# Tibetan Buddhist Nuns in Exile: Creating A Sacred Space to be at Home

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## Abstract

This article looks at the activities of the Tibetan Nuns Project in North India and the experience of Tibetan Buddhist nuns at Dolma Ling Nunnery and Institute for Higher Learning and Shugsep Nunnery in the district of Dharamsala. It is argued that although these women are now in exile from Tibet, their home, they were in "spiritual exile" all along, even when at "home" in Tibet, mainly because of their gender. Examining how the nuns are making innovative and creative progress towards redressing this "double exile", by developing agency in their spiritual lives and acquiring knowledge, is crucial to the analytical perspective of this article. On the basis of observations from a brief time spent with the nuns at Dolma Ling and Shugsep, study of literature about them and insights drawn from theory of sacred space in the study of religion and from feminist theorists (particularly Luce Irigaray), it is suggested that the nuns may well be in exile from home, but they are nevertheless finding a way home to themselves as women and to the spirit of lives dedicated to religious practice.

## The Tibetan Nuns Project

So that it can be taken down, rolled up and carried home when the nuns are able to return to Tibet, was the gist of the guide's comment to visitors when explaining the centrepiece of the temple at Dolma Ling Nunnery and Institute of Higher Learning. When I first entered Dolma Ling's temple my attention was immediately caught by this centrepiece, a vast and very beautiful appliqué *thangka* stretching across the front wall of the hall, which portrays Shakyamuni Buddha,

flanked by the Bodhisattvas Avalokitesvara and Green Tara, in place of the usual statues one expects to see in a Tibetan Buddhist temple. Recalling Jonathan Z. Smith's theory of the sacred (see Chidester & Linenthal 1995: 280-81), this *tangkha* could arguably be indicative of a "utopian" sacred space, not tied down to regulated boundaries and physical place—a "locative" sacred order—but moveable, creatively imagined and challenging to that order, perhaps held constant only in the human heart. Before further exploring theory on the poetics and politics of the sacred (whether fixed or fluid)—and exile from it—I intend first to look at what goes on at Dolma Ling and sister nunneries close by in the Dharamsala region, in the state of Himachal Pradesh, North India.

Dolma Ling is situated in the fertile Kangra valley below Dharamsala, flanked by orchards and overlooked by the majestic Himalayan Dhauladhar range of mountains. At sunset the mountains turn a soft hue of deep rose pink, and while taking a contemplative evening walk around the nunnery grounds, I found it easy to imagine that I had entered a Buddhist celestial realm of peace quite other than this human world. But the buildings of Dolma Ling, surrounding a courtyard and all looking up to the temple, are fairly plain and functional, housing 175 nuns when I was there in November 2003, and since then, having grown to around 200. These girls and women are among the "thousands of Tibetan Buddhist nuns [who] have escaped to India [since the Chinese occupation of Tibet] in hope of freely practicing their religion" (Tibetan Nuns Project 2003a: 2).[1] Most come to this region of Dharamsala, "new" home of the Dalai Lama and the ever-growing Tibetan refugee community in exile. Dolma Ling was founded in 1993 by the Tibetan Nuns Project (TNP), an organisation established in 1987 by Tibetans in exile in India under the auspices of the Department of Religion and Culture of H.H. the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Women's Association. One of the main functions of the TNP, with its primary location and governing body in Dharamsala, is to help support the development of Tibetan Buddhist nunneries in India and to sponsor the nuns. At the same time, a "sister" TNP was developed at Berkeley, California to fundraise and provide sponsorship for more than 500 Tibetan Buddhist nuns living in exile in India. The following specific aims are stated in the TNP's mission statement: "Improving standards of food, sanitation, medical care, basic education and training in existing nunneries; working towards future self-sufficiency through innovative educational opportunities; establishing further facilities for refugee Buddhist nuns".[2] His Holiness the Dalai Lama is patron of the TNP and its director is Rinchen Khando Choegyal, who also serves as Minister of Education in the Tibetan Government of Exile in India. Co-directors are Dr Elizabeth Napper, past university professor of Buddhist Studies in the U.S.A., and senior Tibetan nun, Venerable Lobsang Dechen, both of whom have been consistently resident at and involved in the running of Dolma Ling since its inception. Dolma Ling itself operates as a non-sectarian nunnery and institution of education within Tibetan Buddhism, a religious tra-

dition that comprises several separate orders. It seems to serve as a nexus point for other, smaller sister nunneries in the area that are also supported by the TNP. For example: Shugsep, a small forest nunnery below McLeod Ganj (the Tibetan area in the Dharamsala region), is Nyingma; Geden Choeling, right in the centre of McLeod Ganj, is Geluk; and Tilokpur, outside of Dharamsala, is Kagyu. Each nunnery runs its own education programme, though some practical courses take place centrally at Dolma Ling and are open to nuns from other nunneries.

## Education Programmes for Nuns

Most important, and immediately noticeable when visiting Dolma Ling, is the programme of education—religious and secular—that the nuns are offered and pursue with great diligence. Traditionally, in Tibet, education has been exclusively monastic, available only for boys who became monks, while nunneries were poor and, as Tibetan Buddhist scholar, Anne Klein, points out, "tended to be small and did not offer the educational opportunities provided by the larger monasteries, the largest of which were really university complexes" (Klein 1985: 120). Even in exile in northern India, until only a few years ago, "nuns had little access to the philosophical teachings that have been the basis of monks' education for hundreds of years" (Tibetan Nuns Project 1999: 1). The consequences of this gendered hierarchy that was the norm in Tibet has meant that Tibetan Buddhist monks in exile, in India, have had more support and funding, and indeed have brought with them more organisational expertise to successfully establish thriving monasteries there. However, it has been a different story for nuns, who have not been able to draw on a tradition of support and skills for similar success in forging a community among themselves and establishing successful nunneries. Here we can see that the support of the TNP has certainly worked wonders in this regard or, more to the point, has helped the nuns work wonders for themselves in achieving radical change and development in their religious lives within Tibetan Buddhist parameters. Furthermore, the powerful influence of the Dalai Lama's full support of this radical progress towards change for Tibetan religious women should not be underestimated.

