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Flocks of Golden Beings

by Bhhiksuni Pema Deki (Emma Slade)

If it were hundreds of years ago perhaps, I would say I saw a flock of golden beings, the patches of their cloth glinting and catching the light. Making up a crowd of beaming joy, they gathered under a tent in the forest and drank tea together, looking at one another in the understanding of a deep and profound bond and enormous gratitude to all who made it possible.



On June 21, 2022, in Paro, Bhutan, on Bhutan Nuns' Day, these luminous being gathered around the temple dedicated to Gelongma Palmo, the female practitioner famed for the Nyungne practice. Many threads were woven together to create the this extraordinary historic event, one I honestly did not know I would see in my lifetime, yet alone take part in. The event was historic in enabling female monastics to take full Bhikshuni (Tibetan: Gelongma) ordination within the Vajrayana lineages, which has been impossible for many centuries until now.

The event also felt historic in the conditions it recalled – reminiscent to many who will have read the Sutras and their way of describing conditions for teachings and insight. Here in Bhutan also, there was the blessing of the Dharma King, His Majesty Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, and the support of both his parents: his mother Her Majesty Tshering Yangdoen Wangchuck and his father His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck. There was the essential support of the great Dharma practitioner the Chief Abbott of Bhutan, His Holiness Je Khenpo, accompanied by the necessary ten esteemed gelongs, to bestow the vows. The work of the Bhutan Nuns Foundation was the third key element supporting the vision of those above and supporting the organising of

much of the event. Finally there were those willing and suitable to take the 364 vows: the one hundred and forty-two nuns.

Perhaps the auspicious gathering of these conditions was best confirmed at the start of the first day of taking vows when, at the arrival of His Holiness Je Khenpo, a beautiful rainbow was seen to circle the sun. Who can explain such things? The rainbow seemed to seal the shining radiance of the event, as if the sky lit up with the joy of what was taking place on earth.



It was an incredible start and my state of awe continued as more and more of the ceremony unfolded. Although I am fairly familiar with the meticulous care with which Buddhist events occur in Bhutan, it was as if each moment of this had been polished to perfection.

From different places throughout Bhutan, India, Ladakh, and myself from England, we came together – women who had been living by the Getsulma vows for a required minimum of seven years. Our ages, faces, and languages were different but there was an extraordinary sense of a particular Sangha arising. Through the course of a total of five days, 142 nuns came together to help each other, get to know each other, share tents and food and queries over what we had to do and say and so forth, and together become Gelongmas in the Himalayas.

Luckily we had Khenpo Nima Shar from Tago Dordena, the Buddhist monastic university outside Thimphu, to guide us and help us prepare for the various stages of

the ceremony, which was conducted in the traditional way with groups of three nuns taking vows together. We were given new Gelongma names, all of which began with Jigme ("fearless"), divided into groups of three, and allocated places to sit based on our grouping. The Khenpo, tall and professorial in nature, patiently helped us understand each of the many necessary steps involved. I asked him how he felt to be at the event: "It's a great opportunity for me to be part of this." Every nun I asked said, "It's a great opportunity for me." All expressed great gratitude to Their Majesties and to His Holiness Je Khenpo. Everyone was filled with this sense of an auspicious "opportunity" or "chance," and this created a powerful positive feeling of what is truly possible.

I kept pinching myself that this was really happening. I knew the Buddha had mentioned the four-fold Sangha as a necessary condition for the thriving of Buddha-Dharma in the world. I wondered, could this leap forward imply a great thriving was about to begin?

Below the beautifully decorated temple, stupa, thanka, and ceremonial tents was an area of dining tents and, below that in the forest a family of tents had been erected: some tall, green ones for up to eight nuns, and some smaller medium-height, dome-shaped ones for two people. I was in one of the latter ones with a Bhutanese nun from Wangdi who had been doing the 440,000 preliminary practices twiced in retreat. Luckily, she had brilliant English. I was so grateful for that, as my basic grasp of Dzongkha and keen eye for hand gestures and facial expressions were not going to be enough to safely get me through the next few days without incident! We quickly became inseparable, placing our camping mattresses, pillows, and belongings neatly in the tent, which was just long enough to hold me! I was so grateful for her help through all the days and her patience with my never-ending "What was that? What did he say? Ten prostrations or 30 prostrations?" type of questions. I really did not want to be like the one person in the class who goes left when everyone else goes right. One of the first things to get right was a perfectly shaved head.



Gradually, through the course of three days, the outer robes turned from red to the deep yellow of full ordination. To ordain all 142 nuns took three days in total so it was a gradual turning, with those already fully ordained no longer allowed to eat after midday and those still in red forming a shorter and shorter dinner queue until finally everyone was saffron and everyone was drinking tea. I was personally thrilled to be ordained on the second day, at 2.52pm on June 22, 2022, to be precise, with Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo present. Everyone is told the exact time when the Gelongma vows enter them. For me personally and of course for her three nuns from Dongyu Gatsal Ling Nunnery, it was just wonderful to have her as a precious part of the historic event. Her example as a practitioner in female form was a great inspiration to all the nuns present.



On the final day, His Holiness the Je Khenpo of Bhutan made a moving speech, speaking very clearly about the reasons he felt this ordination was correct. He felt that the statue of the Buddha in front of him kept smiling at him as he considered his decision to bestow the vows. One of my new Gelongma friends from Mongar Nunnery said she could not stop the tears from falling when she heard his words. For a culture not keen on public displays of emotion, this was a moving expression of how much his words pierced her very heart.

Although I had experienced the strength that comes from taking vows when I took my Getsulma vows in 2014, still I had no idea of what it might feel like to receive Gelongma vows, particularly in such incredible circumstances. After all, how can you imagine, let alone know beforehand, how it might feel?

My first awareness was that the vows are about refraining from many things, which is a basic teaching for training the mind to avoid the three poisons. The vows feel very helpful as a form of mental practice.

All I can say is that I felt so very grateful for this chance and so inspired by the words of His Holiness Je Khenpo and the supportive words of Her Majesty, the Queen Mother, Tshering Yangdoen Wangchuck. To be given these vows is a clear statement of being taken seriously as a

Dharma practitioner and renunciate. The vows have given me clear guidance on how to live, largely based on acts of refraining from certain actions, or renunciation. While that may sound severe, a peaceful mind is built on foundations of refraining from anger, greed, and so on. In fact, these vows are a source of profound peacefulness and freedom. Going forward, I felt sure that these vows would be like the wooden rafters of a building, while in retreat and in living a life most help to sentient beings.



Personally, taking these vows, I found that something inside profoundly changed my relationship with my perceived self. Deep within, I felt an ability to care deeply for myself, perhaps indeed as a mother might. I don't mean this in an egotistical way but in a healthy, loving way as a mother may look at their child wishing them complete happiness and joy in their chosen path.

On the final morning, all 142 nuns in saffron robes gathered with our newly offered alms bowls and, together, went forth out of the forest on a traditional alms round through Paro. This meeting with the lay people of the town felt very beautiful, like looking again and again into the eyes of the other with such mutual respect. Sounds like a simple thing, but in this world it felt enormous. Above us, the bright blue sky of a summer's day in Bhutan echoed the vastness of a sky opening up across the world. As we eventually parted, I found myself moved to tears to see this golden flock scattering in all directions to touch many different places.