BUDDHIST NUNS IN LADAKH

Paula Green
Karuna Center, 49 Richardson Road,
Leverett MA 01054, USA

Summary
The nuns of Ladakh, most of whom traditionally lived with their families, are facing big social changes. As the extended family crumbles, the nuns are no longer assured of a place at home. Visits to 3 villages (comprising 100 nuns), showed that each is in a different stage of achieving their aims of communal living and full education, that of Wakkha being the most successful.

Since the time of the Buddha, the question of ordination of religious women has been a challenge. Out of his Great Compassion, the Buddha agreed to ordain women, despite the cultural norms of patriarchy and caste prevalent in his day. He encouraged the spiritual pursuits of his female initiates and did not distinguish between monks and nuns regarding the attainment of enlightenment. Among the first female disciples were members of the Buddha’s own family.

In the 2500 years that have elapsed since the life of the Buddha, the opportunities and responsibilities of nuns have been subject to interpretation by the male dominated Sangha. Since the days of the Buddha, women throughout the Asian Buddhist world have been given a lesser ordination and fewer precepts than their male counterparts. Southeast Asia nuns of the Theravada tradition currently have a greatly reduced position. In Thailand, with a Buddhist population of more than 90%, the lineage of ordained women has been broken and is thus completely extinguished.

In the Mahayana traditions of Ladakh and Tibet, the nuns have never enjoyed the high status, reverence or support given to monks and their monasteries. In Ladakh, the nuns lived with their families throughout their lives, participating in the seasonal routines of agriculture and handicrafts, involved in the life cycles of the newborn, the old and those in need. The nuns were given neither a Buddhist education nor the opportunity for a life of spiritual devotion and meditation.

What the nuns did receive, however, was a life embraced by family connections and a sense of belonging to the land and village community. Throughout the centuries, this tradition must have had its own rewards, both for the religious woman and for her extended family.
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The process of modernization and the influence of western-based development now facing Ladakh is having a profound effect on the nuns, as it is on all sectors of society. As the extended family system crumbles in the face of contemporary pressures and the new demands of a money economy, the place of nuns is less secure. Many Ladakhis feel that unless some positive response is made to this changing situation that few women will choose ordination or remain within the order. The nuns themselves are articulating a need for change.

In the summer of 1993, at the request of a Ladakhi monk and a community of nuns, I visited groups of nuns in three villages. All of the villages, Shargol, Mulbek and Wakkha, are connected to the road between Kargil and the high mountain passes, a full day’s drive from Leh. A Ladakhi laywoman who lives in Leh is closely associated with these nuns; she served as guide and liaison on during our exploratory visit. Translation was supplied by a monk from Shargol with fluent English and by a Shargol government employee who is secretary of the Shargol Nun’s Welfare and Cultural Program. In the three villages we spoke with approximately one hundred nuns, ranging in age from six to seventy-three years old. Perhaps 20% of them were children or young adolescents; the majority were women in their twenties and thirties. We spoke also to several lamas responsible for teaching the nuns.

Almost all of the ordained women we interviewed had been given to the order of nuns by their parents when they were children, generally between the ages of six and ten. Although the decision to ordain was not an adult choice made by the religious calling of a developed mind, the women are quite committed to the life chosen for them and have no inclination to leave for the lay responsibilities of marriage and family. What they clearly articulate, however, is a need for change in their living arrangements.

The nuns in these three villages all have the same wish: to live as a monastic community, to study broadly, and to practice Dharma together on a daily basis. Historically nuns have not attended the government schools. Thus, when there is no lama available for instruction, the nuns remain illiterate in both the vernacular and in sacred texts and practices. The nuns we spoke to are requesting education and no longer find their exclusion from the educational system acceptable.

Furthermore, these ordained women spoke of exhaustion from the pressures of agricultural and domestic demands. They have a strong wish to live together in order to focus their energies on a full spiritual life. They want the experience of a religious community that
supports their meditation practice, and the opportunity for solitude that is available to their Dharma brothers.

