
JAMYANG FOUNDATION

CHANGING PERCEPTIONS OF WOMEN'S POTENTIAL

2015 NEWSLETTER



5998 Alcala Park, San Diego, CA 92110 | www.jamyang.org



Summer debate tournament between nuns of Yangchen Chöling and nuns from Sherab Choeling in Spiti. Photo: Olivier Adam, 2015.

WARM GREETINGS!

As the New Year begins, we send all of you our heartfelt appreciation for your generous support and kindness. Thank you for helping these projects to flourish and prosper. Like you, each project is unique and we strive to provide the best facilities we can for the education and well-being of our students. We now provide education for girls, young women, and nuns at 16 projects in India and Bangladesh, scholarship programs in Thailand and Sri Lanka, and outreach programs in Laos, Mongolia, Nepal, and Vietnam.

In the Indian Himalayas, we have 277 students in 12 programs: one in Kinnaur, two in Spiti, and nine in Zangskar. Students in these programs range in age from 6 to 83. These high mountainous areas are usually bitter cold and under snow for eight months a year. During the cold winter months, our new Sanghamitra Institute in Bodhgaya offers culturally appropriate education programs to 68 students, with classes in English, Hindi, Tibetan, philosophy, literature, basic math, social studies, and meditation. Volunteers also offer training in gardening, healthcare, environmental awareness, conflict resolution, and other skills. Our intention is to create opportunities for more students as quickly as we can we can afford to.

In Bangladesh, Jamyang Foundation supports three primary schools for 270 Marma girls in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. These girls come from impoverished families in very remote villages. As members of a Buddhist minority living in a culturally endangered area along the Burmese border, land grabs, rape of indigenous women, and sex trafficking are common. Education is the key factor in protecting, encouraging, and helping create a bright future for these girls. The girls are receiving a typical primary education and making excellent progress. After completing our programs, for the first time, the girls are attending high school in a nearby village.

Very best wishes for 2016 and thank you for joining us to make these opportunities a reality!

Karma Lekshe Tsomo

Karma Lekshe Tsomo, Director

THE LIVES OF THE YANGCHEN CHÖLING NUNS

by *Dominique Butet*

Leaving the North Indian town of Manali and all the tourist hustle behind, our bus climbs higher and higher towards the remote Himalayan valleys. It takes us at least 12 hours to travel just 120 miles! First, we scale the Rothang Pass. Then we brave the Kunzum Pass, which rises to 14,931 feet, and literally opens the door to Spiti Valley lying below us, especially marvelous after a very long journey. Traveling carefully into the valley, we pass a forest of prayer flags in an inspiring place that honors the glaciers facing us. The valley unfolds as we drop down into this crevice created by the Spiti River that flows towards Tibet. Not always motorable, a single road scrupulously follows the river.

After a few hours, we reach Pangmo, a village of around 35 householders situated at an altitude of 12,500 feet. The local bus leaves us at the door of Yangchen Chöling Monastery, which stands directly on the roadside. There, we are warmly welcomed by a group of nuns and immediately accompany them to the kitchen, where a delicious sweet tea is served. The head nun, Dolma Tsering, invites us to stay, and provides us a comfortable room and very good meals.

In a clear and direct manner, Dolma Tsering explains that she was among the seven nuns who, in the 1980s, created the first community for nuns in Spiti. The first monastery housing where they lived hung from the cliffs above the village – just two simple rooms built onto a cave in the mountain face. “Life was very difficult at that time,” recalls Dolma, who was 15 years old when she became a nun. She vividly remembers that they were extremely poor. They had only four blankets for seven nuns and could only afford to take one meal each day. Still, they were so happy to have a space dedicated to spiritual practice, instead of having to work with their families in the fields.

Ten years later, a snow avalanche destroyed the temple, so the seven nuns decided to move to a new place near Pangmo. Around 1994, the villagers helped them build a new monastery, solidly constructed around a large rectangular courtyard that was open to a vista of Himalayan mountains and sky. By this time, fortunately the monastery received support from Jamyang Foundation and could welcome new nuns from Pangmo and other villages in the area. All of them were young and were keenly interested in religious practice.

Chhetan Dolma is one of the new nuns who joined the monastery. She became a nun in 1996, when she was 13 years old. Her family wanted her to study at school first, before joining the monastery, but she preferred to follow her lama’s advice and decided to become a nun first. She remembers that many learned monks (*geshes*) came to the monastery as teachers. Chhetan Dolma has continued her studies with enthusiasm and become very well educated. She is bright and totally dedicated to the Dharma. She now speaks excellent English and studies in a class with 12 other very bright and active nuns.

