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Systematic Education in Dolma Ling Leading to Gender Equality

By

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The primary aim in establishing Dolma Ling Institute is to raise the education standard and improve the opportunity for nuns to study advanced Buddhist philosophy and doctrine. During the Tibetan Women's Association fourth working committee meeting in Dharamsala in October, 1992, His Holiness the Dalai Lama said, " In our society , we have as a legacy from the past the notion that nuns engage in ritual only and do not study Buddhist texts. This should be changed." His Holiness has in this way been urging the nuns to study higher Buddhist philosophy, in order to gain a deeper knowledge of Buddhism. Whenever His Holiness visits the Tibetan nunneries, he takes the opportunity to encourage them to study.

Dolma Ling Institute is specifically non sectarian and intended to provide nuns from all lineages with the opportunity to study to develop their full academic and spiritual potential. The crucial purpose of the overall project is to allow scholastically gifted nuns to attain the highest level of religious studies, that is the Geshe degree. This much respected degree has up until now only been attained by monks. Enabling women to participate in the study course leading to this goal will give them the confidence to take on roles as teachers and leaders within the communities.

From the religious point of view, there is no reason to object to or create obstacles to women's rights because we believe that every sentient being has the potential to become enlightened. The deity Arya Tara (Jetsun Dolma) generated the mind of Bodhicitta, and through engaging in the Bodhisattva practices eventually achieved enlightenment, all in dependence on a female body. Indeed, the tantric vows specifically state that if a practitioner despises women it is a transgression of the fourteenth root tantric vow.

However, in nunneries in the past, a great deal of emphasis was placed on the memorization of prayers and ritual ceremonies. The mastering of Buddhist philosophical topics was very rarely undertaken by nuns. Therefore, very few nuns became qualified teachers which perpetuated the nuns dependence on monks as teachers.

Despite the lack of emphasis on studies in the nunneries, there have been many great nuns throughout history who gained high spiritual realization through meditation and staying in retreat. These can be found in India as well as Tibet. I will tell you about a few of the notable examples of women who revealed remarkable determination and courage in pursuit of their chosen goal, without regard for acknowledgment or disappointments.

Gelongma Pelmo (Bhikshuni Lakshmi) was a famous Indian nun of the late tenth or eleventh century who was previously a princess known as Lakshmi. She was afflicted with leprosy and was cured by blessings she received from the great Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara directly through her meditation. She was the founder of the fasting practice (nyung nas) of Avalokiteshvara. Her story is still frequently told in connection with the fasting ritual, which is an especially popular practice among Tibetan nuns.

Machig Lapdron (ma-gcig-lab-sgron, 1055-1153), founder of the Chod ego-severing ritual, lived in the eleventh century in Western Tibet. She was a great scholar, religious practitioner and a renowned healer. She had many disciples. It is said that at one time she was visited by three Indian scholars who debated with her. The Indians claimed that all teachings originated in India and that Tibet had no teachings of its own. Machig Lapdron explained her point extensively for seven days to a vast assembly of scholars who at last concluded that what she said was true. They invited her to India but she did not go. Instead she sent teachings of Mahamundra Chod and several commentaries to them there, saying, "This is the first time that a Tibetan teaching has gone to India".

Samding Dorjee Phagmo was the famous abbess of Samding Monastery who presided over a community of monks. His Holiness the Dalai Lama has said that the incarnation system was first established with Karmapa Dusum Khenpo's reincarnation around the 13th century. At the same time, the female reincarnation system was also established with the acceptance of Samding Dorjee Phagmo as a reincarnation of Vajra Yogini. The present fourteenth incarnation of this lineage is a woman who lives in Tibet. The lineage of Samding Dorjee Phagmo is highly respected by Tibetans.

