities shaped by multiple factors, including the division of labor, political leadership roles, and religious authority. The division of labor remains the central factor in determining the form and persistence of patriarchal social structures.



The division of labor chart illustrates that men continue to hold dominant roles within Tibetan communities. They have control over property and land, perform traditional rituals, and, notably, have the right to enter monastic life and assume spiritual leadership in monasteries. Women, on the other hand, primarily engage in maintaining handicraft traditions and caring for the household. This division of labor has contributed to the formation of a patriarchal system in Tibetan society.

While Tibetan men could receive full Bhikshu ordination, women were generally only granted novice ordination as Sramanerika, which significantly limited their access to Buddhist education and leadership roles within the religious hierarchy. In Tibet and other countries with Theravāda traditions, many nuns continue to seek Bhikkhuni ordination in the hope of strengthening their religious standing and gaining broader social recognition.

An inspiring example is Bhikkhuni Kusuma, who played a pivotal role in the movement to restore full ordination for nuns. In a letter to her fellow Bhikkhuni Varanasi, she wrote: *"In 1987, we gathered in the sacred land of Bodh Gaya and committed ourselves to restoring the Bhikkhuni Sangha. We were overjoyed that our dream had come true. May you continue to have the strength to fulfill the mission of reviving the Bhikkhuni order in our homeland, Sri Lanka."*<sup>2</sup> The aspiration to achieve full Bhikkhuni ordination remains a cherished goal among many female monastics in the Theravāda tradition, reflecting a deep desire for spiritual equality and institutional recognition within the monastic community.

## 2. The Influence of the Tibetan Government-in-Exile

A major factor influencing the role of women in contemporary Tibetan Buddhism is the political upheaval of the mid-twentieth century. In 1959, the People's Republic of China assumed control over Tibet, prompting the 14th Dalai Lama, along with thousands of monks, nuns and lay Tibetans, to flee into exile. This mass exodus led to the resettlement of Tibetan communities in border regions of India, Nepal, Bhutan, and other countries particularly in areas such as Dharamshala, Bylakuppe, and Ladakh in India.

Exile brought severe economic and social challenges but also spurred profound changes in traditional religious structures. As Tibetan refugee communities began reconstructing their social and religious institutions, the urgency of ensuring access to education, healthcare, and cultural preservation became increasingly evident. Within this new socio-political context, women's status began to be reevaluated. Tibetan

<sup>1</sup> Janet Gyatso, "Being Women in the Tibetan Religious World," in *Women in Tibet: Past and Present*, ed. Janet Gyatso and Hanna Havnevik (London: Hurst & Company, 2005), 13.

<sup>2</sup> Bhikkhuni Kusuma, *In Search of the Bhikkhuni Order* (Colombo: Tisara Prakasakayo Ltd., 2006), 113.

nuns and laywomen began to assume active roles in social organization, participating in cultural preservation efforts and taking on leadership positions in newly established Buddhist institutions.<sup>3</sup>

### 3. *East-West Dialogue and Buddhist Feminist Thought*

The global spread of Tibetan Buddhism particularly in the West has fostered dynamic cross-cultural dialogue around gender equality and women's roles in religious life. This transnational engagement has led to greater awareness of the systemic limitations faced by Tibetan Buddhist women, especially within monastic contexts where full Bhikkhuni ordination was historically unavailable. Under the influence of broader feminist discourses and egalitarian values in the West, numerous scholars, practitioners, and Buddhist feminists have begun advocating for reform. As Klein (1995) noted, Western Buddhist women and intellectuals have brought powerful critiques of male centered religious structures, encouraging a reexamination of the historical and doctrinal justifications for gender hierarchies in Tibetan Buddhism. The voices of women from an isolated society such as Tibet were not strong enough to challenge entrenched gender ideologies on their own. The support of global feminist movements and progressive Western ideologies has provided Tibetan women with the confidence and momentum to engage more fully with a dynamic and creative world.