In the process of the educational programmes at Dolma Ling and other smaller nunneries, Tibetan Buddhist nuns are achieving what has always been denied to them until now. For example, "Now they have the opportunity to learn and excel in the practice of Buddhist debate as well as the possibility of attaining the position of Geshe (doctor of Buddhist philosophy)" (Tibetan Nuns Project 1999: 1). In 2001, however, the Director of the TNP, Rinchen Khando Choegyal, stated that her vision is to offer a system of education that "will enable nuns to think for themselves", that will lead them to the "true altruism" of care and compassion, along with learning important practical skills. She says, "not all will be scholars; some nuns will need training of other kinds … Not everyone can be

a teacher, but everyone can develop skills so that they can serve the community" (Tibetan Nuns Project 2001: 1-2). In line with this vision, many skills-based training courses and activities are pursued at Dolma Ling, with the goal of self-sufficiency firmly in mind such as: health care, computer skills, tailoring, crafts and a papermaking project, using waste paper and cloth from the well-established recycling project to make greeting cards, envelopes, note pads and wrapping paper (Tibetan Nuns Project 2003a). In the more academic arena, after a major curriculum revision in 2003 at Dolma Ling, the first four years now comprise basic education offered to as many nuns as possible "who have had little or no previous education", providing "a basic competency in Tibetan, English, Buddhist debate and philosophy" (Tibetan Nuns Project 2003b: 3). After tests and evaluation, some nuns may continue for further study, and after 11 years, another five or six years offer the possibility for achieving a full Geshe degree. In 2003, the top class at Dolma Ling was in its eleventh year.

### *Ordination*

The work of the Tibetan Nuns Project illuminates the potential for change and progress for the nuns in the context of life skills, self-sustainable lifestyle, secular and religious education and training to become Tibetan Buddhist religious teachers and scholars at the highest level. The remaining gendered issue is that of ordination. All the women (except some teachers and administrators) at Dolma Ling and sister nunneries are, indeed, nuns. But what does this mean in terms of Tibetan tradition and in comparison with monks? The current status of Tibetan Buddhist nuns can be understood against the backdrop of the history of the Buddhist *bhikshu sangha* (male mendicant order—"monks") and *bhikshuni sangha* (female mendicant order—"nuns"). Although the "Awakened One" known as the Buddha in 6th century BCE India was reluctant at first to allow women into the mendicant life of renunciation—as the story goes in the Pali Canon, the early Buddhist scriptures believed to contain the direct teachings and sayings of the Buddha—he eventually did but special rules were added for nuns that ensured they remained subordinate to monks in every way (see Sponberg 1991: 13-15). Nevertheless, the *bhikshuni sangha* flourished both in India, until Buddhism's decline there, and in other parts of Asia to which Buddhism spread. The nuns order "survives intact in China (the People's Republic, Taiwan, and Hong Kong) and in Korea and Vietnam" (Barnes 1996: 259). But in other parts of Asia, such as Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand and Cambodia (all Theravada Buddhist, and more conservative, especially in terms of gender and women's ordination), as well as Japan and Tibet (Mahayana traditions), the nuns order either died out completely or has survived (or been revived) in modified and informal forms. There are a highly complex variety of shapes and forms, such as *sramanerika* (novice ordination), or informal ordination ("precept holders") whereby women can take up just eight or ten of the many precepts that monks vow to uphold.[3] As

evident from the Asian Buddhist traditions listed above, Tibetan Buddhism, whether in Tibet or in diaspora, is not included among those that have maintained full ordination of nuns, since it is claimed that the lineage of *bhikshuni* ordination was either never transmitted to Tibet or was broken long ago (Barnes 1996). Despite this lack of a nuns order in Tibet, "for centuries there have been women who have abandoned ordinary lay life and have taken the precepts" – in fact, many have taken 36 precepts and are thus regarded as novice nuns (often called *ani*, meaning "aunts"), remaining permanently at that subordinate level (ibid: 273). However, the Tibetan nuns' status cannot begin to compare with that of the Tibetan monks and *lamas* (Tibetan spiritual teachers). This situation is the same, of course, for the nuns in exile in North India. As Ven. Lobsang Dechen explained, for full ordination, a lineage of nuns is necessary, which is thought to have never been brought to Tibet. Nevertheless, research and negotiation for full ordination of nuns is progressing with the full support of the Dalai Lama (personal communication at Dolma Ling, 2003). Further, I would argue that the opportunities the nuns in exile now have for extensive religious education, and even eventually to become *geshes*, make their situation quite different from those nuns in Tibet.

In addition to the above points, an initially promising move towards gender equality in Tibetan religious life, since the 1980s, has seen a few Tibetan women in exile taking ordination in the Chinese or Korean lineages, a move supported by permission from high *lamas* and the Dalai Lama himself (Barnes 1996: 272-275). However, only very few Tibetan women have, in fact, taken this path mainly due to lack of community support, although there have been a greater number of western Tibetan Buddhist women taking ordination in those lineages (Elizabeth Napper, personal e-mail communication, 2006). But the future for the *bhikshuni sangha* within the Tibetan Buddhist tradition itself does look hopeful, as Nancy Barnes has suggested in her following comment:

> The Dalai Lama's government of Tibet in exile will give its recognition to a *bhikshuni* ordination lineage eventually, but, for the sake of credibility and in the hope of future agreement of Theravada leaders, careful preparations for this step are being undertaken. (ibid: 274)

This, however, has proved a highly controversial and slow process, in which the Dalai Lama's crucial and committed advocacy continues to this day.

