

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.66871/ihj.v1i1.002>

From Ordination to Education: Reconfiguring Female Religious Authority among Tibetan Nuns in Exile

Madhav Choudhary¹

¹St. Stephen's College, Delhi

Abstract

The educational and institutional transformation of Tibetan Buddhist nuns in exile has significantly reshaped contemporary Tibetan Buddhism. The establishment of the Tibetan Nuns Project in 1987, the growth of institutions such as Dolma Ling Nunnery and Institute, and the introduction of the Geshema degree have expanded opportunities for women's religious education and leadership. Yet, full bhikshuni ordination remains unresolved within the Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya tradition despite sustained deliberations and the encouragement of His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama. While scholarship often examines educational reform and the ordination debate separately, this paper asks: How is female religious authority being articulated and legitimised among Tibetan nuns in exile in the absence of full bhikshuni ordination?

Drawing upon ethnographic fieldwork in Dharamshala, including interviews with Geshema Delek Wangmo, Geshema Tenzin Kunsel, and Youdon Aukatsang, observations at Dolma Ling Nunnery, and engagement with the Tibetan Nuns Project, this study examines women's religious advancement alongside institutional publications, Vinaya literature, and scholarship by Karma Lekshe Tso-mo, Ann Heirman, Judy Tobler, Rita Gross, and Anne Klein. It argues that the unresolved status of bhikshuni ordination has not prevented new forms of female religious authority. Tibetan nuns increasingly articulate religious advancement through education, scholastic attainment, institutional participation, and the language of the Vinaya, demonstrating how educational reforms and monastic institutions have reconfigured female religious authority within the normative framework of Tibetan Buddhist tradition.

Keywords: Tibetan Buddhist Nuns, Bhikshuni Ordination, Exile, Vinaya, Tibetan Nuns Project, Buddhist Monasticism, Dharamshala

Received: 19/06/2026 | **Accepted:** 10/09/2026 | **Published:** 20/09/2026

Corresponding Author: Madhav Choudhary | **Email:** madhavchoudhary1209@gmail.com

© 2026 The Author(s). Published by Allahabad Academic Press. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) License.

I. Introduction

Before visiting Dolma Ling Nunnery and Institute of Buddhist Dialectics in Dharamsala, I spent several days at Tse-Chokling Monastery, where a senior monk remarked, almost matter-of-factly, that “nuns are half monks.” The comment was striking not only for its casual acceptance of hierarchy, but because it reflects an assumption that has long structured scholarship on women in Buddhism: that a nun’s status is measured, above all, by her exclusion from full *bhikṣuṇī* ordination.

My experience at Dolma Ling complicated this assumption. I found nuns engaged in rigorous philosophical study, formal debate, institutional administration, and teaching – and when I spoke with Geshema Delek Wangmo, Geshema Tenzin Kunsel, Youdon Aukatsang (Director of the Tibetan Nuns Project), and Kama-la (its Project Manager), each consistently framed women’s advancement through education and institutional responsibility rather than through the unresolved question of ordination. Most tellingly, when I asked Aukatsang directly about *bhikṣuṇī* ordination, she declined to comment on the doctrinal question, explaining that the Project’s mandate is education and institutional development, not the resolution of Vinaya law. That deflection is not evasion; it is a distinction — one that scholarship has largely failed to make.

Existing literature treats “religious authority” as a single, undifferentiated category, which produces an unresolved impasse. Feminist scholarship, following Rita Gross, reads the absence of ordination as evidence of enduring patriarchal exclusion. Revisionist scholarship, following Ann Heirman and Bhikkhu Anālayo, reads it instead as a matter of Vinaya legality and lineage transmission, largely bracketing the question of what authority nuns *do* exercise in its absence. A third strand, associated with Karma Lekshe Tsomo and Judy Tobler, documents the real expansion of nuns’ education in exile – but as a parallel story of “progress,” never integrated with the ordination debate itself. No existing account asks what happens when a religious actor recognises education and ordination as distinct forms of standing, and organises her own authority accordingly, as Aukatsang does. That is the gap this paper addresses.

This paper argues that Tibetan nuns in exile have gained substantial scholastic authority (credentialed through the Geshema degree) and institutional authority (exercised through administrative office), and that both are treated by nuns themselves as religiously legitimate in their own right, not as consolation prizes for unresolved ordination. But it further argues that nuns consistently keep these forms

of standing analytically separate from canonical authority, the Vinaya-based legitimacy that only full ordination confers, even where institutional publications and some scholarship elide the distinction. Religious authority in exile, in other words, has not been unified but differentiated, and it is precisely this differentiation, rather than a single narrative of “empowerment,” that best explains how Tibetan nuns themselves speak about their own advancement.