While in some countries such as Sri Lanka and Thailand the ordination of Bhikkhunis within the Theravāda tradition has begun to take root, it remains a particularly complex issue in Tibet. In recent decades, the nuns' cause has gained increasing support from international organizations and scholars, often in cooperation with Mahāyāna communities in Taiwan and South Korea. The relatively slow pace of ordination reform in Tibetan Buddhism has become a pressing concern, prompting a growing and accelerated movement for change.

## II. Revival of Female Monastic Education

One of the most significant advancements in modern Tibetan Buddhism is the revival and formal establishment of educational systems for nuns. Before the Tibetan diaspora, educational opportunities for Tibetan nuns were extremely limited. They often resided in small, isolated nunneries with restricted access to teachings, meditation practices, and qualified teachers. The study of Buddhist philosophy and logic (Pramāṇa) was traditionally the domain of monks.

Following the exile of the Tibetan community, many nunneries were established in India and Nepal. These institutions not only provided residential facilities for nuns to live and study but also initiated formal training programs. The founding of the Tibetan Nuns Project in 1987 marked a critical milestone, coordinating financial resources, educational planning, and infrastructure to support nuns across different regions.

Educational programs at these nunneries now mirror the academic framework of Buddhist monastic universities for monks, including subjects such as Madhyamaka (Middle Way Philosophy), Prajñāpāramitā (Perfection of Wisdom), Abhidharma (Buddhist Metaphysics), Vinaya (Monastic Discipline), along with studies in logic and debate. After years of rigorous study and debate training, many nuns have attained an educational level equivalent to that of monks.

This progress culminated in 2016 when the first group of nuns received the Geshema degree, the highest academic qualification in the Gelug tradition, equivalent to a Ph.D. in Buddhist philosophy. Traditionally, this title had been reserved for monks for centuries. Granting this degree to women not only recognized their academic accomplishments but also affirmed their authority to teach and lead spiritually within the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. The efforts of Tibetan nuns have validated the Buddha's original recognition of women's spiritual potential:

*"In Buddhism, women can openly aspire to and practice for the highest level of spiritual attainment. Buddhism is unique among Indian religions in that the Buddha as founder of a spiritual tradition explicitly states in canonical literature that a woman is as capable of nirvana as men and can fully attain all four stages of enlightenment".<sup>4</sup>*

The Geshema degree not only represents a personal achievement but also signals a shift in the perception of women's intellectual and spiritual capacities. This milestone has inspired a new generation of Tibetan nuns to pursue academic excellence and leadership roles, contributing to a significant cultural transformation within Tibetan Buddhism.

Buddhist academies such as Dolmaling Nunnery and Kopan Nunnery in Nepal have become key centers for nurturing highly educated female monastics. These nuns have expanded beyond academic pursuits into social outreach, interfaith dialogue, and community development. Their work embodies feminist theological ideals adapted within the Tibetan spiritual and cultural framework.<sup>5</sup>

## III. Spiritual Leadership and Authority in Inner Life

In addition to educational achievements, women in Tibetan Buddhism are increasingly taking on spiritual leadership roles and gaining social influence. This marks a significant shift from traditional norms, where spiritual authority was predominantly held by male lamas and rinpoches. In recent years, more and more

<sup>3</sup> Margaret Nowak, *Tibetan Buddhism in the Western World* (San Francisco: Tibetan Review, 1984), 52.

<sup>4</sup> Dhammavihari, *Women in Early Buddhism* (Colombo: Buddhist Publication Society, 1964), 17.

<sup>5</sup> Karma Lekshe Tsomo, *Bridging the Gender Gap: Buddhist Women's Role in Contemporary Society* (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 2010), 104.

female monastics have demonstrated their capacity to guide communities, excel in meditation practices, and even found monastic institutions.

Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo is a prominent figure in Tibetan Buddhism. Born in England, she spent twelve years in retreat in the Himalayas and later established Dongyu Gatsal Ling Nunnery in India to provide rigorous spiritual and academic training for Himalayan nuns. Her advocacy for the full ordination of nuns and gender equality in Tibetan Buddhism has deeply inspired Buddhist women worldwide. She stated: *"The Buddha himself gave his nuns the full ordination. His vision was to have a fourfold Sangha, composed of fully ordained monks and fully ordained nuns together with laymen and laywomen. Only then would his dispensation to relieve all sentient beings of their suffering be achieved."*<sup>6</sup> This statement underscores the critical absence of one of the four key components of the Sangha in Tibetan Buddhism a reality that contradicts the Buddha's original idea. The Buddha taught: *"As long as the four assemblies bhikkhus, bhikkhunis, laymen, and laywomen remain devoted to the Dhamma, are respectful, and live in accordance with the teachings, the true Dhamma will remain for a long time."*<sup>7</sup> Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo is striving to fill the existing void in the Tibetan Buddhist Sangha. If Bhikkhuni ordination is established in Tibet, it will fulfill two core purposes: first, to complete the fourfold Sangha, and second, to create space for nuns to express their abilities in the Dharma and in social engagement.

Khandro Rinpoche, a female tulku (recognized reincarnate lama), has played a significant role in redefining religious authority for women. Fluent in both English and Tibetan, she teaches globally and leads both monastic and lay communities across the East and West. Her leadership challenges gender norms and proves that women can serve as lineage holders and Dharma leaders in the modern world. As she says:

*"There is no reason why women cannot take leadership roles in the sangha. The dharma is not about gender, it is about wisdom and compassion. If women embody these qualities, they are just as capable of guiding others on the path."*<sup>8</sup>

Recognizing the need for full ordination for Tibetan Buddhist nuns, Gyalwang Karmapa conducted a historic ordination ceremony for nineteen Tibetan nuns at Bodhgaya on March 11, 2017. Under the sacred Bodhi Tree, the Karmapa embodied the spirit of Venerable Ānanda, who compassionately petitioned three times to allow the ordination of women. This simple ceremony evoked the image of the original Bhikkhuni Sangha from the Buddha's time. During the ceremony, Tsunmo Tsultrim Sangmo, one of the nineteen nuns, made this vow:

*"We should never be separated from the three Dharma robes, we should never be parted from the three trainings, we should always keep the precepts in our mind and keep them as purely as we can. It is our responsibility to do this in order to be able to restore the Bhikkhuni ordination within the Tibetan Mulasarvastivadin tradition, and this is a responsibility for all the nuns."*<sup>9</sup>

*Bhikkhuni Shikshamana in the prayer ceremony*



Perhaps the aspiration to restore the Bhikkhuni tradition is no longer limited to Tibetan Buddhism, but also resonates across Theravāda Buddhist countries. In 1998, ten female monastics from Sri Lanka traveled to Bodhgaya, India, to receive full ordination as Bhikkhunis. However, all ten later had to migrate to the United States. While some positive reasons include overseas missionary work, the development of the Bhikkhuni Sangha, or individual sponsorship, there are underlying challenges that must be examined. Sri Lanka, despite being a Buddhist country, still discriminates against Bhikkhunis, who are not granted equal rights or support as Bhikkhus. Many Bhikkhunis face material and spiritual hardship, feeling stifled and lacking space for

<sup>6</sup> Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo, *Reflections on a Mountain Lake: Teachings on Practical Buddhism* (Boston: Snow Lion Publications, 2008).

<sup>7</sup> Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha: A Complete Translation of the Anguttara Nikaya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2012), 111

<sup>8</sup> Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, *Dharma Paths* (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 2003), 198.