Shugseb Jetsun Rinpoche was a famous woman practitioner born in 1865 at Tso Pema in the mountains of Himachal Pradesh in India, where there is a lake sacred to Padmasambhava. By the time she was only six years old, Lochen had revealed a deep understanding of the Dharma. She traveled throughout Western Tibet explaining the meaning of the stories depicted in religious paintings. Later she went to Kyidrong to receive the transmission of Kunsang Lama and the empowerments of Longchenpa, the Heart's Drop Instruction of Dzogchen, or the Great Completion, as well as the One Hundred Initiations of Chod, or Ego-Severing Rite. She became a great religious practitioner, meditating and teaching her many disciples. She lived at Shugsep Nunnery, situated southwest of Lhasa, where she established a firm body of disciples and lineage of teachings. She passed away in 1951. Fifty nuns from Shugsep Nunnery, which was revived in Tibet in the late 1980s after being completely destroyed during the Cultural Revolution, have arrived in Dharamsala since 1990 and are being taken care of by the Tibetan Nuns Project.

Khandro Rinpoche, a recognised Nyingma re-incarnation of the great Khandro of Tsurphu who was an emanation of Yeshe Tsogyal and the consort of the fifteenth Karmapa, was born in 1967. She is a lineage holder in the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism and presently is the head of Karma Chokhor Dechen Nunnery, and Samten Tse Retreat Center in Mussoorie. She received both the traditional Tibetan and a Western education and speaks English fluently. She also teaches widely in the West.

Another present day notable woman adept is Sakya Jetsun Kusho, Chime Luding, the sister of Sakya Tridzin, head of the Sakya order. She is a renowned practitioner who has received initiations and practiced along with her brother. Fully empowered as a teacher, she now teaches in the West where she resides.

We should not underestimate how many nuns in Tibet as well as in India have, through remaining quietly in the mountains and continuing their practice in solitude, attained high realizations.

There were also a remarkable number of famous great freedom fighters among the nuns. In 1959, when Tibet was forcefully annexed by the communist Chinese, Ghalingshar Choe-la, a nun from Nechung Ri Nunnery, was one of the leaders of the Tibetan women's uprising when they demonstrated against the Chinese occupation of their country on 12th march 1959. Five thousand courageous Tibetan women followed Pamo Kunsang in this demonstration. Later Ghalingshar Choe-la was arrested and thrown into prison. She was subjected to physical assault and merciless interrogation in an attempt to make her confess her crimes. Since she would not confess, she was subjected to repeated struggle sessions, each more intense than the one before, for almost six years. The Chinese method is that they take victims to hospital to recover sufficiently to withstand the rigors of the next session. She eventually died in the hospital. Her corpse was thrown out on the outskirts of Lhasa town and the Chinese authorities would not allow anybody to touch it. Many people saw it and were dismayed at the fate of such a courageous nun.

The list of such nuns continues despite the Chinese oppression in Tibet. In 1969, Thinlay Choedron, a nun from Nyemo near Lhasa led a guerrilla organization against the Chinese, bravely fighting against the Chinese rule in Tibet. Later, she, along with sixty women were arrested and killed by the Chinese.

Pemba Choela a nun from Shar Pemba, led a rebellion of 30,000 guerrillas against the Chinese. They stopped the Chinese troops entering their region for nine years. Ani Palchen, another brave nun from Kham, Eastern Tibet, who defended bravely against the Chinese invasion was caught and imprisoned for twenty-one years. She is now in Dharamsala.

Recently, many younger nuns have been actively participating in peaceful demonstrations in Tibet and many of them are now in prison. Reliable sources say that there are one hundred twenty nuns in one prison called Gutsa. Who knows how many there are in all the prisons in Tibet.

Now let me tell you a little about the background of the Tibetan nuns. We do not have good historical records regarding nuns and nunneries, and the following figures are a bit low. However, records indicate that prior to 1959, there were 160 nunneries throughout the country with 6,831 nuns in central Tibet, 4,468 in Amdo in 52 nunneries and 8 nunneries in Kham with 290 nuns. There were also an indefinite number of nuns living in small groups in retreat communities or in caves. Still others lived with their families and relatives.

In 1949, the Chinese Communist regime began a systematic attempt to militarily force the absorption of Tibet into China. The peaceful nature and philosophy of the Tibetan people led them to exert noble efforts in their attempts to negotiate a peaceful settlement in the face of China's expansionist aggression. However, by 1959, the situation had become untenable; the Chinese government had reneged on many of its agreements and the very survival of the Tibetan culture and people was in serious jeopardy. Under these circumstances, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, the religious and temporal leader of Tibet, escaped along with 100,000 Tibetans to seek refuge in India and Nepal.

