

## A Means to Achieve Bhikṣuṇī Ordination

### Introduction

The compassionate Buddha allowed women to be ordained as bhikṣuṇīs. Why he resisted at the beginning is, according to the Commentary on Lesser Points (*phran tshogs 'grel pa*) [a commentary on one of the four sections of the vinaya, '*dul ba phran tshogs kyi gzhi, vinayakṣudrakavastu*, that which deals with minor matters,] that for a brief time at the beginning Buddha did not give full ordination for women due to his special loving compassion towards women; he did so with the purpose that they might renounce cyclic existence and as a special technique that they might enter into the higher paths. We need to understand this in accordance with that explanation.

Buddha gave equal opportunities to men and women, and he never made any discrimination between them. From the time of the Buddha, there were set forth, in terms of monastics, fully ordained monks (*bhikṣu, dge slong pha*) and fully ordained nuns (*bhikṣuṇī, dge slong ma*) and, in terms of lay practitioners, both male lay vow holders (*upāsaka, dge bsynen pha*) and female lay vow holders (*upāsikā, dge bsnyen ma*) [that is, lay ordination with any of five precepts]. These are the four types of Followers of the Buddha (*ston pa'i 'khor rnam pa bzhi*) mentioned in the three baskets (*tripiṭaka, sde snod gsum*) of Buddha's teachings and particularly in the vinaya texts. In a similar vein, the statements in many scriptures, "Noble sons and noble daughters," indicate that Buddha made no discrimination between men and women and gave equal rights.

Within the teachings of Buddha Śhakyamuni the first bhikṣuṇī was Mahāprajapati, and she was prophesied by Buddha to be supreme among all the elder nuns. Subsequently the lineage continued in India and then was transmitted to Sri Lanka where it flourished.

However, in the 11<sup>th</sup> century CE, this ordination lineage was lost in Sri Lanka. In the fifth century CE a group of Sri Lankan bhikṣuṇīs, including Devasara (Tessara), traveled to China and transmitted their lineage of bhikṣuṇī ordination. However, although this lineage was transmitted and flourished in China, we have not yet found a detailed source showing how this lineage has continued unbroken to the present.

In Tibet, there never was bhikṣuṇī ordination [that directly came from India or from any other countries] but there is a history that bhikṣuṇīs were ordained by a sangha of only bhikṣus. Therefore, it depends on the vinaya holders [bhikṣus and

bhikṣuṇīs] for a final decision as to whether or not it is possible to restore this tradition.

These days there are many Eastern and Western women who very much wish to receive full ordination as bhikṣuṇīs and, in particular, many of them are calling for equal gender rights with keen interest. Therefore, vinaya holders should have been taking a special interest in this issue. Unfortunately, it seems this issue has been neglected.

In reference to this, His Holiness has made special effort to restore for women the bhikṣuṇī ordination as a right given by Buddha himself. Hence, vinaya holders should take more responsibility to do research as to whether or not this tradition can be restored in accordance with the vinaya. In particular, we request Chinese vinaya holders to take particular responsibility to bring this research to completion. As His Holiness the Dalai Lama has advised on many occasions, an international committee of Buddhist Vinaya Masters needs to make a final decision on this after full discussion of this matter.

In brief, we request all upholders of the vinaya traditions that exist at present, those of the Sthaviravāda/Pāli tradition that spread to Sri Lanka, those of the Dharmagupta tradition that spread to China, and those of the Mūlasarvāstivāda tradition of Nālanda to work together so that we may find a way to definitively decide this matter.

## Necessary Research Regarding the Lineages of Bhikṣuṇī Ordination

Research Committee for Bhikṣuṇī Ordination  
Under the Department of Religion and Culture (CTA)  
(The members of the research committee are given in Appendix One)

There are three subjects to be researched regarding bhikṣuṇī ordination.