A different view taken by Rita Gross (1993), in her consideration of what a post-patriarchal Buddhism might look like, implies that the Dalai Lama has been overly cautious in effecting such reform. Since most traditions of Buddhism originally included *bhikshuni sangha*, then the required reforms for reinstating the ordination of nuns in Buddhist traditions today would hardly be dramatically disruptive

to such traditions, and should surely not be so controversial, she argues (Gross 1993). Perhaps, though, Gross has glossed over the hard realities entailed in advocating such a profound disruption of androcentric structures in a patriarchal, monastic tradition of many centuries standing. In any event, advances in education and negotiations towards full ordination as *bhikshuni* continue to be enthusiastically pursued among Tibetan nuns in exile, which brings us to the remaining contextual question to be addressed: who exactly are the nuns who find their way to Dolma Ling and other nunneries in the Dharamsala region?

## Exile from Tibet

Since the Chinese communist invasion and the subsequent annexation of Tibet in the 1950s, over a million Tibetans have been killed by occupying Chinese forces, and many monasteries and nunneries have been destroyed. After a move towards easing religious restrictions between 1980 and 1987, conditions have again worsened, including "severe constraints on the nunneries (and monasteries), such as limiting admission and ordination and instituting 'patriotic re-education' to communist ideology" (Dechen & Napper; also see Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy [TCHRD] 2004). Central to the Chinese "patriotic re-education campaign", which has been intensified even more since 1996, is a focus on the Dalai Lama and "so-called 'hostile forces' abroad" (TCHRD 2004: 121). Of most concern to Beijing has been the Tibetans' alleged, "split loyalty", towards the Dalai Lama and Chinese authority. Restrictions imposed on monks and nuns include the following (ibid): a "five-point denunciation" of the Dalai Lama; agreement that Tibet has always been a part of China; recognition of the Chinese-appointed Panchen Lama;[4] and finally, to "declare their personal opposition to separatism". All Tibetans are banned from possessing any kind of pictures of the Dalai Lama or from observing any kind of practices in reverence and devotion to him.

Ever since the Dalai Lama's flight from Tibet in 1959, monks and nuns in great numbers continue to flee Tibet to this day, many of them to northern India, via Nepal, to escape the oppression and religious persecution that have deeply affected them personally. Some have suffered imprisonment and torture, usually for simply participating in peaceful demonstrations in Lhasa in support of the Tibetan cause of independence and maintenance of their religion and culture (Dechen & Napper; Tibetan Nuns Project 1999). Other young women leave in order to become nuns and pursue a religious life and education. For those who flee Tibet, it has meant making a journey of several weeks—much of it on foot—over the Himalaya to Nepal under clandestine conditions that are arduous and dangerous, requiring great courage and endurance. Several of these women have ended their journey of exile at Dolma Ling, or sister nunneries in the Dharamsala region. Several nuns at both Dolma Ling and Shugsep nunneries

have such stories to tell, among them a few young nuns who were able to speak to me in English.[5] One, for instance, left Tibet about six years ago with a group of more than 60, a journey that took at least six weeks, and during which one young monk lost his life. Her main reason for leaving Tibet was her aspiration to pursue education and religious life. After meeting the Dalai Lama on arrival in India, she became a nun at Dolma Ling and is deeply committed to her studies there. Another was also determined to become educated, something impossible for young Tibetan women in Chinese-ruled Tibet. Both had left their families behind. At Shugsep, a very small forest nunnery in Dharamsala, where the resident nuns live in extraordinarily poor and harsh conditions, one nun told me of her life since protesting in Lhasa for a "free Tibet" in the early 1990s. She had eventually been captured in Sikkim, when that region was claimed as part of China, and was imprisoned and tortured. She was released after six months and soon afterwards escaped over the mountains. She has been at Shugsep for nine years, still recovering from both physical and psychological injuries sustained during her imprisonment. A similar story is told in more detail in the Tibetan Nuns Project periodical (1999) of one of the nuns at Dolma Ling, who had become a nun in Tibet in 1990 at the age of 16 and was part of the protests in Barkhor Square in Lhasa in 1991–1992. She was arrested and assaulted by police in a 1992 protest and incarcerated in Gutsa prison for 11 months and then Drapchi prison for four years. She kept up her religious practices in secret, suffering beatings whenever discovered, and other intense forms of torture were a regular feature of her prison life. Prison work was harsh in the extreme, and food and sleep were absolutely minimal. Released in 1997, she spent 15 months on parole with her family, and then in 1998 "escaped with seventy-six other Tibetans …They spent three days in cars and twenty-one days on foot before reaching Nepal" (Tibetan Nuns Project 1999: 6).

Clearly, the backgrounds and life situations of all the nuns in exile in various nunneries in the Dharamsala region vary. Some had experienced the direct oppression of imprisonment and torture and all had left behind a politically oppressive situation in terms of Chinese control and destruction of their culture. They had also all escaped a traditional and cultural form of oppression in terms of women's subordination in Tibetan Buddhist monastic and educational institutions. Some were nuns already while others became nuns after their arrival in India, and yet others were very specifically in search of a meaningful education, both religious and secular. They have left home, family and familiar life situations behind for a new life in exile in the world of the Tibetan diaspora.

## Religion and Exile

If it can be assumed that religion plays an important role in the aspiration to be fully human, and often forms a fundamental part of a person's identity, then

under circumstances of radical change such as exile from one's home country, religious continuity may become an essential part of maintaining one's identity. Religious continuity implies maintenance of tradition but it is important to remember that tradition itself is not static; rather, it develops and changes as it is taken up by later generations in different historical and socio-cultural contexts. Eve Mullen, for instance, argues that "religious continuity … is vital to any immigrant, transnational, diasporic or uprooted peoples in a new host environment" (2001: 121). But the process of adapting to that new environment itself involves change and thus changes in the traditions of the religion will emerge to facilitate that process. This could not be more evident than in the case of the Tibetan Buddhist nuns in Dharamsala. They have left their home—the home of Tibet where their hearts belong—but their move to India is marked not only by change in environment, but also by change in their own aspirations once denied them in Tibet in their very identity and status as female in Tibetan Buddhist patriarchy and religious hierarchy, as well as in their ways of self-understanding and experience. Everything is changing, while at the same time the religious continuity of their Tibetan Buddhist beliefs and practices, and commitment to them, remain constant.

