

GESHEMA: A MILESTONE EXAMPLE OF WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN TIBETAN BUDDHISM

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Abstract: Mostly after the IInd world war things has been changed rapidly in many way. The system of ruling and domination shifted into the democracy, demand of human rights, movements of social justice, political, economic and social equality, and differences between sexes are raised on the different stage of the world.

So, far the Tibet and entire Trans-Himalayan regions practice the equality between man and women more or less from earlier, but when we look into the past, equality of education between the monks and nuns were found dissimilar. Of course, the reason behind case is lack of Bhikkhuni ordination in Tibet and entire Himalayan region. Due to the Bhikkhuni ordination Tibetan nuns were deprived from Geshema degree and other relevant issues. We can see the percentage of women were also very low in the education field.

Tibetan women especially by the nuns have raised their voice for the degree of 'Geshema' in the last seven decades. Their demand of 'Geshema' was genuine because on other hand monks are not only getting the opportunity to pursue the higher education even they are privilege to acquire the degree of 'Geshe' since 17th century onwards. Finally, Tibetan nuns are getting the degree of 'Geshema' since the year 2011. Due to the continuous blessings, kindness and compassion of His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama, it needs to be bestow the Geshema's degree earlier to the nuns without demanding.

Keywords: Tibet, Bhikkhuni, Geshema, Geshe, Monks, Nun, Bhikkhuni ordination.

INTRODUCTION:

Today, when we talk about the world of humanism so far, the role of Women in Society comes at the front most which plays a vital role in every field. But the status given to the woman differs from east to west countries, city to village life, industry to education field and religion to secular beliefs and more.

If there is a belief and thought in a society a woman where she is said to be slaves and mistress, a woman as a sinful and an evil, a woman of luckless and unfortunate. There is a contrast exhibition striking to those of all with a distinctive features, characters and belief. Among them, the domination of Buddhist countries displays and talks a striking position of a woman with the belief of inevitable result of karma and relativity, principal of interdependence, spiritual equality of all being and so makes the woman more of a honoured, loyal, committed, lucky, blessed and so on.

Buddhist dominated country like Tibet exhibits the woman as an equal being, the free bird, independence, same choice and power holding as a man, moreover, they focus on education equality.

Once Dalai Lama said in one of his speech that, "Through the power of education, women have been able to rise to play prominent roles including leadership in various societies. Education has played a great role in the advancement of gender equality and material development. However, when you think about secular

ethics like compassion, modern education is still not sufficient.¹

Regarding the women's empowerment in Tibetan Buddhism, especially for nuns, there are two main issues one is the degree of 'Geshema' the highest Tibetan monastic degree in the field of Buddhist studies especially in the Gelugpa tradition and the restoring of the full monastic ordination of 'Gelongma' (Bhikshuni). Unfortunately Bhikkhuni ordination was not spread in the Tibet and today also there is no Bhikkhuni Sangha or Bhukkhuni in Tibetan Buddhist tradition. These two issues have been debated for the last seven decades. Here my study is concerning on the first issue the higher-level academic degree for nun so-called Geshema. The Geshema (Spiritual woman friend) degree is equal to the 'Geshe' degree.

Geshe:

Before knowing about the Geshema, it appears pertinent here to understand the meaning of 'Geshe'. The Tibetan term 'Geshe' is a short form of "dgeba'i bshes gnyen", which literary denotes the meaning of virtuous or spiritual friend. It exists in Tibet since the 11th century and its Tibetan rendering of the Sanskrit word "Kalyana Mitra". In Tibet, the title of Geshe is conferred on the learned or great scholar of Buddhist Philosophy. We find the reference too many esteemed scholars belonging to the Kadampa tradition who held the title of Geshe in the history of Tibet (e.g. Geshe Langri Thangpa 1054-1230).