This paper draws on ethnographic fieldwork conducted at Dolma Ling Nunnery and Institute of Buddhist Dialectics, preceded by preliminary observation at Tse-Chokling Monastery, alongside secondary scholarship, institutional publications, and Vinaya literature. The fieldwork itself was necessarily limited in scope: conducting interviews in English restricted my access primarily to nuns and administrators in senior positions, since it is largely these individuals through prior exposure to public-facing roles, international engagement, or administrative training who speak English or another language beyond Tibetan. As a result, the interviews at the core of this paper, with Geshema Delek Wangmo, Geshema Tenzin Kunsel, Youdon Aukatsang, and Kama-la, reflect the perspective of institutional leadership at one prominent nunnery rather than a representative cross-section of nuns at Dolma Ling or elsewhere. Junior nuns and novices, who may hold different or less institutionally inflected views of their own religious standing, are largely absent from this account, not by design but as a direct consequence of this language barrier.

The paper proceeds in three steps: Section II establishes the historical and Vinaya basis of the ordination impasse; Section III traces the post-1959 institutional reforms that built scholastic and administrative pathways for nuns; Section IV returns to Dolma Ling to test the three-part distinction against ethnographic evidence, engaging critically with Saba Mahmood’s account of religious agency along the way.

II. Women, Vinaya and the Historical Limits of Religious Authority in Tibetan Buddhism

The contemporary position of Tibetan Buddhist nuns presents a striking historical paradox. While the past three decades have witnessed unprecedented advances in women’s monastic and scholastic education and institutional leadership, the question of full *bhikṣuṇī* ordination remains unresolved within the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. Today, nuns receive advanced philosophical training, participate in rigorous public debates, and earn the prestigious Geshema degree, yet they continue to belong formally to a monastic system in which the lineage of full female ordination has never been established.

Understanding this apparent contradiction requires situating contemporary developments within the historical evolution of the Buddhist monastic order, particularly the relationship between women's admission into the *Saṅgha*, the authority of the Vinaya, and the institutional organisation of monastic life.

The origins of the Buddhist order of nuns are traditionally traced to the ordination of Mahāprajāpatī Gotamī, the Buddha's foster mother and maternal aunt. According to the Vinaya traditions, Mahāprajāpatī approached the Buddha seeking permission for women to renounce worldly life and enter the monastic community. The request was initially refused. It was only after the intervention of Ānanda, who questioned whether women were equally capable of attaining liberation— that the Buddha agreed to admit women into the *Saṅgha*, acknowledging that women possessed the same spiritual capacity for enlightenment as men.¹ This episode has occupied a central place in Buddhist historiography because it simultaneously affirms women's soteriological equality while introducing the institutional conditions under which that equality would be exercised.

The admission of women, however, was accompanied by the acceptance of the Eight *Garudharmas*² a set of disciplinary rules that established the formal relationship between the communities of monks (*bhikkhus*) and nuns (*bhikkhūnīs*). These rules required, among other things, that even the most senior nun defer to the most junior monk, that nuns seek regular instruction from monks, and that certain disciplinary procedures be conducted under monastic supervision.³ Collectively, the *Garudharmas* created a hierarchical relationship between the two monastic communities, making the nuns' order institutionally dependent upon the monks' order.

Modern scholarship has complicated the traditional narrative surrounding these rules. Rather than accepting them as an original pronouncement of the historical Buddha, scholars such as Ann Heirman and Bhikkhu Anālayo argue that the *Garudharmas* most likely developed gradually after the establishment of the nuns' order as Buddhist communities sought to regulate the relationship between male and female monastics.⁴ Their appearance across different Vinaya traditions with significant textual variations further suggests that these regulations emerged through processes of institutional develop-

1 Anālayo, Bhikkhu. "Mahāprajāpatī's Going Forth in the Madhyama-āgama." *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 18 (2011): 268–317.

2 Gurudharmas

3 Heirman, A. (2011). "Buddhist nuns: Between past and present". *Numen*, 58(5), 603–631.

4 Ibid

ment rather than as a single immutable decree. This distinction is important because it separates the question of women's spiritual capacity from the historical evolution of monastic law.

