

JAMYANG FOUNDATION

CHANGING PERCEPTIONS OF WOMEN'S POTENTIAL

2018 NEWSLETTER



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Young nuns receive their novice precepts at Yangchen Chöling in Spiti.

Dear Friends,

This year brought many joys and achievements for the students of Jamyang Foundation. Visakha Girls' School in Bangladesh is expanding with happy, healthy children who love to study. The nuns from Kinnaur and Spiti excelled at the large intermural debate tournament for nuns in Nepal. Construction of the new Sanghamitra Clinic for village women and children in Bodhgaya, India, is complete. Now we just need medical equipment! We are deeply grateful to all the kind donors who help make all these wonderful projects possible.

May you enjoy a peaceful, fruitful New Year!

Karma Lekshe Tsomo

Karma Lekshe Tsomo, Director

WARM HANDS, WARM HEARTS

by Annanya Panagala

As I write this, I remember randomly searching for volunteering opportunities online. On the lookout, I had three key words in mind: remote, cultural, and tranquil. Khachoe Drupling Monastery in Karsha in Zanskar Valley was all that and more. Although the journey to the monastery was arduous, I realized it was all worthwhile the moment I set foot on Zangskar soil and was welcomed with open arms, wide smiles, and a chorus of "Jullay!" – a term that elicits so many dear memories even now.

My friend Joel Robinson and I started volunteering on May 15, 2018, while it was still snowing at nights, just enough to cover the tops of the mountains. Soon after settling into our rooms, we were surrounded by the warm, curious eyes of the children. They eagerly introduced themselves to us in both Hindi and English. Later that day, I taught them to set up a chess board, and although they didn't understand the game, they sure



A young nun in Zangskar delights in learning.

laughed a lot while naming the chess pieces. That night, I remember shivering from the cold for a moment, which the children noticed. Two children, Youdon and Dasal, sat beside me and rubbed my palms to warm them up. Small acts of kindness like this surprised and touched me deeply.

The nuns taught us basic Ladakhi and called me Nomo, which translates to “younger sister.” Their hearty welcome was moving and I knew I’d found a family in them. We were pleasantly surprised to find that the nuns knew basic Hindi, so we could communicate well. Since this day marked the start of a 15-day puja, the senior nuns were occupied, so Joel and I focused on the children. Each day our classes started at 9 am and lasted until 12.30 pm. Then we’d break for lunch and resume class from 2 to 3 pm. We taught them to use the 5 Ws (who, what, where, when, why) and 1 H (how), then focused on meanings and opposites. We also taught them basic geography and felt satisfied that, by the end of our stay, most of the children were able to add and subtract well.

One teacher at the monastery, Lobzang Ngawang, was kind enough to share his insights on Buddhism with us, as well as life in general. He does a great job of teaching the children, not only in terms of studies but also important life lessons. The nuns were the epitome of kindness. They were always asking whether we were in good health and offering us tea or water. They asked us to show them pictures of our lives back home. Within a short time, they made sure we felt

like family. We took part in some daily prayers and always sat together for meals. The children made sure we played volleyball or badminton at least once a day.

One day, the small nuns shyly asked whether I could make a video of them playing. I’ll never forget the way their eyes and smiles widened as I played the video back for them and they pointed out each other on the screen. Most of the children had picturesque memories, so during the last week of our stay, we drew up charts of everything we had taught them and stuck them up on the walls.

Once a week, Joel and I went to Padum and bought treats and stationery for the children. We always took the steep path leading up to the monastery. I can still recall the scenery exactly, with the distant snow-topped mountains, the stream that runs down the hill, the gentle breeze, the distant sounds of prayers and bells ringing, and the scent of fresh snow and wild flowers, all in perfect harmony. Sometimes, I sat quietly at the edge of the path overlooking the mountains and watched the sunset. To call it magical would be an understatement. In these moments, I realized how far I’d come and how stark the contrast was between the monastery and the jarring world I’d always known.

The day before we left, we sat with the nuns for one last meal. They placed a white shawl on our shoulders that day, explaining that this was their way of expressing thanks. The children hugged us tightly and told us not to leave, urging us to stay longer.

At that point, I had tears in my eyes, and promised to come again soon. The entire volunteer experience was deeply awakening and fulfilling for me and I definitely hope to stay for another stint in the coming years.

