
JAMYANG FOUNDATION

CHANGING PERCEPTIONS OF WOMEN'S POTENTIAL

2019 NEWSLETTER



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Young students at Skyagam Monastery send peace. Photo credit: Bee Chua.

Dear Friends,

May these New Year greetings find you and your family well!

This summer, I traveled to India with two volunteers and was able to visit all nine of our monasteries in Zangskar. Happy to report, all the students are healthy and studying well. The journey over the mountains was long and bumpy, but it was a great joy to visit the nuns again and to see all the progress they've made. Along the way, we met several of our volunteers and could see first-hand all the creative contributions they are making. Here are some of their stories.

With loving kindness,

Karma Lekshe Tsomo, Director

APPRECIATING THE SIMPLE THINGS

by Kylie Dal Bello

I'd been travelling around Nepal and India for five months when the opportunity to volunteer with Jamyang Foundation presented itself. I remember sitting enjoying my breakfast in the beautiful mountain town of McLeod Ganj, watching my friend light up as he recalled his experience teaching young nuns English in a remote Tibetan Buddhist monastery in Zangskar. I'd always been curious about Buddhism and during my days spent in Macleod Ganj, had been quietly fascinated by the discipline and sense of inner peace the monks and nuns seemed to have. My friend's enthusiasm stirred up such an excitement within me that I knew instinctively that this was something I wanted to do. The next day I contacted Jamyang, the day after had committed to a month of teaching, and by the weekend was on a bus headed for Jampa Chöling, a pretty pink monastery tucked away in the lush mountains of Meeru, Kinnaur.



Life at the monastery is simple and serene – a haven free from the distractions of the outside world. In that simplicity, I found myself quickly becoming aware of little things all around me, like the sound of trickling water down the mountainside and bees buzzing around the flowers outside my room. The rhythm of daily life became something I looked forward to, rising with the sun to a breathtaking view of snow-capped mountains, enjoying three delicious, plentiful meals a day, and teaching English to the junior, middle, and senior nuns before settling into the soundest of sleeps. There was always plenty of free time to plan lesson, explore, and relax.

I had not taught English before this experience. In fact, I came from a corporate background of account management and sales, so initially the prospect of having my own class intimidated me a little, but I'm glad I pushed through the fear to see how rewarding teaching can be. Classes were so much fun. Not only are these women smart (they speak four languages! – local Kinnauri, Hindi, Tibetan and English) they are also extremely keen to learn, respectful, and patient with themselves and each other. They would often quietly help one another out if someone was too shy to speak up, which I found so endearing.

English was our main focus, especially spelling and creative writing. We also explored subjects that were of particular interest to the nuns, such as geography, astronomy, and world religions. I enjoyed watching their competitive streaks kick in, usually during spelling games or debating

philosophy. Debate often took place in the late afternoons, on the grass area outside puja hall. It was magical to watch just as the sun was setting, with the mountains as their backdrop. The nuns stood in a big circle or small groups and became so animated, debating loudly in Tibetan with a whole lot of clapping and foot stomping. In the melee, sometimes I wondered, 'Where did all the sweet little nuns go!'

I was blessed to be at the monastery in the run up to the single most holy day in the Buddhist calendar, Saga Dawa Duchen, the day that commemorates the birth, enlightenment, and death of Buddha. The nuns and their Tibetan teachers spent ten days preparing for this day, doing intensive retreat and performing pujas (prayer services) three times a day for two to three hours at a time. I found it incredible that, for the most part, this did not disrupt the monastery's daily schedule of Tibetan philosophy classes, debates, English classes, memorization of texts and mantras, as well as completing domestic chores such as cooking, washing clothes, tending to the cows, and cleaning. All these activities were done with smiles on their faces. I loved being able to join them for evening puja, meditating and sharing in the incredible vibrations created by their mantras and prayers. The celebration of Saga Dawa Duchen was really special, with a number of local villagers joining us for the day's ceremonies, offerings, and blessings.

Another time I joined some of the senior nuns for an overnight trip to Kalpa, which is a small Kinnauri town known for its apple orchards. We took part in a vipassana meditation session that was hosted at a beautiful boutique hotel and had the honor of sharing dinner with a former monk who had been part of the group that fled Tibet with His Holiness the Dalai Lama in 1959. The following day, we visited some of the locals at their homes for tea. What I noticed most in our weekend away was how much the community revered the nuns. We made one last stop to gather supplies for the monastery at the bustling hub of Reckong Peo, where I also met a number of their monk friends who lived in a monastery nearby.

