
JAMYANG FOUNDATION

AN EDUCATION PROJECT FOR HIMALAYAN WOMEN

2014 NEWSLETTER



jamyang.org | tsomo@sandiego.edu



Gen Thubten Senge in his beginning English class at Sanghamitra Institute. The students are from three different Himalayan regions.

Echoes of the Buddha's Word

Getsul Thubten Senge

If you walk away from the noisy hustle and bustle of the streets surround the Mahabodhi Temple in Bodhgaya and cross the long, long bridge that spans the mighty, dusty Niranjana River, you'll find yourself in the quiet, peaceful fields of rural India. Apart from the metaled road and a few shops, probably little has changed since the Buddha was here, all those centuries ago. His words still echo across the years – resounding from the Tree of Awakening, booming over the mighty Himalayas, and echoing back again to this very spot.

Here, that echo manifests as a monastery for nuns. It is a humble establishment, to be sure, but the garden has the feeling of a sanctuary and the building is full of laughing, energetic, radiant nuns. From the gentle elderly nuns of Zangskar (two days' journey from Ladakh) to the impish knee-high nuns of Spiti, to the dazzlingly enthusiastic nuns of Kinnaur's forest ridges, the nuns seem to express the richness of the Buddha's teaching itself – a vast array and deeply joyful.

I was an English teacher for these nuns in the early part of 2014. I was fortunate to visit many of them and stay in their home monasteries throughout the following months. In the end, I think I was the one who learned the most. I had so



Small, brave students on the debate court at Sanghamitra Institute.

many enjoyable experiences in our classroom, beneath the portrait of the Buddha cello-taped to the wall. Together, we transformed the room into a restaurant, a train, a debating courtyard, and even, at one point (Don't tell Jomo Lekshe!), a ballet studio. The nuns proved adept at expressing the profound doctrine of emptiness by taking on all of these different, transient forms and more. Even the older nuns, who seemed a bit reluctant at first, joined in with intelligence, enthusiasm, and an indestructible sense of fun. The junior nuns are now full of confidence. I'm sure they'll have no trepidation if they encounter a situation where they need to buy a bus ticket or ask someone's address.

The senior class was full of nuns from Kinnaur, who were always ready to ask questions and debate a point. Even though my stubborn English conditioning made me scold them for being late from time to time, I have seldom taught such a pleasing group of students. The laughter and goodness radiating from their eyes made me truly relish the opportunity to be their teacher. It makes me happy to know that the future of Buddhist education in the Himalayas will be in the hands of such nuns.

In the afternoon, you can walk back across the long, long bridge. The sky is blue and the mind still resounds with the sonant lunchtime chants of the nuns at Sanghamitra. These echoes become an inner smile that even the cacophony of Indian street life cannot dislodge. It is certain that in the garden of the Daughters of the Buddha, tomorrow will be another good day.

Morning Tea

Desiree Palmer

An excerpt from my journal entry for Sunday, July 27, 2014.

I woke up late today, surprised to have slept through puja, breakfast, and all the way to 10:15 with no one waking me! One of the nuns usually pops her head in at 8 o'clock and scolds me (or plies me with chai and chapattis) until I roll out of bed. I felt as though the day was off to a bad start, especially since it was Sunday and everyone was off doing their own chores, so I sat down in the dining room right outside of my quarters and began reading *Cave in the Snow*, a book lent to me by a nun named Thukche Dolma. It's a great book about a Western woman who came to spend 12 years practicing Tibetan Buddhism in a cave in the Himalayas. I've found that reading about the U.S. while in India makes me homesick and unhappy, whereas reading about India helps me to make sense of things here and to better understand how I can fit into this unfamiliar place.

Thank goodness, just a few minutes into the reading, my friend, a nun named Nima Dolkar, poked her head through the miniature doorway that leads into the room. Nima turned the day around. "*Sho, sho, sho! Cha, chapati!* (Come, come, come! Tea, bread!)," she said. But then she saw that I was already drinking hot water (*chu skol*) and urged me to finish my cup. Hot water seems to be the proper first drink of the day here, which makes sense: Without fail, I wake up every morning with blocked sinuses, hardly able to swallow due to the dry and dusty atmosphere. The nuns look at me like I'm crazy when I drink cold water, since they wholeheartedly believe that cold water in the morning leads to stomach aches. When I finished my hot water, she filled my cup with "mi-lik tea," as she and the rest of the nuns pronounce it, and then left.