As Heirman observes, the early Buddhist tradition consistently recognised women as capable of achieving liberation; the hierarchical position of nuns was therefore not primarily justified through differences in spiritual potential but through concerns relating to institutional organisation, monastic discipline, and the preservation of the *Saṅgha*. The distinction between soteriological equality and institutional hierarchy would become one of the defining characteristics of Buddhist monasticism. Women were acknowledged as equally capable of attaining enlightenment, yet their participation within the organised monastic community was regulated through legal and disciplinary structures that placed the nuns' order under the authority of the monks' order. This duality would profoundly shape subsequent debates concerning women's ordination across Buddhist traditions, including Tibetan Buddhism.

The historical significance of these developments lies not merely in the establishment of a female monastic community but in the central role accorded to the *Vinaya* as the source of monastic legitimacy. Questions concerning authority, ordination, seniority, and institutional continuity were understood not as matters of individual preference but as issues governed by canonical law.

While the admission of women into the Buddhist *Saṅgha* established the legitimacy of female monasticism, it also placed questions of religious authority firmly within the framework of the *Vinaya*. The Vinaya functions as the constitutional foundation of Buddhist monastic life, regulating admission into the order, disciplinary procedures, ritual conduct, and the transmission of ecclesiastical authority. As Buddhism spread across Asia, multiple Vinaya traditions emerged, each developing its own legal corpus and ordination procedures. Of these, only three survive as living monastic traditions today: the Dharmaguptaka tradition followed in China, Taiwan, Korea and Vietnam; the Theravāda tradition prevalent in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia; and the Mūlasarvāstivāda tradition, which forms the canonical basis of Tibetan Buddhism.⁵

The continuity of monastic authority within each Vinaya tradition depends upon an uninterrupted ordination lineage. Unlike novice ordination, full *bhikṣuṇī* ordination requires a legally constituted dual ceremony conducted first by an assembly of fully ordained nuns and subsequently confirmed by

5 Heirman, A. (2011). "Buddhist nuns: Between past and present". *Numen*, 58(5)603–605

an assembly of fully ordained monks belonging to the same Vinaya tradition. This procedure was intended to safeguard the legitimacy of the *Saṅgha* by ensuring that ordination remained part of an unbroken institutional lineage rather than an individual act of religious commitment.⁶ Consequently, if a lineage of fully ordained nuns ceases to exist, the legal validity of subsequent ordinations becomes a matter of considerable debate.

It is precisely this historical circumstance that distinguishes Tibetan Buddhism from several East Asian traditions. Tibetan monasticism adopted the Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya, yet there is no conclusive historical evidence that a complete *bhikṣuṇī* ordination lineage was ever successfully transmitted to Tibet. As a result, Tibetan women traditionally entered monastic life as novice nuns (*śrāmaṇerikās*), observing novice precepts without access to full ordination. This absence did not imply the non-existence of female monastic communities; rather, it created a structural distinction in monastic status whereby even the most senior nun remained, in Vinaya terms, below a fully ordained monk.⁷

However contemporary scholarship cautions against interpreting this situation solely through the lens of gender discrimination. Heirman argues that the principal obstacle to restoring full ordination within the Tibetan tradition lies not in doctrinal assertions of women's spiritual incapacity but in disagreements over Vinaya legality, lineage continuity, and the validity of cross-traditional ordination procedures.

This legal complexity has shaped the cautious position adopted by His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama. While consistently expressing support for expanding women's educational opportunities and recognising the importance of full ordination for many Buddhist women, he has repeatedly maintained that no single individual or lineage holder possesses the authority to alter Vinaya regulations unilaterally. Instead, any resolution must emerge through collective deliberation among senior representatives of the relevant Buddhist traditions. This position reflects a commitment to preserving the integrity of the Vinaya while remaining sympathetic to contemporary efforts to enhance women's participation in monastic life.

The distinction between canonical continuity and institutional reform would become particularly sig-

6 Heirman, A. (2011). "Buddhist nuns: Between past and present". *Numen*, 58(5).604–605, 618–623

7 Tobler, J. (2007). "Tibetan buddhist nuns in Exile: Creating a sacred space to be at Home". *Journal for the Study of Religion*, 19(1).

nificant following the Tibetan exile after 1959. As the restoration of *bhikṣuṇī* ordination remained unresolved, educational reform, scholastic recognition, and institutional innovation emerged as alternative means through which Tibetan nuns expanded their religious authority. Rather than challenging the Vinaya from outside the tradition, exile institutions increasingly sought to transform women's position through rigorous philosophical education, new opportunities for leadership, and the eventual establishment of the Geshema degree. It is within this historical context that the institutional reconstruction of Tibetan nunhood in exile must be understood.