NEW FRIENDS

by Blake Bierwith and Peggy Kennedy

In July 2018, I embarked on the journey of a lifetime with my mom, Peggy. After a bumpy 18-hour jeep ride clinging to the side of the Himalayan mountains, we finally reached Zangskar. In the town of Karsha, where we were staying, we met some of the kindest and warmest people we had ever met.

When we first arrived, we had no idea what to expect. We had not been able to contact the monastery directly and, with frequent changes in travel times, we were not quite sure when we would arrive. When our taxi dropped us off at Khachö Drubling Nunnery, we were instantly greeted by several smiling kids running up to take our luggage. They gave us big hugs, as if we had been there many times before and were already friends. They took us to the kitchen area to meet some of the older nuns, who served us milk tea. The nuns told us to rest and said they would be able to arrange for



Young nuns practice their debating skills at Sanghamitra Institute in Bodhgaya, India.

us to stay in one of the rooms at the monastery the following night.

We walked down the steep hill to the village to look for a place to stay that night. On our way, we met a young man about my age (22) who was very kind and spoke great English. He took us to see whether any of the guest houses were available, but they were all full. He offered to let us stay at his homestay, where we met his family, and his mother made two amazing makeshift beds for us to sleep in.

We woke up to the sound of their cow bellowing under our window and discovered that we were surrounded by a pretty flower garden. Off in the distance, women, men, and children with large baskets on their backs tended lush fields of wheat and barley. Surrounding us were Himalayan mountains topped with snow, some of them 23,000' high. It was some of the most beautiful scenery I have ever seen.

As we made our way back up the side of the mountain to the nunnery, we ran into Lobsang, a monk who taught at the nunnery and spoke good English. He offered to let us stay in his room at the monastery, saying he would stay at another room at Karsha Monastery nearby. That very morning, we began teaching English and math to the young nuns, who were extremely excited to learn. We had brought four laptops with us and they quickly learned how to use them better than we did.

The days generally started around 7 am with puja (prayers and chanting), followed by a simple meal of chapattis and tea. Our first English session started at 9 am. We taught for about five hours each day, which was just part of the young nuns' schedule. Altogether, they had eight hours of classes, including Tibetan, Hindi, Buddhist texts, and more. The food they served was all vegetarian and delicious.

The older nuns have an amazing sense of humor and we would always be laughing during dinner time. I have a weird talent for being able to wiggle my ears, which all the nuns thought was hysterical. Even though the nuns did not speak much English, it was amazing how much we could communicate through the wiggling of ears or flaring of nostrils.

The people of Karsha are genuinely amazing people. In many places, it would seem odd to wave to someone you did not know, but in Karsha everyone waves and everyone is excited to see you. They do not live easy lives – most villages are farmers – but it is apparent that the people here do not seek happiness in the material world. Buddhism is deeply rooted in their culture and thus people value kindness and compassion above all else. Their kind and compassionate approach to life had a deep impact on us. That's what made our visit the experience of a lifetime. We look forward to going back to Zangskar soon to see all of our new friends.



Brazilian volunteer Diogo Diniz da Costa Pereira meditates with senior nun Tenzin Chödron in Zangla, Zangskar.

LESSONS IN COMPASSION AND KINDNESS

by Samakti Jariwala

“Chai pi lo” (Drink tea!), Gen Nima said. My friend Gautam and I looked at each other, trying to mask our confusion. We had journeyed from Mumbai to Leh, Leh to Kargil, and Kargil to the remote town of Padum in Zangskar Valley. Padum is situated at an altitude of around 12,000 feet above sea level and is nestled in a valley between two rivers and three mountain ranges. Dorje Dzong Monastery is even more remote and harder to access, situated atop one of those mountain ranges, and a five-hour walk uphill from Padum. She insisted we drink some tea before explaining our unannounced visit. After a cup of traditional Ladakhi butter tea, we finally managed to convey that we were volunteers who had come to teach the nuns for four weeks. We were met with equally confused expressions. This was the first summer that Dorje Dzong saw an influx of volunteers. There had only been one before. Gen Nima explained that the students were on summer break, but would be back in a week’s time. We were welcome to stay.