Finding instructors for women’s communities, especially in such a poor and remote area, has always been extremely difficult. Women faced considerable gender discrimination, especially when it came to getting an education. Women were undervalued in patriarchal Spiti society. It took a long time to find a teacher willing to teach nuns. Finally, a kind monk who had been meditating in a cave agreed to come teach at their monastery. For several months, they all studied happily together. Suddenly, however, the monks of his monastery arrived and told him he could no longer teach nuns. All the nuns and the teacher, too, became sad and distraught. Finally, he agreed to resign from his monastery and stay with the nuns. After six years, one day he said, “I have taught you all that I know. Now I will go back to my cave.”

The nuns then faced the difficulty of finding another teacher. About six years ago, a young monk from South India arrived



The original site of Yangchen Chöling nunnery. Photo: Olivier Adam, 2015.

and has been teaching the nuns ever since. Yangchen Chöling applied to become a branch of the Institute of Buddhist Studies in Leh, Ladakh. The branch school officially opened in 2011. The secular education program at the monastery school is sponsored by the Indian government and supplements the traditional Buddhist studies program already in place. The monastery school has three teachers and four different classes. It has attracted 15 nuns to join the monastery in the last two years.

Pema Bhutit, the youngest nun, joined when she was three. With mischievous eyes and great motivation, she is now five years old and already studying in the second class. Every morning and evening, like all her classmates, she memorizes Tibetan texts. To do this well, she has to diligently apply herself to the task for an hour or more. She wakes up at 5:30 am. After memorizing texts, she attends the morning *puja* from 7:30 to 8:30 am, until breakfast time. Classes begin at 10 am: Buddhist philosophy, Tibetan, English, Hindi, and math are the main subjects taught at the school. Between 9 to 10 am and from 5 to 6 pm, the nuns debate their lessons with a full commitment and dynamism. The traditional Tibetan Buddhist style of debate that they practice is an exercise in verbal sparring, using all the knowledge gained during the Buddhist philosophy courses. Debating the lessons not only helps the students internalize the course material, but has the additional advantage of encouraging them to develop deep understanding.

Each summer for the last four years, the nuns have organized a debate tournament in Spiti. There are two monasteries

LEARNING TO SEW!

Jamyang Foundation founded Sanghamitra Institute in 2003 to provide education and training to disadvantaged girls and women in India. Since 2010, Sanghamitra has provided education to local village children and to nuns of all ages from remote regions of the Himalayas.

In 2014, Sanghamitra established a vocational training program in tailoring to help women gain the knowledge and practical skills they need to become self-sufficient. A total of 46 young women, aged 16 to 21, received tailoring instruction five days a week for six months.

These women will carry their knowledge back to their communities, helping to alleviate poverty, suffering, and injustice in some of the poorest villages in the world. This year, even more young women will learn to sew!



Young nuns memorizing texts during Puja, Yangchen Chöling Nunnery. Photo: Olivier Adam, 2015.



Yangchen Chöling Monastery today. Photo: Olivier Adam, 2015.

that provide philosophical studies and they take turns hosting the tournament. One year Yangchen Chöling hosts it and the next year Sherab Chöling hosts it. Over a period of ten days, around 75 nuns debate vigorously under the encouraging and sympathetic eyes of their philosophy teacher. With their teachers' excellent guidance and encouragement, they are able to sharpen their intellectual abilities. Years of education and repeated training in debate have increased the nuns' self-confidence tremendously, enabling them to take on more responsibility in their community. Gradually, they are learning to manage all their affairs independently.

Olivier Adam and I arrived precisely during the debate competition that was being held at Yangchen Chöling last year. We were very impressed, both by the keen engagement of the nuns and by the joy that they brought to the gathering. Nothing could stop the debates, not even the dark of the night! When the little Pema fell asleep in the middle of the competition, one of her roommates took her in her arms, brought her to bed with a deep kindness, and immediately came back to the debates. Not only do the stars seem to shine more brightly in this pure Himalayan sky, but the nuns' compassion also seems to shine more brightly!

Altogether, 40 of the 47 nuns living at the nunnery regularly attend classes. The seven older nuns offer their help to support the study program. Between the time that the snow melts and the subsequent snowfall, they enjoy a period of warmer weather that only lasts a few months per year. Winters are long and very challenging for people in Spiti. For the nuns, life in the winter follows the same pattern as during the warmer months, except that they face even greater challenges: extreme cold, a lack of drinking water due to frozen pipes, and no opportunity to move outside the monastery, because the roads are closed to any kind of traffic.