Certainly, life has changed for these nuns, if nothing else, in terms of place and space. "Home" is Tibet, and in the broader view of "home" as nation, they are now engaging in making a home in India. But "home" is a multi-layered entity, both situated and moveable, and the language of "home" is so often shaped by nuances of the sacred. For some Tibetan Buddhist nuns in exile, home in Tibet was the domestic home of family, while for others it was the religious home of a nunnery. At this point, then, I turn to investigation of the possible meanings of these layers of "home space" for Tibetan nuns in exile, with particular focus on theory of sacred space, and the gendered meanings that might emerge from it. At every level, it could be argued that the idea of home is permeated with romanticised images (the perennial "home is where the heart is", and its attendant sense of longing) that are often feminised, and yet at the same time, represent spaces where real women are silenced by ultimate patriarchal control and androcentric discourses.

Humanistic geography has gone a long way in humanising analysis of space and place by acknowledging the fundamental, relational role of human experience in relation to space. Yi-Fu Tuan (1977) suggests that intimate experience of place is only possible for human beings in the personal, domestic sphere. Home, he insists, is the source of such experience: "Hearth, shelter, home or home base, are intimate places to human beings everywhere" (1977: 147). While such a notion of space, and human relationship to it, certainly humanises the study of geography, it simultaneously idealises and romanticises "home" in what feminist geographer Gillian Rose calls "humanistic geographers search for the essence of place … a search characterised in terms of home - but this was an ideal home"

(1993: 56). Doreen Massey further notes that home is situated at the core of geography's idealisation of place, defined as a "source of stability, reliability and authenticity" (1994: 180). Feminist theorists have long been critical of the division between the domestic and public spheres, seeing it as one example of hierarchical and gendered binaries that underpin patriarchy and the subordination of women (see Moore 1988; Ortner 1974). In claiming home as the essence of place, humanistic geographers idealise and universalise experience where no such unity of experience and feeling exists. From a feminist perspective, which has revealed how women have been confined to the domestic domain and relegated to the reproductive functions of childbirth, childcare and caring for the home, Rose comments that "there seems little reason to celebrate a sense of belonging to the home, and even less so … humanistic geographers claim that home provides the ultimate sense of place" (1993: 55). This is particularly pertinent when we recall the currently soaring rate of domestic violence against women in many patriarchal societies of today's world (see Tobler 2000). Human experience of home is, in fact, marked by difference, and one of the core markers of difference is gender.

Massey's feminist critique further points out that humanistic geography portrays home as a utopian, moveable space, as a site of nostalgic longing experienced by those who have left home—home, after all, is where the heart is. But this, she insists, is an androcentric perspective of the exile's longing for something that is lost, indicating a longed-for home where "the woman (mother, lover-to-whom-you-will-one-day-return) remains" (Massey 1994: 180). So, as well as being idealised and romanticised, home is frequently feminised—and to bring a psychoanalytic (particularly Lacanian) gloss on things—home becomes a symbolic rendering of nostalgia for the lost (m)Other, the maternal home that is forever the object of human desire and longing. Tibetan nuns in exile may well experience a nostalgic longing for home in the sense of leaving behind family, leaving behind Tibet itself, but what exactly have they left behind? Is it possible that the "home" left behind is not always a memory to be celebrated? But let us not assume too much, for universalising claims to the subordination of women in the domestic domain across cultures has had to be put under a critical lens in feminist theory. The public/private divide does not necessarily hold the same cultural and gendered meanings in all societies, pre-Chinese Tibet being a case in point. In this regard, Klein (see 1985; 1995) offers some useful pointers on gendered roles and life in Tibet, especially for Tibetan women. For instance, she notes: "During the century before the occupation of Tibet, if not earlier, there was considerable parity between women and men in the area of work" (Klein 1995: 49). Women and men—especially nomads—have equally shared a simple life of hardship and active work, and trade has also been an area where women have held considerable power and control. Such egalitarianism, however, is not entirely upheld by the customs of Tibetan marriage, mostly arranged by the

prospective bride's parents. In some regions of Tibet, though not all, such marital arrangements often go ahead without the parents consulting their daughter. Moreover, it has not always been easy for young Tibetan women who wish to take up monastic life to do so. Parents expect their daughters to marry and pressure is put on them to do so. Wedding rituals and symbols further reinforce the wife's role as nurturer and sustainer in the domestic realm, a role that is vividly depicted in two Tibetan words for "woman" that translate as "maker of a dwelling" and "maker of stability" (Klein 1995: 51)—the latter surely reminiscent of the feminised ideal of home, the longed-for and lost maternal home mentioned above. Home, therefore, seems to have been an ambiguous space for women in Tibet, a site of both a certain degree of agency, as well as subordination, in family and marriage. Lay education also seems to have been an arena of gender parity in Tibet, though one of equality in lack. For example, although most of the nuns at Dolma Ling arrived in India illiterate, such lack of education has not generally been a gendered issue in Tibet, since education has been largely inaccessible and illiteracy the norm across the majority of the population, male and female (Elizabeth Napper, personal communication at Dolma Ling, 2003). Where lay education has more recently been possible, girls have been as likely as boys to receive it (Klein 1985: 120). However, as noted earlier, it is in religious institutions that men are privileged, especially in terms of religious education and scholarship.

## Sacred Space and Exile

The markedly gendered inequities of the Tibetan Buddhist monastic system suggest that it is the sphere of religion that remains to be scrutinised in relation to its gendered significance—especially for women—in Tibetan Buddhism, both in Tibet and in exile. As Klein points out,

> The greatest life-choice for [Tibetan] women was whether to enter a religious life or to marry. There was no "public sphere" to speak of that might tempt her away from home. (1995: 55)

And after all, the Tibetan nuns in exile have already made that choice in taking up the religious life and leaving behind the domestic space of family and prospective marriage—a home space that has in any event been given nuances of the sacred in humanistic geography's theory of space and place. But this concern with place, and the idealisation of "home" at its centre, is echoed in the study of religion's theoretical analysis of what constitutes space or place as sacred. For example, David Chidester (1994) points to a similarly essentialist understanding of sacred space in his reading of Van der Leeuw's study of manifestations of the

sacred, in which he lists places that are indicative of a "poetics of sacred space": sacred sites of home, temple, settlement, pilgrimage site and the human body are juxtaposed with metaphoric homologies found at the centre of each site, respectively: hearth, altar, sanctuary, shrine and the human heart (see Chidester 1994: 212). Clearly focusing on the domestic, Van der Leeuw indicates that a sacred space is ultimately a place where a person can truly be at home. Human experience of place as sacred, according to such a poetics of sacred space, is defined as intimate, personal and domestic, corresponding closely with humanistic geography's definition of the essence of place as the intimate experience of, and longing for, "home".