III. Promoting 'Nunhood' in Exile: Institutional Reform after 1959

The Tibetan diaspora following the events of 1959 constituted one of the most profound ruptures in the history of Tibetan Buddhism. The destruction of monasteries during the Cultural Revolution, the displacement of thousands of monks and nuns, and the re-establishment of Tibetan religious life in India fundamentally altered the institutional landscape within which Tibetan Buddhism would develop during the second half of the twentieth century. Yet exile was not solely an experience of loss. It also created conditions for institutional innovation that would prove particularly significant for Tibetan Buddhist nuns. While women had long participated in Tibetan religious life, their opportunities before exile remained constrained by limited educational infrastructure, inadequate economic support, and the absence of institutions dedicated specifically to advanced monastic training. The reconstruction of Tibetan Buddhism in exile therefore became not merely an exercise in cultural preservation but also an opportunity to reconsider how religious authority itself might be cultivated within the monastic community.⁸

The Central Tibetan Administration (CTA), established in Dharamshala under the leadership of His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, approached the preservation of Tibetan Buddhism through systematic institutional rebuilding. Monastic universities were re-established in exile, educational curricula were standardised, and new religious institutions were created to ensure the continuity of Tibetan scholastic traditions. Although these efforts initially focused on reconstructing the major monastic centres for monks, the rebuilding process gradually expanded to include women. As Judy Tobler observes, exile transformed the educational prospects of Tibetan nuns by creating stable monastic environments in which sustained philosophical study became possible on a scale previously unavailable

⁸ Tobler, J. (2007). "Tibetan buddhist nuns in Exile: Creating a sacred space to be at Home". *Journal for the Study of Religion*, 19(1).

to most women.⁹ Rather than replicating the institutional inequalities that had characterised much of pre-1959 Tibet, exile increasingly became a space in which women's education could be integrated into the broader project of preserving Tibetan Buddhism.

A decisive feature of this transformation was the educational vision consistently articulated by the Dalai Lama. While maintaining that questions surrounding *bhikṣuṇī* ordination required consensus across the Buddhist world and could not be resolved unilaterally, he repeatedly argued that there existed no doctrinal justification for denying women access to the highest levels of Buddhist learning. His support for women's education emerged not from a rejection of the Vinaya but from a conviction that the future vitality of Tibetan Buddhism depended upon the cultivation of qualified scholars irrespective of gender. As Karma Lekshe Tsomo has argued, the Dalai Lama's interventions shifted the emphasis of reform from the contested terrain of ordination towards the more immediately attainable objective of scholastic equality, thereby creating opportunities for women without disrupting established Vinaya traditions.¹⁰ This distinction would prove foundational to subsequent institutional developments.

Among the earliest organisations to reflect these changing priorities was the Tibetan Women's Association (TWA), re-established in exile in 1984. Although the Association's principal objectives centred upon preserving Tibetan culture, advocating for the Tibetan freedom movement, and improving the social position of Tibetan women, it also contributed to a wider reconfiguration of women's public leadership within exile society.¹¹ By encouraging women to assume responsibilities in education, community organisation, and political life, the TWA challenged inherited assumptions concerning women's participation in public institutions. Its significance for the history of Tibetan nunhood therefore lies less in direct intervention within monastic education than in fostering a broader social environment in which female leadership became increasingly visible and legitimate.

The most significant institutional catalyst for reform, however, was the establishment of the Tibetan Nuns Project (TNP) in 1987 under the patronage of the Dalai Lama and the Department of Religion and Culture of the Central Tibetan Administration. Initially conceived as a humanitarian initiative to

9 Tobler, J. (2007). "Tibetan buddhist nuns in Exile: Creating a sacred space to be at Home". *Journal for the Study of Religion*, 19(1).

10 Tsomo, Karma Lekshe. "Tibetan Nuns and Nunneries." *The Tibet Journal* 12, no. 4 (1987): 87–99.

11 Central Tibetan Administration, Department of Religion and Culture, *Annual Report* (Dharamshala: Central Tibetan Administration, 2025)

support refugee nuns arriving from Tibet, the Project rapidly evolved into the principal institution dedicated to transforming women's monastic education. Rather than limiting its work to welfare provision, the TNP adopted a long-term educational strategy that combined infrastructural development, academic training, healthcare, and financial support with the explicit objective of enabling nuns to pursue advanced philosophical studies. As Tsomo observes, this represented a significant departure from earlier patterns in which nuns often received only elementary religious instruction before being expected to devote themselves primarily to ritual practice and domestic responsibilities within monastic communities.