So it began. Gen Nima allotted Gautam the task of making cheese, then took me with her to get the guest house ready. After an hour of moving heavy rocks, furniture, planks of

wood, and old bathroom fixtures around, we had accumulated as much dust as humanly possible in the windy desert region of Zangskar. Our abode for the next few weeks was ready. This was a reversal of the gender roles one witnesses in Mumbai and I was mighty pleased. Little did I know that this was but a prelude of things to come.

We soon found out that His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama was due to visit to Padum in a few days’ time and the kids would return to school only after that. Ecstatic at the opportunity to attend His Holiness’ teachings, we went back to Padum after a few days of painting and cleaning the kids’ classroom. We found ourselves thrown into the chaotic frenzy that had enveloped the town and its surrounding villages. Padum was hosting hundreds of Buddhist nuns and monks, foreigners, and tourists from distant places. Over the next three days, the crowd battled the cold rain and harsh sun, in turns, to attend the teachings. Not only did His Holiness teach about Buddhist philosophy and human values, but he also spoke about religious harmony, world peace, and environmental protection. Each individual has a role to play in each of these, he said. We were truly blessed to attend His Holiness’ teachings and be present for what, we were told, might be his last visit to Zangskar.

After the teachings, we returned to the monastery and our daily routine for the next three weeks commenced. Life at the nunnery was unlike anything I had experienced before – a perfect blend of tradition and quiet, with a subtle mix of modernity. As a result of its remote location, problems with transportation and communications are encountered on a daily basis. These “problems,” as we called them, were non-issues for the nuns. They view all problems as opportunities to learn and face them with unwavering smiles.

While we were away attending His Holiness’ teachings in Padum, a bear (*temu*) had broken into the guest house, leaving most of the windows broken and a carpet of glass shards inside. Apparently, sabotage by bears is common. The recently-installed solar water heater had suffered a similar fate. While we viewed this as a catastrophe, the nuns were ecstatic about the resulting sleep-over on the open roof, battling cold rain and dust storms. This was just one example of their daily battles with nature, unheard of by city folk like us.

Days at the nunnery were long, filled with tasks that required us to push our bodies and minds to their limits. Typically, we arose early and spent the mornings cleaning, watering the fields, milking the cow, picking vegetables, and preparing breakfast while the children memorized their religious texts. Classes commenced after breakfast and the morning chanting. Meal preparations throughout the day were a group effort, as was cleaning up afterwards. Evenings were reserved for debate for the older nuns and playtime for the younger ones.

If we didn't need to collect dried cow dung for the hearth or fill dirt into sacks for the compost toilet, we spent the time after class playing games or reading storybooks. After this, we usually helped the older students with their homework. They studied by torchlight and oil lamps, since the power supply was infrequent. Meanwhile, Gen Nima and the two teachers – Gen Jigmet and Guruji – spent time helping the younger ones memorize their texts. After this, we helped a couple of the students cook while the others chanted for an hour before dinner. There was something magical about their chants, which they recited with an almost trance-inducing fervor. Dinner was usually a quiet affair, followed by a quick retreat to our beds.

As amateur teachers, we did not know what to expect. Our first few days were spent feeling a bit dejected, exhausted, and lost. Over the next few days, however, we experimented, adapting and tailoring our teaching methods until we found what worked best for the students. They are sharp learners and picked up everything – English, math, science, geography, history, environmental studies, and health and hygiene – quickly and effortlessly. Their eagerness to learn, coupled with their fun-loving nature, made them an absolute delight to teach. We integrated book learning with activities like identifying planets each night on our walk back to the guest house or making brushing teeth a group activity. We even spent a day digging a hole for plastic waste, taking turns shoveling, while the students taught us traditional Ladakhi songs. It was as much fun for us as it was for them. We soon became good friends (*trokpo* and *tromo*).

Over the weekends, most of the young nuns went home to their families. The ones who stayed behind worked in the fields, cutting grass, cleaning, going up the mountain to wash clothes and bathe in the frigid water. Once we watched a movie on the portable DVD player they had received as a donation. One day, there was a sudden, drastic decrease in water in the canal that brought water from the glacier – the monastery's only water supply. We made a picnic of climbing the mountain to build a miniature dam, shoveling the canal bed and throwing away large rocks to restore the supply of water. Many times, we had visitors on the weekends that called for special meal preparations. One Friday, the nuns took us along to one of the villages at the foot of the mountain to attend a traditional Ladakhi wedding. They held our hands and rushed down the slopes excitedly. Weddings meant getting to eat a fancy meal and a chance to meet some of their family members. It was a joyous evening and we returned with cherished memories, our bond stronger than before.

