



# Jamyang Foundation

## NEWSLETTER 2008

Jullay! In 1965, I first encountered Himalayan peoples while traveling in Nepal. In 1972, while studying in Dharamsala (northern India), I learned more about the communist invasion of Tibet and how the fragile ecology and economy of the region was disrupted after the border was sealed in 1959. The silver lining on this cloud is that His Holiness the Dalai Lama in India has helped revitalize the Buddhist cultural heritage in the Himalayas.

Impressed by the courage and good humor of these people, I began a literacy project for women in Dharamsala in 1987 that quickly grew into a full-time education program. New pathways opened for women, as they began taking leading roles in preserving traditional learning and culture. Now when they get snowed in during the winter, reading Buddhist texts is their greatest joy. Seeing women and girls

emerge from the shadows to become educated role models for their communities has been an immensely heartwarming experience. Here you will read the reflections of some of our 2008 volunteers.

Thank you for your vital support to continue these projects! All donations, except for printing and postage, go directly to support nutrition, education, and health care. Since 1988, hundreds of girls, young women, and nuns have received full scholarships. Since 2002, nine young women from Bangladesh, Bhutan, and India have received scholarships to study at colleges and universities in Bangladesh, India, and Thailand. Your donations are going a long way!

With warm wishes,  
Karma Lekshe Tsomo (Director)



Nuns of Jampa Choling Monastery in Kinnaur Create a Human Mandala

# TSAMPA AND THUKPA, MOMOS AND PUJAS

Beth Jay (Canada)

In the summer of 2008, I volunteered at Yangchen Chöling Monastery in Spiti. The nuns were wonderful – warm, welcoming, hospitable, humble, and hard-working. Their lives, though simple, are full and devoted to the Dharma. They seem happy to live at the monastery with other women and not have to marry and have children. I enjoyed sharing their simple lifestyle: fetching water, making dumplings (*momos*), and washing clothes in the stream. I loved the peace and quiet of the monastery and often joined in the *pujas*, meditating while the nuns chanted.

While I was at Yangchen Chöling, I taught English and yoga. The nun really enjoyed learning and the younger nuns especially loved the English classes. Two were even able to translate for me. The older nuns often work ten-hour days to support the studies of the younger ones: cooking, roasting barley, and doing all the daily tasks of running a monastery. Everyone pitched in to carry cement, rocks, and gravel for the construction of a new prayer hall. They hope to complete it in time for the visit of His Holiness the Dalai Lama next summer, so they can invite him to the monastery for tea.

Sometimes realities at the monastery were starkly different from the image I had created of the lives of the nuns. I had imagined them totally sequestered from the world, living lives of silence. Soon after I arrived, my romantic fiction was shattered by the ringing of a cell phone! Of course, the nuns spend hours studying Buddhist scriptures, chanting, doing *puja*, and debating, but they also love learning to type on laptop computers and doing the shoulder stand in yoga. And then there were the peas – fields and fields of peas, in a glowing patchwork of iridescent green, set against the rocky, brown monochrome of the barren mountain landscape.

The nuns spent hours harvesting green peas in the two monastery fields, never far from their agrarian, village roots. For several days, I also worked in the fields alongside the nuns, back and ankles aching, my fingers turning green from picking countless peas. The nuns picked about 10 hours a day, while I could only manage three or four. At first, the nuns insisted that I just rest, but I enjoyed being with them and working alongside them. Now I really respect all the hard work it takes to cultivate and harvest peas! Even at the end of a hard day's work, the nuns were still cheerful – laughing, joking, and often singing.



nuns. After contacting an environmental group called Ecosphere, they decided to fund some projects for the nuns, including solar cookers and a greenhouse. Sustainable development projects like this make a great deal of sense in Spiti's fragile ecosystem.

One day I was surprised to see a small boy at the monastery. The nuns said his name was Arjun and someone had dropped him off to live with the nuns. Fortunately, I was able to find a sponsor for this boy, so he can attend Munseling School. As the case of this boy shows, the nuns of Yangchen Choling serve the needs of their community in many important ways.



