

Jetsunma tenzin palmo; empowering buddhist nuns



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When you normally think of Buddhists what do you imagine? Most of the Western society thinks of monks, however, there are many nuns that sacrifice so much in honor of the path to nirvana. Many modern-day Westerners have a warped idea of Buddhism and Buddhists which is part of the reason these women are overlooked. In this essay I will argue that the Buddhist nun and scholar, Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo, changed the way Buddhism was viewed especially the way Buddhist nuns were viewed by Western Civilizations.

Origins of Buddhism

Buddhism is a peaceful religion founded in South Asia based on the dharma.

[1]To understand Buddhism, one must first understand the Buddha himself.

The Buddha is a historical figure who was born in India into the Kshatriya caste with the name Siddhartha Gautama sometime between the mid-6th and mid-4th centuries.[2]Gautama lived in complete luxury; however, he quickly realized not everyone did. On his occasional chariot rides he passed by the elderly, the sick, and the dying. He was deeply troubled from the sights and became motivated to end suffering for all by spending the next six years meditating and living under extremely poor conditions. 2 He then realized the way to end suffering wasn't through depriving himself of basic needs. He tried a new tactic and spent time meditating under a tree for forty days until he had achieved enlightenment.[3]After the Buddha became enlightened, he had a vision of humanity as a bed of lotus flowers some in full bloom while others had a hard time growing. This is symbolizing how many have not reached enlightenment and that vision is what made the Buddha spend the next forty-five years telling others about the path of

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enlightenment. The chain continues even today and now three-hundred-fifty million people follow the Buddha's path. The Buddha was an ordinary man who never claimed to be a prophet or a god; he simply wanted to work towards a world without suffering. In fact, Buddhists do not worship any gods; Buddhism remains unconcerned with the existence of gods. 3

Basic Teachings of Buddhism

Overall Buddhism is a rather peaceful religion and its major beliefs revolve around the idea that suffering is the source of all problems yet there is a path to follow to avoid it. One of the basic teachings reflecting this idea of Buddhism is the Four Noble Truths. 2 The first truth is the truth of suffering. This is the idea that suffering is the source of all conflicts. The second truth is the truth that suffering is caused by craving. This means we blame our suffering on other people when really the source is our own mind. The third truth is the craving can be eliminated. This means through meditation and prayer we can start taking responsibility for our actions and clearing our minds. The fourth truth is we can eliminate this craving if we take a well-thought-out path. This path is generally described as the eightfold path which is a way to overcome suffering in the mind, views, speech, emotions, actions, life, and meditation. 2

The simplified version of the eightfold path to avoid suffering is the threefold way. 3 The threefold way has three components on how to live: ethics, meditation, and, wisdom. Ethics is living in such a way where one realizes the potential impacts of one's positive and negative actions. Buddhists follow five precepts to live ethically which include the following: do not harm

others, do not take without giving, do not do harm in sexual activities, do not lie, and abstain from drugs and alcohol. Meditation, the second component, is a practice used frequently in Buddhism. It is used to clear the mind and bring one's mind to the right state. Buddhists believe the source of suffering are bad actions which is caused by one's negative thoughts. While the deeds and bad that happens are caused by bad karma[4]which prevents one from reaching the ultimate goal – nirvana.[5]This is why the focus in Buddhism is setting the right mindset through meditation. Wisdom, the third component, is important for Buddhists because once the extreme level of wisdom is achieved one can achieve the goal of enlightenment/Buddhahood. 3

There are three very important concepts known as the “ Three Jewels” one must have sufficient faith in to be a Buddhist. 3 These include: The Buddha, the dharma, and the Sangha. Having faith in the Buddha means commitment to achieving enlightenment while having faith in the dharma means trusting all the teachings of the Buddha. Sangha refers to the spiritual community around a person. One having faith in his/her sangha means having faith that the people around will guide him/her through their spiritual journey. 3

Gender Bias in Buddhism

“ I don't think anyone sat down and thought ‘ Oh, let us be biased.’ It's just that it was part of the prevailing social scene.”[6]Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo explained how women were seen as lesser than men since the early beginnings of Buddhism in India because India was a patriarchal society at the time Buddhism emerged. Due to India being a male-controlled society, Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo explains “ In the time of the Buddha, Indian women

were defined in relation to their menfolk.” 6 In early Buddhism the only way women could achieve liberation[7]was through the commitment to their husbands meaning women must marry to achieve this freedom. 6

Women were not given a proper education because of these patriarchal ideas and so the record keepers for religion were the literate ones- males. Men did not intentionally disregard women in their record keeping; they simply wrote about their own experiences being male Buddhists. A major saying for Buddhists is “ The enlightened mind is neither female or male.” yet even today nuns are still unable to attain full ordination. This goes to show that no matter how much religion tries to send the message of no discrimination it is still there because patriarchy is deeply rooted in society already. Many followers of religions are in fact hypocrites as they promise acceptance of all for a greater good when in reality, they too participate in the very thing they try to destroy.