- (1) Whether or not it is possible to establish full bhikṣuṇī ordination in accordance with the Mūlasarvāstivāda lineage that flourished in Tibet.
- (2) Whether or not there is a way for Tibetan nuns to get full bhikṣuṇī ordination within the Dharmagupta vinaya tradition that flourished in China.
- (3) Whether or not there is an unbroken lineage of transmission within the system of vinaya that spread to Vietnam, as was told to His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

1.) Regarding full bhikṣuṇī ordination in accordance with the Mūlasarvāstivāda lineage that spread to Tibet, in the eighth century the great Dharma King Trisong Detsen (*khri srong lde'u btsan*) invited ten great vinaya holders, including the great abbot Shantirakshita, to Tibet. They newly established [in Tibet] an ordination lineage of bhikṣus in the system of the Mūlasarvāstivāda vinaya of the stainless tradition of Nālanda, ordaining seven men as bhikṣus. The first of these was called Ba Ratna and King Trisong Detsen himself praised and venerated him, calling him “Jewel of Tibet”. These seven bhikṣus gradually bestowed on others the precepts and vows of fully ordained bhikṣus, and the lineage transmitted from those seven has continued unbroken to the present.

However, the lineage of bhikṣuṇī ordination was not transmitted to Tibet. But, according to sources we have found, there is a history that from the thirteenth century some Tibetan vinaya holders ordained bhikṣuṇīs with a sangha of only bhikṣus.

Generally, according to the vinaya, there must be an assembly of both bhikṣus and bhikṣuṇīs in order to ordain women as bhikṣuṇīs. However, there is a clear source in the vinaya of the Mūlasarvāstivāda tradition that flourished in Tibet saying that if one cannot find any bhikṣuṇīs, then it is suitable for a sangha of only monks to ordain bhikṣuṇīs, although those giving the ordination will incur some infraction. Hence, due to the fact that in the system of Mūlasarvāstivāda vinaya that flourished in Tibet, there exists a vinaya source that if one cannot find any bhikṣuṇīs, then a sangha of male bhikṣus alone can ordain women as bhikṣuṇīs, later, from the thirteenth century, in Tibet a sangha of only male bhikṣus ordained women as bhikṣuṇīs.

In particular, in the biography of Panchen Shakya Chokden (*pan chen shakya mchog ldan*, 1428-1507) written by Kunga Drolchok (kun dga' grol mchog, 1507-1566, published by Kun bzang stobs rgyal, 1974, Thimphu, Bhutan, the Collected Works of Shakya mchog ldan, Vol.16, 164-165), it mentions the following: In the male iron dog year (1490) when Panchen Shakya Chokden was 63 years old, while he was staying for two months at Gyama Trikhang (*rgya ma khri khang*), he gave bhikṣuṇī vows to a woman, a religious practitioner from a prominent family of Gyama, Choedup Palmo Tso (*chos grub dpal mo 'tsho*) with a group of ten bhikṣus only [and no bhikṣuṇīs]. Panchen Shakya Chokden himself served as abbot; Chennga Drupgyal (*spyan snga srub rgyal*) served as karma master (*las slob*); Jetsun Kunga Gyaltsen (*rje btsun kun dga' rgyal mtshan*) as interviewer in isolation (*gsang ston*); Je Drak Marwa (*rje brag dmar ba*) as tutor for the celibacy vow (*tshangs spyod nyer gnas kyi slob dpon*); Dungwang Zangba (*drung dbang bzang pa*) as the discloser of the time of ordination (*dus sgo ba*); Choeje Samten (*chos rje bsam gtan pa*) as assistant (*grogs dan pa*); and four others served as supplementary members for the ordination ceremony.

It says that after her ordination she was called Gyama Gelongma (the bhikṣuṇī of Gyama). It is clear that there are two texts on the basis of which she was ordained as a bhikṣuṇī, written by Panchen Shakya Chokden himself, the *Commentary on the "Vinaya Sutra", Sun Chariot Illuminating the Sutra* and the *Treatise Clarifying the Individual Meanings of Difficult Points of the "One Hundred and One [Disciplinary Practices]"*.<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, that ordaining bhikṣuṇīs by only male bhikṣus is regarded as agreeable vinaya practice (*las 'chags pa*) in the Mūlasarvāstivāda system is shown by citation of vinaya texts from valid Tibetan commentaries on the vinaya. As to what those vinaya sources are, they can be found in the Indian commentary, [Gunaprabha's] *Vinaya Sutra* (the root text), and in three commentaries on it and the source for that can be traced back to Buddha's own words in the vinaya scriptures. The detailed research on this has been published in the *Clear Mirror, A Basis of Investigation Regarding Bhikṣuṇī Ordination in Tibet*.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Complete works (Gsung 'bum) of Gser-mdog pan-chen Shakya-mchog-ldan Vol 22, Ngawang Topgay, reprint 1995 of 'Bruk pa kunzang Topgyal edition, 1978 'dul ba mdo'i gnas rnam par bshad pa mdo'i snang byed nyi ma'i shing rta, pp. 1-310. las brgya rtsa gcig gi dka' gnas so so'i don gsal bar byed pa'i bstan bcos zla ba'i shing rta, pp.311-525. These are commentaries on the two central texts by Gunaprabha (yon ten 'od), the Vinaya Sutra ('dul ba'i mdo) and the Ekottarakarmashataka (las brgya rtsa gcig pa), these two texts being the main Indian commentaries on the vinaya texts found within the 'dul ba'i sde snod.