I enjoyed the food the nuns cooked, though it concerned me that their diet is so basic. The nuns mostly ate *tsampa* (barley flour) and *thukpa* (noodles) in various forms. The few times foreigners donated fruit, the nuns served it to guests, always concerned more about others' welfare than their own. Once I heard the nuns discussing whether they would have enough food to last through the winter months. They told me that life at the monastery during winter is very difficult for them. The weather is extremely cold and carrying water through the snow is very arduous. Wood for heating is expensive and the nuns often get sick, which makes it difficult to concentrate on their studies. They dream of being able to winter in Bodhgaya, where the climate is milder.

During my time at the monastery, a couple from Spain visited for a few days. They were very taken with the hospitality of the



## GIFT FROM A BABY COW

Charlotte Kaufhold (Germany)



I really enjoyed the time I spent in Zangskar this summer. My friend Kathi taught children in Karsha while I taught nuns in Skyagam. One day, I went to Karsha to visit Kathi and see how life was in Karsha. On the way, something quite funny happened. The only bus runs at 4 pm, so I started to walk. After a while, a jeep came along and I stopped it.

The young men sitting inside were on their way to another village and luckily took me along. When I opened the car door, I saw a young calf standing in the back seat. As you can imagine, I was quite surprised and started to laugh. I had never seen a calf in the back seat of a car before. The men sitting in the back pulled the calf a bit to the side to make space for me. The poor calf was so nervous that it had already pooped on the floor.

I started to wonder whether it was wise to sit down, but I was really happy to get a lift. But, as it happened, just before we reached our final destination, the calf pooped again – right on my trousers. Everybody started to laugh and even forgot to ask me if I wanted to pay for the lift. When we arrived at the foot of the mountain to Karsha Monastery, I really didn't know how to clean my trousers. The smell was disgusting, so I took them off. Luckily, underneath I was wearing the long johns that Lekshe had given me when she visited! There was no alternative but to climb the mountain dressed in this very strange way. As I walked through the village, people along the way laughed in a friendly way. Everybody could see that my long thin trousers were long johns. Coincidentally, I knew the words for “jeep” and “cow” in Zanskari and tried to explain as best I could, accompanied by gestures. I was grateful the situation was not worse!



## A SNOWY ADVENTURE

Chick Alsop and Aisha Allen (Hawai'i)

Aisha and I had a wonderful time in Spiti. We were ready for adventure and, having twice traveled in Tibet, we were anxious to be back in the Buddhist Himalayas. Visiting Dechen Chöling and Yangchen Chöling was the highlight of our time in Spiti.

The day we arrived at Dechen Chöling Monastery, September 18, it began to snow heavily and did not stop for two days. The blizzard dumped two and a half feet of snow, closed all roads, and unexpectedly extended our stay at Dechen Chöling to nine days. At the time of our arrival, most of the nuns were away visiting Tabo and were stranded there. There were only four nuns left at the monastery and, of course, we got to know them well. We had fun with English classes, many good conversations, letter writing with Aisha, and so on. We also worked hard hauling water (since the pipes froze), shoveling the roof and walks, installing tarps, and all that goes into survival during the Himalayan winters.

The head nun at Dechen Chöling, Sonam Zangmo, is one of the most remarkable people I have ever met. I was amazed by her strength, endurance, and toughness. She was always cheerful, friendly, hospitable, an effective leader, well liked, and respected. She allowed me to stay at the nunnery and, in fact, gave Aisha and me her room. All in all, it was a great learning experience. We really bonded with the nuns. Aisha had an especially tearful goodbye. Back in Kaza, we had a brief friendly meeting with Elles Lohuis, Jamyang Foundation's volunteer coordinator. We then traveled on to Yangchen Chöling Monastery with Dorje Tsering, Jamyang Foundation's project manager, who was also wonderful. I regret that we could only spend one night at Yangchen Chöling.

We also thoroughly enjoyed Ladakh, where we did a “potato harvest” farm stay and traveled as far west as Lamayuru. Our plan for 2009 is to explore Zangskar – traveling slowly south from Kargil, finishing with a trek to Phugtal Gonpa, and then south over the Shingo La to Darcha. This should give us ample time to visit the Jamyang Foundation projects in Zangskar and hopefully assist various ways. We congratulate Jamyang Foundation for all the wonderful work it is doing in the Buddhist Himalayas!