The tender-heartedness that the nuns demonstrated on many occasions truly moved me. Once, at the wedding, I cut my finger. I asked around for a band-aid to keep the wound clean while we climbed back up the mountain, but couldn't

find one. Ten minutes later, Saldon, an eleven-year-old nun, ran up to me and took my hand. She had somehow found a tiny strip of cloth and carefully wrapped my finger in it. Later, I heard that she had torn off a piece of cloth from the scarf offered to us at the wedding to cover my wound. Another time, a fourteen-year-old nun named Dechen seemed upset and looked like she had been crying. She refused to tell me why, though I asked her repeatedly. It was her turn to cook and clean, but she refused to let me help her and went on working as usual. Later in the evening, Saldon told me that Dechen had a terrible toothache and didn't want to worry me by telling me. Even though she was the one in pain, she was concerned about worrying me. Such is their benevolence.

During our time there, we abandoned all our inhibitions and immersed ourselves completely in the lifestyle of the nuns. Their inclusive and thoughtful nature made it easy. It was a symbiotic experience where we exchanged knowledge about our respective cultures and learned each other's languages. While we taught them academics, they taught us invaluable life lessons about love and compassion.

While we were at the nunnery, Gen Nima assumed the role of a teacher for us. She taught me how to cook Tibetan food like *momos* (dumplings), *thukpa* (noodle soup), and *timos* (steamed buns), and also the basics of farming and gardening. Even greater were the priceless lessons I learned by simply observing and being in her presence. She is a real-life superwoman – spontaneously and effortlessly playing the



Small nuns at Changchub Chöling Monastery in Zangla, Zanskar, take a play break.

role of a parent, teacher, protector, friend, and disciplinarian to everyone, including the young nuns, pets, and even us.

Gen Nima and the nuns are the embodiment of compassion and selflessness. They demonstrate superlative purity, innocence, kindness, patience, and love. My time with them was truly transformative and I cannot wait to return.

“MA’M! COMPUTER CLASS!”

by Neranjana Gunetilleke

My name is Neranjana. Yes! I am named after the Neranjana River that flows in front of Sanghamitra Institute. The name Sanghamitra also has lifelong associations for me. In the third century BCE, Arahat Sangamitra gave Sri Lanka two very sacred offerings: the *bhikkhuni* lineage and a sapling of the *bodhi* tree. Both survive to this day in Sri Lanka.

I am a Sri Lankan woman and a Buddhist by birth, conviction, and hopefully by practice, so Bodhgaya is very special to me. Imagine what it meant to me to arrive in the freezing white dawn in Bodhgaya and to cross the Neranjana River. Together with the skeptical rickshaw driver, we located Sanghamitra Institute, and for over a month, I lived at this winter abode of over 70 Himalayan nuns. I was tasked with teaching English and computer. A time of such receiving and giving is hard to condense into a couple of pages, so here are some random extracts from my diary to give a hint of what Sanghamitra meant to me.

5 January: On the train to Gaya and ten hours behind schedule already. At dawn, I can slowly see what is outside. Foggy fields, villages, and towns are barely visible. The rising sun is a faint ball of red. Surprising that the Ganges River valley,

the primary area of the Buddha’s field of activity, can get this cold and foggy. How did the early monks and nuns manage in just their robes? Just heard from two Ladakhis in the next cabin that His Holiness the Dalai Lama will be teaching in Bodhgaya until the 16th! What luck!!

6 January: Arriving at Sanghamitra Institute in Bodhgaya, the sound of debating comes from all sides. I am seeing it for the first time and can’t really make any sense of it – a lot of clapping, hand and foot movements, and shouting “yo, sho sho sho!” Even the baby nuns are at it.

11 January: The hardest thing to get my head around is the confusion of roles. I am slowly learning to accept being served food by the nuns. But today, as I sweep my room, two nuns insist on doing it. A lifetime of conditioning, of totally and respectfully serving the *sangha*, is turning upside down. But for the nuns, it’s respect toward the teacher. Ultimately, they won 70 to 1!