When Nima returned, she was with Skalzung Tsomo, the nun who spews quick strings of incomprehensible Ladakhi at me as if I spoke the language fluently, even though she knows my vocabulary is only about ten words long. She makes up for it by being the main reason I know those ten words. Skalzung is a persistent and generous teacher. Nima was eager to refill my cup with sweet tea. "*Tung, tung, tung!* (Drink, drink, drink!)," she said repeatedly, lifting her flat palm skyward, a gesture that means, "Throw back that drink!" The nuns take their tea like vodka shots here, so different from my western "curl up in a chair and smell the steam" method of enjoying chai. Nima left me to finish that cup and, upon her re-entry, made good on her earlier promise of tea and bread, beckoning me to follow her to her room. We drink tea around the clock! This is how it happened many days at Karsha Nunnery. Nima or Thukche either sought me out or ran into me by chance on the monastery grounds and asked me to tag along as they went about their day – always certain to offer a seat, assign a chore, and dole out chai and chapatti. They made me feel like a valued guest and member of their family. I will cherish the memories of their hospitality for many years.

Health, Hygiene... Happiness!

Christie Yuling Chang

The Himalayan nuns studying at Sanghamitra Institute in Bodhgaya were fortunate to receive medical care from a team of skilled medical practitioners from Taiwan. Facilitated by Sakyadhita Taiwan, the medical volunteers from Chang Gung Memorial Hospital in Taiwan visited Sanghamitra twice in 2014. The first group of ten participants made their pioneering visit between February 17 and 23. And the second group of twelve participants made a second trip between November 19 and 23. Both groups were warmly received by the students at Sanghamitra!

In addition to vitamins and various medical items such as first aid kits, the medical volunteers brought donations of necessities such as mosquito nets, toothbrushes, dental floss, socks, and other useful items, as well as educational materials, including pencils, erasers, and six laptop computers. Monetary donations that were raised in Indonesia and Taiwan arrived at Sanghamitra just in time to cover the nuns' living expenses for their winter study programs.

During their stay at Sanghamitra, the Taiwanese medical team carefully examined every nun's health condition, created a medical profile for each, prescribed medicines and/or vitamin supplements, and taught the nuns exactly how to take them. In addition, the medical volunteers conducted a series of health education programs. The presentations included tips on personal hygiene and advice on skillful ways to cook, so as to retain and maximize the nutrition in food. The team also taught the nuns first aid skills, including CPR. Members of the team remarked that the nuns were really fast learners. They were deeply touched by the eagerness of the nuns to learn everything.

Throughout their visits, the volunteers were impressed by the nuns' warm hospitality and their sincere dedication to learning and spiritual practice. They lived closely with the nuns, joining the nuns' daily practice sessions whenever they could. By the time they left, they felt like part of a kind and loving family. When it came time to part, all the team members had a difficult time saying goodbye to the nuns. Many reported still hearing the sweet sound of the nuns' morning chanting even after they returned to their jobs in Taiwan.

The Taiwanese medical team hopes to plan future visits at Sanghamitra soon. Some are also keen to bring their families, especially their children. Many have expressed how deeply



Lacking tables, a resourceful student makes the best of it.

touched they were by having this opportunity to serve the nuns. Many expressed the sentiment that they were the ones who benefitted most from this precious cultural and educational exchange at Sanghamitra. "It's been such a nourishing and unforgettable experience. We can't wait to return to meet our sisters there," one member said. The team members have all written reflections on their experiences. We hope to translate and share more of these heartwarming stories in the future.

From Nepal to Sri Lanka, on the Path of Dharma

Samaneri Prassanawati

I was born in Nepal in 1986 and went to school in Kathmandu. In 2004, at the age of 17, I became a novice nun (*samaneri*) at Sanghamitta Aramaya, a monastery for nuns in Madiwela, Sri Lanka. I was ordained under two teachers: Reverend Punyawati from Nepal and Reverend Walpola Dhammapali from Sri Lanka. I have not received full ordination as a *bhikkhuni*, because the chief nun of the monastery where I stay is not fully ordained. As long as I stay in this monastery, I will practice as a novice.

In Sri Lanka, I did my undergraduate studies at the Buddhist and Pali University in Homagama. Currently, I am pursuing a doctorate in Buddhist Studies at the Postgraduate Institute of Buddhist and Pali University, University of Kelaniya. Apart from my studies, I conduct chanting ceremonies at several hospitals on behalf of my monastery. On Sundays, I teach children in the Dhamma school (Sunday school) at the monastery. In addition, I engage in daily chanting and conduct short meditation programs for secondary students and adults on full moon days. From time to time, I go for a meditation retreat in the forest.

