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# JAMYANG FOUNDATION

## CHANGING PERCEPTIONS OF WOMEN'S POTENTIAL

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2017 NEWSLETTER



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Small nuns send greetings of peace from the remote Zangskar Valley. (Photo: Parichay Yadav)

### **SMILES AND LAUGHTER IN THE MOUNTAINS**

*by Parichay Yadav*

Major withdrawal symptoms have hit me ever since I returned from the quaint valley of Zangskar. While writing this, here at home, I feel a wistful longing for the days I spent in Skyagam. The mountains behind the village of Skyagam exceed in beauty those seen on postcards. With high snowcapped peaks, fierce rivers, and lush green meadows with yaks grazing on them, this was the place where I was going to teach English to the nuns.

On the morning of May 29, I journeyed to the tiny little hamlet of Skyagam, which houses a population of roughly 100 people. The journey took a two and a half hours from Padum, the district headquarters of Zangskar. When I reached there, the first thing that caught my attention was the remoteness of the area. There was no network in any corner of the village and only 20 or so vehicles run in either direction to commute between places.

When I arrived at the gate of the gonpa (monastery), the Buddhist women draped in red robes were too engrossed in their daily chores to notice. In those moments, I realized that I had traveled somewhere very,

very far away – to a different world. The nuns welcomed me with heartwarming smiles, a bowl of thukpa (noodle soup), butter tea, and jumbled sentences of broken English and Hindi. Slowly, I discovered that some young nuns are too shy to converse at all, and some did not know any language other than Ladakhi.

The next few days were tough. Both my excitement and enthusiasm faded away, because the nuns' English was not improving and I felt kind of disappointed in myself. But their ever-smiling faces and the curiosity in their eyes kept me going. Yes, that's how it worked. I started spending time with the nuns, cooking and doing dishes with them. Their shyness faded and, as the days passed, they began opening up and it became easier for us to convey our thoughts to each other.

I really wish that I could come up with words to describe how much fun it was, but I can't. During my stay at the monastery, I was most excited about the mornings. Early each day, while leaning against the door of my room, wearing the same priceless smiles, the nuns asked me, "Sir, what would you like to eat in breakfast?" This felt like a tiny little achievement to me. The days went by very slowly and I started losing track of time, and yet I could never figure out where all the time went!

There were still some nuns who were too shy to ask me questions, so I tried to make the class more interactive and fun. I engaged them in discussing activities that happened in their everyday lives: their conversations with monastery suppliers about prices, the ingredients they used when cooking different dishes, and other topics they could relate to. I also made efforts to stimulate their curiosity and welcomed their questions. The key is patience. All it takes is time. The moment I observed that everyone in my class was putting questions to me, I knew that I was somewhere on the right track.

If I had to sum up my whole experience in a single word, it would be "pure." Everything I experienced in Zangskar was so wonderful and so genuine. I spent some beautiful, beautiful days where I learned a new language, interacted with the locals, and grew fond of Buddhism. I lived in a place where nobody knew my language and shared laughter with the most beautiful people alive on the planet over a bowl of butter tea and traditional barley wine. I made some lifetime friends, danced unabashedly in the snowfall, learned to cook mouth-watering momos (dumplings) and thukpa, and ran barefoot across the wooden bridges to help villagers catch their cows. Above all, I felt content, happy to contribute my bit in the journey of these kind human beings who, without knowing it, had inspired a spark in me. Jullay!



The nuns of Palmo Ling Monastery, Skyagam, with their friendly volunteer teacher.

## **OF PIGS AND HIPPOPOTAMUSES**

*by Jeffrey Hallock*

It had been two years since my first visit to Karsha Nunnery, but three days of non-stop travel was kindly rewarded with warm smiles and open arms. The nuns were incredibly happy that my friend Hannah and I had arrived safely, if not a little annoyed that we had not called so they could help carry our bags up the steep hill from the village. Within moments, the nuns' infinite compassion was on full display, reminding me why I had come to revere these women as some of the most amazing people in the world.