¹ <https://Tibet.net.>2016/12>his.holi..>

Later in the 14th century, Je Lama Tsongkhapa established the monastery, named Gaden where existed the Gelugpa School. The old monastic centres of Kadampa emerged in the Gelugpa School. Sera and Drepung monasteries also came into existence gradually. In 17th century representative of GaldenTripa 4th Penchen Rinpoche Lobsang Choeki Gyaltzen had bestowed the Geshe Lharam Pa degree during the Galden Monlam Chenmo upon the best candidate of the Gaden, Sera and Drepung. Since then the term Geshe Lharampa is used for a higher academic degree in Gelugpa School. It is, however, also awarded by the Bon monastic academic centre or monasteries for monks but not to a nun as a 'Geshema' yet.

Geshema:

Geshema is the same highest academic degree, offered by the Tibetan Nunneries to the Nuns especially in the Gelugpa tradition of Tibetan Buddhism till now. This tradition started recently in 2013. It's a matter of pride for all the Buddhist Institution and especially for those women who were conferred with Geshema degree and also for those who are in the academic process of learning to receive this degree.

Tibet hosts the largest community of Buddhist nuns in the world for many years. Almost thousands of small and large nunneries are existed in Tibet. Thousands of Tibetan nuns are getting education in those monasteries in the Tibet and outside the Tibet in the vast and inaccessible land of Himalayan region too, for an example, Nepal, Bhutan, Sikkim, Ladakh, Arunachal and Himachal Pradesh in the vast and inaccessible land of Himalayan region, but the nuns were deprived from getting a higher monastic academic degree till last decade. The decision of providing them degree of Geshema is the part of promoting the educational equalities and opportunities between man and women. It is also the demand of the human beings to overcome from the gender discrimination. Today whole world welcomed the decision by open handed. All the credit goes to His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama and his companion along with all the Geshema and Buddhist women. Now the path is open for the women of entire world one who wish to become the Geshema.

1st women Geshema:

In the history of Tibetan Buddhism the first Geshe title was conferred outside the Tibet and was conferred in April 2011 at Dharamsala. The candidate was also non-Tibetan a German Buddhist nun 'Geshe Kalsang Wangmo.' She had studied Buddhist philosophy for 20 year under the Geshe curriculum at the 'Institute of Buddhist Dialectics' Dharamsala in Himachal Pradesh. She has opened the door for all the women to pursue the degree of Geshema.

The officially decision of bestowing the Geshema degree was taken by the department of religion and culture of Tibetan government in exile and representatives from six

major nunneries, the institute of Buddhist Dialectic and the Tibetan nun's project after long meetings of years. Finally, it announced publicly in 2012.²

In the beginning, the Geshema examination was held by the Tibetan nuns' project and nunneries under the guidance of the department of religion and culture of the Tibetan government in exile. The first Geshema degrees were conferred to 20 Tibetan nuns at Drepung Monastery on 22nd December 2016 by His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama. Later, in the year 2017, it was handed over to Tibetan nunneries by the department of religion and, formed a new assembly commission. There are six nunneries under the Geshema curriculum. The final examination of the Geshema was hosted by the six major monasteries annually turn by turn. Since 2016, 37 nuns from different regions of India, Nepal, and Tibet have been honoured with the Geshema degree.

The curriculum of the Geshema: The curriculum of the Geshema consists of the study of the Buddhist Sutra portion for 17 years and the study of Tantra for two years. The Geshema degree is a 17-year course of study based on "Five Great Text"³ from the Indian Buddhist commentaries tradition. In the first four years, they learn the introductory topic;

1. Dudra (the collected topics).
2. Lorik (awareness of Knowledge).
3. Tarik (Signs and Reasoning). Studies on aforesaid topic are based on Logic and reasoning. It took almost four year to become them perfect on the logic and reasoning which helps them to understand the vast, depth and profound Buddhist philosophy.

Next, they studied 'Parchin (Prajnaparamita or Perfection of wisdom)' for seven year and 'Uma (Madhyamik or Middle way)' for three year. Likewise, they have to spend two or three year to become perfection in the 'mdzod (Abhidharmakosa)', and finally learned the 'Dulva (monastic rule)' for two or three years. These studies are based on the Sutra portion only. Apart from the Sutra portion, they have to study and complete the two year course of Tantric education after receiving the Geshema degree.

