



# WHEN WESTERN WOMEN BECOME EASTERN *Nuns*

What drives women to give up jobs, leave friends and family, and take monastic vows in a faraway land? My visit to a Tibetan Buddhist nunnery in India provides some answers.

By MRIDU KHULLAR



Tibet

pale faces of the women walking in and out of the dining hall of this Tibetan nunnery are distinctly un-Tibetan: they're Australian, European, American, even Philippine. I get my bread and soup, then join the rest of the group in the sunny courtyard.

"Oh, I remember my first time," says one woman with a smile. "I walked out thinking, oh, my God, what have I done?" The others laugh and nod in agreement.

I'm sitting with a group of Buddhist nuns, and they're sharing their ordination stories. Typically, Asian women receive ordination when they are young and often have no choice in the matter. But these Western nuns have made a conscious decision. They are educated, have had careers, and some even have families and children. We are at Thosamling Nunnery in Sidhpur, nestled in the Himalayas a few kilometers away from His Holiness the Dalai Lama's residence. This is the first and only Buddhist nunnery in India for Western nuns.

*Illustration by* ANDREW HEM

*“I found that with that kind of surrender, there’s a certain kind of power that comes. . . . You find that your true home is in your heart and not in a place.”*

### FINDING FAITH IN INDIA

Ani (Sister) Choekyi, a 26-year-old nun from Australia, was 21 when she arrived in India. After her ordination in Sydney, she’d gone back to her full-time job. “I had consciously made a decision to remain celibate, to pray morning and night, go to retreats, and focus on the Dharma [literally, “protection”; the Buddhist means of eliminating ignorance],” she says. But working — and working with non-Buddhist people in particular — made that a challenge. Ani Choekyi knew she had to find a way to focus completely on her Dharma, so she decided to travel to India.

Thosamling Nunnery and Institute was built in 2006, after Ani Sangmo, another resident, now 49, had spent several years as a nun in India and repeatedly found that Western women had fewer options and very different struggles than their Asian counterparts. The Tibetans, refugees in India, have to support their own communities and people, and they assume that Westerners are rich. While some Tibetan monastics are able to stay in monasteries and nunneries for free, Western monks and nuns have to pay for lodging and food. In places where Tibetans are charged, Westerners pay two or three times the rate.

Nuns must pay a very nominal fee to stay in Thosamling Nunnery; other women like me, who are interested in learning about the Dharma or in undertaking retreats, are welcome to rent rooms. Our fees help offset the costs of the nunnery.

### WHY BUDDHISM?

When at age 14 Ani Yeshe Chodron lost her father, she began to question the meaning of life. She left school at 15 and became a hippie. “I wasn’t just being self-indulgent or hedonistic,” she says. “I was really looking for a spiritual path. So I lived in communes and I tried yoga, and I tried vegetarianism, and I tried fruitarianism, and I tried drugs, and I tried boys, and I tried every extreme there is. And none of those things satisfied me in the long term.” At age 17, she came to India to explore a quasi-Hindu sect known for its free-love and free-drugs culture. It was in a bookstore in Nepal that she came across *Reborn in the West: The Reincarnation Masters* (Da Capo Press, 1996) by Vicki Mackenzie. The book steered her toward Buddhism, and she enrolled in several meditation retreats. Six years later, she was ordained in Australia.

For Ani Choekyi, it was also a book that made the difference. Longing for happiness in an unhappy life, one day she saw His Holiness the Dalai Lama’s face on a book titled *The Art of Happiness*. “Gee, that said it all,” she laughs. Plagued by questions about why things were as they were, she says, “The law of cause and effect was probably the thing that hooked me into Buddhism. If you do this, you’ll get this result. Logical.”