Toward the end of my stay, the nuns' wheat crop was harvested and some of the villagers came to the flat concrete rooftop of the monastery to pound wheat with large sticks so it could be sent in smaller pieces to the mill nearby. Watching this process gave me such an appreciation for the handmade chapati I enjoyed every day, knowing the hard work that went into making the flour. Another day, some villagers came to help bundle up bales of long grass into hundreds of tight wreaths, which were stored on a hill to be used later as cow fodder in the harsh winter months when nothing can grow. I remember watching the young nuns giggle and smile as they worked into the late hours on this



Kylie with Thupton and Dalkao

task, amazed at how they chose to make it so joyful. This moment touched me deeply and is etched into my memory. The nuns' cows provided milk; the forest was a forage ground for unique vegetables and mushrooms that appeared in our dahl at lunch. Everything had a role and a purpose and nothing was ever wasted.

I find it hard to put into words how much of an impact this experience had on me. In my travels, I have built memories around the places I've been, but the real connections come from the people I've met and this experience was no different. Actually, it went deeper, because the nuns taught me, in an exemplary way, about the intrinsic qualities I want to nurture as a human being. I felt this from the first moment I was embraced at the bus stop, to the last moment waving goodbye to a colorful sea of students on a full balcony of madly waving hands. These are some of the kindest, most generous, and patient women I've ever met in my life, with the purest, most unconditionally loving hearts.

When I look back on my experience in Kinnaur, I realize how quickly time went by in that heavenly place. I recall how energized and joyful I felt during my stay and for a long time after I left. It was such a heart-opening and fulfilling experience to teach these bright young women and I feel they taught me so much in return. Through their kindness, warm smiles, humor, patience, and generosity, I felt at home and part of a tight-knit sisterhood. There was a profound joy and ease in their energy that made them magnetic to be around. There are not many places where my mind and heart have truly felt at peace, but Jampa Choling took me there.

THE PRACTICE OF INFINITE COMPASSION

by Gautam Doshi

My time at Dorje Dzong Monastery in Zangskar was the hardest and most fulfilling experience I have ever had – and not just because of the daunting altitude (13,000') of the monastery, overlooking the breathtaking valley, or its remote location, quietly tucked away above the village of Rejing. My two friends, Suhail and Samakti, and I were completely immersed in the lives of some of the most selfless, compassionate, humorous, and diligent humans I have come across in my life: 16 novice nuns between the ages of 6 and 15, 2 teachers, and the most brilliant Jomo Nima, the nun who looked after the children and us.

The nuns were taught in three different groups: five first-graders, four third-graders, and seven fifth-graders. As teachers, it was very hard to gauge what to teach each nun because their ages were jumbled up. As someone who loves mathematics, I'd like to share an anecdote about the sharp learning skills of the nuns and the perseverance of teachers. We noticed that most of the nuns had learned everything by rote. The best example was the simple multiplication tables from 2 to 10. When I asked the fifth-graders "Why is $3 \times 4 = 12$?" I got no response. We decided to go back to the roots of multiplication and teach them the basics. This would not have been possible without the patience and consistent hard work of the nuns. With time, regular homework, and addressing each and every question, astonishingly, by the end of our month-long stay, solving the problem by hand, the nuns were able to successfully answer questions



like “756243 x 34521 =?” What a wonderful academic accomplishment!

We taught the students many subjects: English grammar (the use of articles, singular and plural, and tenses), reading, mathematics, and basic geography, such as directions, map reading, the geography of India, and environmental studies with an emphasis on environmental protection, garbage segregation and disposal, and health and hygiene. We had them perform a couple of skits and read aloud daily to help with their public speaking skills. The students were quick learners and picked up everything extremely well.

This was an incredibly fulfilling experience and why I cannot sufficiently express my gratitude for having this wonderful opportunity. Witnessing and being a part of the nuns daily life was such a humbling experience for someone who had never lived in a monastery. Life there is completely different from what most urban-dwellers are used to – worlds apart, in fact.

The nuns start their day at around 5 am, ready to do their assigned chores. They prepare breakfast, brush their teeth, pray, and prepare for school, which starts at 9:10 with an assembly, followed by classes from 9:30 all the way up till 4:30, with a lunch break from 12:30 to 2. After school, we have tea and, if the nuns have time, they play for about

an hour. They loved skipping jump rope and were ecstatic when they improved.