Even the Buddha was biased towards women at one time. The Buddha’s stepmother begged him for an order of nuns and he declined on many occasions. In fact, he was so appalled by the request itself. However, Ananda, Buddha’s attendant and cousin, questioned then if women could be liberated. Buddha said yes of course and realized a nunnery was necessary, so he established one. Buddhist nuns today are forever grateful for Ananda convincing the Buddha to establish a nunnery. 6

Some practices of the Buddha have become gender biased from generations of monks passing down the practice without female influence on the practice. For example, the Buddha had created a meditation based on the

human body. 6 It was meant for monks to detach themselves from their physical body and let their mind see beyond the physical world. However, over time the meditation began to focus on the impurity of the woman's body. The meditation became less about monks finding their inner self and more about avoiding the temptation of women and maintaining celibacy. 6 It paints the picture that women are just objects of temptation that should be avoided, and it neglects the fact that women can be knowledgeable people as well.

Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo: Biography

Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo was born in 1943 in London as Diane Perry.[8]Her family life from an early age had some spiritual elements such as weekly séances.[9]She said in one of her books “ I believed in the continuity of consciousness after death. In fact, death was a frequent topic of conversation in our family, so I never felt any fear or reservations about it.... An awareness of death gives great meaning to life.”[10]In this quote Palmo shows how her family had open discussions that helped her understand Buddhism at a later age when she became interested in religions and began research. She stumbled upon Buddhism at eighteen after reading a book called “ The Mind Unshaken” by John Walters. In her book she said “ The problem for me was that all these religions started with a notion of a soul and the soul's relationship with its creator. The path laid out was a path of devotion, of the soul seeking its creator outside itself. But this had no meaning for me...In contrast Buddhism was a path which led inwards, rendering any notion of an external creator or God totally superfluous.” 9

Palmo realized she agreed with all Buddhist teachings and she wanted to become a part of the Buddhist community.

At just twenty-one she traveled to India and met a major Drukpa Kagyu lama^[11] named Khamtrul Rinpoche. She asked if she could become a nun; the lama agreed to start the process and she became one of the first Westerners to be ordained a Buddhist Tibetan monastic. Three years later she was ordained as a newly initiated nun. Women cannot have full ordination according to Tibetan Buddhist law, so she obtained the bhikshuni ordination. She stayed in a monastery with Khamtrul Rinpoche and his community for six years. Then she was sent to a smaller monastery for more intense practice for another six years. For even more strict and intense practice she spent twelve years in a Himalayan cave. For nine years she took some trips in and out of the cave but for the last three she set stricter rules. These stricter rules she inflicted on herself meant she stayed in complete seclusion. After the 12 years were completed Tenzin Palmo left her cave and began to get requests for teaching.

Her spiritual guide, Khamtrul Rinpoche suggested she start a nunnery. Several years after his death his successor suggested the same. She decided to finally do it and so she gave worldwide tours for funding. The first nuns came in 2000 and in 2001 construction began for Dongyu Gatsal Ling (DGL). The DGL means ' Garden of the Authentic Lineage'. In 2008 she was given the title ' Jetsunma' which means Venerable Master due to her attempts to promote females in Tibetan Buddhism through the DGL. The following are other successes she accomplished:" President of Sakyadhita International Association of Buddhist Women, Founding Director of the Alliance of Non
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Himalayan Nuns; Honorary Advisor to the International Network of Engaged Buddhists and Founding Member of the Committee for Bhiksuni Ordination.”

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Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo's Nunnery: DGL

Probably one of the most prominent contributions to Buddhism Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo made is the DGL- a nunnery she established in 2000. A plentiful amount of Palmo's inspiration for the DGL came from her involvements in a monastery.[12]She quickly realized whilst joining a monastery that women were not allowed to participate in many of the activities and were not to be taught some basic teachings. She also realized there was no female role model to look up to in her monastery because there were mostly males. Palmo personally believes things were not meant to be this way and that the Buddha left teachings for women too that just were not recorded. 12

The major idea behind the DGL was to offer support to Buddhist nuns. In one of her talks on her thoughts for the future Tenzin Palmo discusses the trouble many nuns go through and how she wanted to help them with her nunnery. [13]She says the DGL is meant to support all women ordained in Tibetan Buddhist practice. She explains that if you are a nun from Tibet or the Himalayas the lama that ordains you sends you to the monastery and you are prepared for your spiritual journey. Newly ordained nuns from anywhere else however, don't have any support or a place to go. The other option is the lama brings the newly initiated woman to a Dharma center to run on her own. The nun has to do all the work of paying rent, teaching, and raising