The poetics of sacred space, as described above, imagines an essential experience of the sacred and discerns certain sites as inherently full of spiritual power and meaning. But just as humanistic geography's essentialised and feminised ideal of place masks the reality of women's lives, a poetics of sacred space tends to mask the reality that sacred space is humanly constructed and maintained, especially through the cultural "work" of ritual (see Chidester 1994: 212). The latter points to a "politics of sacred space" in which sacred space is produced by a human, relational process that includes four components: a politics of location or colonisation of space; a politics of inclusion and exclusion to maintain boundaries; a politics of property that negotiates who owns the space; and a politics of exile, referring to alienation, dislocation and remoteness from a place that engenders the experience of nostalgia or "homesickness"—a "homesickness" that imbues the place left behind with sacred meaning. If the sacred is defined in this way, places that might be sacralised, and even violently contested, would inevitably include the domestic space of home itself, and even the human body with the human heart at its centre (Chidester & Linenthal 1995: 6-9). At the heart of idealised notions of "home" as sacred space, as has already been argued, reside equally idealised (and domesticated) images of women.

Can any of these theoretical notions help develop an understanding of the lived realities of Tibetan Buddhist nuns in exile? It has already been shown that idealised notions of home—as the domestic space of hearth and home, with all its gendered ambiguities—signify a space that the nuns have left behind for commitment to religious life, whether before or after they fled Tibet. Consequently, I intend to conclude by analysing the nuns' exile and position in Tibetan Buddhist religious institutions addressed in this paper, mainly Dolma Ling and Shugsep nunneries. The changes in the nuns' lives, in the context of religion and the sacred, could be seen as a dynamic example of a politics of sacred space, for indeed the nuns are in exile, and at the same time are taking up a position that is shaped by contested and changing gendered power relations. It is certainly clear that the nuns in North India have fled into exile from their home country, many of them because of violent experience of political conflict and oppressive conditions in Chinese colonised Tibet. Also, the nuns have left behind their

family homes in choosing to commit themselves to the religious life, and in doing so, I would suggest, have found themselves in spiritual exile, excluded from the "heart" of the androcentric institution of Tibetan Buddhist religion itself, their chosen "spiritual home". In their religious lives, then, which are shaped by contested gender hierarchies they have, as women, found themselves exiled from their own spirit, the heart of their very being, whether at home in, or exiled from, Tibet. Therefore, I would argue that in a fluid interweaving of both a poetics *and* politics of the sacred, the nuns are intimately engaged in a process of changing their experience of alienation from the self, towards coming "home" to themselves, to the heart of their being.

## Creating a Sacred space of the Feminine

At the core of the problem for nuns within the patriarchal hierarchy of institutionalised Tibetan Buddhism, I would suggest, remain the subordination and marginalisation of women and the feminine, as well as women's exile and alienation from the self. The birth of change, ironically, is taking place among nuns in exile from Tibet, and this change heralds the pursuit of female subjectivity, agency and the aspiration to be fully human, by embracing the spirit at the heart of the self. The work of French feminist theorist and psychoanalyst, Luce Irigaray, brings a useful perspective to the problems of female subordination and exile that need to be overcome in the process of change. Irigaray's feminist theory includes strategies to recover female subjectivity and create an exclusively feminine linguistic and symbolic order (see 1985a; 1985b), aiming to counter the centrality of the patriarchal and androcentric symbolic order embedded in western social and cultural gender ideologies, including psychoanalytic theory. This, Irigaray insists, has denied women a voice by relegating both women and feminine symbols to the position of subordinate "other". Religion, she further claims, has played a major role in these culturally determined and dominant "phallocentric" discourses (1993b). Of relevance here is Irigaray's incisive critique of the symbolic power of religious myth in creating the dominance of the symbolic masculine over the feminine, which in turn reinforces the power of men over women. Through the exercise of this male power in patriarchal religions, an exclusively masculine sacred space is constructed from which women are exiled. Irigaray's feminist strategies to counter these androcentric trends focus almost entirely on redressing the oppressive effects of western discourses and religious traditions on women's status and experience. However, I would argue that these strategies could be just as effectively applied in the case of women's status and experience in Asian religious traditions, especially a religion such as Tibetan Buddhism that is so rich in powerful myth and symbol.

Furthermore, it is important to note that Irigaray's intention in this regard has been to forge a completely new ethics that would provide an avenue for open

expression of the feminine and for women's equal but different participation in society, culture and religion (see Tobler 2000: 89-95). This is not a project to "turn the tables" whereby women and the feminine will dominate men and the masculine, rendering "man" the subordinate "other"; nor is it an attempt to transform the dominant patriarchal symbolic order by subversive strategies from within it. Instead, it is an attempt to construct an entirely separate discursive sacred space for women, a visionary ethic based on acknowledgement and acceptance of difference. This would allow male and female to relate as two equal subjects, rather than in accord with the androcentric cultural and social representation of "man" as human, as the dominant subject, and 'woman' as subordinate other: "Women's exploitation is based on sexual difference … It is quite simply a matter of social justice to balance out this power of one sex over the other" (Irigaray 1993a: 13). In such a reconstruction of gendered relationships, "woman" and "man" would simultaneously be "other" to one another, as two autonomous and different subjects, "by suspending the authority of the One: of man, of the father, of the leader, of the one god, of the unique truth, etc."(Irigaray 2000: 129). Although this aspiration may appear too essentialist in nature for some feminists, I would suggest that Irigaray in fact points to a politics of sacred space where women, as individuals, might redress their exile from the male domain and claim sole ownership and control over their own expression and creativity. The question remains—how?

