

## Tibet's First Female Philosophers—Transcript

[00:00:03] **Narrator:** You are listening to the sound of philosophy in action. If you imagine philosophical debate as something done by old bearded men in tweed jackets smoking pipes, then you have never been to Tibet. Tibetan Buddhist monks treat debate almost like a sport. One debater stands at a time circling their opponent like a bullfighter. Every time a monk scores an important point, they smack their palm just to make sure their opponent knows. There's more shit talking at a Tibetan debate than an American basketball game.

What's especially exciting about this debate is that it's being conducted by Buddhist nuns. Historically, women in Tibet weren't allowed to receive higher education, much less train to become philosophers. And yet, that's precisely what's happening at Larung Gar, the world's largest monastery, where over the past 20 years, Buddhist nuns have begun publishing seminal works of philosophy and scholarship.

To get to Larung Gar, you fly into Chengdu, a city with a population of 16 million, which makes it bigger than New York but only midsize by Chinese standards. From there, you take 16 hours of buses across Tibet's sparse grasslands and off-road jeeps over 15,000-foot mountain passes, only to arrive at a monastery just as crowded as Chengdu. Larung Gar is the world's largest monastery. At its peak, Larung Gar would house 20,000 monks and nuns during the teaching season and its ranks would swell to tens of thousands during important festivals as Tibetans would gather at one of the last sites in all of Tibet where Buddhists could still receive authentic teachings. Chinese officials have recently downsized (in quotation marks) the number of monastics to 5000, at least officially. But Larung Gar maintains its frantic Buddhist Disneyland feel. After three days of buses, jeeps and car camping, I finally met with Khenmo Lhakyid in the teahouse of a five-star Chinese hotel built to accommodate important Chinese dignitaries who come to Larung for religious teachings. We really hit it off, and like almost all philosophers I know, she'd prefer to spend all day talking theory.

[00:02:21] **Khenmo Lhakyid:** (speaking Tibetan)

[00:02:26] **Narrator:** I address her as Khenmo Lhakyid, but that's not her actual name. Khenmo is her title, like "master" or "doctor." A khenmo degree is roughly equivalent to a Ph.D., requiring about 10 to 15 years of study in philosophy, theology and contemplative practice.

Khenmo Lhakyid is very charismatic. Her intellect and intensity are matched by an unexpected humility. I'd ask her a question and she'd modestly say that she wasn't sure she had anything to contribute and that I should really ask someone else only to expound some teachings so profound and concise that it was hard to believe she wasn't reading from a speech. I imagine that one day Tibetans will read about her in the same way that Europeans read about Hypatia or Mary Wollstonecraft.

[00:03:11] **Khenmo Lhakyid:** (speaking Tibetan)

[00:03:14] **Narrator:** But her profound teachings belie her modest beginnings. Khenmo Lhakyid is the daughter of illiterate herdspeople who rose to become a distinguished scholar. It's difficult to imagine Khenmo Lhakyid as a nervous teenager, but that's exactly how she describes herself when she first entered Larung Gar.

[00:03:31] **Khenmo Lhakyid (in translation):** I became a nun in 1988 when I was very young, just 13. I had almost no experience of the world and hadn't developed a heart for renunciation.

[00:03:42] **Narrator:** Khenmo Lhakyid's decision to become a nun wasn't the result of a deep religious conviction or the desire to pursue enlightenment. It was almost transactional. She wanted to escape the difficult life of a Tibetan nomad.

[00:03:54] **Khenmo Lhakyid:** I was actually born into a nomad family, so I woke up every day at five to start working. And this arduous life was repeated day after day.

[00:04:04] **Narrator:** It is common for Tibetan parents to send their children to the local monastery to become monks or nuns. This often looks to Westerners like abandonment, and there's an element of truth in that. Families are often happy to be rid of a daughter since it gets them off the hook for a dowry. But the reality is more complicated. In Tibet, monasteries are not where you go to escape the world, but to enter it.

[00:04:27] **Dr. Liang:** A monastery is also kind of like a university, almost all forms of learning, secular or non-secular, happen in the monastery.

[00:04:36] **Narrator:** This is Liang Jue, a professor at Denison University who studies gender in Buddhism.

[00:04:41] **Dr. Liang:** So monks are really the people who are the center of social, cultural, religious, political, and economic power. They can be religious leaders. They can be doctors. They can be managers of large estates. Really there is not one thing I think monks cannot do.

[00:05:01] **Narrator:** However, these opportunities for learning and advancement aren't equal. Many monks spend all day studying or engaged in vocational training. When a boy is dropped off at the monastery, they might one day become a scholar, a political leader like the Dalai Lama, a poet, or a medical doctor. But nuns basically serve as free labor for the monastery—cleaning, preparing meals, farming the nearby fields, emulating the life they would have lived outside the monastery walls.