14 January: At lunch, Gen Tsepal says, “Go out and be in the sun. Do some bodily action. You will feel warmer. I walk out into the garden with a cup of hot water. The small nuns are playing hopscotch: “Mam, come play! It’s easy!” So here I am, feeling like a creaking ancient cart, jumping from square to square, energetically cheered on by the pro players! Obviously Mam was not up to mark. “Mam cold! Need exercise. I give massage?” Sure! I gratefully retire from the game and sink down. Wow! What a thumping massage on my neck, shoulders, and back. And I defrost in no time!

15 January: My hot water bath in the night is such an adventure. Each time the kitchen roster changes, so does the hot water. Once, the bucket was so full of boiling water, I could not cool it down. Today, I bath in ginger water! A huge



Warm heads and warm hearts generate smiles on cold days in Zangskar.



Nuns from Jampa Chöling Monastery (Kinnaur) tour sacred sites after their novice ordination in Spiti.

flask full arrives. Guess I failed to communicate that it is to wash in and not to drink!

18 January: Reading *The Joy of Compassion* really got me. We react too much to the sense world, even in religious life. Learning to go with the flow, I accept, and discover it works. “In the world, bad is not too bad, good is not too good.... Good and bad are relative and exist only in the conditioned mind. They are not absolute qualities.”

20 January: A tap on the door and a shaven head pokes through with a cluster of more shaven heads behind her. “Mam, computer class?” Yes, indeed! Always a few minutes early. Such fast and enthusiastic learners. The days of finger exercises to manage the keyboard are long gone. The graphics classes are the greatest fun, for both teacher and students!

23 January: In the early morning, there is a continuous hum, like an invasion of giant bees! It’s the nuns memorizing the texts. The oral tradition is alive and well. The nuns love interactive learning, too. I decide to take a leap and do group storytelling with the senior class. What a success! Everyone spoke up! No dipping heads and painful embarrassment, just great fun! No going back to the traditional method for teaching English. What a relief for both the students and the teacher!

26 January: Finally! I learn to make *momos* (dumplings), *timok* (buns), and all the unfamiliar stuff the nuns cook. Love it! All the ingredients are easily available at home, so I’ll expand my menu when I return.

28 January: It’s really working! The Kinnauri nuns write

out “the train story” and narrate it. They really get across the excitement, uncertainty, wonder, chaos, and fear they felt on their very first train journey from Delhi to Gaya. Their rendering of the adventure of crossing a city street is hilarious! They are so good, I literally gasp when the train pulls out of the station with only half of the nuns on the train and the other half still on the platform!

4 February: Walking through the fields to the Sujatha Stupa, the younger nuns want to take photos for a story they will present in class. Such a joyous, spontaneous lot! When I first came here with the older nuns, walking across the fields, I was struck by the timelessness of the saffron robes. At the entrance of the small village, under a huge banyan tree, are stacks of grain and little earthen houses. The sight of gentle, robed figures approaching the village made me think of the innumerable times the *suttas* describe just such a situation.

5 February: I thought the “kitchen list” and “sick list” would be very long. Quite the opposite, record-breaking numbers are in class today. Excited by the idea of presenting their work after dinner, we practice and practice. Today, they are on a roll, so creative in their storytelling. Not a word in any other language, all in English! And the thank-you cards made in our computer graphics class are amazing!

OF MOUNTAINS AND HEARTS by Vidushi

I would like to share an incident that occurred on my return journey from Kinnaur to my house in Delhi. I had

been waiting to catch a bus from Shimla to Delhi for almost three and a half hours. When the bus arrived, I was the third passenger to board. A father and his son were already in the bus and I politely asked the man to move out of the aisle. Before I could finish my sentence, he rudely shouted at me. Shocked, I was unable to figure out what had caused such a sharp reaction. Stunned and confused, I walked up to the man and apologized for any mistake I might have committed. He explained the situation from his perspective, saying he had a habit of speaking loudly. He had shouted because he had assumed that I was in hurry and would not wait, so he shouted. I pointed out that I had been polite and had in no way conveyed that I would not wait. I urged him not to randomly shout at people, as everyone has their own story, and unconsidered actions might have adverse consequences. Despite having expressed my concerns, I found myself sobbing in my seat for a long time.