There are several interweaving threads running through Irigaray's transformative theory, all of which she mobilises to liberate social, cultural and religious life from the power of one gender over the other. These threads, I believe, can be vitally relevant for understanding the exile of Tibetan Buddhist nuns in Dharamsala, as well as supporting the process of change they are beginning to effect in their religious lives. Underpinning Irigaray's intentions is her assertion that women need to fully enter into their embodied, female experience, to create and own a female sacred space which, she insists, includes and embraces women's religious and mystic experience. Therefore I intend, next, to examine three threads of her theory and then conclude by suggesting how all three relate to the religious lives of the Dharamsala Tibetan nuns.

First, and essential to Irigaray's recovery of female subjectivity and symbolic discourse, is her critique of psychoanalytic theory's marginalisation of the mother-daughter relationship in favour of giving father and son—and, in fact, the son's psychosexual development—centre stage, as represented in Freud's interpretation of the Oedipus myth. The unsymbolised relationship between mother and daughter, Irigaray suggests, signals women's exile from the patriarchal Symbolic. To redress this exile, she thus insists, "we [women] must … enter further into womanhood, and not become more alien to ourselves than we were, more in exile than we were" (1993b: 60). To this end, she therefore urges women to construct a separate, autonomous female Symbolic that emphasises their embod-

ied sexuality and restores a genealogy of women. This would allow women the space to come "home" to themselves, to their hearts. Second, in focusing on images of the mother for creating such a female Symbolic and genealogy of women, Irigaray advocates myth and symbol that represents the mother-daughter relationship as a prototype for relations between women. Maternal images that symbolise "mother", or more accurately, "m(Other)", are not intended to be limited to representations of women's reproductive function, but to serve as metaphors for the creativity of all women. As Irigaray states,

> [W]e are all mothers just by being women. We bring many things into the world apart from children, we give birth to many things apart from children: love, desire, language, art, social things, political things, religious things … We must take back this maternal, creative dimension that is our birthright. (1993b: 18)

Irigaray's inclusion of "religious things" in her above encouragement points to a third thread to her project, that is, her insight that women's exile from the sacred space of the patriarchal Symbolic is further replicated in western, patriarchal religious traditions. Recalling the western philosophical history of a gendered division of mind and body, she asserts that these religions offer no way back to the mother and the body, only a way up "to heaven, toward the father and his kingdom" (1993b: 15). "Mother", as symbol of body (maternal body and sexuality) and earth ("mother nature"), represents only a distraction from transcendent divinity, and therefore must be subjugated and controlled to hasten human transcendence to some world beyond the one we have. But, claims Irigaray, it will not work simply to reject religious life altogether, as "no human subjectivity, no human society has ever been established without the help of the divine" (1993b: 62). Women therefore need divinity in order to be free and autonomous and they do need an alternative way of relating to what is larger than them. However, since they are exiled from the sacred space of man's construction of a uniquely male god, women need a "god" of their own, one that serves to revalorise women's subjectivity, language and embodied experience, one that values female symbols, fertility and nature. What is it, Irigaray asks, that holds women back from becoming "divine women"? Her answer suggests that, "as long as woman lacks a divine made in her image she cannot establish her subjectivity or achieve a goal of her own" (1993b: 63).

## A Divine Made in her Image?

How do the above points of Irigaray's theory relate to the Tibetan Buddhist nuns in Dharamsala, especially given they have renounced sexuality and motherhood

and are located in a religious tradition that is non-theistic, with no "male god" as such? Much of Irigaray's critique, I would argue, is relevant for our analysis. The androcentric institution of Tibetan Buddhism has indeed excluded women, especially evident in the claim that no lineage of nuns was brought to Tibet. The lineage of the monastic *sangha* remains exclusively male in Tibetan Buddhism, along with the important teacher-disciple relationship between *lama* (teacher) and monk founded on the central theory of lineages of reincarnated teachers and spiritual leaders, for example, the Dalai Lama. Despite all this, however, the Tibetan nuns have courageously engaged a process of change. With regard to the first thread, Irigaray's call to recover a "genealogy of women" I would argue that, in their own way, the nuns are in fact doing this—not in literal terms, of course, for as nuns they have taken the precept of celibacy and have renounced patriarchy's "sacred calling" of motherhood (see Rich 1986). But they have formed a community of women and are becoming educated and skilled, taking faltering steps towards autonomy and development of a female lineage of teachers and, eventually, the full ordination of nuns. This is all going to take time and may still reside in the realm of hope since the nuns remain reliant on monks for their religious and philosophical education, as well as waiting for the male leadership to negotiate full ordination for Tibetan Buddhist nuns. Also, as Elizabeth Napper pointed out, even when some nuns do achieve the status of *geshe*, they will still need to develop more confidence as they may well face problems in being accepted as teachers by their own peers (personal communication at Dolma Ling 2003). Nevertheless, I believe the nuns are creating a female sacred space, a space where they are coming home to their own identity and personal power.

Then with regard to the second and third threads, and inextricably interwoven with the above point, we need to explore Irigaray's call for myth and symbol that represents the mother-daughter relationship, as a prototype for relations between women, and for a "divine made in her [woman's] image". I have suggested elsewhere that perhaps Irigaray could have looked more closely at so-called "eastern" religions for appropriate symbolic resources that could be empowering for women (Tobler 2000: 92; 2001: 54). Even though she focuses on gender relations in western contexts, these religions could still be a relevant resource, given the growing number of western practitioners of teachings based on Hindu and Buddhist traditions. However, in spite of the fact that such traditions are rich in powerful feminine symbols of divinity and enlightenment, they have not necessarily been interpreted in ways that support equity and justice for women in their lived reality (see, for example, Gross 1989; King 1995). This does not mean to say that myth and symbol that represent the feminine cannot be mobilised and reinterpreted by women themselves to create their own female subjectivity and feminine symbolic discourse.