[00:05:29] **Khenmo #1:** Usually in Tibetan society, if you're a woman you need to spend all your time cooking, herding the yaks and sheep, these kinds of things, they definitely don't encourage you to study. The main reason is the Tibetan patriarchy. They look down on women and don't give them the same opportunity to study as men. People think they lack the capacity.

[00:05:53] **Narrator:** Even though Khenmo Lhakyid preferred being a nun to a nomad, because that way she could at least work for the benefit of Buddhism and accumulate good karma, she was prepared for a life of menial labor and servitude when she was dropped off at the Larung Gar nunnery. And so what happened? How did she end up as a renowned philosopher instead of a cook? At Larung, Khenmo Lhakyid met Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok, one of the most renowned teachers in modern Tibetan religious history. Even as a 13-year-old, Khenmo Lhakyid was familiar with Jigme Phuntsok—all Tibetans were. Khenpo Jigphun was born in 1933, and by the time he was in his early twenties, he was already recognized as one of the most important religious teachers in Tibet, and was appointed abbot of a major monastery. But his career was derailed when China escalated their invasion of Tibet in 1959. When China invaded, most of the Tibetan intelligentsia had

fled into exile abroad, including the Dalai Lama. But Khenpo Jigphun went deep into the mountains to herd sheep with his sister...for 20...long...years. Khenpo Jigphun descended from the mountains in the 1970s after the worst of the Cultural Revolution was over. The Tibetan people were shocked. No one knew where he had been or what he had been doing. But they remembered his pre-war legacy and he was instantly regarded as the most important Buddhist teacher still in Tibet.

[00:07:19] **Khenpo Jigphun:** (speaking Tibetan)

[00:07:23] **Narrator:** Khenpo Jigphun wasn't interested in teaching publicly. After coming out of exile, he took only six of his closest disciples into the most remote valley he could think of to meditate and teach them. But once word got out that one of Tibet's last authentic Buddhist teachers had disciples, it was impossible to keep aspiring monks away. Six disciples grew to sixty, sixty grew to six hundred. And that quiet retreat soon became the largest monastery in the world. Khenpo Jigphun simply couldn't turn away anyone interested in the Buddhist teachings—to him, everything else about their identity was irrelevant.

[00:08:02] **Dr. Liang:** When Khenpo Jigphun founded Larung Gar in the 1980s, I think what he had in mind was a monastery that is for the modern society, and it is a monastery that is as inclusive as possible. Larung Gar has an inclusive curriculum that includes all the Tibetan Buddhist schools. Larung Gar really allows not only Tibetan but Han Chinese as well as foreign disciples to come and study there. And this is the most important aspect, I think, is that Khenpo Jigphun is really welcoming and inclusive to women disciples, especially nuns.

[00:08:46] **Khenmo Lhakyid:** The nuns just came one by one as word of Larung Gar spread. Whenever Khenpo Jigphun teaches, he always says that women must study hard and make an extra effort since they haven't had the opportunity to do so in the past. He mentions this every teaching.

[00:09:03] **Narrator:** There were many shocking things about Larung Gar for the nuns who arrived in those early days in the 1980s, including Khemo Lhakyid. Many remember sitting alongside monks at teachings instead of behind them, as is customary, and at spending their days studying just like the monks instead of having to do chores.

[00:09:21] **Khenmo Lhakyid:** Before, when I was studying with Khenpo Jigphun, he treated the monks and nuns the same. There was no difference in their course of study. Here one is respected if and only if one is good at studying and if one is virtuous.

[00:09:35] **Narrator:** But even though Khenmo Lhakyid had heard of Khenpo Jigphun in the past, she had no idea that he would take such a personal interest in her life and education. The most shocking day of her life was when Khenpo Jigphun called her aside to tell her that she and a few other exemplary students would begin studying to become khenmos. It is an arduous curriculum, as one of her classmates remembered.

[00:09:55] **Khenmo #2:** You wake up at five a.m. to prepare for that day's classes, make offerings, and sit in meditation. In the afternoon, everyone has class. After studying all day, in the evening I need to edit the abbot's books, followed by class with the abbot and more meditation. It's an extremely busy schedule, but it's not painful. Everyone thinks we must be exhausted, but we're really not that tired because we enjoy the work.

[00:10:21] **Narrator:** At first, laypeople and even monks were skeptical that these nuns could become khenmos. After all, women hadn't been allowed to study philosophy in the 1,500 years that Buddhism had been in Tibet. For centuries, Tibetan culture and Buddhist orthodoxy alike had said that women didn't have the intelligence or discipline to receive these degrees. But in 1997, after 15 years of study, dozens of exams and a defense of a doctoral thesis, Khenmo Lhakyid became part of the first class of female khenmos in Tibetan history.