<sup>9</sup> Karma Lekshe Tsomo, *Bridging the Gender Gap: Buddhist Women's Role in Contemporary Society* (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 2010), 104.



growth. Societal pressure also isolates them, making it difficult to practice and develop fully. Evidence of this ongoing struggle is seen in a recent Sri Lankan news article: Colombo, June 17 (Daily Mirror) In a landmark judgement upholding the right to equal treatment, the Supreme Court, by majority decision yesterday, issued an order directing the Commissioner General of the Department of Registration of Persons to issue a National Identity Card (NIC) to a Buddhist Bhikkhuni, recognising her status as a Bhikkhuni instead of 'Sil Matha.'<sup>10</sup> Although Sri Lankan Bhikkhunis have received full ordination, they have yet to be fully recognized as one of the four assemblies in the Buddhist Sangha. The issue of restoring Bhikkhuni ordination in the Theravāda tradition remains controversial. This has created major obstacles for Buddhist nuns to confidently pursue study, practice, and propagation of the Buddha's teachings. These examples reflect the growing demand for female religious authority. Despite ongoing challenges including cultural resistance and institutional conservatism the increasing presence of female practitioners has initiated a movement toward inclusion and gender equality in global Buddhist communities.

#### IV. Gender Equality and Institutional Challenges

Although Tibetan Buddhist women have made significant progress in education and spiritual life, the pursuit of gender equality in Tibetan Buddhism continues to face deeply rooted cultural obstacles. Entrenched patriarchal traditions, conservative interpretations of monastic law (Vinaya), and the imposition of hierarchical authorities have slowed institutional reforms.

One of the most pressing issues is the lack of full *bhikṣuṇī* ordination ceremonies within the Tibetan Vinaya lineage. While the conferral of the *Geshema* degree to Tibetan nuns in 2016 marked a groundbreaking advancement in education, the ordination of women as full *bhikṣuṇīs*, granting them equal status to monks, remains controversial. Tibetan monastic leaders often justify the delay or denial of reform by citing the absence of an unbroken *bhikṣuṇī* ordination lineage in Tibet, arguing that its restoration could disrupt the monastic community despite progressive examples from other Buddhist traditions around the world.

Efforts to restore full *bhikṣuṇī* ordination have faced opposition from some senior monastic figures. However, advocates argue that upholding outdated norms contradicts the Buddha's original intent, which recognized the spiritual potential of women. International conferences and dialogues many attended by the Dalai Lama have addressed these issues. The Dialogue on Women and Buddhism, held in Dharamshala, India, in 2015, focused on gender equality, education for nuns, and the restoration of the *bhikṣuṇī* lineage in the Vajrayāna tradition. The Tibetan Nuns Empowerment Workshops, also held in Dharamshala, have trained nuns in preaching, leadership, and philosophical studies. These international forums have fostered dialogue on gender equality and created opportunities for nuns to demonstrate their capabilities and actively contribute to the development of modern Tibetan Buddhism. However, the issue has yet to be fully resolved, as political dynamics continue to exert considerable influence.

Another significant barrier is access to organizational power. While some nunneries have flourished in exile, few enjoy the same autonomy, resources, or influence as male monastic institutions. Nuns often rely on external donors particularly from the West or on male dominated hierarchies to sustain their institutions. This dependency limits their ability to shape institutional agendas or advocate for structural changes from within.

Momentum for reform in Tibetan Buddhism is steadily growing. Younger generations of Tibetan nuns, equipped with higher levels of education, global connections, and strong social awareness, are increasingly speaking out for fairness and inclusion. Transnational support networks, feminist scholarship, and digital media platforms have amplified their voices and created new spaces for activism, both within the monastic community and in the broader society.

Following the spirit of the Buddha's teachings, the Gyalwang Karmapa has shown great concern for the female Buddhist community, particularly through his aspiration to restore full ordination for Tibetan nuns. According to the Gyalwang Karmapa, gender equality should not only apply within the monastic Sangha but also extend to society at large. In his lecture at Princeton University, he emphasized:

*"It is important to remember that the restoration of women's rights and the full empowerment of women must go far beyond mere external appearances and institutionalized mechanisms or structures... famous historical steps such as women's suffrage and even the election of a woman as president."*<sup>11</sup>

The Gyalwang Karmapa's view is that the spirit of gender equality must not be confined to words or written documents but must be embodied through concrete actions. Women have the right to participate in elections, this is a civic right and if capable, they are equally deserving of leadership roles in society.

