



# *Jamyang Foundation*

**EDUCATION IN THE HIMALAYAS – NEWSLETTER 2007**

Greetings, Friends of Jamyang Foundation!

Many wonderful things have happened this year. We distributed funds to 213 beneficiaries at 12 projects in the Indian Himalayas (Kinnaur, Spiti, and Zangskar). The students are enjoying both their traditional studies and general education subjects, including English and math. Jamyang Foundation was fortunate to receive a large grant from Joan and Doug Cockell from Canada to construct living quarters, a classroom, and an assembly hall for the previously homeless nuns of Dechen Choling in Pin Valley (Spiti). We continue to fund three primary schools in Bangladesh, despite political upheavals and natural disasters in the country. A new primary school has also sprung up in Laos! Maekhao Chanthasomphone founded Wat Sila Salalam Pokam School for Girls and won the 2007 Engaged Buddhism Award from the Buddhist Council of the Midwest Women for her efforts. We continue to provide scholarships for three Bangladeshi women to study in Thailand, one Bhutanese nun to study at Delhi University, and one Spiti nun to attend college in Kullu. We were also fortunate to have many great volunteer teachers this summer, including some who loved the experience so much that they have decided to stay in Zangskar throughout the icy winter!

Last summer, I was fortunate to visit the projects in Kinnaur and Spiti and also to do HIV/AIDS awareness along the way. I also visited the land in Bodhgaya where we plan to build Sanghamitra Institute, a place for women from around the world to gather and study languages, culture, and meditation. The Institute will also be a perfect place for teacher training and intensive courses. We plan to construct a junior high school for children in the surrounding community, starting with programs for girls. We welcome your participation in all these wonderful projects!

With heartfelt appreciation, Lekshe



*Maekhao Keo, Maekhao, Chanthasomphone and Karma Lekshe Tsomo  
at Wat Sila Salalam Pokam School for Girls in Laos*

## **REFLECTIONS FROM 2007 VOLUNTEERS**

**Noel O'Domhnaill – Jampa Choling Institute, Meeru, Kinnaur - July/August 2007**

Last year my partner Elles Lohuis came back from her experience of teaching young women at Jampa Choling Monastery in India. She filled our long winter nights with stories of the students she taught there. After a while, I felt like I knew the students myself and decided to join her teaching there. As the time grew close to travel to India, I was filled with questions. How will I cope in India? How will I, as a western male teacher, be received by these young nuns?

Well, I needn't have worried. From the first day, I felt at home. From the welcome I received at the monastery, I

knew that I was going to have a great summer. After the first day of introductions, it was down to work, as I started my first class. The classroom diary that previous teachers had kept was a great help. The nuns had taken great care of the notebooks provided by voluntary teachers from previous years and had certainly done some homework during the winter.

Both Elles and I taught from 9 am until after the evening *puja* (service). Days and weeks of grammar and conversation classes flew by, coupled with mathematics classes, which are always dear to my heart. When a number of the nuns became faster at Sudoku than I, it set up a friendly rivalry! I can honestly say that never enjoyed teaching so much in my 20+ years of teaching. The nuns, with their great enthusiasm for learning, grasped everything we had to teach them. We arrived with four laptops, donated by Elles' university, and the nuns mastered them within a few days. When I introduced mathematical shapes (resembling *mandalas* from their own culture), the nuns grasped the mathematical properties involved and could accurately reproduce these forms. They even designed some new and interesting shapes of their own.

It was not only the teaching I enjoyed. I really savored being part of the nuns' daily life. These courageous nuns definitely won a place in my heart. The nuns have a clear idea of what they want to do in the future, whether becoming teachers, doctors, translators, mentors to young nuns, or caretakers of the monastery's livestock. I have no doubt that they will achieve the goals they have set for themselves. Everything is approached from the point of goodness and the genuine desire to help others. I felt honored to be a small part of their great lives.

It was also a joy for Elles and me to be able to help the nuns financially. When the students at my secondary school in Holland heard where I was spending my summer vacation, they raised money by holding a sponsored bike race and a fashion show. With these donations, the nuns decided to buy new robes, shawls, winter shoes, socks, and mattresses. They also bought tables, chairs, stainless steel cooking pots, medicines, oil, rice, and beans to stock up for winter.

When I arrived home and showed my students the photos and Tibetan handwritten thank-you letters from the nuns, the students decided to hold an annual sponsored bike race to raise donations. They have embraced these young women in their hearts. And, yes, I will head back next year to teach the nuns again and I'm really looking forward to it.



Noel teaching math at Jampa Choling, Kinnaur



Computer class at Jampa Choling, Kinnaur

### **Marguerite Hutcheson – Dechen Choling Monastery, Pin Valley, Spiti – June/July 2007**

On June 9, I arrived at Dechen Choling Monastery in Pin Valley, Spiti, with Nicole Edick, another student from Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts. Our guide, Dorje Tsering, had mentioned that the nuns had not had much English instruction. Still, I felt completely lost when Dorje left and I realized that the nuns knew so little English. Even finding out where to take a bath or when class would start was a challenge. I had never taught before and my knowledge of the local language was limited to the greeting "*julley*." The nuns' English was not much better than my Hindi. Despite the language barrier, I found comfort in the nuns' kindness, which was readily apparent, and the beautifully pink, fragrant wild roses blooming around the monastery.

