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Enlightenment for women

It is an earnest plea - a call for those with a calling. The world needs more women in monasteries according to Tibetan Buddhist nun Tenzin Palmo.

But why? What role could holy women fulfil in modern society that wouldn't be better served in a more established vocation?

During her lecture on "Women's Spiritual Monkhood and the Healing of the World" at Chulalongkorn University recently, Tenzin Palmo stressed that the monastic life is still relevant and of benefit to the public. In an increasingly materialistic society, a way of life that subsists on "very few material goods, without sex, without entertainment and without money", but is still "very happy" can provide a much needed alternative, "a light in the world that is currently very dark", she said.

Women, in particular, have a pivotal role to play, said the venerable bhikkuni (female monk). Their natural qualities such as sensitivity and empathy will not only enrich their Sangha (community) but also make possible broader social changes.

The Buddhist world, Tenzin Palmo pointed out, has witnessed a growing number of strong, educated and dedicated women joining the monastic realm. Examples from countries like Taiwan, Sri Lanka and Korea show that wherever women are given the opportunity they rise to leading roles in their society.

To this end, Tenzin Palmo has set up a nunnery where young women from Tibet and the Himalayan border regions of India, Bhutan and Nepal can gain an education while living as nuns.

Established in 2000, the Dongyu Gatsal Ling (Garden of the True Lineage) nunnery currently houses and provides free education to more than 50 women. (Its capacity is expected to increase to about a hundred in the next few years).

Women at the nunnery, located about 90 minutes from Dharamsala in northern India, are ordained as novices for the duration of their six year stay. They are required to study both secular subjects such as English, and monastic subjects such as Buddhist philosophy and rituals, as well as take a two month intensive retreat each year. In addition, the venerable bhikkuni has been trying to revive the ancient tradition of female yoga practitioners called Togdenma (the realised ones), which was almost eradicated in China's Cultural Revolution.

Upon graduation, the nuns of Dongyu Gatsal Ling are given a choice: They can continue their studies, undertake a three year meditation retreat, or learn some skills in nunnery administration.

"We hope that, eventually, some of these nuns will return to their own regions and start nunneries to help educate other girls," said Tenzin Palmo.



A note of eager, motherly kindness enters the bhikkuni's voice whenever she talks about the novices at her nunnery. After all, before her guru, the late eighth Khamtrul Rinpoche, passed away in 1980, he asked Tenzin Palmo several times to begin such a mission. It is through their vast compassion and belief that men and women are equally capable of pursuing enlightenment that this nunnery has come to exist.

To learn more about and/or support Tenzin Palmo's nunnery, visit <http://www.tenzinpalmo.com/> or <http://www.gatsal.org/>.