[00:10:55] **Dr. Liang:** When we first started our research project on the khenmos, the word was so new and so unknown to people that many people actually corrected us and asked if we were looking for khenpos, which is a male equivalent of a khenmo. When one of the nuns was told by Khenpo Jigphun that "you are going to study to become a khenmo," she nodded religiously and immediately went back to her room and pulled out the dictionary. She tried to look up the word khenmo in a dictionary, but there was not an entry.

[00:11:30] **Narrator:** I fished for soundbites of Khenmo Lhakyid bragging about her achievement, but she sidestepped me with the humility you might expect of a great Buddhist teacher, talking instead about how she hoped the accomplishment would benefit others.

[00:11:45] **Khenmo Lhakyid:** Not studying is the same as not practicing. Study leads to compassion because if you don't understand your relationship to another person, then how can you develop compassion for them? The same is true for the precious human rebirth. If you don't study, how can you appreciate how rare it is to be reborn as a human capable of practicing Buddhism? If there is gender equality throughout the world, that is beneficial for spreading the Buddhist teachings and for cultivating world peace.

[00:12:19] **Narrator:** In the late 90s, the first khenmos put their education to good use, assuming leadership roles within Larung Gar. The khenmos immediately took control of Larung's publishing operations, the most public facing part of the monastery, and today Khenmo Lhakyid sits on the committee that sets the monastic curriculum for all of Larung and the dozens of other monasteries that have implemented the Larung program. The khenmos also oversee a huge scholastic project designed to catalog the teachings of great Buddhist women. To date, 53 volumes have been published, making it the largest reference collection about Buddhist women not only in Tibet but across the world. Khenmo Lhakyid was happy to take on the work, but she was terrified when Khenpo Jigphun asked her to teach at Larung's Great Prayer Festival in the late 90s. Almost 100,000 Tibetans gather at the festival annually to hear teachings relevant to everyday life. For many Tibetans, this would be their first time seeing a woman teach on the basis of her academic and spiritual credentials.

[00:13:20] **Khenmo Lhakyid:** Two years ago, 100,000 Tibetans came to Larung's Great Prayer Festival. The khenmos taught and everyone was so impressed. They were surprised that women could teach like this.

[00:13:35] **Narrator:** Getting khenmos degrees isn't simply the isolated accomplishment of exemplary women. It has effected a paradigm shift in Tibetan understandings of what women can do. Nuns who are currently khenmo students in a nearby program said that watching Lhakyid and the other Larung khenmos teach changed the minds of ordinary Tibetans about women's intellectual capacities.

[00:13:56] **Khenmo #1:** When we were only ordinary nuns, society viewed us as not so different from ordinary women. But once we became khenmos, we started to teach large audiences. When society saw this was possible, that women could teach, they were very impressed and their attitude toward women started to change because the khenmos did such a good job.

[00:14:15] **Narrator:** Many of the Tibetans we spoke with said that seeing the khenmos teach at Larung Gar made them realize that Khenpo Jigphun had affirmed women is capable of studying and teaching the highest Buddhist teachings that lead directly to enlightenment, and this caused them to rethink gender relationships in their own communities.

[00:14:31] **Khenmo Lhakyid:** Traditionally in Tibet, women have had a lower status than men. Jigme Phuntsok wanted to raise their status.

[00:14:39] **Dr. Liang:** I think Khenpo Jigphun had two main purposes in starting the khenmo program: The first was to change the way that nunneries were structured to give the nuns the opportunity to read and to study, just like the monks. The second was for the khenmos to teach laypeople and therefore change laypeople's attitudes toward women.

[00:15:00] **Narrator:** The next young girl dropped at Larung will have very different expectations than Khenmo Lhakyid did when she was a child, thanks in no small part to her own accomplishments. Instead of growing up to become a servant, a young nun might now dream of becoming a Buddhist philosopher, scholar, or doctor, and of receiving the social respect that comes with such education.

[00:15:21] **Khenmo Lhakyid:** Women in Tibet can hold their heads up high because of the Larung Khenmos. Both Khenpo Sodargye and Khenpo Tsulo discuss gender equality whenever they teach and they encourage both genders to work and study hard. I think that now the situation for men and women in Tibet is almost the same.

[00:15:53] **Narrator:** This audio project was produced for the Religion, Race and Democracy Lab at the University of Virginia with help from the lab's senior producer Emily Gadek and the lab's editor Kelly Hardcastle Jones. Special thanks to Tsering Say for voicing Khenmo Lhakyid and to Lynn He for her voice acting. Further thanks to Liang Jue for sharing her time and expertise. And the biggest thanks of all to Khenmo Lhakyid herself for sharing her story. You can find more documentary research on religion, race and democracy at [www.religionlab.virginia.edu](http://www.religionlab.virginia.edu).