Thereafter, the Chinese have shown continued and unrelenting hostility towards the Tibetan people and their culture. Over 6,000 religious institutions were destroyed, nuns and monks were forced to disrobe, scriptures were burned, religious objects were smashed, and other precious things were taken away by the Chinese officials. Since then only a few could escape to India either individually or with their relatives. Very few nuns were able to escape to India until recently because many of those who tried were caught by the Chinese and some died as they made their way through the mountains without proper guides.

During the early years of exile, the nuns who had escaped lived an isolated life. Some lived with their relatives, others looked after children in schools, worked on road construction and

so on. It was only gradually that some nuns began to realize the importance of living in a religious community in order to preserve their purity of practice and the traditional lifestyle in a nunnery. One by one, through the interest and support of individuals and organizations in the exile community, nunneries began to be established.

The first to be established was the Mahayana Buddhist Nunnery, established in Dalhousie, India by an English nun, Ven. Khechok Pelmo (Freda Bedi) in the early sixties. Later the nunnery was moved down to Tilokpur. Now there are almost sixty nuns at Tilokpur and the nunnery is run by the nuns themselves under the kind guidance of H.E. Situ Rinpoche.

Gaden Choeling nunnery was started in a rented house, Rishi Bhawan above McLeod Ganj, Dharamsala, in the mid-1970's, by twenty one nuns on the initiative of two Nechung Ri nuns. Later, they bought the present land on which Geden Choeling is established which is only a ten minute walk from the main temple of McLeod Ganj. They built a big wooden house which was divided into halls and rooms for the nuns with a small kitchen nearby. Now there are almost one hundred fifty nuns living at Geden Choeling. Their accommodation and education have improved a great deal due to the kind help given by individuals and organizations.

In 1987, Jangchup Choeling nunnery was established by the Tibetan Women's Association and the local Tibetan welfare office. Their main supporter is Bhikshuni Jampa Tsedron from Germany. Recently, many new arrival and Himalayan nuns have joined the nunnery, swelling the number of nuns resident there to almost one hundred. They have a well established educational program.

In 1988, Jamyang Choeling nunnery was established by an American Bhikshuni Karma Lekshe Tsomo with three or four Himalayan nuns. At present this nunnery has around fifty nuns living at their new property in Garo, a village outside of Dharamsala and sixteen at their original home in McLeod Ganj. They also have a well organized study program.

There is another nunnery in South India run by Penor Rinpoche, head of the Nyingma lineage, which contains more than a hundred nuns. Karma Chokhor Dechen nunnery situated near Rajpur in Uttar Pradesh, North India is run by Khandro Rinpoche, and also in Rajpur a new nunnery for nuns of the Sakya tradition has recently been established. There are also a number of nunneries established in Nepal, including Kopan nunnery and Keydong Thugche Cheoling. A further unrecorded number of nuns and small nunneries exist in the Himalayan border regions including Zaskar, Ladakh, Sikkim, and Lahoul Spiti.

In addition to these, Dolma Ling Nunnery and Shugsep Nunnery were both set up by the Tibetan Nuns Project in 1991 in Dharamsala in response to the arrival of large numbers of nuns from Tibet fleeing the Chinese repression after the wave of demonstrations in Tibet in the late 1980s. Shugsep traditionally follows the Mindroling Lineage with slight variations in rituals. Their main practice is the Heart's Drop (snying tik) -- the essence of Dzokchen, or the Great Completion, following Longchenpa's Heart's Drop ritual text. Here in India, they also follow the regular Nyingma nine year study program developed at the Ngagyur Nyingma Institute in Bylakuppe, South India.

This summarizes the expansion of Tibetan nuns in exile. Clearly there has been a great increase in numbers and an unprecedented emphasis of education since they left Tibet. During the same period of time how have nuns been faring in Tibet?

In Tibet during the cultural revolution, nuns and monks were forced to disrobe. They were made to work together in the hope that they would be attracted to each other and break their vows. Sometimes they put monks in one row and nuns in other and forced them to choose partners. One old woman with revealed with some embarrassment that her husband had chosen her when the Chinese authorities had forced him to choose a wife. She was a nun before the cultural revolution. Nevertheless, there were some nuns who were able to keep their vows purely even though there was so much pressure on them not to do so. They kept up their prayers and meditation secretly.