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funds. Palmo talked about a Chinese nun who was ordained in a Tibetan tradition that travels a great distance several times a month to give teachings. She says, “ If she were a monk or especially a lama everybody would do everything but because she’s a nun....” 13 Palmo says people spend money on monasteries, but sadly they never think of the nuns who also give up everything in the sake of the dharma and aren’t encouraged, helped, or trained. 13

Currently, the DGL she founded supports over 100 nuns. In one of her talks Palmo discusses how the new generation of girls differ from the first. She says the first group she had were low in self-esteem but now her new girls believe they can do anything in life. She says to the first group she asked, “ Do you believe males are inherently more intelligent than females?” 8 They were all sure the answer was yes. She told them that actually was not true, and males happened to have more opportunity. She then went on to explain that when males and females have equal opportunity, they both succeed. She believes now if asking the same question to her new set of girls they would all be even confused by the question and would never doubt their intelligence. 8 I truly believe it is because of her and others like her that the new generation of females view themselves with a more positive outlook than previously.

Teachings from a Cave Dweller

Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo made a significant contribution to Buddhism by writing books and giving talks on her interpretations of Buddhism to the

Western World. What I personally found most interesting was what she said about her 12-year cave residence.

In one of her most famous books Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo said “ It is not so much the quantity as the quality that counts. Anyone can sit in a three-year retreat with a distracted mind and not gain very much from it...The important question we always have to ask is fundamentally, has there been any change?”[14]This is important because most of the time when we think of religious people, they tell us we have to pray and go to church, synagogue, temple etc.... But Palmo just says we should do retreats and meditate because it will change us for the better. She also touches on the fact that the time doing it does not play such a significant role. She needed twelve years to feel changed while another could feel changed in twelve days. The time spent really depends on the specific person. So, the question should not be ‘ How much time should I spend meditating?’ It should be ‘ What must I do to feel a change while meditating?’

In this book Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo touched on another point. She wrote“ Somebody asked the lama, “ What is the aim and goal of meditation?” He replied...we mustn’t look at the retreat situation as a kind of tutorial intensive before the exam. It’s a time to really just be completely knowing what we are doing right now, and just doing it.”[15]Palmo is challenging the idea that you should convert to a religion to achieve something. Instead the idea is to just do things for oneself. Why must there always be something to gain instead of focusing on the journey?

Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo is a remarkable person who not only revolutionized the way women practice Buddhism but brought basic Buddhist Teachings to Western Civilizations. It is because of her, her fellow Buddhist nuns have a female figure to look up to. More women now may choose the holy life in Buddhism. On a greater scale her endeavor to lessen patriarchal effects on Buddhism may inspire other religions and even countries to do the same. Her teachings and views to modern day Western Civilizations may inspire them to follow in Buddha's teachings.

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[1]Dharma- Teachings of the Buddha

[2]Nakamura, Hajime, et al. “ Buddhism.” *Encyclopædia Britannica* , Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 27 Apr. 2018, www. britannica. com/topic/Buddhism.

[3] *Noble Eightfold Path | The Buddhist Centre* , thebuddhistcentre. com/buddhism.

[4]Karma is the idea that good will happen from good things and that bad will happened from bad things.

[5]This is the state of being free from suffering and escaping the endless cycle of rebirth.

[6]Palmo, Tenzin. 69-71 *Reflections on a Mountain Lake: Teachings on Practical Buddhism* . Snow Lion Publ., 2002.

[7]Freedom from the cycle on endless rebirth.

[8]Barry, Aileen. “ Dongyu Gatsal Ling Nunnery, Founded by Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo.” *Dongyu Gatsal Ling Nunnery* , Dongyu Gatsal Ling Nunnery, 21 Feb. 2017, tenzinpalmo. com/.

[9]An attempt to communicate with spirits

[10]Palmo, Tenzin. 9-10 *Reflections on a Mountain Lake: Teachings on Practical Buddhism* . Snow Lion Publ., 2002.

[11]A high priest

[12]Swanepoel, Elizabeth, Blossoms of the Dharma: *The Contribution of Western Nuns in Transforming Gender Bias*

[13]Blog, Sakyadhita, and Danie M. “ November 2015.” *Sakyadhita: Awakening Buddhist Women* , 30 Nov. 2015, awakeningbuddhistwomen.blogspot. com/2015/11/.

[14]“ BuddhaNet – Worldwide Buddhist Information and Education Network.” *Basic Buddhism: The Theory of Karma* , www. buddhanet. net/. Tenzin, Palmo, 5-6, *Three Teachings*

[15]Tenzin, Palmo, 11-12, *Three Teachings*