<sup>2</sup> bod du dge slong mar bsgrubs pa'i dpyad gzhi rab gsal me long, by Acharya dge bshes thub bstan byang chub, published by the Department of Religion and Culture, Dharamsala, India, 2000.

In brief, although there was not a lineage of bhikṣuṇī vows in Tibet, there is a history of some vinaya holders in Tibet ordaining women as bhikṣuṇīs with a sangha of only monks. Whether, in accordance with this, ordination can be restored or not needs to be determined. We need to do further research to find all available materials and distribute such materials to all related members as bases of research.

In this way, it seems that by way of discussion with respected Vinaya Masters of the Mūlasarvāstivāda tradition, we could within the year 2006 reach a conclusion as to whether or not, from the side of vinaya holders of the Mūlasarvāstivāda tradition that flourished in Tibet, bhikṣuṇī ordination is suitable in the system of Sarvastivada vinaya. We can give a clear and detailed determination that our conclusion is thus.

Not only this, but also, in accordance with the vinaya of the Mūlasarvāstivāda that flourished in Tibet, and with there existing clear and detailed vinaya sources that it can be bestowed in this way, then, regarding women of the East and West who wish to receive full ordination as bhikṣuṇīs within the system of Mūlasarvāstivāda vinaya, the first essential point is have a final approval by an international group of Buddhist Vinaya Masters as to whether there is or is not a way to restore this tradition and ordain bhikṣuṇīs.

2.) Regarding the question of whether or not Tibetan nuns can receive full bhikṣuṇī ordination in accordance with the Dharmagupta vinaya that flourished in China, this research has been left for many years without having been brought to a conclusion. Concerning this, Vinaya masters across the world, internationally, and particularly Chinese vinaya holders should take greater responsibility for resolving this issue.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama has many times given his valuable advice and guidance regarding this, but we haven't accomplished it up to now. We must take this issue up again so as to resolve it. Chinese vinaya holders should take special initiative and this committee will work together to reach a conclusion. (What things need to be resolved is set forth clearly below.)

3.) His Holiness has been told that an unbroken lineage of bhikṣuṇī ordination exists in the system of vinaya that flourished in Vietnam. To seek out the authenticity of this lineage, we need further research into what tradition they belong to, how the tradition arrived there, and what ritual texts are used for the bhikṣuṇī ordination ceremony. To find out all these points, we need to do research with scholars who are actually well aware of these questions. Further, these scholars have to contact individual lineage holders and obtain proper sources. As mentioned earlier, to do this research everyone should be involved equally, and in particular Vietnamese bhikṣus and bhikṣuṇīs should take key responsibility.

Second Point  
Project to Conclude the Research on Bhikṣuṇī Ordination  
Regarding the Dharmagupta Vinaya that Flourished in China

There are two indispensable points which must be resolved in order for Tibetan nuns to take bhikṣuṇī ordination that accords with vinaya in the present Chinese tradition. Without finding reliable sources for these, it seems that there is no way for them to get bhikṣuṇī ordination that accords with the system of Dharmagupta vinaya that is accepted in China. The first of these is that in the Chinese system, a sangha of only bhikṣus is ordaining women as bhikṣuṇīs. In order to adopt this tradition we must find a reliable source on which they base this, such as a quote from the vinaya.

Otherwise, the second condition is that from the fifth century there was a bhikṣuṇī ordination lineage in China that came from Sri Lanka. We have been doing research, seeking a reliable source that this lineage has continued to the present as an unbroken tradition of practice. Regarding both of these points, we have not yet found a clear source, and we must carry on further research. Concerning this, His Holiness the Dalai Lama has given guidance and advice that finding the sources by which this can be resolved needs mainly to be undertaken by Chinese vinaya holders, but it hasn't been accomplished up to now.