Most days, the nuns have tasks to do after school. They collect manure, cut the grass and pastureland around the nunnery, graze the cattle, and hike 20 minutes northeast to manually adjust the flow of the spring by moving rocks to ensure a constant supply of water. While we were there, they packed up their stuff under weights on the roof of the guesthouse so it wouldn't be blown away by an approaching storm. The nuns enthusiastically slept on the roof, in the chilly night winds, while their room was being reconstructed due to a bear break-in. A wild bear had broken the glass in the windows while all of us were away attending the teachings of H. H. Dalai Lama in Padum.

At night, the nuns gather to memorize and recite scriptures, while two of them help Jomo Nima prepare dinner. Meals in Zangskar, especially the ones cooked at Dorje Dzong, were blissful. I tried my hand at helping out, but my cooking skills were worse than I imagined. Samakti was much more successful and learned so much. We were fortunate to have some amazing Tibetan dishes such as thukpa, thentuk, momos, and tsampa, all prepared with fresh vegetables picked from around the nunnery. Throughout the day, we drank lots of sweet tea and butter tea. Due to the kind

hospitality of Jomo Nima and the students, our stomachs were always full.

I was touched by the good spirits and unconditional love of the nuns. They insisted that we accompany them to a wedding one evening in the village of Khassar, 45 minutes away. This was such a beautiful experience. For the first time, I witnessed the richness of Zangskari culture. As we walked back to the monastery, we all bonded and started singing along the moonlit trail.

On the weekends, there were no classes, so the nuns have the option of going home to visit their families. Those who stay back help with daily chores and, with permission, may watch a film on a donated DVD-player with a 12-inch screen. Once we watched “Frozen” together and, even though the younger ones found it hard to understand the language, they enjoyed it nonetheless.

As volunteers, we had the liberty to go to other places during the weekends. When we had time, we went to Padum, usually hiking to Karsha and getting a lift by the bridge. We visited Karsha Monastery, the breathtaking waterfall at Sheela Village, and met the wonderful nuns and Brazilian volunteer at Zangla. By the end of our stay, we had grown so close to the students that it was hard to say goodbye. The nuns pleaded with us to stay “at least ten more days, if not three more months.” It was with a heavy heart that we had to part ways, but my resolve to return became even stronger.

I am thankful to Jamyang Foundation for the exceptional coordination and compassion of Elles Lohuis and Karma Lekshe Tsomo for making this experience possible. My time at Dorje Dzong was the most rewarding experience of my life. I intend to send donations and, with Suhail and Samakti, will work hard to motivate others to volunteer, too. Dorje Dzong needs volunteers during the warmer and pleasant months. The nuns are always hungry to learn and showed great interest in everything we taught them. The children need teachers to continue the momentum of learning. I left a letter outlining the next steps for volunteers after us to help them start teaching. Not only does volunteer teaching benefit the nuns, but the nuns may also transform your life.

KANHERI TO ZANGSKAR: ENCOUNTERS AND REALIZATIONS

by Prajanli J. Vyas

I’m a student of philosophy, ancient Indian culture, and Buddhist studies, and have also been learning Indian classical dance forms like Bharat Natyam and Kathak. In February, I visited the Kanheri Caves along with my classmates in the P.G. Diploma course in Buddhist Studies, our faculty at the K. J. Somaiya Centre for Buddhist Studies, and Dr. Karma Lekshe Tsomo. During this trip, Lekshe-la and a faculty

member who has been a constant source of inspiration to me were talking about life in the Himalayan regions. They discussed the hardships faced by the people there and how trivial the trek to Kanheri Caves was compared to treks in the valleys of Ladakh, Spiti, or Kinnaur. Since I have always led a life of comfort and luxury, I made up my mind to visit Zangskar this year to see for myself a different way of life. I was also inspired by Lekshe-la’s work in Zangskar Valley, her determination for the cause of the nuns, and wanted to be a part of it. That’s how the journey began for me – with this intention in mind.

I reached Fakmoling Monastery in Skyagam on July 20. This was the first time I had ever been completely alone and unaccompanied. Unfamiliar with solitude, this was almost a personality altering experience for me, one which I still find very difficult to put in words. However, I was glad to have the company of the students from the school most of the time.

These younger nuns, ranging in age from four to nine years old, were under the care of older nuns who were either their sisters or aunts. Their parents enrolled them in the monastery school that started five years ago under the auspices of the Central Institute of Buddhist Studies so that they could obtain education and be trained in the monastic



tradition.

The older nuns wake up early in the morning to read texts and meditate in the assembly hall (dukhang). After this, they gather for breakfast until 10 am, when the teacher and students head to the school for classes and the older nuns return to their living quarters. Taking turns every five days, two nuns are in charge of the kitchen and looking after the cow. In summer, during the day, they are occupied with various tasks, such as plastering and painting the walls of the monastery, cleaning the assembly hall, and so on. Towards the end of my stay, the nuns had taken up the task of making a greenhouse for the monastery, with some aid from the Ladakh Environment and Health Organization (LEHO). As an outsider, this looked laborious to me, but I realize that this is a form of self-reliance.