I know that this is quite an abrupt way to begin an article. A commonplace incident was met with a disproportionately reactive response. I realized that my response reflected the events I had experienced over the past five weeks. In Meelu, a small village in the Kinnaur District of Himachal Pradesh where Jampa Chöling Monastery is located, people live a simple life. Everywhere I went, people met me with serene smiles, kind words, helping hands, untiring dedication to their

work, and boundless patience. The beauty of my interactions with them had stripped away all my emotional defenses. This contrast, conveyed by my tears, was the reason I had been sobbing on the bus.

My time at the monastery began when I was a student of social studies. My professor, Dr. Sudhir Suthar, had introduced me to the terms “co-learning” and “colleagues” as an alternative way to describe the teaching-learning process. Somehow, I had lost my ability to communicate ideas effectively and this seemed like a good way to learn. I do not know whether I have improved on that front, but the experience surpassed my expectations.

Co-learning with the nuns at the monastery can best be described as humbling, and not solely because of the excessive respect they showed me. Their intense curiosity, zeal to learn, creativity, energy, ideas, and feelings of connection made me feel that my efforts were extraordinary, as we learned English, math, science, and social studies. Each morning, I awoke to a view of the mountains, which inspired the activities for the day. My colleagues responded with enthusiastic engagement. When assigned to do an oral presentation, a colleague prepared not only one response, but two. Hand-painting became a collective task, with colleagues collaborating to make natural colors and improvising on each other’s art. A treasure hunt encouraged them to write difficult clues and



Young student nuns enjoy doing their homework in the warm sunshine at Sanghamitra Institute.



Barley and peas ripen in the fields below Changchub Chöling Monastery in Zangla (Zangskar).

a science class aroused intense curiosity. Their experiments extended beyond the class hours. Skits were enacted intently and joyfully. A profit-loss experiment with fake currency seemed almost real. I felt humbled and embraced by their level of engagement, effort, and enthusiasm.

My colleagues ranged in experience and background, from 11-year-old Avantika to Subhadra, who had been living in the monastery for more than 18 years. The energy they gave to the activities varied, but their eagerness to learn was always high. They loved the short stories by O. Henry that I read for them. Their favorites were “The Last Leaf” and “The Gift of the Magi.” The expressions on their faces, which changed as I narrated the stories, were endearing. They even wrote letters to the late “Mr. O. Henry” as a writing exercise. Recalling these memories now brings a smile to my face.

Everyone in the monastery was extremely hardworking, especially Hiradasi Dadi, who beamed with joy. Shib Devi, a calm person, expressed random philosophical thoughts. Buaji, who managed the nunnery and took care of the nearby fields, delighted in organic farming and cherished the purity of the land. She radiated elegance through her love, confidence, fearlessness, and strong sense of responsibility. Sunita Di was known for her laughter and her kind concern for everyone at

mealtimes. Gen-la, who taught the nuns Buddhist philosophy, earned respect for his dedication. He played cricket with the students every weekend and deliberately threw away his wicket to give them a chance to bat.

Living in a monastery at such high altitudes, surrounded by mountains, was a magical experience. Clouds walked into the room unabashedly, blurring the view. The Sutlej River flowed, at the foot of the mountains below, in a rich green landscape. I will never forget the countless stars twinkling in the night sky. Recalling the taste of the super-cold mountain water, the feel of the bright sunlight’s warm embrace, and the scent of the fragrant firewood at night instantly quenched the longing of my heart. But more than anything, I was captivated by how this natural beauty was reflected in the hearts of the people. As I looked out at the mountains each day, the word “majestic” resounded in my heart. Compared to these wonders, human affairs seemed minute. The majesty of the natural surroundings reverberated in the laughter, hard work, humility, and heartfelt interactions of my colleagues.

As I left the monastery, I carried three small bags. Heavy items had been replaced by gifts from the nuns. My phone held more images, contacts, and songs. Priceless memories – my first sight of snow, a love of smiles, a quiet faith in myself, and endless gratitude – have replaced my tears.



American volunteer Summer Siman clearly won the hearts of her rambunctious students in Zangla.

A SUMMER OF MOUNTAINS, MOMOS, AND MAGIC

by Summer Siman

Sometimes I close my eyes and conjure up Changchub Chöling Monastery in my mind, hoping to hear the laughter and feel the breeze of that magical place again. Changchub Chöling Monastery is the most beautiful place I have visited to date. The scenery is mesmerising in itself, but bested by the beauty of the smiles and hearts of the nuns and villagers of Zangla.