Specifically, the chief responsibility regarding ordaining as bhikṣuṇīs Eastern and Western women who wish to receive full bhikṣuṇī ordination rests with holders of the vinaya pitaka. And as His Holiness the Dalai Lama has given clear and repeated guidance, a final decision with regard to matters of vinaya must come from an international body of Buddhist Vinaya Masters who have authority to take such a decision.

To accomplish this project as His Holiness wishes, everyone must take initiative to resume research regarding the following three points, and we request, once again, that Chinese male and female vinaya holders take the main responsibility in this regard.

The results of our research on the Chinese tradition of bhikṣuṇī ordination up to now have been published and disseminated in a small booklet, but there remain some unresolved points that definitely require further research, as per the following:

**1. A vinaya source is to be sought:**

In the Chinese tradition, from the fourth century, a tradition began in which the first nun ordained was a woman [whose ordination] name was Ching Chien, who was ordained as a bhikṣuṇī by a sangha of only bhikṣus. In accordance with that tradition, women have been and even nowadays are being ordained as bhikṣuṇīs by

a sangha of only bhikṣus. Regarding a source which says that is suitable, although we have searched and tried to find out whether there is or is not a clear source for this in the vinaya pitaka of the Dharmaguptakas, which was translated from Sanskrit into Chinese by the Indian master Buddhayashas between 410-412, we have not yet been able to find a proper source. Hence, the first point is that we need to reach a firm conclusion as to whether or not there is such a source.

## **2. A record of the lineage of the transmission of this vow is to be sought.**

According to another Chinese tradition, from the fifth century a group of Sri Lankan bhikṣuṇīs, who had come to China and included bhikṣuṇī Devasara as the main one, and bhikṣus, of whom the Indian master Guṇavarman was the main one, ordained a group of Chinese women as bhikṣuṇīs with an assembly of both bhikṣus and bhikṣuṇīs. We have been doing research as to whether or not this lineage has continued unbroken up to the present by meeting various Chinese vinaya holders, bhikṣus and bhikṣuṇīs, and posing our questions; also individuals traveled to various Taiwanese nunneries where this question is being researched. However, still we have not reached a point where the question of whether or not this lineage of dual ordination is unbroken is firmly settled. Hence, the second point of research is to engage in further research to the point where there is a clear decision that it is or is not.

## **3. The ritual ceremony of bhikṣuṇī ordination is to be sought.**

It seems that research is needed regarding the ritual for ordination of bhikṣuṇīs in the Chinese tradition as to whether or not there is a difference between the vinaya ritual ceremony of full ordination of the Dharmagupta tradition in Chinese and how that ritual is carried out in China today. The reason for this is because it seems that nowadays some vinaya holders in China, when they give bhikṣuṇī ordination not only read aloud the ritual ceremony text of ordination [which is not the same as in the Mūlasarvāstivāda vinaya, according to which the rites have to be said by heart, as opposed to reading from a text], but also give ordination as bhikṣuṇīs simultaneously to one or two hundred women [whereas in the Mūlasarvāstivāda vinaya, not more than three can be ordained at one time]. We need to investigate whether or not this is allowed in the Chinese translation of prātimokṣa vow liturgy ('*dul ba'i las chog*) in the Dharmagupta tradition.

Another question is that in the prātimokṣa vow liturgy of the Dharmagupta tradition in Chinese, it says that one must first ordain as a lay vow holder (*upāsikā*), then as a novice nun (*śramaṇerikā*), then as a probationary nun (*śikṣamāna*), and when one has trained for two years in the basic precepts and maintained pure behavior, then one takes bhikṣuṇī ordination. However, these days some Chinese vinaya holders within one month ordain women as *śramaṇerikā*, and then as *śikṣamāna*, and then, without their training for two years in the basic precepts, ordain them as bhikṣuṇīs. So the third point to be researched is the two questions: if they are ordained in this way, is there a ritual fault or not? And, is this ritual practice in accordance with prātimokṣa liturgy of the Dharmagupta tradition?

#### **4. A final decision by vinaya holders.**

Knowledge regarding the three points laid out above is the basis upon which international Buddhist sangha members can make an informed decision regarding ordaining bhikṣuṇīs within the Dharmagupta vinaya that flourished in China. Hence, this is the fourth point, that an international body of Buddhist Vinaya Masters having authority with regard to matters of vinaya needs to, on this basis, reach a final decision as to how Eastern and Western women who wish to receive full bhikṣuṇī ordination in accordance with the Dharmagupta vinaya that flourished in China can do so.