



Jamyang Foundation



AN EDUCATION PROJECT FOR WOMEN IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES – ANNUAL NEWSLETTER 2010

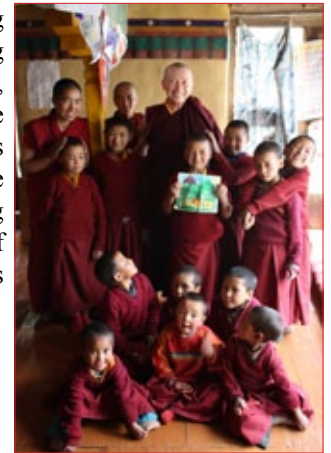


Dear Friends,

We bring you warm greetings from the Jamyang Foundation and good news about our projects for women in developing countries that you have so kindly helped to support.

As the holiday season approaches, we remember our blessings and renew our commitment to relieving the sufferings of the world. The objective of Jamyang Foundation is to benefit Buddhist women everywhere, especially through education, and we try to help the neediest first. The people who benefit from Jamyang's work are those who are so poor and remote that they are overlooked by most other organizations. The Jamyang

projects in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh and the Himalayan regions of India serve some of the neediest communities in the world. We strive to give girl children and young women opportunities for a better future and help the people preserve their Buddhist way of life, too.



Please accept our appreciation for your generosity!

Karma Lekshe Tsomo, Director

A Summer in Karsha

Catherine Hartmann



Within thirty minutes of my arrival at Khachoe Drubling, I had drunk two cups of tea, eaten a bowl of pakthuk (barley porridge), and had a tsebo (a woven basket ubiquitous in Zangskar) strapped to my back. Though most of the nuns hardly knew my name (its pronunciation would continue to elude them long into my stay), I had joined the procession of people carrying baskets of clay from the mountainside behind the nunnery to the roof of the school building, where it would be used to reinforce the structure's walls.

I came to Karsha absolutely terrified; I had no idea what to expect. My fears, however, proved to be unfounded. The nuns at Karsha were warm, inclusive, and just plain fun. After arriving that first day, I felt a bit shell-shocked by the new world I was to inhabit for the next few months. I was standing outside the main building, wondering what I should do, when Thukje, a small but sturdy Zangskari nun, walked into the courtyard carrying her tsebo full of clay. Using a blend of broken Hindi and sign language, I tried to convey that I wanted to help. After refusing several times, on the grounds that I would

get dirty, Thukje laughed, fitted me with an unclaimed tsebo, and headed up the path to get another load of clay.

As I scrambled up the path behind her sure-footed lead, I saw why the monastery had seemed so empty when I arrived a half hour previously. While the young nuns were in school, the older nuns were all working together on the annual maintenance of the monastery buildings. The nuns laughed when they saw me, but filled my tsebo nonetheless. After a few trips, during which I started to meet and interact with the nuns, one of the nuns working in the kitchen brought up tea and biscuits for a mid-afternoon break. I had learned my first few words of Zangskari at this point ("It's good!" being a phrase that would serve me well throughout my stay), but was still communicating mostly with sign language. Still, as we crouched in a circle enjoying the snack, I felt that I had been welcomed into the community.



My relationship with the nuns certainly changed and grew deeper after the first day. I started teaching classes, at first only to the younger nuns in school, then later adding classes for the older nuns. The nuns never failed to impress me with their quickness (one student made a pun in class that nearly had me on the floor with laughter) and, particularly in the case of older students, their

determination to learn English. Since the nuns used the summer to do a lot of work on the monastery, I usually joined in the communal labor after class. While the work was hard (even considering that the nuns insisted I rest more frequently than anyone and often gave me the lightest loads to carry), it was always enjoyable because of their friendly humor. The nuns were also willing to open their lives to me, a relative stranger in their midst, by inviting me to their rooms or natal homes for meals, encouraging me to sit in on prayer or chanting sessions, showing me some aspect of their individual



duties, and humoring my attempts to learn Zangskari. The nuns lead very demanding lives, marked by physical labor, few material possessions, difficult weather, and a complex web of monastic and familial obligations, that seem to leave little time or energy for scholarship or developing friendships with strange foreigners living in their midst. In addition, their many qualities and contributions often go unrecognized. Yet the nuns of Khachoe Drubling were inspiring in their firm commitment to Buddhism and to each other, and in their ability to exert agency and pursue their own aims, even in a world that expected so much of them while giving little back.