Tibetan Buddhism is founded on Mahayana tradition, but is more specifically Vajrayana (or Tantric) Buddhism, which is an extension of the Mahayana

tradition and involves esoteric and often secret ritual and meditative practices that are passed on directly by accomplished teachers to disciples. It is this tradition, I would suggest, that offers a space for such reinterpretation by women. Vajrayana tradition includes myth and symbol indicative of the profound significance of both "feminine" and "masculine" principles or energies that manifest in both celestial and human realms of being. These principles make up *bodhicitta*, a pure state of mind, motivated by compassion and cultivated by practitioners in their aspiration for enlightenment, not only of self, but of all sentient beings. In Vajrayana or Tantric Buddhism, which originated in India and spread to Tibet in about the 7th century CE, these gendered principles are symbolically represented as "deities", that is, as celestial Bodhisattvas (beings who vow to lead all beings to enlightenment) and fully enlightened Buddhas. A central female deity is Tara, who manifests in many images, and is the female counterpart to the male Bodhisattva and Buddha of compassion, Avalokitesvara. Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhist myth narrates that Tara was born from tears wept by Avalokitesvara:

> It is said that Avalokitesvara wept when he saw that no matter how many beings he saved, countless more still remained in *samsara* [wheel of birth and death]. A blue lotus (also held by Tara) grew in the water of his tears and Tara was born on that lotus. (Gross 1993: 110)

Devotion to Tara is popular among most Tibetan Buddhists, including nuns, and she is a central image for Vajrayana meditation practice (see Gross 1993: 109-14). Images of Tara and Avalokitesvara sit alongside the Buddha in many Tibetan temples, including Dolma Ling nunnery (as mentioned in the opening paragraph of this paper). Although Tara's forms appear in different colours, each with its own symbolic significance, the most popular image is the Green Tara. Green, according to Tibetan symbolism, represents the "Wisdom of All-Accomplishing Action" and Tara, according to Tibetan myth and poetry, is engaged in "constant activity to help and save beings" (ibid: 111). As the feminine dimension of the Bodhisattva of compassion, she symbolises and enacts the active and soteriological dimensions of both compassion and wisdom. It is indeed the Green Tara who sits at the side of the Buddha on the *tangkha* of Dolma Ling's temple shrine, and so she is seen every day by the nuns. It can be argued that Tara offers a particularly apposite and inspirational symbol for the Dolma Ling nuns, since the changes they are making in their religious lives, and importantly, in the structural form of the Tibetan *bhikshuni sangha*, are very much based on activity and dynamic creativity. This activity, in turn, rests on the nuns' advances in religious, philosophical and practical education that was previously denied to them in Tibet—from both political and Buddhist monastic points of view. I

would suggest that Tara, as just one example among Tibetan Buddhist symbolic forms of feminine divinity, fulfils Irigaray's vision of "a divine made in her image" and supports women's agency in their religious lives.

There are many other symbolic and spiritually powerful forms of the feminine, both celestial and human, that are profoundly significant in Vajrayana, particularly for women. My last example, which I would suggest is especially relevant for Tibetan nuns in exile, refers to a dimension of the history of Tibetan Buddhist tantric, or yogic, teachings in which lineages of great *yogis* and *yoginis* (male and female adepts and teachers) are found. These teachings and practices have been mainly preserved in the Nyingma and Kagyu traditions in Tibet (Simmer-Brown 2001). In Vajrayana Buddhism, a further alternative to marriage or becoming a nun has been available to Tibetan women, that is, becoming a *yogini* or *tantrika*. These practitioners do not always take a vow of celibacy and may or may not be married, and may or may not be part of a Tibetan monastic order. Rita Gross notes that the history of this religious lifestyle taken up by some Tibetan women often entailed wandering "freely on religious pilgrimage all over Tibet and into Nepal, alone, with other *yogini*-s, or in mixed company with *yogi*-s"(1993: 87). This itinerant practice would be interspersed with settling down "in an isolated hermitage for long periods of intensive meditation practice" (ibid). Although there have been far fewer women than men in the Tibetan yogic tradition, several of these extraordinary women in the history of Vajrayana Buddhism have been great teachers, drawing male and female, lay and monastic students. To this day, they remain greatly revered in Tibetan Buddhist tradition. Some biographies of prominent women in this tradition in fact record how they suffered abuse at the hands of their parents and husbands in attempts to confine them to the domestic domain. As Rita Gross points out: "If a woman can somehow make it through the maze of negative socialization and gender stereotypes, she will be greatly revered as an exceptionally accomplished *yogini*" (ibid). But in terms of their religious significance, records of significant female figures in this history are woven into elaborate myth that simultaneously records a human history that is injected with profoundly esoteric, miraculous and celestial stories in which some attain the status of advanced Bodhisattvas and fully enlightened Buddhas (see Allione 1984; Gross 1993; Klein 1985, 1995; Ray 1989; Simmer-Brown 2001). One of the most famous, Yeshey Tsogyel, was also known as the Great Bliss Queen and as "the supreme preserver of the 'resources' that constitute the Nyingma teachings" (Klein 1985: 126). According to myth, she suffered violent abuse as a result of resisting marriage, eventually becoming wife to the emperor, who then allowed her to become disciple and later, consort, of the great *yogi* and Bodhisattva Padmasambhava in eighth-century Tibet. Together they are said to have established Buddhism in Tibet and "Tibetans regard Yeshey Tsogyel as a Buddha who takes the form of an ordinary Tibetan woman so that the people of her country might more easily form a relationship with her" (Klein, 1995: 17).