When I arrived, I was greeted by dazzling smiles and warm handshakes. Right away, I noticed how the older nuns took care of the younger ones, from dishwashing to homework. I was moved and excited to teach these seemingly docile little angles. I was in for a surprise! The girls were eager to learn but also had a cheeky, mischievous side. During my first class, one little nun asked me to help fold and tie her special skirt. I did a poor job, so her legs had little space for movement. The others noticed this and suddenly there was a long line of nuns with undone belts and skirts, and a chorus

of “Madam Summer, help me!”

The nuns never ceased to amaze me with their energy. How I wished I could buy it in a bottle! They were also full of creativity. One afternoon, after a full day of classes, the small nuns were in a playful mood. It began when three of them started pulling their hats over their faces and posing like Spiderman. This soon escalated into stunts such as cartwheels, headstands, and flying hats on the lawn. Soon, there was a beautiful symphony of laughter, scary sounds, and martial arts cries.

The small nuns also taught me to see the world with childish wonder again. They were so present in the moment and easily enthralled by all sorts of roleplaying, songs, and new games. After one outdoor lunch on the lawn in front of the guesthouse, the nuns picked up stones of various colors and shapes and came up to me and the other three volunteers, calling “Madam, look!” As we described the geological type of each stone, they would repeat our words and eagerly go find new stones.

One overcast afternoon, we did cloud-gazing. The nuns eagerly impressed me with the many shapes they could see and name. Their sweetness and open, unabashed affection

was very moving. They drew portraits of us as fantasy princesses and princes with pineapple crowns. When we went to lunch, they eagerly grabbed our water bottles and carried them for us, extending their little hands for us to hold, saying “Madam Summer, let’s go!” These little students were truly my teachers as well. They taught me so much about being present and seeing the magic in the mundane.

The senior nuns were my teachers, too, and my role models. I am so grateful to have met them, with their cheerfulness and good humor. They worked busily all day, cooking huge meals, constructing the winter green house, and carrying rocks uphill to lay a new floor. Their diligence was astounding and humbling. Becoming part of their sisterhood was such an honor and source of joy!

Helping the nuns make dinner was one of my daily highlights. One such happy evening, another volunteer and I were helping Nima and Tenzin make *momos* (Tibetan dumplings). We all agreed to sneakily eat a bit of the filling, because it looked so good. The nuns sweetly teased us for our poor *momo*-making skills. As I looked around the kitchen at the junior nuns, senior nuns, and volunteers, we all seemed like one big, happy family. Another highlight was the banter and joking. The nuns love life and are skilled at finding opportunities to play a prank. For instance, once, when I was doing laundry, I suddenly felt a bit of water on my face. Looking up, I saw Tsering Angmo laughing cheekily at me and running away before I could retaliate.

In sum, I can only say that the nuns of Zangla are some of the most welcoming, wise, genuine, and kind people I have ever met. Witnessing their eagerness to learn, coupled with the many obstacles they face – especially the senior nuns who do are busy with chores – has inspired me to change my career path. I want to find a way to help them and other girls like them to have a better chance at life. I hope that others will help these girls, too. In the process, I think they will

experience the magic of Zangla and all the Himalayas.

TEACHING THROUGH PICTURES AND STORIES by Agatha Haun

This summer, I spent five weeks teaching English to the nuns of Pema Chöling Monastery in the village of Manda in Zangskar Valley. Although we could not make major progress toward English fluency in such a short time, the classes helped renew what the *jomos* (nuns) had learned in previous summers and retained. Due to the harsh winters in Zangskar, volunteers provide fragmentary and sporadic education, using different methods of teaching.

At the outset, I spent some time figuring out what sort of instruction would most useful and interesting for the *jomos*. Several of them had received little or no schooling, so a formal approach to grammar seemed inappropriate. At first, I experimented, explaining basic elements of grammar, such as the present tense, pronouns, and the use of affirmative and negative verb forms. After a few days, the students brought out a book titled *English and Ladakhi Easy Self-Study*, which had the virtue of including relevant vocabulary along with some essential grammar points.