After over thirty years of repression, in 1981 China announced individual freedom of religion in Tibet and those monks and nuns who had kept their vows secretly took the opportunity to start rebuilding their monasteries, despite the illusory nature of religious freedom in Tibet since all the monasteries are under the control of the Chinese authorities. Gari, Nechung Ri, Tsamgon, and Shugsep have all been rebuilt over the past ten years.

In September, 1987 monks from the great monasteries of Lhasa staged demonstrations against the Chinese occupation of Tibet and were quickly joined by many lay people. The Chinese were swift to respond by catching and imprisoning the demonstrators. The Chinese authorities asserted that only a handful of people were creating problems in the country and the majority were very happy under Chinese rule. Just to show the Chinese that it was not only the handful of people who not happy, a series of demonstrations initiating from Gari Nunnery calling for freedom for Tibet were undertaken by nuns.

Since then the Chinese authorities have increasingly tightened their control over the nunneries, restricting who may be admitted, their numbers and their activities and insisting on political education and investigations of any glimmer of insurrection. Following in the tradition of the nuns who fought for freedom in the 1960s, since 1989, many nuns have led resistance activities in Tibet by initiating and organizing demonstrations. If caught, they are tortured suffer imprisonment, and when they are eventually released, they are denied re-admission to their nunneries. Compelled to return to their home villages, they are forbidden to continue their religious practices or to communicate freely with the local people or to receive help from them. As a result, many nuns have left and continue to leave Tibet to seek asylum in India.

The Tibetan Nuns Project was initiated in 1987 in Dharamsala as a centralized entity for channeling assistance to Tibetan nuns in exile. It operates under the auspices of the Tibetan Women's Association and the Department of Religion and Culture of the administration-in-exile of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. This Project is the first of its kind devoted solely to the needs and problems of Tibetan nuns living in exile. It's primary aim is to provide improved educational opportunities for nuns. With the intention of establishing a higher education and training institute, in 1990 the project bought four acres of land in the valley below Dharamsala.

Unexpectedly, at the beginning of 1991, a group of sixty-six nuns arrived in Dharamsala from Tibet, with no means of support at all. The Tibetan Women's Association organized emergency assistance to provide them with their basic needs, and as there was insufficient space to accommodate them all in the existing nunneries and more nuns were continuing to arrive, it became necessary for the Project to establish a new nunnery. Therefore, it was decided to build a nunnery, now called Dolma Ling, large enough to accommodate about two hundred nuns on the site purchased for the educational institution which could be built along side. This building project has been going on steadily since March, 1993. The first phase of the construction which provided basic accommodation and educational facilities for one hundred nuns was completed in October, 1995. A second housing wing was completed in 1996 and now we are engaged in a three year project funded by Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, to provide facilities for the institution of higher education initially planned.

Since 1990, around seven hundred nuns have arrived in Dharamsala. Most are very young, between fifteen and twenty-five and even though many, especially those from the more remote regions of Tibet, are illiterate, they are determined to receive a proper education in the Tibetan language and religion. They are also interested in English studies and learning about the world. Nuns from the Lhasa and central region have usually received some education but many of these have endured torture and imprisonment, sometimes involving sexual abuse and solitary confinement, at a very young age.

The primary goal of the Tibetan Nuns Project has always been to improve the educational level of the nuns, seeing education as the key to provide them with the resources leading to eventual self-sufficiency and improved status within the Tibetan community. His Holiness the

Dalai Lama has said that it is important that women should use their potential and feel empowered to take responsibilities which will enable them to enjoy their equal rights in both religious and secular matters. Without education this goal is impossible. We cannot fully appreciate our rights without education and determination.

From the very inception of the Tibetan Nuns Project, the nature of education for nuns has been a primary topic of discussion and investigation by the Project organizers. Establishing an educational curriculum which encompasses the essential elements of both the traditional monastic education and the modern secular one is considered to be essential in order to provide nuns with the means to excel in any of the various fields which they might wish to enter in the future. Dolma Ling Institute has been chosen as the central locus for the development of this program for a number of reasons. The nuns in Dolma Ling are almost all young recent arrivals from Tibet who have come to India with the express purpose to gain the education they have been denied in Tibet. Therefore their motivation to study and achieve is high. Furthermore, Dolma Ling has been set up as a non-sectarian nunnery unencumbered by pressure to follow a particular course of study. Because the nunneries in general have less established study traditions, it is more easy to change things. More specifically, since Dolma Ling is a brand new institution it is a conducive environment in which to develop an innovative program.