For the last few years, most of the nuns have had the opportunity to go and study at Sanghamitra Institute in Bodhgaya (Bihar) during the cold winter months. This Institute is an important project to provide education for Himalayan women. Jamyang Foundation faced many difficulties in building Sanghamitra Institute and the Yangchen Chöling nuns are very proud and happy to attend classes there during

the winter months.

In Spiti, there are four distinct seasons. Spring is the time for planting. In the summertime, there is a lot of work to do at the monastery and the nuns have less time to study. In fact, the nuns are really busy! Fall is the time for harvesting crops of barley and peas. When the days grow cold, they head south to Bodhgaya. There, they find that winter is a very good time to concentrate on their studies.

Tendup Dolma is 21 years old and has been nun for 10 years. She likes to study philosophy, English, and computers, although there is big problem of electricity in Spiti. It was her own decision to become a nun. Her father, a thangka painter, preferred that she go to a government school, but finally agreed that she could join the monastery. At first, Tendup wanted to experiment with the nun's life and test her motivation in praying and helping others. At Yangchen Chöling, she quickly discovered a taste for Buddhist studies, however, and now aspires to become a *geshema* (female Buddhist scholar) in future years. The *geshema* degree, which is comparable to a PhD in Buddhist Studies, is awarded after at least 17 years of philosophical studies. Until recently, only monks could hope to succeed at these studies and become a *geshe*. In May 2016, 27 nuns from five monasteries in India and Nepal will take the *geshe* examinations in Dharamsala and thereby become the first *geshemas* to graduate from this challenging study program.

Education is clearly the key to women's emancipation. Hasn't His Holiness the Dalai Lama himself been encouraging the nuns to study Buddhist philosophy for more than 40 years? For the nuns, the stakes are high: as experts in philosophy, they will be called upon to teach – a role allotted only to monks until now. The Dalai Lama urges the nuns to participate in this new mission: "I request you, after your studies consider going into retreat, and after that resolve to teach others." We deeply hope that among those nuns will be some of the conscientious nuns of Yangchen Chöling. We happily look forward to the day when the first Spiti *geshema* graduates.

When we left Yangchen Chöling Monastery, we felt very proud of the nuns. Our hearts were filled with their generosity, their compassion, and their extraordinary motivation. We feel

certain that the nuns will contribute greatly to the cultural life of Spiti Valley in the future. We are convinced that they are totally ready for it, with their strong determination to benefit of all sentient beings.

BIG SMILES AND A CUP OF TEA

by Jeffrey Hallock

This past July, Sara Pielsticker, a fellow student at the University of San Diego, and I found ourselves in the fortunate position of teaching English at Karsha Khachoe Drubling (Jujikshel) Monastery in the Himalayan valley of Zangskar. It was a beautiful experience and we relished every moment of the four weeks we spent there. Although it was only a short stay, we both felt it had a tremendous impact on us. Because we were disconnected from the Western world, we were able to appreciate each moment and embrace the simple beauty of life around us. We were able to fully engage in numerous activities and even the minutia of daily life became exciting.

Every morning, we woke up to have breakfast with the nuns who were working in the kitchen. While the majority of the nuns were in the *puja* room doing prayers, two or three nuns were on “cooks’ duty” in the kitchen, preparing the meals for the day. They welcomed us with big smiles and a cup of tea as we ducked in through the low-hanging kitchen doorway. Breakfast could be anything from a fresh chapatti to a delicious omelet to leftovers from the night before. Whatever the menu, we gratefully ate our breakfast as we watched the nuns cut the vegetables for lunch and make enough butter tea to satisfy the copious needs for consumption throughout the day. Our mornings were filled with laughter, as we told jokes and did our best to incorporate English lessons into the morning routine.

After breakfast, we gave a class for the “little” nuns. Sara was much more capable in teaching these young girls, as her kind and gentle demeanor allowed them to be comfortable and more outgoing. Along with vocabulary and grammar, we created lessons that incorporated games to keep interest levels high. Each class closed out with the reading of a fairytale. This always seemed to captivate them, despite the language barrier. Sara was also a wealth of knowledge when it came to teaching songs in English. This led to plenty of laughs as we danced the Hokey Pokey and Head-Shoulders-Knees-and-Toes with the

little nuns. By the end of our month at the monastery, all the little girls opened up to us, even the three-year-olds who had given us suspicious looks at the beginning!