In some countries, being born female is still considered a misfortune. Women are confined to household duties, childbearing, and in some extreme cases, were historically used as sacrificial offerings to deities. In India during the Buddha's time, women faced clear discrimination. In the *Nikaya* suttas, when King Kosala expressed disappointment upon hearing that the queen had given birth to a daughter, the Buddha taught:

<sup>10</sup> Lakmal Sooriyagoda, "Bhikkhuni Wins Right to NIC in Her Own Religious Identity," *Daily Mirror*, June 17, 1987.

<sup>11</sup> The 17th Gyalwang Karmapa. *Genuine Gender Justice and Full Ordination of Nuns*. 2015. <https://kagyu.org/gender-justice/>.

*“Some women are indeed better than men, O ruler of the people.  
Wise and virtuous, a devoted wife who honors her mother-in-law.  
And when she gives birth to a son, he becomes a hero, O Lord of the land.  
The son of such a blessed lady may even rule the realm.”<sup>12</sup>*

During the Buddha’s era, the role of women was still significantly limited. Although women’s status has changed over time, restrictions still persist particularly within social and cultural mindsets. For this reason, the Gyalwang Karmapa has spoken out on the issue of gender equality. He stated:

*“Whatever the result of my efforts may be, I wish to dedicate my life to easing their pain and changing the difficult circumstances that women face.”<sup>13</sup>*

The Gyalwang Karmapa understands that in order to realize true gender equality, it must begin within the Buddhist monastic community. In countries such as Vietnam, Taiwan, and China, women are already permitted to receive full Bhikkhuni ordination. However, in many others including Thailand, Tibet, and Myanmar women are still not allowed to ordain as fully ordained nuns. Therefore, the Gyalwang Karmapa has consistently expressed his aspiration to restore full Bhikkhuni ordination for Tibetan nuns.

The institutional challenges faced by Tibetan nuns reflect deeply rooted gender inequalities within traditional monastic systems and socio-religious structures. Despite progress in education, ordination efforts, and growing international support, nuns continue to face limited access to full ordination, unequal allocation of resources, and exclusion from decision-making bodies. Nevertheless, their resilience manifested through educational reforms, grassroots initiatives, and the call to restore full Bhikkhuni ordination is gradually reshaping long-standing institutional norms. These efforts represent not only a spiritual journey but also a significant step toward gender equity in contemporary Tibetan Buddhism.

### C. CONCLUSION

The role of women in contemporary Tibetan Buddhism is undergoing a profound and multifaceted transformation. Once marginalized in spiritual and institutional contexts, Tibetan Buddhist women especially nuns are increasingly asserting their positions as scholars and spiritual leaders. The revival of monastic education for women, the emergence of prominent female practitioners, and ongoing advocacy for full ordination and institutional reform all signal a reawakening of female spiritual authority in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition.

While structural challenges rooted in traditional culture remain, the achievements of figures such as Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo and the success of initiatives like the Tibetan Nuns Project illustrate the potential for meaningful change. These efforts are not merely about achieving gender equality by modern standards; they reflect the Buddha’s original vision of spiritual liberation for all sentient beings, regardless of gender.

Exile has posed both hardship and opportunity for the Tibetan people, serving as a catalyst for historic change among women. By challenging outdated hierarchies and asserting their rightful place in the Dharma, Tibetan Buddhist women are helping to shape a more inclusive, compassionate, and just future for themselves, for the Tibetan sangha, and for Theravāda nuns across the world. They deserve to live, study, and serve as fully ordained monastics. When human dignity is honored, the latent potential of each individual can be fully realized. Tibetan Buddhist nuns have demonstrated this truth they have refused to submit to obsolete traditions and have instead risen to forge a new path, one illuminated by the Buddha’s teachings of compassion, equality, and wisdom.

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<sup>12</sup> Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), 455.

<sup>13</sup> The 17th Gyalwang Karmapa, *Genuine Gender Justice and Full Ordination for Buddhist Nuns*, Kagyu Office, March 8, 2015, <https://kagyu.org/gender-justice/>.

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