Tantric Curriculum of Geshema: In the year 2017, however, the Geshema have got an opportunity to formally study to tantric Buddhism. In the beginning, a committee consisting of the representatives of six nunneries approached His Holiness Dalai Lama for advice about the curriculum and how to proceed further. By the

² <https://tnp.org/tag/geshema-degree>

³ Pramana, Madhyamika, Prajnaparamita, Abhidharmakosha and Vinaya.

compassionate blessing of His Holiness, it started in the same year. The Buddhist Tantric studies program is of two years for the nuns Geshema and four years for the monks Geshe. The first program in Tantric studies began in the year 2017 and completed at the beginning of 2019. On 1st February 2019 special ceremony for honouring Geshema for a tantric degree was held in Dharmasala and 23 out of first 36 from the batch of the year 2016 and 2017 were conferred on the title of Geshema. "The tantric program provides training in tantric theory, rituals, and mind-training techniques, used by those engaged in meditation. The 2nd batch of the Tantric Geshema curriculum is yet to start."⁴

Geshema Exam: The examination of Geshema in Tibetan Buddhist monastic tradition is very long and it takes four year to complete. The examination includes both the written and oral; a written test is based on important Buddhist texts, as well as oral (debate) an exam. During the long process of examination they have to study some optional subject e.g. Tibetan Grammar, History, introduction of modern science, history of Bon tradition and four major schools Nyingma, Kargyud, Sakya and Gelug too. These are the optional subject apart from the aforesaid philosophical subjects. Each of the final years, candidates also have to write the thesis of 50 pages and they are examined during the Geshema exam.

Participants of the Geshema: Any interested women from the worldwide can enter in the following nunneries and take ordination as a nun and join in the academic curriculum of Geshema. After the completion of the academic curriculum and examination, she becomes the Geshema. At the present following nunneries is taking participate in the long process of Geshema examination. 1. Dolma Ling Nunnery Dharmasala, (non-sectarian), 2. Geden Choling Nunnery, Dharmasala, 3. Jamyang Choling Nunnery, Dharmasala, 4. Thujee Choling Nunnery, Nepal, 5. Kopan Nunnery, Nepal. 6. Jangchub Choling Nunnery, Nepal, 7. Jangsemeling Nunnery, Kinnaur, 8. Jampa Choling Nunnery, Kinnaur, H.P., 9. Yangchen Choling Nunnery, Spiti, H.P. From the beginning only six nunneries from India and Nepal are participating in the examination of Geshema and the other three are in preparing.

Bon Tradition: Bon tradition has also started offer the same education program to the nuns as the monks receive recently in India. Apart from the Tibet In India, the mother monastery of the Bon tradition 'Pal Shen Ten Men Ri Ling' is situated in Dholanji, Solan near 50 kilometers away from Shimla since 1962. The new nunnery was established in the year 2002 at the opposite side of the Men Ri monastery. It is only the Bon Po nunnery outside Tibet. At present, about 80 nuns have been studying in the nunnery. 15 senior nuns are engaged in the 15-year academic curriculum of Geshema and more than 60 young nuns are attending the day school.

Tibetan Nuns Project:

The Tibetan nuns project has dedicated to serves the nuns of Trans-Himmlayan from its beginning "The Tibetan nun's project was founded in 1987. It is a non-profit organization. After the invasion of China on Tibet in 1959, many Tibetan nuns flee from Tibet to India in Dharmasala. This project aims to provide shelter, food and education for the Buddhist nuns those who come from Tibet and the Himalayan regions of India, and to educate and empower the nuns of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition as teachers and leaders; and establish, strengthen, and support educational institutions to preserve the Tibetan religion and culture. Today, the organization is supporting 7 nunneries and over 700 nuns in India."⁵

CONCLUSION:

The decisions of offering the same educational degree for the nuns in the Tibetan Buddhist monasteries in Tibet and outside the Tibet are equal to that of monks. It does signify the equality of the education for both the male and female. In the beginning it was not easy but the role of His Holiness 14th Dalai Lama and his kindness and unwavering blessing has made the Tibetan nuns dreams come true. The support of intellectual societies and generosity help from different countries, government, individual, nunneries and family of the nuns are creditable and commendable. By the support of all it has become the history in the world and especially in context of Tibetan Buddhism.

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