Every day after our always-enjoyable lunch with the nuns, we had some down time before convening our next class at 3pm. This down time sometimes became work time – an opportunity to help the nuns do chores around the monastery. The nuns approached their work with such dedication and conviction that it was impossible not to pitch in and help. Our tasks included helping them collect dung (not our best skill!), breaking rocks with a pick ax, and, most notably, helping carry supplies up the hill to build a new roof. I was always amazed to see how strong the nuns were and how long they could work. Despite hours of hard manual labor, at the end of each day, they always had big smiles on their faces. As we sat at the top of the monastery, out of breath, they would still ask me questions about English. Of all the words I taught them, their favorite was “clean-shaven,” illustrated by pointing to their heads. They found this very funny, especially in contrast to my long hair and beard!



Sara Pielsticker, University of San Diego student, with nuns of Karsha Khachoe Drubling (Jujikshel) Monastery in the Himalayan valley of Zangskar. Photo: Jeffrey Hallock, 2015.

One thing that impressed me most was the contrast between how hard the nuns worked and their relative place in Zangskari society. It seemed to be ingrained in the culture that the nuns were subservient to males, especially monks. This was problematic for me, because each day I observed how hard the nuns worked, not only to take care of themselves with limited resources, but how dedicated they were to their religious practices and Buddhist studies. Having so much work to do to keep the monastery going in such a harsh environment took time away from their formal religious practice. More troubling for me was how diligently they worked to accommodate the needs of visitors, and yet they did not get the same respect



Nuns at Karsha Khachoe Drubling (Jujikshel) Monastery in the Himalayan valley of Zangskar. Photo: Jeffrey Hallock, 2015.

from monks when visiting their monasteries. The way these brave women worked, despite all this, was an inspiration. They completed their duties with aplomb and found a way to push through each day, with big smiles.

At 3 pm, we had English classes with the “big” nuns. Whereas Sara had the magic touch with the little nuns, I found myself much more comfortable teaching the big nuns. I was happy to teach them, because they were always engaged and eager to learn. I often found myself acting as a cheerleader, clapping and rooting for the nuns when they answer correctly and actively participated in the classes.

Beyond day-to-day life at the monastery, I felt a deep connection with the natural beauty of the Zangskar Valley. I often walked up the hill above the nuns’ monastery and was filled with a deep sense of calm as I looked out over the fields, river, and mountains. The peace and tranquility was

further enhanced by the love and compassion of the nuns. Sara and I made a handful of missteps, but the nuns were always compassionate and helped steer us in the right direction. They invited us to share in numerous activities, such as making momos (dumplings) or inviting us to talk and have tea.

The level of respect that the nuns showed us from the moment we arrived was incredible and we felt the same respect for them. This mutual respect helped to foster extremely close relationships. By the time we had to leave, we all shared plenty of tears. We told them that we would do everything we could to return sooner rather than later. I truly hope we can find our way back to spend more time with the nuns of Karsha – some of the most amazing women we have ever met.



Jeffrey Hallock with young nuns at Karsha Khachoe Drubling (Jujikshel) Monastery. Photo: Jeffrey Hallock, 2015.

THE JOURNEY OF VISAKHA GIRLS’ SCHOOL

by Mong Sano Marma

Visakha Girls’ School in Bangladesh is celebrating its tenth anniversary this year! From humble beginnings in 2006, with just two class rooms and two teachers, the school has gradually grown over the years. Now, the school gives free education to about 100 girls, taught by five dedicated teachers.

The school is located in Dhosri, a remote village of Manikchari in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). The villagers are desperately poor ethnic Buddhist minorities who have been living there for centuries. They have their own unique cultural heritage, but are now at risk of cultural extinction. At one time, this area was the heartland of the indigenous peoples of the CHT, an area where the people are very different from the rest of the country. Decades of unfavorable state policies towards the indigenous peoples in the CHT are making their lives very difficult. Their dwindling populations, extreme poverty, and lack of basic human services are evidence of how discriminatory, misguided policies can decimate people and their culture.

For generations, the children of the village, who belong to the Marma and Chakma ethnicities, did not even have access to primary education. Therefore, the children in the village had no choice but to follow the occupations that their elders followed in the past. For girls, this usually meant helping their parents with domestic work and other tasks, beginning from very young age.

Visakha Girls’ School was truly a gift from heaven for the girls in the village. The families wasted no time in supporting the school project. They volunteered their time and donated hardwood and bamboo to put up the original

two-room schoolhouse. One year later, when the school was severely damaged by a tornado, a generous grant from the Firefly Mission in Singapore enabled the villagers to build a brick-structured school.

In 2015, Visakha School was able to implement a lunch program for all students and to install a clean water system on the school premises. Students are given nutritional meals at lunchtime. Since most students who attend the school walk a long distance to get there, the lunch program is a great help for them and their poor parents. The lunches improve the students' health and the quality of their educational experience, by keeping them free of illness and alert. Support for the lunch program also makes it possible for more children to attend the school.