The first few weeks of teaching were difficult, as I had anticipated. I lacked confidence and went much too fast, expecting the nuns to learn far too many new words at a time. Teaching got easier with the arrival of Joan Cockell, a professional ESL teacher who had volunteered at Dechen Choling the year before. Watching Joan, I realized how important it is for the nuns to just speak English as much as possible. From Joan, I learned how to make the class more fun for the nuns. After Joan and Nikki left, I stayed two more weeks and became much more confident and relaxed. It was wonderful to see the nuns' progress in English. By the time I left, most of them could respond to simple questions like "What time is it?" "What country/state/village are you from?" and "Who's cooking today?"

When I first arrived at Dechen Choling, I was homesick, but now I am homesick for Spiti. I miss walking to the surrounding villages with the nuns, stopping for tea at least three different houses, and eating peas in the fields. I miss eating *thukpa* (noodle soup), *tingmo* (steamed bread), and *sabzi* (vegetables). I miss starting each class with phonics and the satisfaction I felt each time a nun answered correctly. I miss having the nuns knocking on my door and asking me to teach them. I miss lingering outside before going to sleep and looking at the biggest sky full of stars that I've ever seen. I miss waking up at 5:30 to the sound of the nuns doing *puja* and going for a morning walk to clear my mind before class.



## Joyce Salvona – Pishu, Zanskar – July 2007

Having spent a wonderful summer in Ladakh in 2005, I wanted return in the summer of 2007 and hopefully gain a deeper understanding of the wonderful inhabitants of this northern corner of India. Speculatively, I googled "Ladakh + voluntary work" and was delighted to find the Jamyang Foundation website. I emailed Karma Lekshe Tsomo to see whether I had something to offer. Her enthusiastic response convinced me to spend a month in the village of Pishu in remote Zangskar helping Buddhist nuns to learn English.

I arrived in Leh at the beginning of July and hired a jeep to take me on the two-day journey to the remote Zangskar Valley. I must admit that I was anxious as I approached the village. I even wondered why I hadn't just gone on holiday. My anxiety evaporated as soon as I arrived and was made to feel so welcome. I stayed with a local family whose daughter is a nun at the *gonpa*.

The nuns at this remote *gonpa* had had little education, but they were a joy to teach. They approached the lessons with enthusiasm and a great sense of humor. Some of the children from the village came for lessons, too. I taught for two hours each morning. Afterwards, I had lunch with the nuns, usually rice and vegetables and plenty of tea. I liked to spend the afternoons walking and helping with the farm work. The scenery was stunning and the kindness of the villagers is something I will remember for the rest of my life. Obviously, a month was much too short to achieve anything significant. I hope that one day I will be able to return and spend a more time in Pishu.



English class at Dechen Choling Monastery



Building phase 2 at Dechen Choling Monastery

## Alyson Gombas – Pin Valley, Spiti – June/July 2007

As a religion major, I left for India hoping not only to learn about Buddhism, but to observe the way the nuns live their faith. I imagined attending their *pujas* with them, listening to their chanting, trying their healing medicinal herbs, and watching their long meditations. With next to no knowledge of Buddhism, I left the United States excited, nervous, and completely uncertain of what to expect.

From the moment I arrived at the monastery, all my expectations and assumptions were proved wrong. I was completely overwhelmed by the hospitality and kindness of the nuns. The first few days, I felt confused by the entirely new environment and people. The majority of the nuns spoke only a little English. Every request or question brought nuns from every corner of the monastery to my aid. After a period of adjustment, I came to love and embrace this endearing chaos. Within a week, the nuns became my sisters and the monastery became my home. The nuns welcomed me into their hearts and invited me into every aspect of their lives. At first, they tried to help me with literally everything. Whether it was washing my clothes, preparing my bath, or even carrying my purse, I always had at least five pair of helping hands. The nuns brought me milk or lemon tea about four times a day and refilled my cup again and again.

I was surprised by how much I enjoyed teaching. Despite my lack of teaching experience, the nuns' eagerness to learn really inspired me. They have great respect for teachers and welcomed me before every class with, "Good morning, ma'am," and a cup of tea in their finest porcelain cup. This formality and their timidity soon began to wear off. Within a few weeks, I began to see each nun's unique personality.

The nuns were all at different levels of proficiency in both English and math, so my first step was to find a good starting point with each of them. They were all on different pages in different books, so each student received individual attention. This method of teaching turned out to be very effective. By the time I left, all the nuns could at least comprehend basic English. Seeing this transformation was one of the most rewarding aspects of my experience.