My goal is to become knowledgeable in Buddhist studies, so that I can help educate the new generation and share the essence of Buddhism to the entire world. I wish to dedicate my entire life for the benefit of society, carrying the message of the Buddha. I especially wish to share this great treasure with the new generation, who will become a light for the nation. I am very grateful for the support I receive from Jamyang Foundation. Because of this precious help, I am able to continue my education.

May the Buddha's dispensation flourish forever! May we all benefit from the gift of the Dhamma!

Children in the Chittagong Hill Tracts

Karma Lekshe Tsomo

All children are adorable and the children who greeted us in Ruma were especially adorable. They lined the roads and the steps up to the village temple, showering us with sparkly, brightly colored confetti that stuck to us for days. Located in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) of Bangladesh, the village of Ruma is about as remote as can be. A few more steps and we might have inadvertently crossed into Burma. The children made sure that we didn't lose our way, though. They very proudly guided us to the small bamboo temple that houses their school, where sugary soda pop awaited us all.

At the end of July 2014, I met up with Megan Huynh, a Jamyang volunteer from the University of San Diego, who had been volunteering as a teacher at Jyoti Vidya Niketon School on the outskirts of Dhaka. Undaunted by the heat, mosquitos, and culture shock, she jubilantly reported: “The students are very interested in the peace building classes and the video project. I also started a girls’ football league that they are enjoying very much!”

Together, Megan and I set out to visit all the projects that Jamyang Foundation has established in the CHT. Within a week, we were able to visit Sanghamitta School in Bandarban, Visakha School in Khagrachari, and Visakha School in Rangamati. Despite the intense and muggy heat, our journey went very smoothly. We were greeted with warm hospitality everywhere we went – including some stops we had not planned on! It was a tremendous joy to meet our dear little students and to see all the wonderful progress they are making.

Just two days before our onward flights, we arrived back in Chittagong, expecting to get some rest. But that word is not in Jamyang Foundation’s vocabulary. Our translator, Swe Prue Ching Marma (“a nice gentleman”), had other plans for us. Before we knew it, we were on our way east to the village of Ruma, built on steep slopes far from any known location. After six hours of windy road, we reached our destination. Following the confetti-strewn path up a precipitous incline, we arrived at a traditional Marma Buddhist temple built on stilts.

In conversation with the temple committee members who had gathered to greet us, we learned that the monk who founded



Students at newly founded Yasodhara Girls’ School in Ruma, Bangladesh.

the temple years ago had established a school for children there. The school now has 166 children – 60 boys and 106 girls. It’s unusual for a Theravada temple to allow girls to stay at a temple school and to offer them education. The monk, now deceased, must have been very open-minded and his young monk disciple continues his legacy. The girls all come from very poor, remote villages and currently stay all squashed together in three small rooms at the back of the temple. We immediately began thinking about how we could help them.

The first thing was to establish an independent school for the girls, to meet Jamyang’s guidelines. Thus, Yasodhara Girls School was quickly born. When we asked what was needed most at the school, the girls unanimously responded, “A cook. Now we students must cook for all the children. It’s very time-consuming and cuts into our study time.” When we asked who did the cooking, the boys or the girls, we were pleasantly surprised to hear the children respond, “Both.” When we asked them to introduce the boys who cook, there was a pleasant commotion outside the window. Soon, four teenaged boys walked in, both humbly and proud, to a big round of applause. A fulltime cook to help the children seemed a very reasonable request. Within days, the committee found a good-natured, hardworking woman named Hla Yoi Ching Marma, who was delighted to take the job.

Between discussions, we wandered through the small village to learn more about the lives of the students and their families. Wherever we went, the children would follow us, with two senior girls conscientiously serving as our attendants. Once we saw a chicken fall off a cart and I couldn’t help but encourage the chicken to liberate itself, but the poor thing was too slow. Life is hard for everyone in Ruma, especially animals. The villagers can take refuge in the temple when things get tough, but chickens will have to wait for a better rebirth. Even though taking on 106 more students is really beyond my imagination, it was impossible to ignore the plight of these sincere, destitute, and delightful children.

Many thanks for making these programs possible!

Hama Lekhe Isoma



Pasannawati Guruma with her teacher, Punyawati Guruma.