Some major changes had occurred since my previous visit in 2015. Most notable was the dramatic increase in the number of little nuns, aged 5-12. Whereas there had been 3 little nuns in residence at the nunnery and 12 day students during my first visit, the current number had increased to 16 in residence and 22 day students! Hannah and I were constantly playing games and speaking with the girls in English. This constant contact paid dividends in terms of the little nuns' confidence, which increased substantially during the three weeks we stayed at the nunnery. By the time we left, one little nun named Chunit was able to make jokes and express complex thoughts in English. She would do things like point at a picture of a pig and jokingly ask, "This is hippopotamus?" This would lead to merriment all around, as she demonstrated her command of a long and funny word. She would also come up to us and sweetly whisper, "Hannah is my sister" or "Jeff is my brother." Chunit was not the only little nun to make major strides. Our class made us proud when a group of Swiss women came to visit the nunnery and each student nun was able to introduce herself, clearly stating her name, age, and home village.

The bit of English we were able to pass on is not the only education the nuns get. The little nuns were also receiving an excellent education from Sonam, a nun from Leh who has been assigned by the Indian government to teach during the summer. In addition to being an amazing person in her own right, Sonam proved to be an excellent bridge between Hannah, me, and the older nuns. She helped explain more complicated issues that were beyond our communication skills by translating between Zangskari and English. This helped us better understand why the nuns spent a full week going to the village of Pipiting for day-long puja sessions and also the different ideas the nuns had for improving the nunnery. We were thrilled to hear that one of the nuns' biggest needs had already been addressed: the construction of a water reservoir that stores up water during the warm parts of the year to be used during the winter months when the river dries up.

Though we were only at the nunnery for a short period of time, the nuns constantly demonstrated the incredible amount of hard work they put into maintaining the nunnery. A conch shell was blown early in the morning to signal morning services. Along with their daily pujas, the nuns were constantly working in the kitchen, cleaning, moving wood and tin for different projects, looking after the little nuns, gardening, collecting milk and cow dung, or finding time to come to English class. Despite the seemingly endless amount of work, the nuns always had smiles on their faces and offered Hannah and me tea or Maggi instant noodles whenever they saw us. Their kindness culminated with Skalsang Dolma and Tehen Wangmo making us beautiful sheepskin vests called nambu fuma, which received praise from nearly every Ladahki person we met. The nuns saw us off with a heartfelt and tearful goodbye, as we made a promise to return again soon.

## **PARADISE IN BANGLADESH**

*by Josefu Limoli Deyama*

Visakha Girls' School, located high up in the hill tracts of southeastern Bangladesh, was started in 2006 by local villagers with the help of Jamyang Foundation. The girls at Visakha Girls' School mostly belong to the Marma ethnic minority group, one of 11 indigenous peoples living in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). These indigenous groups are of Mongoloid origin and differ markedly from the Bengali majority in Bangladesh in terms of religion, culture, dress, language, appearance, and farming methods.



Hannah sewing with the nuns of Khachoe Drubling Monastery, Karsha. (Photo: Jeffrey Hallock.)

This primary school for girls started with 38 students, but has quadrupled in size over the past 11 years. Recently, I had the great pleasure of visiting Visakha Girls' School and spent an amazing day with the girls, their parents, and their teachers. The school is located in the village of Doshri, which is located in the Manikchari area of Khagrachari District in the CHT, on the southeast edge of Bangladesh. If you think that remembering the school's location is a challenge, rest assured, getting there was a much bigger challenge.

As a volunteer doctor and social activist, I was in the midst of helping the Rohingya refugees in the very southeast corner of Bangladesh, between the towns of Cox's Bazaar and Teknaf. One day, my friend Lien Bui from Jamyang Foundation asked whether I could visit Visakha Girls' School. Never one to turn down an opportunity for adventure, I contacted our liaison, Kong Chai, who is himself ethnically Marma and lives in the CHT. Little did I realize what challenges lay before me. I had not yet studied the history of the region and quickly learned that the Marma people are an isolated Buddhist minority in a majority Muslim nation that hardly acknowledges their existence. In fact, along with Sikkim, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Ladakh, and other

remote areas of India, they constitute one of the few remaining Buddhist communities in South Asia.