Over the course of my stay, I feel that I developed some real friendships that went even beyond admiration and respect for the nuns' community. I began to see the nuns not just as a group, but as individuals: to appreciate the loyalty of Namdol, the cleverness of Garkit, the independence of Angmo, and the sassy humor of Thukje, always willing to joke around by putting a tsebo on the back of a newcomer. I fully intend to return to these women and their friendship, and to eventually stay for a winter. My first summer at Karsha was challenging at times, but completely worth it.

And, although the summer is over, I know my experience with Karsha is just beginning.



In the Footsteps of Jamyang Foundation

Chick Alsop

When Karma Lekshe Tsomo asked me to represent her and Jamyang Foundation in the Zangskar Valley in the summer of 2010, I felt at once honored and daunted. I was familiar with Jamyang's work, since I had volunteered at one of the Jamyang projects in Spiti in 2008 and had also traveled with Lekshe and Elles Lohuis, Jamyang's volunteer coordinator from the Netherlands, in 2009. On the trip to Zangskar, I watched as Lekshe lectured, checked the health status of the nuns, went over the financial records of the projects, and dispersed sponsorship money and gift packages at each of the eight monasteries. The ninth monastery is a daunting trek along Himalayan cliffs next to a raging river, so the nuns came to Padum, the capital of the Zangskar Valley, to meet us.

In 2009, there was a tremendous outpouring of love for Lekshe and the Jamyang volunteers at each monastery we visited. These expressions of affection are a reflection of the loving hearts of the nuns and also their gratitude for the support they have received from Jamyang Foundation over the years. The annual visit of Lekshe and the Jamyang volunteers is the highlight of the year for the nuns. It was a bit overwhelming to stand in for people and an organization that is so well known, loved, and respected. This year, my travel partner Aisha Allen agreed to work with me and I felt confident that everything would go well. The Jamyang team has worked tirelessly for more than two decades to promote much-needed educational and spiritual opportunities for Buddhist women in the poorest, most distant and neglected areas of the Himalayas. As Lekshe had reminded me, the nuns recognized me from our 2009 visits.



In Leh, we went full speed ahead with a week of procuring supplies of practical gift items to take to the nuns in Zangskar. Aisha worked overtime assembling and boxing the gift packages prior to our departure, for easy distribution. Just before our arrival, Ladakh had suffered unusually heavy rains and devastating flooding that washed away hundreds of homes and did serious damage to the roads, waterways, and fields. We wanted to help with relief efforts around Leh, but all available jeeps were already busy assisting. We devoted our energies to getting in supplies for the nuns and carrying heavy loads long distances, from one end of town to the other.

At last, we set out from Leh to begin the long, slow two-day jeep ride into the Zangskar Valley. Along the way, we saw houses ripped apart by the flooding, torn in half and washed into the river



beds. Huge trees had been uprooted by the deluge and some lay blocking the road. Enormous mud slides had knocked down trees and buildings and had decimated the crops. Bridges had been washed out, which caused many detours. The roads were badly rutted and muddy. This resulted in a lot of one-way traffic and traffic jams, with many convoys of military trucks. Fortunately, the road between Kargil and Zangskar was better than expected.

Arriving late in the afternoon of the second day at our first stop, Palmo Ling Monastery in Skyagam, we found the nuns busy at work putting a mud roof on their new solar study room. Although the nuns were saddened by Lekshe's absence, they lavished us with a warm and hospitable welcome from the minute we arrived.



In our first Jamyang presentation, I conveyed my feelings that Lekshe was in the prayer hall with us in spirit and thought. When I told the nuns that she was sending them her love, prayers, and wishes for good health and happiness, many had tears in their eyes. Although Lekshe's 2009 presentations were filled with lightheartedness and compassion, she was quite firm on matters such as monastic discipline, careful bookkeeping, and regular class attendance. We strove to maintain the same demeanor. Many times, we used Ladakhi or Tibetan translators to ensure



understanding. Our presentations generally concluded with celebrations of joy and laughter as Aisha handed out the gift packages and the sponsorship money was turned over to the nuns who serve as financial stewards (ngul nyer) for each monastery. Our goodbyes were decorated with prayer scarves, posed pictures, expressions of gratitude, and promises of return visits.