Fortunately I had brought a few other books to use in the classes. Two were children’s picture books: a life of the Buddha and a story about a pig, a rooster, and a snake to teach the dangers of greed, anger, and ignorance. We also had a picture book written by a German friend and a Lonely Planet Tibetan phrase book.

Some of the vocabulary in the children’s picture books seemed too difficult for the students, so we began to alternate sessions on grammar with sessions of storytelling. The storytelling gradually took over. I wrote simplified versions of the stories on the white board, two or three sentences at a time, which the *jomos* patiently copied into their notebooks.



At first, it seemed helpful to write the more difficult words on the board in Hindi alongside the English words. This proved less useful than writing the Tibetan, copied from *Self-Study* or the Tibetan phrase book. The *jomos* can speak Hindi but they cannot write it. After working through the three picture books, the *jomos* brought out a bundle of picture books donated by the Jamyang Foundation. Most of these were picture books of folk tales and Aesop's fables, published in India for school children. I paraphrased these in simple sentences, using *Self-Study* and the Tibetan phrase book.

The age range and different levels of education among the *jomos* made it challenging to structure lessons that were suitable for all levels or to assess how effective the classes were. Still, due to their Buddhist practice, the *jomos* were patient and well-disciplined, which made them good students. They were always polite and respectful and seemed determined to learn and make the most of whatever educational opportunities the volunteer teachers provide.

In the beginning, I encouraged the students to do homework, such as writing sentences with the grammatical constructions I had written on the board. Gradually, this gave way to creative assignments, which eventually replaced most written work. The *jomos* were enthusiastic artists, drawing and coloring a page or two in their sketchbooks every day. Some of their pictures were copied carefully from the picture books and some were landscapes of the surrounding mountains, fields, villages, trees, and flowers.

The *jomos* were busy most of the day with chanting and routine tasks to keep the monastery running smoothly, which didn't leave much time for schoolwork. Every day, I devoted some class time to checking their homework and making notations next to the pictures in their sketch books. This reinforced basic vocabulary and simple sentence structures. Every day, I gave individual attention and positive responses to each jomo, before or during class, to encourage their efforts and their continued interest in learning. Their art projects and writing practice supplemented their reading and writing in class.

Manda is a small village and Pema Chöling Monastery has only ten nuns. In addition to teaching, I soon became acquainted with each jomo individually in the course of the daily routine. At meal times, the *jomos* on kitchen duty came every few minutes to refill my tea cup or urge me to have some more rice, lentils, soup, and vegetables. Even if you tell them you have had enough to eat, they urge you several times to have just a little bit more. The *jomos* also offer to help their teachers with routine tasks, such as carrying their backpack on trips to town or on walks to visit the *jomos'* families in the village.

Many strong and varied impressions come to mind when

I recall my experience at the monastery. I hope that the *jomos* will be able to continue their studies. They have good minds and know how to study. They sincerely appreciate the efforts of their volunteer teachers and will benefit from getting further opportunities. Hopefully more volunteers will come to teach in the future.

PRECIOUS MEMORIES, PEARLS OF A NECKLACE

by Diogo Diniz da Costa Pereira

This past July, I traveled to Zangla (Zangskar) and taught English for exactly one month at Changchub Chöling Monastery. That was one month without access to the internet! But I am thankful for what turned out to be an unforgettable and profoundly powerful experience.

The nuns in my classes were dedicated, eager to learn, and open to whatever was put before them. Since their studies have lacked continuity, because volunteers come and go, I chose to focus on the basics: verb tenses, adjectives, and the verb "to be." I presented them with many exercises, offered revisions, and provided homework to help them memorize sentence structures.

I also learned from the different aspects of life in the monastery. These included not only morning prayers, daily chores, and meals together, but also extended to the nuns' simple way of living, and their consistently light and happy attitude, even in difficult situations. We laughed a good deal, even during classes.

This was my first time teaching and it proved so inspiring that I plan to pursue a teaching career when I return to Brazil. In fact, I now view the problems of my own country in a different light. In this sense, my time at Zangla was an extremely important step in my own inner realization.

Many precious memories stay with me, like pearls on an invisible necklace. From the first day, the affection between the nuns and myself was evident, and this affection increased during my time there to true friendship and love. Leaving Zangla was heartbreaking, yet I was happy and grateful for everything I had experienced there. I am thankful for this unforgettable opportunity.



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