For several decades, the CHT tribes were subject to a genocide perpetrated by the Bangladesh military, a critical situation that required the UN and others to try to intervene. Any resistance by the indigenous peoples to land grabs and other injustices there had been met with extreme forms of retaliation, including rape and murder by the Bangladesh army. The whole region was militarized and any tourist entering the region had to get official approval from the Ministry of the Interior. To this day, the indigenous people of the CHT suffer from forced displacement and prejudice. Their lands are being aggressively encroached upon and eroded by Bengali slash-and-burn farming and tobacco farming.

As if by destiny, thanks to my well-connected liaison and newly-minted good friend Kong Chai, my application to visit the CHT was approved by the Ministry of the Interior in less than 24 hours. "Never has there been such a quick approval," said Mr. Kong. It was meant to be!

Because I was on the very southernmost tip of Bangladesh, it took me 10 hours by bus, with several transfers, to get from Teknaf to Chittagong,

Bangladesh's second largest city. There was a local celebration going on and it took many attempts before I could find a modest hotel. Settling into the hotel room, complete with shower, TV, and a comfortable bed, all for four U.S. dollars, I was happy to rest my weary body.

Very early the next morning, I met up with Kong Chai and we headed towards the hills. After three to four hours of bus travel, we arrived at the base of the hills surrounding Doshri. I saw no roads heading up to the hills and wondered whether we might be in for some trekking. This caused me some concern, since I was recovering from a broken ankle and was still in some pain. "No problem!" Kong Chai said ever so cheerfully with his lovely smile. "You will ride on motorcycle!" I hopped on the back of a motorcycle that suddenly appeared out of nowhere and wondered where we would find a road. What I did not anticipate was that the greatest adventure of my two-day journey to Visakha Girls' School was yet to come.

The motorcycle suddenly took off and I grabbed the driver's shirt with both hands. We dipped crazily almost straight down a hill, with no road in sight, dipping in and out of a creek bed, and emerging up an incline onto a little tiny pathway. During the 20 minutes or so that we careened along this very

muddy path, we were slipping and sliding all over the place. On occasion, I had to get off and walk up a steep hill, because the motorcycle simply could not make it with my 250-pound body on the back.

When we arrived at the school on the top of the hill, it was like arriving in Shangri-La. The school was situated on a small hill, surrounded by a gorgeous, panoramic 360-degree view of the outlying hills and valleys, all filled with lush green vegetation. As I got off the motorcycle, more than 100 little girls came screaming out to greet me! I was in heaven.

I spent the rest of the day playing games, teaching the girls how to listen to each others' hearts and lungs with a stethoscope, and talking about any topic under the sun they wanted to hear about. I was treated to an amazing lunch with the staff, lovingly made from locally grown fruits and vegetables. As is so common with endangered indigenous peoples around the world, these Marma girls' families are living day to day. Growing what they can on their own, they live a simple, happy life.

Girls in the CHT are the ones who were most at risk if they do not receive an education. Even at a young age, they are susceptible to oppression, poverty, and even sexual slavery. Visakha Girls' School provides the only opportunity these girls



Students at Visakha Girls' School in the Chittagong Hill Tracts enjoy picture books. (Photo: Josefu Limoli Deyma)

have a chance to improve their lives and the lives of their families.

I have traveled to over 160 nations and have visited many displaced peoples. Never in my life have I felt more welcome and been treated with such loving kindness. The girls' gentle smiles and giggles have left an indelible mark of love on my heart. I recommend that everyone not only help these girls have a chance in life, but also hope that they will be able to visit one of the few true Shangri-La locations and peoples left on Earth!

## **PRAYERS FOR THE COW**

*by Paola Andrea Abril Bohorquez*

When I first heard about volunteering at a monastery in a remote place in the great Himalayas, I truly had no idea what to expect. A friend in Germany told me about the Himalayan nuns, the way they live, and how they always need volunteer teachers. That's how I got connected with the nuns of Jampa Choling Institute in Meeru, Kinnaur, in the mountains of northern India.

I have always been interested in religion. I grew up in a very Catholic family and lived for four years in a Muslim country. Volunteering was my chance to learn a bit about Buddhism. When I set out, my knowledge of Buddhism was close to zero. I thought that being in the Himalayas for awhile would be a good break from the Internet and other distractions. It would give me time to read about Buddhism and to ask the nuns about it.