The educational philosophy of the Tibetan Nuns Project reached its fullest institutional expression with the establishment of Dolma Ling Nunnery and Institute of Buddhist Dialectics near Dharamshala in 2005. Conceived as the first non-sectarian nunnery designed specifically to provide higher Buddhist education, Dolma Ling embodied a new model of female monasticism centred upon scholarship, debate, and institutional self-governance.¹² The curriculum intentionally paralleled that of the great monastic universities, requiring intensive study of Buddhist philosophy, logic, epistemology, Madhyamaka, Abhidharma, Vinaya, and dialectical debate. Equally significant was the fact that the institution increasingly came to be administered by nuns themselves, signalling a gradual transfer of educational and organisational authority into female monastic leadership. In contrast to earlier models that positioned nuns primarily as recipients of religious instruction, Dolma Ling cultivated women as future teachers, administrators, and intellectual leaders within the Tibetan Buddhist community.

The culmination of these reforms was the formal introduction of the Geshema degree, awarded for the first time in 2016 after decades of sustained institutional preparation. Requiring nearly two decades of rigorous philosophical study and comprehensive examinations, the Geshema qualification represents the highest scholastic achievement available to Tibetan Buddhist nuns.¹³ Its importance extends beyond educational certification. The degree institutionalises women's authority as interpreters and teachers of Buddhist philosophy, granting formal recognition to intellectual accomplishments that had historically been associated almost exclusively with monks. Unlike the unresolved question of *bhikṣuṇī* ordination which continued to depend upon complex Vinaya deliberations involving lineage continuity and inter-traditional consensus, the Geshema degree could be implemented entirely within existing monastic structures. Educational reform therefore became the principal mechanism through which women's religious authority expanded without necessitating immediate changes to the

12 Tibetan Nuns Project, *Annual Report* (Dharamshala: Tibetan Nuns Project, 2025)

13 Tibetan Nuns Project, *Annual Report* (Dharamshala: Tibetan Nuns Project, 2016)

canonical framework governing ordination.

Viewed collectively, these developments reveal that exile transformed Tibetan nunhood not through a single act of doctrinal reform but through the gradual reconstruction of institutions capable of producing new forms of religious authority. Education, scholastic excellence, administrative participation, and institutional leadership increasingly became recognised sources of legitimacy within the monastic community. Significantly, these reforms were consistently articulated through the language of Buddhist tradition rather than secular rights discourse. They sought not to circumvent the Vinaya but to maximise the possibilities for women's advancement within it. This institutional strategy provides the historical context for the ethnographic observations examined in the following section. As conversations with nuns, Geshemas, and administrators at Dolma Ling demonstrate, contemporary understandings of women's advancement continue to privilege education and institutional responsibility while treating full ordination as a question whose resolution remains contingent upon the wider Buddhist community.

IV. Reconfiguring Female Religious Authority: Ethnography, Tradition, and Feminist Debates

Existing scholarship on women in Buddhism has approached the question of bhikṣuṇī ordination through two interpretive traditions that, despite their disagreements, share a common assumption: that ordination is the measure against which all other forms of religious standing must be evaluated. Rita Gross reads the absence of a functioning bhikṣuṇī lineage in Tibetan Buddhism as symptomatic of a broader patriarchal structure, in which institutional practice subordinates women despite doctrinal affirmations of their spiritual capacity.¹⁴ Ann Heirman and Bhikkhu Anālayo, by contrast, locate the same absence within the technical history of Vinaya transmission, treating it as a problem of monastic jurisprudence rather than gender ideology.¹⁵ Both readings are defensible, and both are supported by real evidence – Gross by the historical fact of institutional exclusion, Heirman and Anālayo by the genuine legal complexity of cross-traditional ordination. But both treat ordination as the *terminus* of the inquiry: for Gross, its absence is the injustice to be explained; for Heirman, its absence is the technical puzzle to be solved. Neither asks what nuns do with authority in the meantime, or whether

14 Gross, R. M. (1995). *Buddhism after patriarchy : A feminist history, analysis, and reconstruction of Buddhism*. Satguru Publications.