Theoretically, we learn that monks and nuns lead a monastic life with no attachments. Maybe that's why I found their compassion unique. They do not shy away from offering a helping hand to anyone in need, despite the very little they have. Their compassion not only includes their very few material possessions, but also reflects in their attitude. "Sharing is caring" can be seen here at all times! They help others without thinking twice. They'd joyfully walk an extra mile for someone, and they did! I saw this on multiple occasions while I was there. Not only did they accompany one another in times of need, they also accompanied me if I asked. All that I had learned as a student of Buddhist ethics and philosophy came to life! Examples were never-ending, but a small glimpse was the stream of compassion from the younger nuns. Whenever they received anything, they immediately shared it with one another. They looked out for each other. Their compassion was not limited to the people they were living and studying

with or people who were related to them, but to every being around, including me. They all stand as one community, including children and nuns from different villages, and blend as easily as sugar dissolves in water.

One thing I really loved the most during my time at the monastery was realizing how little I know and how much I learned from the kids. Because the majority of my time was spent with the students, I learned the most from them. They copied my behavior immediately, which made me extremely mindful, not only of my words but also my expressions and body language. Another thing I learned was the language. The kids were the best source for learning the language. They blended the local language with Hindi and English so that I could pick up the words easily and use them in my vocabulary.

I also loved the freedom that the monastery provided. The nuns' self-reliance kept me in awe until the end of my stay and beyond. I will definitely return there, in spite of the hardships of the living conditions, the wrath of the weather, and the lack of facilities. I may not know the language a hundred percent, but the nuns' voices still echo in my heart, along with the silence of the mountains that I carry in my mind. No wonder the greatest of scholars spent time meditating in caves in these regions. A visit to one of the caves at Zonghkul, associated with the great mahasiddha Naropa, was a highlight of my stay in Zangskar. Photos cannot do justice to the experience of being there in person.

When we visited Phuktal Monastery and interacted with the monks attending school there, we realized that they were more aware of technological advancements and current affairs than the nuns. Although they were older than the nuns attending school at Fakmoling, they were also in a much more remote location than Skyagam. Yet somehow the





monks had been exposed to far more advanced knowledge and technologies. This keeps motivating me to go back next year to teach again. Now I am more aware of the climate, culture, and language, so that will help me connect better next time. I conclude with the words of a very dear friend: “As a volunteer, I received much more than I could give.”

MEETING LIFE IN EVERY MOMENT

by K. S. Devina

Changchub Chöling Monastery is a very special place. Although I was oblivious to this part of the world before I landed there, I was welcomed with open arms. In turn, with the nuns and the natural beauty surrounding us, I opened my arms to life.

The monastery is an apt metaphor for life. I went to Zangskar to impart what little knowledge I have but instead, I learned from the people I met. Spending time with these kind people made me count the many blessings in my life. Although people in Zangskar would consider my usual lifestyle luxurious, I previously ignored these blessings. As I served the nuns, I realized that life is truly about living each precious moment.

The great love and affection of the nuns and the way they take care of each other moved me deeply. They set a perfect example of being receptive to living creatures and all natural things. I enjoyed sharing yoga, meditation, conversation classes in Hindi, and Sanskrit prayers. The natural beauty of the place sparked a quantum shift in my mind. Sitting in the mountains and alongside the river for hours felt divine. I felt incredibly privileged to have this opportunity to live simply and love unconditionally.

My stay in Zangskar filled me with bliss. My love and

respect for all the nuns made me feel special every day. I am especially grateful for my fellow volunteer, Vishwajeet, who gave me great lessons about life. Everyone should visit this place and these the lessons of life before they die.

Every time I tried jotting down my experiences in words, I fell short of words. While writing, I cherished my memories again and rejoiced. Hope everyone who reads these words will understand how very special this volunteer opportunity was for me, full of love and grace.

FINDING WHAT WE WEREN'T LOOKING FOR

by Carolina Pérez and Antti Kaivola

When we arrive for the first time in a new country, after a very long flight and with some stomach issues, the last thing we want to hear is that our final destination requires a ride over the mountains for two days. However, once we were seated in the car with Ladakhi music in the background and the beautiful Zangskar Valley embracing us, all fears and fatigue disappeared.