Having said this, it is also necessary to understand the limitations to innovation. In order to develop gender equality between monks and nuns we do not have to merely imitate the monks established study programs, indeed we may see some limitations in the traditional courses of study in the modern context. Yet, in order that the nuns qualifications through this program are respected in the Tibetan community, it cannot deviate too much from an accepted norm. The study of Tibetan Buddhist philosophy in Dolma Ling leads to the attainment of the Geshe degree which is the top degree traditionally attained by monks. Whilst we do not expect all the nuns who work through the Dolma Ling study program to become Geshe, we are very hopeful that we will produce the first female Geshe in the Tibetan tradition. However, it is important to point out that the Dolma Ling nuns are not the only nuns engaged in the studies of the geshe program--several of the other nunneries mentioned above--Jangchup Choeling, Jamyang Choeling, Keydon Thukche Choeling, and Geden Choeling, for instance, all have initiated programs of traditional philosophical study.

The educational program in Dolma Ling Institute is specifically designed to provide for the long-term educational needs of the Tibetan Buddhist nuns. The aim is to offer an educational program which is relevant and takes into account the needs of the nuns. A thirteen year curriculum with a four-pronged focus has been developed and initiated. The first four years of the study program is undertaken by all the nuns. This involves traditional training in Tibetan Buddhist philosophy (such as is followed in the Tibetan monasteries but has not previously been available to women). In addition, there is training in Tibetan language, history, and culture, training in the essentials of a modern education including basic science, social sciences, and mathematics, and training in English language which is essential for communication and accessing information.

Those nuns who have passed through this first four years of the program are encouraged to proceed with the advanced study program, This involves advanced training in Buddhist philosophy and doctrine. This program will be developed in the Dolma Ling Institute of Higher Studies and will be open to any nuns in exile. This crucial aspect of the overall project will enable scholastically gifted nuns to attain the highest levels of religious studies, the Geshe degree and to take on roles as teachers and leaders within the community.

It is seen as a very important aspect of the educational program provided within the Institute that opportunities will be provided for some nuns to undertake professional training as teachers, health workers, or training in various community services such as counseling and care of the elderly, administrative training and possibly technical training in services such as electrical installation, water management and so forth.

In addition, the development of income generating projects is acknowledged to be essential in the long term subsistence of the nunneries. Model arts and crafts projects are to be set up in Dolma Ling which will provide training bases for nuns coming from other nunneries and will in themselves generate income for the nunnery. Initial trial projects are presently being undertaken.

Finally, the Institute will conduct research through interviews and archives to document the current and historical conditions of the Tibetan nuns in order to raise awareness of the needs, modes of living, and aspirations of the nuns in the Tibetan community as well as abroad. Already we have quite a substantial base of information about nuns through the documented case histories of all the nuns assisted by the Nuns Project.

Let me go through a more detailed analysis of the program as it is presently functioning at Dolma Ling. At present there are one hundred and fifteen nuns enrolled in the study program—ninety-seven of whom are resident at Dolma Ling and the other eighteen who attend as day scholars. In terms of level, they are spread out over the first five years of the study program. The first four years undertaken by all the nuns are named Preliminaries (Ngondro), Logic (Dusda), Science of mind and science of reasoning (Lotak) and the transitional class (Tsamjor). The Buddhist philosophy course is divided into two parts. In the first part Ngondro class studies Primary Logic. In Dusda they study the small, medium and large presentations of logic. In Lotak they study the divisions of consciousness and the science of reasoning. In Tsamchor, comparative tenets and the stages of spiritual realization are studied.

The second part of the Buddhist philosophy course involves study of Logic in terms of Dharmakirti's *Pramanavarttika*, *Commentary on Valid Cognition*. This begins with and continues over the remaining years of the study program. Throughout this time period, essential texts of the Buddhist philosophical tradition such as the *Pramanavarttika*, the *Abhisamayalamkara*, and the *Madhyamikavatara*, are memorised in their entirety.