15 Heirman, A. (2011). "Buddhist nuns: Between past and present". *Numen*, 58(5), 603–631, Anālayo, B. (2013). "The Legality of Bhikkhunī Ordination". *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, 1-25

the categories they use to describe their own standing might not map neatly onto either “exclusion” or “legal impasse.” My fieldwork suggests that this is precisely the wrong place to stop looking, and the vignettes that follow are organised around a different question: not whether ordination has been achieved, but what other things count as achievement, in what register, and with what limits acknowledged by the nuns themselves.

Curriculum and scholastic authority– When I asked Youdon Aukatsang, Director of the Tibetan Nuns Project, whether meaningful differences remained between the education of monks and nuns, she rejected the premise of the question outright. The curriculum, she explained, is fundamentally the same: nuns study Buddhist philosophy, logic (*pramāṇa*), *Madhyamaka*, *Vinaya*, *Abhidharma*, and *Prajñāpāramitā* using the same texts and the same sequence of examinations as monks, and debate where institutional arrangements permit, is organised across the two communities rather than confined within them.

Aukatsang’s answer is a claim to scholastic authority, stated with considerable confidence, and nothing more. She does not claim, and was not asked to claim, that curricular parity translates into canonical parity; the Geshema examination system, however rigorous, operates entirely outside the legal machinery that would confer ordination status. This is worth stating plainly because the institutional literature does not always keep the distinction as clean as Aukatsang does in conversation: TNP’s own annual reports tend to describe the Geshema programme in language that borrows the prestige of ordination – comparing the degree to a doctorate, framing 2016 as a moment of “arrival”¹⁶ without specifying that scholastic recognition and canonical recognition remain governed by entirely different institutional logics. Aukatsang’s own precision, in other words, is sharper than her institution’s public messaging, which raises a question the paper returns to below: whether the flattening of these categories in institutional self-presentation is a rhetorical strategy, one that borrows ordination’s symbolic weight for a credential that does not carry ordination’s legal force rather than a simple description of reality.

Institutional authority and its economic dimension– My conversation with Kama-la, Project Manager at the Tibetan Nuns Project, was organised around a different vocabulary entirely. Rather than describing what nuns learn, she described what nuns are increasingly permitted to run: the nunnery’s income-generating workshops producing prayer flags, incense, and khatas; the encouragement given

16 Tibetan Nuns Project, *Annual Report* (Dharamshala: Tibetan Nuns Project, 2016)

to nuns to pursue employment outside the nunnery after completing their studies; the gradual shift of administrative responsibility from monks and lay trustees toward nuns themselves. Aukatsang made the same point from a different angle, noting that Dolma Ling had recently appointed its first female Principal.

This is a claim to institutional authority— authority exercised through governance and financial stewardship rather than through doctrine and it is analytically the least ambiguous of the three categories, precisely because it requires no negotiation with Vinaya law at all. A nunnery can appoint a female Principal, or authorise nuns to manage a shop's finances, without touching the question of ordination in any way; these are matters of internal institutional governance, not canonical status. This is also, I want to suggest, exactly why institutional authority has expanded fastest and furthest of the three categories: it is the one form of authority that exile institutions can grant unilaterally, without waiting on inter-traditional Vinaya consensus. That ease of expansion is worth treating with some suspicion rather than simply celebrating. An institution can multiply administrative titles for nuns relatively cheaply, in a way that visibly signals reform, while the far more difficult and contested question, canonical standing, remains untouched. Institutional authority, on this reading, risks functioning as a release valve: real, and valuable to the women who hold it, but also convenient for an institution whose leadership, including the Dalai Lama, has consistently declined to resolve the ordination question unilaterally.

Geshema Delek Wangmo, Principal of Dolma Ling, offered the clearest example of a pattern that recurred throughout my fieldwork. When invited to reflect on her own monastic journey, she spoke about education, discipline, and perseverance rather than about institutional exclusion; when I asked directly about *bhikṣuṇī* ordination, the conversation moved back, within a few sentences, to the achievements of the Geshema programme.

It would be easy to read this simply as confirmation of the paper's thesis — a nun choosing to locate her authority in scholarship rather than ordination. But this reading requires scrutiny rather than acceptance at face value. Wangmo is not merely describing her experience; as Principal, she is also the institution's most senior representative, and her account of her own journey is simultaneously the institution's account of itself. It is difficult, from a single conversation, to separate a personal narrative of authority from an institutionally rehearsed one. What can be said with more confidence is narrower: that scholastic authority is available to Wangmo as a legitimate, non-evasive answer to a

question about ordination, in a way it would not have been available to a nun of her generation thirty years ago. Whether this reflects a deep personal reorientation of what she considers to matter, or a well-practised institutional deflection, or most plausibly some inseparable combination of both, the ethnographic material alone cannot settle.