## HEALTHY BODIES, HEALTHY MINDS

Joan Cockell (Canada)

For 25 days in July and August, I taught at Dechen Choling Monastery for the third time. This year, I was on my own, though the nuns had a volunteer in May and June. When I first arrived, no one was around and the monastery was all locked up. Luckily, it didn't take long to find the nuns. They were in the village of Kungri attending a three-day *puja* at the monk's monastery. The nuns are closely associated with that monastery and the monks' events often involve the nuns.

After the *puja* concluded, English classes began running smoothly. Again, I divided the nuns into three classes and taught each class one hour a day. This year, I concentrated on the theme of health and hygiene. Some of my ideas came from the book published by the Tibetan Nuns Project called "Healthy Body, Healthy Mind" and some came from Cynthia Hunt's books on Ladakhi culture: "Padma and the Dirty Dog," "Dirty Padma," and "The Magic Spectacles."

We had many laughs together. When we discussed handwashing, we shouted "ATBF" (always wash your hands After Toilet, Before Food). When we came to noseblowing, I bought them each two handkerchiefs and pins, so they could attach them to their robes. We discussed dental care, including not to leave toothbrushes in dirty places, and how to floss. We learned the importance of using toilets rather than the great outdoors. After a gentle suggestion, they renovated the toilets.

As part of our health program, I taught a half-hour of yoga each day after English classes. This was a highlight for all of us and was especially enjoyed by the younger students. We crammed into the classroom like sardines. I had to caution them to take care during some of the poses, so as not to accidentally kick each other. A French organization that was visiting Kungri kindly did a health screening for each of the nuns, taking urine and blood samples. Two or three of the nuns were referred to doctors outside Spiti, since they may have diabetes.

The new kitchen at the back of the monastery was finally ready this summer. It was great to be able to eat meals with the nuns, rather than in my own room. Good progress was being made on the second phase of construction: a prayer hall with some upstairs rooms. The laborers had already begun digging holes for the foundation of the third phase of construction: additional accommodations for the nuns. The nuns were growing flowers outside the kitchen – a tasty treat for passing animals. They had planted their first herb garden, perched precariously on the side of a small cliff. These herbs were used to flavor their *thukpa*, traditional noodle soup.

Three days before I left, there was real excitement. Two electricians from outside the valley had returned to test the wiring. When they temporarily hooked up wires from a house in the village, we had electric lights for all of one hour!!! It's not certain when the nuns will be more permanently illuminated.

As always, there were teary goodbyes when I left and hopeful promises to meet again next year. I gave my three top students the responsibility of making sure the nuns don't entirely forget their English or yoga during the winter.



## TEACHING IN PISHU

Joyce Salvona (Scotland)

Having spent a wonderful summer in Ladakh in 2005, I wanted to return in the summer of 2007. My hope was to gain a deeper understanding of the wonderful inhabitants of this northern corner of India. When I googled, "Ladakh + voluntary work," I was delighted when the Jamyang Foundation website appeared. I emailed Lama Lekshe to see if I had something to offer. Her enthusiastic response made up my mind to spend a month in the remote Zangskar village of Pishu helping Buddhist nuns to learn English.

I arrived in Leh at the beginning of July and hired a jeep to take me on the two-day journey to the remote Zangskar Valley. I would be lying if I didn't admit that, as I approached the village, I was anxious and wondered why I hadn't just gone on a real holiday. My anxieties evaporated as soon as I arrived. I stayed with the family of one of the nuns and everyone couldn't have made me more welcome.

The nuns had little other education at the time, but were a real joy to teach. They approached the lessons with enthusiasm and a great sense of humor. Some of the children from the village came along, too. Usually I taught for 2 hours each morning. Afterwards, I had lunch with the nuns, usually rice and vegetables and plenty of tea. I liked to spend the afternoons walking and helping with the farm work. The scenery was stunning and the kindness of the villagers is something I will remember for the rest of my life. Obviously, a month was totally inadequate to achieve anything significant in terms of mastering English, but the nuns' earnest efforts were a joy to see. One day I hope to return and spend more substantial time in Pishu.