Their vision is that each of the three villages would have a small assembly hall (dukhang) for puja and meditation, a kitchen, gardens, a classroom, and small connected cells where the nuns would live individually. Ideally, each village would have a resident lama as teacher, as there are currently no nuns trained and available to teach the Dharma.

The actual situation for the nuns is different in Shargol, Mulbek and Wakkha. The Shargol nuns have a Tibetan geshe as teacher and have built with their own hands a small classroom and adjacent kitchen. Those who are free from domestic duty attend class each day, but some of the women reported with tears in their eyes that they were not able to study because of family work demands. The Shargol nuns have land for their residence and assembly hall, but no funds with which to build. They raised the money for their classroom by begging funds from many villagers, but feel that the costs of building, even with their own labour wherever possible, makes fund raising from villagers beyond their capacity.

In Mulbek there is no resident teacher for the nuns, and one part-time teacher who is just beginning to work with them. These women are illiterate, and although they have applied to the Central Institute of Buddhist Studies for a teacher for the past four years, they have not yet had a favourable response. They also begged for money with which they hand-built a modest assembly hall, but are eager both for a full-time teacher and for funds to create residential spaces.

The nuns of Wakkha have accomplished something unheard of in Ladakh. They, under the guidance of a strong minded and forward thinking Tibetan geshe, have built a beautiful dukhang and nine residential cells. A solar room was donated by the Ladakh Ecological Society and the Ladakh Project, and the nuns have planted trees and lovely gardens in front of their rooms. The complex has an air of peace and harmony; one can feel the love that was put into this twenty year building project. The residential quarters are very crowded; three to a room meant for one. The sisters are eager for cells to have individual practice and living space. They showed us scars on hands and backs from so many years of clearing land and making mud-bricks, and dread the idea that they might have to face construction work again to obtain more living space. They credit their teacher for the vision of the nunnery, as well as for the loans he secured for them to accomplish their building project.

As of the present not many groups of nuns have come to visit the Wakkha nunnery, but it is a shining example of a model
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community that it may well become an ideal to which others can aspire. We attended the evening puja with the thirty nuns of Wakkha, and found great pleasure in joining a hall full of Buddhist women chanting the ancient Buddhist scriptures with confidence and robust voices.

The reality for the nuns is that they will likely remain tied to their agricultural tasks of their families and villages in order to secure their own food. Indeed the nuns at Wakkha, who no longer live with their families, were all participating in the barley harvest the day we visited. Because of the deeply entrenched traditions, in the immediate future it will not be possible for the nuns to receive the gifts of food and supplies offered to the monks. However, once they are living in the community, they will no longer be accessible to their families as a constant source of labour, and their days will be more largely focused on spiritual practice and education. In the future, the time may come when villagers perceive the value of the nuns as full daughters of the Buddha, and offer them necessary support.

At a conference of Dharma teachers in the spring of 1993, His Holiness, the Dalai Lama affirmed the importance of educating nuns as a chief goal for the coming years. In India there are already five Tibetan nunneries offering full training and education for women in both secular and religious subjects. There are long waiting lists for entrance into these new institutions.

Perhaps the encouragement of His Holiness and the models being established in India will inspire the movement of Ladakhi nuns. One project in the planning stages in Choglamsar, near Leh, is an educational centre for current and future nuns that would offer a seven year in-depth training programme in both Buddhist Dharma and general curriculum. It is hoped that eventually these women would become teachers for Ladakhi nuns throughout the region.

There are other small models of Ladakhi nuns living and studying together, in Zanskar, Temisgam and elsewhere. Clearly, change is in the air for the nuns of Ladakh, in this case a shift which they welcome and consciously seek for their own growth and spiritual progress.

Let us hope that these changes will increase the strength and depth of the Ladakhi nuns and enable them to contribute their own love and understanding of Dharma to their fellow villagers and to future generations. A renewed order of nuns, supported and educated by the Ladakhi people and Ladakhi institutions, would be of enormous benefit in this era of rapid development. Spiritual guidance will be greatly needed as the pressures of modernization intensify in the villages, and an order of educated, confident and spiritually developed
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nuns might be an important resource in difficult times. Let us hope this change brings great benefit to all.