During one conversation, it was suggested that accumulating merit as a nun in this life could facilitate rebirth in a male body in a future life, where the path to liberation is traditionally held to be less obstructed. When I then asked whether liberation could also be attained directly in a female body, the answer was immediate: yes.

Gross would likely read the first statement as evidence of exactly the doctrinal residue she describes – a cosmology in which female embodiment remains, even now, marked as a lesser starting point, however much official teaching affirms women’s equal capacity for enlightenment.¹⁷ Its coexistence with an unequivocal affirmation of women’s capacity for direct liberation suggests that Tibetan nunhood in exile is not moving along a single trajectory from exclusion to inclusion, but holding several doctrinal layers simultaneously, an older cosmological hierarchy and a Mahāyāna universalism that in principle supersedes it, without the institution requiring these layers to be reconciled. The figure of Tārā, who vowed to remain in female form until saṃsāra is emptied rather than seek male rebirth en route to Buddhahood, is regularly invoked by nuns at Dolma Ling precisely to hold this tension rather than resolve it: an affirmation available within the same tradition that also produces the male-rebirth teaching.

Saba Mahmood’s argument that agency need not take the form of resistance to tradition, but can instead be realised through inhabitation and reinterpretation of that tradition from within, is frequently invoked in scholarship on women in South Asian and Middle Eastern religious revival movements, and it offers an obvious point of reference here.¹⁸ The convergence with Mahmood’s framework is nonetheless real, and worth stating on its own terms before it is qualified. Mahmood’s central intervention against liberal feminist theory is her insistence that agency should not be measured only by the degree to which a subject resists or subverts inherited structures of authority; a subject can also exercise agency by taking up the disciplinary practices of a tradition and inhabiting them with skill,

17 Gross, R. M. (1995). *Buddhism after patriarchy : A feminist history, analysis, and reconstruction of Buddhism*. Satguru Publications

18 Saba Mahmood. (2012). *Politics of Piety, the Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton Oxford Princeton University Press

seriousness, and self-direction, even when those practices originate outside her own authorship. This is precisely the register in which Wangmo, Aukatsang, and Kama-la spoke about their own advancement. None framed the expansion of women's education as a demand wrested from a resistant institution, still less as a critique of the Vinaya; each located it, unprompted, within the existing normative vocabulary of Tibetan Buddhist scholasticism, treating rigorous inhabitation of that tradition as the substance of their achievement rather than an obstacle to it. Aukatsang's insistence that the curriculum is "fundamentally the same" as the monks', and Wangmo's tendency to answer a question about ordination's absence by returning to what the Geshema programme has made possible, both exemplify what Mahmood calls agency exercised through a tradition's own terms rather than against them.

However, there exists a fundamental difference in practise advocated by Mahmood and one exemplified by the Tibetan nun. Mahmood's subjects cultivate a virtue – pious self-formation, that is explicitly not oriented toward institutional recognition, credentialing, or formal office; the value of their practice lies in interior ethical cultivation, not in the acquisition of a title. Tibetan nuns pursuing the Geshema degree are doing something categorically different: they are seeking a formally examined, publicly conferred, institutionally ranked credential, modelled explicitly on the monks' Geshe system, that confers external, comparative status. This is agency exercised through institutional achievement, not through interior cultivation, and Mahmood's framework designed to explain agency that operates below and apart from formal institutional recognition does not straightforwardly account for agency that operates precisely by seeking such recognition.

Taken together, this ethnographic material does not support a simple narrative of empowerment, nor does it support Gross's reading of ordination's absence as the single decisive marker of ongoing exclusion, nor Heirman's reading of the ordination debate as a self-contained legal question separable from lived religious practice. It supports something more specific: that scholastic and institutional authority have expanded substantially and are treated by the nuns I interviewed as religiously legitimate achievements in their own right, that this expansion has occurred precisely because it does not require resolving the canonical question, that nuns in senior institutional positions maintain a clearer distinction between these registers than their own institutions' public messaging sometimes does, and that a fourth, cosmological register of gendered status, untouched by either educational or institutional reform persists alongside these developments without being resolved by them. Mahmood's framework illuminates part of this picture, particularly the refusal to frame advancement as resistance, but requires modification to account for a case built on formal credentialing rather than interior piety, and

its own logic counsels caution about how much weight tradition-affirming speech, gathered under conditions of institutional access and language constraint, can bear as evidence of genuine belief.