Alongside this two part Buddhist philosophy course, the nuns are studying Tibetan Language and Literature. In Ngondo they learn Tibetan calligraphy, reading and writing and study the first and second Tibetan Pre-Primary text-book along with the 3rd Tibetan Reader by Sherig. Dusda class studies Legs-bshad-ljon-dbang & byis-pa-dag-yig along with how to write applications and letters. They begin studying the history of Tibetan language and literature. Lotak studies rtags-'jug-dka'-gnad-gsal-ba'-melong, both the root text and the explanation and Sakya-legs-bshad up to the third chapter. They continue the study of the history of Tibetan language and literature. In Tsamjor they study Thonmi-zhal-lung, by Tseten zhabdrung. Sakya-legs-bshad from the fourth chapter through to the sixth. They also continue with the study of the History of Tibetan language and literature.

The fourth course of study is Tibetan Religious and Political History. This is based on Shakyapa's two volume history. In Ngondo they study a brief geographical topography of Tibet and the twelve deeds of Lord Buddha from Shakyapa's Political History of Tibet. Dusda studies unique and common Tibetan customs and education and a brief history of five Tibetan religious sects. In Lotak they study a brief history of the three great kings of Tibet and the hagiography of eight great Indian scholars, the "six ornaments and two most excellent". Tsamjor studies Tibetan history from Nyatri through Lang Darma and the administration of the Tibetan government-in-exile.

At the same time the nuns study English using standard English textbooks available here in India. For the general studies portion we are using Tibetan language textbooks developed for use in the Tibetan Children's Village school system. We kept this general studies for only first five years. Mathematics is also studied up to the point of passing a basic proficiency test in order to give the nuns a basic working knowledge.

The subsequent years consist of six years study of the Perfection of Wisdom (Parchin, prajnaparamita) and three years of the Middle Way (U-ma, madhyamika). They follow a complex course which I will not narrate in detail here.

At the same time as engaging in this extensive study program the nuns at Dolma Ling are fully involved in the normal activities of a nunnery which include performing ritual ceremonies. In preparation for these the nuns need to be able to create ritual offering cakes (tormas), butter sculptures, mandalas and become familiar with the preparation for and performance of the rituals. Whilst in Tibet the nuns would make tormas and simple butter sculptures, they would not usually learn to make the large or elaborate butter sculptures or sand mandalas. These days the nuns are learning these monastic arts as well.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama said that a few nuns might decide to go to the mountains to meditate after finishing their studies. For them there is no need to have certificates. Indeed, this is the best thing that one can do with one's life. For others, he stressed the importance of having certificates on graduation from Dolma Ling in order to serve the community with confidence and to generate respect for their well earned position in society. The Geshe degree is the ultimate degree which fully qualifies them as teachers in the Tibetan monastic context. One of the first priorities will be to staff the various nunneries with nun teachers instead of always having to look outside the nunneries for teachers. However, not all the nuns will aspire to or be able to complete this level of study, and the other components of our study program will give them the qualifications needed to teach in any school or study group in the Tibetan community in exile as well as in Tibet itself. Those who choose to gain skills in administration, community services such as counseling and care of the elderly, technical training in services such as electrical installation, water management and so forth or training in income generating arts and crafts will have no difficulty finding a very useful place for themselves in any nunnery and will enable them to reach out to the broader community.

To conclude, our situation at Dolma Ling is unique because our student body is composed primarily of young adults most of whom came to us totally illiterate. This means that as they arrive, the nuns are taught right from the beginning, learning the Tibetan alphabet through a course of study that will eventually give them a level of competency comparable to a western doctorate. They are very determined to receive a proper traditional education in Tibetan language and religion but they are also interested in studying English and learning about the world. Therefore our curriculum is very specifically tuned to their requirements and they are enjoying their courses and producing good results. The curriculum has been made through experience of the nuns and will, if it is seen to be necessary be adapted to suit changing needs. It is our hope that through this education the nuns will gain more confidence and determination to use their natural potential to enjoy their rights for the benefit of other sentient beings.