### DHARMA IN THE DAILY LIFE

At any given time, Thosamling is home to about 15 nuns and the same number of non-monastic women, although there is room for 80 residents, and the nunnery temple can hold at least 120. The institute hosts classes for Buddhists — nuns, monks, and even lay practitioners — who want to learn the Tibetan language and the Dharma. Every day, the nuns get up before dawn, pray in the temple, and meet in the dining hall for breakfast. Some eat alone; some sit in groups and talk about their lessons. Others



practice learning Tibetan with each other. And some, I discover after getting a stare but no verbal response to my small talk about the weather, are on a silent retreat that can last for several days and months.

Western nuns come after facing unique challenges in their own countries, where they’re often seen as escapists trying to run away from the responsibilities of a normal life. “Living in the West is a bit like living as a fish on the shore,” says Ani Sangmo, who was ordained at age 37 after having practiced Buddhism for seven years. “There are not so many places you can stay where you have the direct guidance from a teacher around you. It is so much different to live in India, close to the Tibetans, and study and practice in their environment. They help you and teach you not only the Dharma but also about the customs and their rich tradition, which is very interwoven with Buddhism.”

### GOING HOME

“Sixty to seventy percent of Western monks disrobe because even though they have vows against going out and working in a lay job, they have no options,” says Ani Yeshe. “They’re basically almost held in contempt in the West, unfortunately.” But this, she says, is a good thing, because it makes them give up seeking praise and fame and forces them to look inside. “You know that it’s not about the outside,” she says. “It’s more about how much you’re torn about your own ego, your own delusions, your own pride. That’s the hardest battle.”

After finding little support in Australia, Ani Yeshe left her Dharma center, and with her robes and bowl, set out to find what the world had to offer. Every day, she’d wake up not knowing where she would sleep, what she would eat, what she would do. “I found that with that kind of surrender, there’s a certain kind of power that comes. . . . You find that your true home is in your heart and not in a place.”

Soon after this, HarperCollins offered her a chance to write a



Place a caption here place a caption here place a caption here place a caption here place a caption here place a caption here place a caption here place a caption here

I don't want anything from them. I don't want to manipulate them; I don't want to possess them, and they trust me."

### SEX AND MONASTICISM

One of the biggest challenges to being a nun is celibacy. Ani Choekyi was in a six-year relationship when she decided to become a nun. She was only 17 when she first started dating her then-boyfriend. But in a way, she's thankful for celibacy. "I don't feel obligated to do these things in society now because people can physically see that I'm out of the contest." Ani Choekyi wanted to give her life to the Dharma. "In Buddhism, we think that if you take a lot of vows, it's more powerful," she says. "Everything you do is more powerful. So it's like a pressure cooker. You have fewer options, and because there are fewer options, there's more clarity, there's more power, there's more focus. It's more intense."

It's also about declaring your faith, to yourself and to others, she says. "If I externally change my appearance, every time I get dressed, every time I look in the mirror, every time I look down, I'm reminded that I'm committed to changing my mind. Because if I don't have that level of responsibility, I would easily rationalize my negative behaviors." She doesn't believe, however, that monasticism is for everyone, nor does she believe that someone is not a serious practitioner if he or she is not a monk or a nun.

"If the joys didn't outweigh the sorrows, I would have given up long ago," says Ani Yeshe. "When you know that this freedom of spirit is possible, when you know that this purity of mind exists and that you can experience it with your own heart, then to give up everything else is not so hard." **S&H**

Mridu Khullar's biography is on page 8.

book about her life, which she did. *Everyday Enlightenment: How to Be a Spiritual Warrior at the Kitchen Sink* was published in 2006. She also started teaching the Dharma to people in Australia who were interested in Buddhism.

As nuns, Western women encounter some interesting reactions from people, both in India and in their home countries. People sometimes wonder if the nuns belong to cults; they're sometimes regarded with awe, other times with suspicion; and more than one nun says she's been wished good luck with her chemotherapy because of her bald head.

"I miss being invisible," says Ani Yeshe. "When you're a lay person you can go to movies — no one will blink. But when you're a monk or a nun, you're really obvious. They don't see you anymore. They see the Dharma," which can be a blessing. "There's a lot of freedom to being a monk or a nun, because my relationships with people are much more pure. They know that