Another luminary female figure, later on in the eleventh century, was perhaps "Tibet's most innovative woman teacher and practitioner, Machig Lapdron" (Gross 1993: 98) who is also believed to have been an incarnation of Yeshey Tsogyel (Klein 1985: 11). Not only was she married but she also had children who are said to have been trained by her and to have continued her lineage of teaching after her death. She is particularly associated with the origins of the Chod ("cutting-off ego") ritual practice, central to the Nyingma tradition. This practice gives central significance to the body, in which the practitioner visualises severing and offering parts of her or his body to various deities as a symbol of cutting away worldly attachments and the ego (Tibetan Nuns Project website; Samuel 1989; Stott 1989). It is here that a link between this ancient Nyingma tradition and refugee Tibetan nuns is evident. The Shugsep Nunnery in the Dharamsala region, sister nunnery to Dolma Ling, is specifically part of the Nyingma tradition and directly associated with the original Shugsep Nunnery in Tibet, first established in the 11th century. Most of the 60 nuns there are from the original Shugsep, having fled continual harassment by Chinese authorities; as mentioned above, this includes several who have suffered imprisonment and torture for protesting against the destruction of their religion and culture. The nuns of Shugsep are devoted to following the teachings of the famous tantric practitioner of the 20th century, Jetsun Rigzin Chonyi Sangmo, of Machig Lapdron's lineage of Chod practice (Conservancy for Tibetan Art & Culture website; Tibetan Nuns Project website). Known as Shugsep Jetsun Rinpoche, this great adept and teacher made Shugsep Nunnery in Tibet her spiritual home and died in 1953. The nuns of Shugsep in Dharamsala continue her meditative and ritual practices. The Chod ritual is central to their practice and is performed every Sunday night (Tibetan Nuns Project website).

Furthermore, many of the Dharamsala Shugsep nuns are engaged in the traditional Nyingma nine-year course of study, which has previously been exclusively for monks. This includes studying several Buddhist philosophical traditions, such as Madhyamika, as well as core Mahayana texts (for example, the *Prajnaparamita*), and those nuns who advance further in their years of study then teach Buddhist Philosophy to those nuns in years one to four. Those who reach years seven, eight and nine study "the inner and outer tantras", and on completing the course, they are able to go on to do independent research towards attaining a Khenpo degree, equivalent to a PhD in Tantric Philosophy (Tibetan Nuns Project 2001: 3; 2002: 3). At an inspiring graduation ceremony on April 14th 2004, eight Shugsep nuns were acknowledged for being the first ever nuns to complete this nine-year course that until then had only been achieved by monks in the Nyingma tradition (Tibetan Nuns Project 2004). If they go on to achieve the Khenpo degree, they will be able to teach both nuns and monks throughout their tradition. The nuns at Shugsep, I would argue, have progressed a long way towards recovering a "genealogy of women" and creating a sacred space of the feminine. Through

their devotion to their teacher Shugsep Jetsun and dedicated practice of her Nyingma teachings, they are upholding a lineage begun in the 11th century. One of the Shugsep nuns told many stories of miraculous feats of their guru, continually emphasising that this was a *woman* she was talking about (personal communication, 2003). This nun's attitude of love and devotion as she spoke, and her confidence in her own practice, seemed to vindicate my feeling that this nunnery, despite its poverty, was indeed a home for the heart and spirit, a sacred space for these religious women.

## Conclusion

The subject of this paper has been Tibetan Buddhist nuns in exile in the Dharamsala region of North India. The objective has been to show that these nuns are, in fact, female *subjects*, who are fulfilling their agency and subjectivity in ways that identify them as fully human, no longer the feminine "other" to a prevailing androcentric norm of humanness. In looking at the nunneries of Dolma Ling and Shugsep, it is possible to see a developmental process of Buddhist and secular education, as well as ritual and meditative practice that is empowering for the nuns. These are women who have found themselves doubly exiled – that is, in exile from their national "home" of Tibet and a central place in its patriarchal social systems, and in exile from the centre of institutional Buddhist monastic life, their religious and spiritual "home". Both experiences of exile, I would argue, involve a poetics of sacred space, as they are matters of the heart, involving a deep longing for "home", whether material or of the spirit. To be in exile from both these realms of being human, means experiencing an alienation from the deepest spaces of the self and heart and thus demands change. Such change, I would suggest, indicates a process of claiming ownership of sacred space that has been formerly colonised by male dominance and contested in an ongoing play of gendered power relations—all of which point to a politics of sacred space played out alongside a poetics of the heart. The nuns of Dolma Ling and Shugsep, with the support of the Tibetan Nuns Project, have embraced this challenge in many ways. In keeping with the Buddhist teaching on the fluidity and impermanence of all things, including ideas of the self, I believe the nuns have courageously embraced effecting a change in their identity, a subordinated female identity that has, in fact, been reified and static in the patriarchal and androcentric history of Buddhism. By referring to Luce Irigaray's call to women to enter into creating an autonomous female subjectivity, a genealogy of women, and "a divine in her image", an understanding of such fluidity and change emerges: With the support of the TNP, the Tibetan Buddhist nuns in exile are establishing a new home for themselves in India. By claiming a religious education equal to that of monks, they are creating an autonomous home, or sacred space, in the realm of Tibetan Buddhist monastic life, the seat of wisdom; and finally, by fully

engaging with feminine symbols of agency, wisdom and compassion—whether human or divine—they are in the process of coming home to the deepest part of themselves, the spirit, the heart of compassion for self and others.

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## Notes

1 *Tibetan Nuns Project* is the TNP's periodical, published four times a year, giving news about the nuns and nunneries sponsored by the project.

2 www.tnp.org

3 See WAiB Pages website for an informative explanation and listed categories.

4 Since the time of the fifth Dalai Lama in the 16th century, each Panchen Lama has been the Dalai Lama's teacher, the term "Panchen" meaning "Great Scholar". The continued detention of the 11th Panchen Lama Gendun Choekyi Nyima, since May 1995, at the age of six, shows continued Chinese intervention in Tibetan religious affairs. The whereabouts of the Panchen Lama remains unknown, and the Chinese authorities have announced their own State appointed Panchen Lama, in order to discredit the Dalai Lama's recognition of Gendun Choekyi Nyima as the 11th Panchen Lama (see TCHRD Report 2004:125-26).

5 Here I refer to informal conversations I was privileged to have with a few of the nuns during my brief visits to Dolma Ling and Shugsep nunneries.

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