V. Conclusion

This paper began by asking how female religious authority is being reconfigured among Tibetan nuns in exile despite the continued absence of full *bhikṣuṇī* ordination. While the ordination debate continues to occupy a central place in both Buddhist institutions and modern scholarship, the findings presented here suggest that it no longer provides a sufficient framework for understanding the changing realities of Tibetan nunhood.

Exile altered not only the geographical location of Tibetan Buddhism but also the institutional conditions under which authority itself was produced. The emergence of higher education for nuns, the Geshema degree, female monastic administrators, and new opportunities for institutional leadership collectively indicate that authority is increasingly grounded in scholarship and governance alongside ritual status. This does not diminish the importance of full *bhikṣuṇī* ordination. Rather, it demonstrates that the historical relationship between ordination and authority has become more complex than earlier scholarship has assumed.

Equally significant is the language through which Tibetan nuns themselves explain these transformations. Throughout my fieldwork, discussions of women's advancement were consistently articulated through Vinaya, lineage, scholastic discipline, and institutional responsibility rather than through the vocabulary of rights or resistance. This finding suggests that contemporary reform is not experienced as a departure from Buddhist tradition but as a process of working within it. In this respect, the experiences documented at Dolma Ling complicate both feminist accounts that privilege institutional exclusion and revisionist interpretations that focus exclusively on monastic legality. Neither perspective fully captures how reform is understood by the women who are participating in it.

More broadly, this study suggests that the history of religious reform cannot be understood solely through formal changes in doctrine or law. Institutions often change before canonical structures do, and authority may be reconfigured long before legal questions are resolved. The experience of Tibetan nuns in exile illustrates precisely this historical process. The unresolved debate over *bhikṣuṇī* or-

dination remains important, but it is no longer sufficient to explain the changing realities of women's religious lives. If exile transformed Tibetan Buddhism, it also transformed the very ways in which religious authority is imagined, negotiated, and lived.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Anālayo, Bhikkhu. "The Legality of Bhikkhunī Ordination." *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, vol. 20, 2013, pp. 310–333.
2. Aukerman, Maren. "Whose Nirvana? Tibetan Buddhist Nuns in North India." *Off Our Backs*, vol. 24, no. 3, 1994, pp. 22–23.
3. Barnes, Nancy J. "7 Buddhist women and the Nuns' order in Asia." *Engaged Buddhism*, 31 Dec. 1996, pp. 259–294.
4. Bhikkhunī (Chatsumarn Kabilsingh), Dhammanandā. "Institutional Authority: A Buddhist perspective." *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2010, pp. 147–157.
5. Central Tibetan Administration. *Annual Report*. Central Tibetan Administration, 2025.
6. Dalai Lama XIV. *Freedom in Exile*. HarperCollins, 1990.
7. Dolma Ling Nunnery and Institute of Buddhist Dialectics. *Annual Report, 2025*. Dolma Ling Nunnery, Dharamsala.
8. Gross, Rita M. *Buddhism after Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism*. State University of New York Press, 1993.
9. Gyatso, Janet. "One Plus One Makes Three: Buddhist Gender, Monasticism, and the Law of the Non-Excluded Middle." *History of Religions*, vol. 43, no. 2, 2003, pp. 89–115.
10. Havnevik, Hanna. *Tibetan Buddhist Nuns: History, Culture and Social Reality*. Norwegian University Press, 1989.
11. Heirman, Ann. "Buddhist Nuns: Between Past and Present." *Numen*, vol. 58, no. 5/6, 2011, pp. 603–31.
12. Ito, Tomomi. "Questions of ordination legitimacy for newly ordained Theravāda *bhikkhunī* in Thailand." *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. 43, no. 1, 3 Jan. 2012, pp. 55–76.
13. Mahmood, Saba. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton UP, 2005. .
14. Tibetan Nuns Project. *Annual Report*. Tibetan Nuns Project, 2016/2025.
15. Tobler, Judy. "Tibetan Buddhist Nuns in Exile: Creating A Sacred Space to Be at Home." *Journal for the Study of Religion*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2006, pp. 41–62.

16. Tsomo, Karma Lekshe. "Tibetan Nuns and Nunneries." *The Tibet Journal*, vol. 12, no. 4, 1987, pp. 87–99.