During my time at the monastery, I didn't need to ask the nuns much about their beliefs. Honestly, although I read some books, I learned more by watching the way the nuns lived. Every day was a lesson of love and compassion, seeing the way they acted with older people, their sisters, neighbors, environment, animals, insects, and just about everything.

From the beginning, I noticed how disciplined the nuns are. Some start the day at 4 in the morning. Most



Students at Visakha Girls' School are now healthy and very happy to be learning!

(Photo: Josefu Limoli Deyma)



wake up around 5 am to get ready for their first puja of the day. After puja, comes learning. At 8 am, we have breakfast, followed by debate class, and then Tibetan philosophy, English, and lunch. After lunch, the nuns practice Tibetan handwriting, do more reading, then homework, and then puja again. Unless they are sick, they don't take breaks. Occasionally, some rest on their beds, but always with a book in hand. Their diligence is very impressive. Even on their day of rest, they are very busy. Some work around the gonpa (monastery), while others do chores – washing their clothes by hand, tending the cow, or cleaning the cow shed.



The nuns of Jampa Choling Monastery, Kinnaur, show great affection for animals.  
(Photos: Paola Andrea Abril Bohorquez)

Tending the cow was one of my favorite things. The second week I was there, the cow was pregnant and needed better grass to eat, so we hiked for around three hours to find a nice meadow for her. For me, life was easy, since the nuns did all the work. I tried to help, but I was useless. And the nuns didn't like their teacher to work: "Teacher, just rest. Don't worry!" The day we went with the cow was one of the best days of my stay. I loved how sweet the nuns were with the cow and other animals passing by. They hugged them and asked me to take pictures. When we finally got to the pasture, they ate some candies and played a bit in nature. It surprised and delighted me to see the young nuns enjoying themselves, without complaining or checking their phones like kids where I live.

After some weeks, we learned that the cow had been eaten by a bear. The cow was old and pregnant, so it couldn't run fast enough to escape. When we went back to take another cow to pasture, we found the corpse. When the nuns saw it, they gathered around and said prayers for the cow. They told me how deeply grateful they were for this cow, because it had given them milk for many years.

There are so many things to tell about my experience of living with the nuns and teaching them. I liked challenging them with difficult subjects, like geometry and calculations. In the beginning, they were very insecure, but gradually they gained confidence. At first, some could not multiply, but once they got their first calculation right, they were so happy. Some days they surprised me with extra homework or some drawings. They were excellent students!

Sometimes life in Meeru was hard. For example, I was terrified when one of the nuns got really sick. I realized what it means to be sick high in the mountains. First, we had to hike downhill for an hour – and most of the nuns do it in flip-flops. Then we went by jeep for 30 minutes, then by bus for an hour and a half. The nun was so very pale and sick, I didn't think she would make it. When she didn't get better at the local hospital, she had to go all the way to Rampur, which is very far away.

I was told that the food at the monastery would be very basic, but I found it so tasty. From very basic ingredients, the nuns could cook delicious things. They were all excellent cooks. They told me I wasn't needed in the kitchen, but sometimes I insisted and they were happy to teach me how to make bread, which spices to use, which recipes were Tibetan, or Indian, or Kinnouri.

We had many visitors at the monastery. We were happy to see how strong the local women are and how much the men respect them. Some visitors were local, some were relatives, and we even had a photographer from Mumbai. She helped translate for me, so I could understand the culture better. For

example, we learned that polyandry is still practiced in this area, which was a big cultural shock for us.

Altogether, volunteering with the nuns was very interesting and fun. I really want to go back and stay for a long time. I have so much to learn from the nuns. We had a great time together. It was very inspiring to see how much they respect and help each other. As I left, I promised to visit again soon!



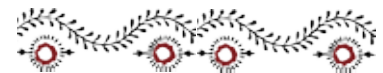
Speaking the language of the heart. (Photo: Jeffrey Hallock)

Dear Friends,

The students at Sanghamitra Institute, Bodhgaya, send you these flowers, warm greetings, and heartfelt appreciation for your kind generosity.

Wishing you a very safe and peaceful New Year!

Karma Lekshe Tsomo, Director



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