We eventually reached the Changchub Chöling Monastery for nuns in Zangla. We only wanted to rest, but the little nomo (younger nuns) were full of energy and very happy that we were staying for a longer time than normal tourists and would be teaching in the school as well. For the first few days, we had the amazing company of an Indian traveler, who helped us break through some initial language barriers and made settling in much warmer and more comfortable.

When we think of a school in our home countries, we have the idea of classrooms divided by age, with defined subjects, proper textbooks, and some kind of curriculum to follow. However, we found ourselves with one classroom

full of 16 little novice nuns ranging in age from 4 to 13, all expecting us to come up with fun English lessons. It was a real challenge to teach so many different grade levels, trying to foster the children's personal aptitudes and, at the same time, help them do some significant learning.

If we compare how we have been educated and how these little girls were being educated, we might think that they are disadvantaged and lack opportunities. Confined in a small, remote, traditional Buddhist-only village for most of their lives, how could they imagine all the opportunities that the outside world has to offer them? We lacked access to teaching resources, we spoke no Hindi or Ladakhi, and we didn't even know much about the local culture.

A change of perspective was needed, almost essential, if we wanted to succeed in our task, which was to teach and ensure a holistic environment of well-being. Instead of bemoaning the "lack of resources," which indeed were hard to obtain, we decided to work with the knowledge and ingenuity we had, and whatever materials were around. The German writer Berthold Auerbach said, "Now is not the moment to think of what you don't have, but to think of what you can do with what you have." Good advice.

Each day, I created some general guidelines for my lessons and changed them along the way, so that the theme shaped the mood and the needs of the students. Copying was a pedagogical method, to some extent. It allowed the children to practice handwriting, have notes for reviewing vocabulary, and helped create a concentrated environment in the classroom. Still, relying only on copying, without student participation, was not what I wanted. How could I think up activities that were easy to explain, easy to do, and both fun and didactic?

I decided to use art as a method. For me, art is anything that is recognizably beautiful and makes me feel pleasant. Usually, art is both hands-on and fun to do. First, I decided that their notebooks needed more color and should be attractive to read, enticing them to return. Second, copying on the blackboard should also be beautiful, so I created murals for each lesson, either on the blackboard or on handmade posters.

Creativity is not necessarily creating something new and super-extraordinary, but rather playing around with what you have. Robert Kennedy, the U.S. Senator, said, "Some men see things as they are and ask why. I dream of things that never were, and ask why not?" The kids in the monastery were used to reinventing the objects around them, turning them into fascinating toys. They were experts on creating games and solutions for daily problems. Why not utilize their innate curiosity and creativity at school as well?

Holistic well-being has been defined as "ensuring

the wellness of the whole self, including our physical, mental, emotional, and social needs." I think the students taught us more about well-being than we could imagine, starting with the self-sustainable community they have built. Something I noted about the unique environment of the nunnery classroom was the sense of responsibility the children feel towards their community. All the kids, no matter how annoying they could be with each other, had a strong sense of compassion for each other. They seemed to know that their actions would not only have repercussions for themselves, but would extend to the atmosphere of the whole group. Even at such a young age, they had boundless empathy and intuitively knew how to ensure well-being.

Several impressions remain with me. To begin, living in a community with women only, in my view, automatically made sisterhood worthy of support. Also, these women had no limitations. As far as I was able to observe, they were able to do anything. The nuns were definitely united as a community, yet even though they wore the same clothes and had the same hairstyle and lifestyle, each one of them had a distinctive personality, so there was an enriching diversity even within an environment designed to make everyone homogenous.

We came back with suggestions for school materials. First, books! Books with as many illustrations as possible. We brought one called, "Good Night Stories For Rebel Girls." The children love storytelling, as long as they can follow it easily; otherwise they get bored. This school had lots of pencils, notebooks, wax crayons, and markers (though they need to be more careful closing the caps). I suggest bringing scissors, glue, tape, whiteboard markers, cardboard (big size, if possible), kid's clay, water-soluble tempera (we brought brushes for that), and any other child-friendly arts-and-crafts materials. In Padum, very basic supplies are available. If volunteers bring a good textbook with them, that will be a perfect guide, unless they feel confident improvising with the outdated, over-used books that are already there. It's a good idea to bring a few books on different subjects and share the exercises with the kids. "English class" is much more than grammar and vocabulary! The children love singing and dancing, so be sure to prepare some verses or songs, with a choreography, if possible! Of course, toys and any kind of games are more than welcome!

We kept a small notebook in which we recorded our lesson plans and left it behind for future teachers. We hope that upcoming volunteers to Zangskar will find more than they were looking for, too!



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