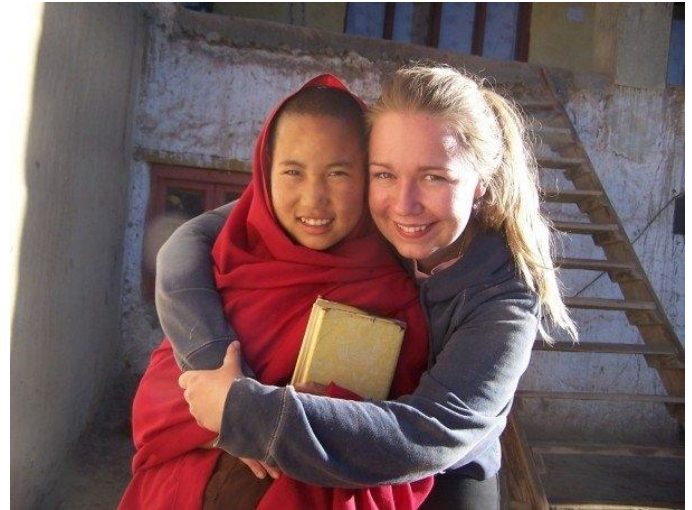
Leaving was the most difficult part of my time at the monastery. It is impossible to explain how I made such deep connections with the nuns in such a short period of time. Despite the barriers that divided us, we found common ground. Leaving was made even more difficult when I saw how deeply the nuns were affected by our impending departure. I wasn't

just leaving my students, but 29 amazing friends. Even with their red robes and shaved heads, I sometimes forgot that I was at a monastery with Buddhist nuns.

The religion major in me that had hoped to see the spiritual aspect of monastic life was not disappointed. Though I never attended their morning and evening *pujas* or watched them in meditation, I saw their faith in everything they did. I saw it in the kindness and unconditional love that they showed me and in their completely impartial generosity and charity. Despite all that they did for me, they never expected anything in return. Even with all our different personalities, likes, and dislikes, we were united in our desire to do and be good.



*Spiti Nuns on a Tractor*



*Alyson Gombas with Tenzin Yangchen, Spiti*

### **Kristance Harlow - Yanchang Choling Monastery, Spiti Valley - Summer 2007**

Chetan Dolma, a brilliant fifteen-year-old nun who is fluent in English, touches her hand to her head and then lifts it toward the sky. A storm is coming. She says it's a dragon walking and when its legs release the thunder, it will start to rain. It never rains around here. It's been almost two months and I've only seen one rainfall. Even without the dragon's rain, the fields stay green in the summer. The Himalayas are always releasing snow and pouring it down the mountainsides, keeping the stream behind the nunnery filled with fresh water.

Penba Lhamo is hiding behind her balloon and I can see tears welling up in her eyes. As soon as she notices my gaze, she fades away into the corner and wraps herself deep in her dark red robe. As I watch her, my own eyes mirror hers. Normally Penba is the class clown, the one girl I can count on to make me smile. Today she is having as hard a time as I am. This is our last day together.

Holding a reflection of Penba in my eyes, I turn to watch Tenzin Paldon and Tenzin Kaldon release their balloons into the air. They are always together, both shy and sweet. They run over to where I sit on the wooden bench and bounce the balloons towards me. I laugh through my misted eyes and all I see is a blur of blue and orange. I grab a balloon and tie a string to it. The Tenzins squeal with delight and rush off to play.

Little Sonam Puti slowly approaches me. "Ka la ta ta rah," she whispers and gives me a hug. "I love you too," I whisper back. Not yet a nun, she wears a tunic and her head is covered with a white cloth. As she reaches up to pick at a scab, Tondup quickly stops her and applies a healing white cream to the sore. Tondup is Penba's other half. Only three years younger than Penba, 13-year-old Tondup is constantly making everyone laugh. She and Penba make a hilarious duo. Suddenly, Sonam Dolma is snuggled under my arm. Only eleven, she'll soon be a nun. Like Chetan Dolma, she learns quickly.

Over a month ago, I was sitting on the steps outside the kitchen reading a novel, when Sonam's brilliance came to light. She leaned over my shoulder to look at my book. She began to read it aloud, pronouncing even the most difficult English words. Ever since, even though she goes to school in the village, she joins our classes on her days off. Today has nothing to do with classes. I'm learning about unconditional love. Sonam Dolma smiles up at me and, not wanting me to see her cry, hides her face in the crux of my arm. I am grateful to be called a sister and thankful for their love.

I'll be starting the long journey home tomorrow. Ahead of me is a nine-hour jeep ride to Manali, below the Himalayan tree line. I'll rest for two days in that beautifully green town and hope to see Sonny, a young shoe-shine boy who was so eager to learn about school in America. After that, a 14-hour overnight bus ride will take me to Delhi. After two nights rest, I'll take a 24-four-hour flight back to my country, far from my new Himalayan home.

Chetan Dolma is a quick learner and leader, she is respectful and daring. She engages the class in complex dialogue and is always willing to translate for us. I would like to be even a little bit like these women, with their genuine kindness.

There is something different about the wind, the thunder, and the lightning in Spiti. Golden Blue Tārā gazes down from the spaces in the clouds. Being this close to the heavens, I know that Chetan Dolma must be right about the dragon. Just a gentle stroke in the sky and the lightning reverberates in an eerie rustling in the air.