Representing Jamyang Foundation this year was a one-of-a-kind experience. Visiting the monasteries was deeply rewarding on many levels and gave us a clearer understanding and appreciation of the work that Lekshe and the Jamyang team has done. Together, they put into practice the bodhisattva ideal of dedicating one's life to the welfare of others. After our final presentation at the last project, I returned to Zangla for another good season of volunteer teaching at Changchub Chöling Monastery, while Aisha went to Pema Chöling Monastery in the village of Manda and thoroughly enjoyed her time there as Manda's first-ever volunteer. Jamyang Foundation has touched many lives in a positive way and we are very happy and proud to be a part of it.

Volunteering as an English Teacher in Pangmo Village, Spiti Valley

Leonie Vogt

This summer I was an English teacher at Yangchen Chöling Monastery for six weeks. Teaching the nuns in Spiti Valley was such a unique experience! From the moment I arrived they opened their home and welcomed me into all aspects of their lives.

At first there were some language and cultural barriers, which at times left me completely confused as to what was happening or how I was expected to behave. For example, the nuns have such respect for their teachers – something that's largely been lost in the schools I attended in Europe. This respect goes far beyond the classroom, including requests that I should rest, constant offers to help with my washing, and persistent rejections of my offers to help in the kitchen or elsewhere. When I first arrived, I couldn't understand this at all. Over time, I learned from observing.



Being the only "chi gyal" (foreigner in Spiti), I became completely immersed in the new culture that surrounded me in Pangmo Village. My daily cycle changed, as I began to mirror the nuns' schedule: getting up at 6 am and going to bed at 9 pm, using as much of the daylight hours as possible, with power cuts being the norm. Every morning at 7 am, I attended puja, the morning prayer service. The nuns chanted rhythmically for the good part of an hour, with two breaks for tea – one sweet and one salty. Knowing no Tibetan, I understood nothing of the content of the service, but watching the nuns sway as they chanted, I became absorbed in every part of the prayer. It



was a privilege to observe the nuns' spiritual practice and I always left the gathering feeling completely serene as I started the day.



As I was able to spend a few weeks at Yangchen Chöling, the nuns soon became my friends. The third week was definitely the highlight of my stay. On this special occasion, we all went on a road trip to Jispa, which was eight to ten hours drive from the monastery, to attend a two-day teaching with His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama. This was the first time I had ever had a chance to see the Dalai Lama, which was a very powerful experience in itself, of course. But the experience included much more, starting with the lively preparations for the trip back at the monastery prior to leaving. Following that, was the bus ride to get there, crammed in with our belongings below and on top of us. Once we arrived, I ate and slept with the nuns in the massive tent city that had been erected for the event. Strolling with the nuns through the market along a street that had virtually everything, just appearing out of nowhere, is one of my best memories. And, of course, the teachings with His Holiness were also very

memorable.

The excitement reached every part of our tent – the hurried lunch break between the teachings and the initiation, sitting together in the evening, content with the day. It was perfect!

Once we returned to Pangmo, it was pea season and the nuns went to their families' homes to help their parents with the harvest. When the nuns returned to the monastery, classes resumed again. Yet, there were still a few more fields in Pangmo that needed harvesting. The nuns could then eat the peas that were produced in these fields. On days when there was work to be done in the pea fields, I helped them out for a few hours. Even now, thinking about how we ate some of the ripe, sweet green peas directly from the fields as we picked them, makes my mouth water.

Unfortunately, the date for my departure quickly approached and I felt an increasingly complex mix of feelings. On the one hand, I was looking forward to going home and seeing everyone I'd left behind. On the other hand, after more than six weeks together, the nuns had become my family and friends. We had learned together, worked together, eaten together, and shared so many moments of happiness, that I didn't want to leave. The nuns always requesting me to stay for the winter didn't make things any easier. Finally, the day of my departure came. Along with two of the nuns, Tsetan Dolma and Tandup Zangmo, I waited for the public bus on the road. As always, they heard it from afar long before I did. As we said our goodbyes, I got on the bus with a smile. But, as I looked out the back at them and the nunnery disappearing into the distance, my vision was blurred by tears.

My thanks go to Jamyang Foundation for having such a wonderful volunteer program in place and to Elles Lohuis for all of her helpful tips and answers to my queries. And, of course, the biggest thanks of all go to the Yangchen Chöling nuns themselves. Thank you for letting me into your lives and making this summer one of the best I've ever had!



Visit the new Jamyang Foundation website at: <http://www.jamyang.org>



The teachers quarters at Jampa Chöling in Kinnaur collapsed in the heavy rains.



The nuns of Palmo Ling (Zangskar) in the Buddha hall that they built themselves.