A special feature of Visakha School is that the teachers speak the same ethnic languages as the students. Language competency is an important aspect of educating students from ethnic minority backgrounds. Each year in January, the teachers work with the families to bring new students to school. The teachers also work with families and village elders to retain students, sometimes even intervening to prevent the students from dropping out. After finishing the fifth grade at Visakha School, the students are guided in their transition to high school.

Almost all the students who have finished fifth grade at Visakha School are now attending high school in Manikchari. We consider this a very positive sign. The girls walk in groups for hours each way from their homes through unsafe hill terrain to reach the high school. Each level of education these girls attain is an important milestone for their families, as their parents never had such opportunities.

Some of the girls will soon complete high school and embark on higher education at colleges and universities. For example, Aungkroi Marma was among the first group of students who began studying at Visakha School in 2006. Now 16 years old, this year she will finish tenth grade at Manikchari Collegiate High School. She is one of the top students in her class and she dreams of becoming an officer in social services after finishing her university education. She was just six years old when Visakha School opened its doors to provide education for girls. She is the fortunate one in her family. Her elder siblings did not have such an opportunity. Like Aungkroi Marma, there will soon be streams of girls achieving these important milestones in their lives.



Visakha Girls' School is located in Dhosri, a remote village of Manikchari in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), Bangladesh. Photo: Mong Sano Marma, 2015.



Celebrating its tenth anniversary, Visakha Girls' School in Bangladesh gives free education to about 100 girls. Photo: Mong Sano Marma, 2015.

Another student is Myaching Marma, a fifth grade student who attends the school along with her three younger sisters. The lunch program at school is a great help for her family. Her dream is to become a teacher when she grows up and help her parents and siblings. These are the dreams that the girls of Dhosri Village can now afford to pursue. Soon their dreams may come true, thanks to Visakha School.

The catalyst for their hopes and aspirations is the combined effort of Jamyang Foundation in the United States, which directs the project; Firefly Mission in

Singapore, which helped build the school house; and the local people of Manikchari, who serve in so many ways to help the school. Together, this team effort is bringing much-needed help to the marginalized children in one forgotten village in Bangladesh.

JULLAY, TASHI DELEK, NAMASTE, AND HELLO!

by Adam Berne

Last summer, I volunteered at Pakmo Ling Monastery in Skyagam Village, Zangskar Valley (Jammu-Kashmir State), in northern India. When I arrived at the monastery to teach English, I found that one nun and one monk teacher had been sent from the Central Buddhist Institute in Leh and were already teaching Tibetan, English, Hindi, and math to about 16 nuns between the ages of 4 and 30. They were holding their classes in the entrance of the puja room, which was really too small and very cold in the winter.

Thanks to the generous donations of about 30 friends and family members, we were able to build a passive-solar-heated classroom. This type of construction is important in an area where the weather regularly reaches -40 C in the winter. On the inside, the room measures about 24 x 12 feet, with a 7.5-foot-high ceiling. The walls are made out of stone and mud with a layer of cement plastered on the outside. The roof is made out of wooden beams and planks covered with a few layers of mud. The floor is made of wood. The nuns and I are very thankful to all the donors who made this possible. You will forever have the grateful thanks, prayers, and blessings of the nuns in this beautiful place.

We built the classroom at Skyagam for only US\$1,500, including labor. But that was largely possible because there was enough leftover wood from a previous project to build the roof and so on, which would have cost a few more hundred dollars. Also, I was able to be there to manage and help with much of the construction, which saved the cost of a contractor and one worker. We were able to collect the materials for building the walls (stone and mud) from the nearby area with only the cost of a tractor to bring it to the monastery. On the other hand, we spent a lot to have large windows constructed for passive solar heating, as well as a wooden floor. Wood and glass are the most expensive items in Zangskar. The cost of materials has been going up dramatically each year in the area, so we were happy to undertake this project asap.

Most importantly, the nuns enthusiastically took part in the construction of the new classroom. It's amazing how much work gets done when they pitch in together! Their major contributions were gathering stones, digging the foundation, fetching dirt, sanding and sealing the window frames, putting on the roof boards, and drinking plenty of tea! In spite of snowfall (in summer?!?) and the fact that my hands literally fell apart from handling cement without proper gloves, I had a very good time!

Adam's [hilarious photo story](#) of the construction of the new classroom is available online. Enjoy!



Nuns of Pakmo Ling Monastery, Skyagam Village, Zangskar Valley in front of the passive-solar-heated classroom they built. Photo: Adam Berne, 2015.

