



# *Jamyang Foundation*



**EDUCATION IN THE HIMALAYAS – NEWSLETTER 2011**

Greetings, Friends of Jamyang Foundation!

Since 1988, Jamyang Foundation has been working to provide educational opportunities for girls, laywomen, and nuns in developing countries, such as Bangladesh, India, and Laos. This year, even with the world in turmoil, our generous donors, with far-reaching vision, continue to support these goals. It is heartwarming to share the stories of our volunteers and deserving students with you. When we consider how much has been accomplished over the years and see the smiling faces of these young nuns and laywomen, full of trust and hope for the future, we know that the recipients of your generosity will reach out and touch the lives of countless villagers.

With warm wishes,  
Karma Lekshe Tsomo  
Jamyang Foundation



## **A Trek to Remember**

*By Connor Lind*

After a month teaching English at the heartwarming Zangla nunnery in Zanskar, it was time for me to reluctantly head home. I had taken the bumpy jeep ride from Leh to Padum one month prior, and intended to trek back with locals through the very same mountains I had spent hours admiring during my stay. It was an opportunity that couldn't be missed. I planned on hiring a pony man in Zangla to guide me to Lamayuru, but when the nuns had realized my plans, they insisted on being my guides. I was most impressed with this selfless display of gratitude. The nuns had no pressing need to travel to Leh; if they did, they could simply take the two-day jeep ride from Padum. I encouraged them to reconsider. They told me not to worry, that they would guide me themselves or find a pony man in their place if they decided not to go. As the time to leave approached, it became clear that the nuns were completely set on guiding me. I had no intention of removing them from their life in the nunnery, or forcing them to assist me on an immensely challenging trek that I was passionate about. Regardless, they insisted. It became clear to me that trekking is a part of Zangskari culture and, in this particular case, their way of saying thank you.

July 7 was our departure date. My trekking partners, the two nuns Lobsang Palmo and Lobsang Angmo, informed me we would start at 5 am sharp. This was considered the "local pace." I was slightly apprehensive, as one of the nuns informed me that this trek was like walking the "outline of your hand." I was excited to begin, as the trek would prove to be the best experience of my life. The first part of the trek from Zangla to Lamayuru is completely flat, through a

long, beautiful valley dotted with quiet villages. I encountered my first *la* (mountain pass), the Parfi La, a magnificent switchback of rocky trails and thin air. Lobsang Palmo and Lobsang Angmo excelled at walking mountain trails. My fully loaded pack contained belongings for my entire trip to India, so I lagged behind. They were patient as I battled my way up the mountain and even offered to carry my pack! I tried to imagine my relatives back home trying to keep up with these nuns. At the day's end, Lobsang Angmo informed me we had trekked an astonishing 35 km. I was extremely impressed with their determination, physical capability, and patience.



The next morning I received a pick-me-up: two monks were heading to Lingshed, our next destination, with a convoy of empty donkeys. I loaded my pack on a donkey and decided to carry a small day pack filled with water, energy bars, my passport, and my bulky camera equipment. This allowed me to keep up a better pace. Throughout the day we took turns guiding the donkeys. The nuns were quite animated about it, and kept me laughing and in great spirits. I had joked about having English lessons for them while we trekked and that is essentially what we did. In the process of sharing our words and thoughts throughout the incredible journey, there was a genuine exchange of language and culture. We passed many groups of foreign trekkers and

interacted with them, as they fairly dominated the trails. The many quiet hours of trekking throughout the day also allowed for engaging discussions and allowed me to dispel or clarify some myths and misperceptions of the West. Over the course of the extremely challenging trek, we were constantly encouraging each other and learning from each other. I am so grateful for the opportunity and am forever appreciative of Lobsang Angmo and Lobsang Palmo for facilitating many welcome insights into Zangskari culture.

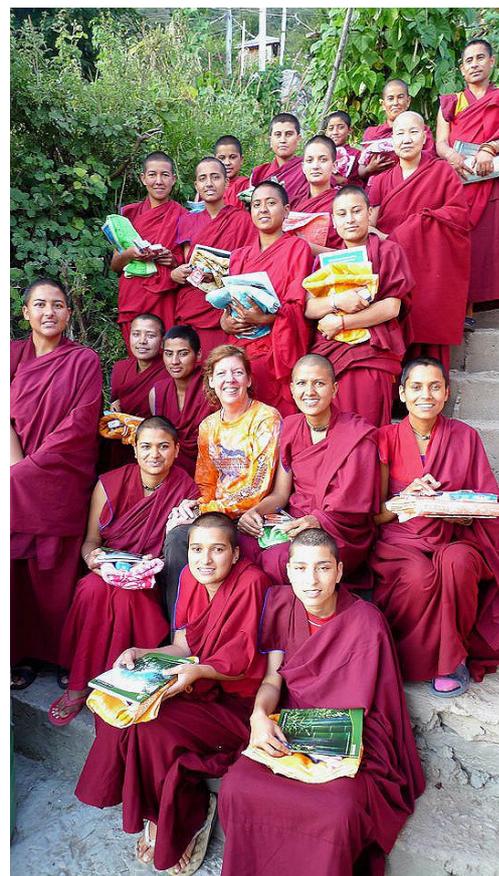
### Himalayan Pilgrimage

By Cindie Travis

In April 2011, Grace Heinz from Seattle, Washington, and I made our first trip to Jampa Chöling Monastery in Meeru, Kinnaur (Himachal Pradesh). Our first objective was to make test samples of their drinking water. The nuns had complained of frequent stomach ailments and we suspected that the problem was caused by bacteria in the drinking water. Our plan was to sample the various water sources at the monastery for bacteria, ph, temperature, and nitrates. We arrived with our Jama-Tara test kit, provided by World Watershed Alliance (WWA), and proceeded to collect three water samples from the surface water located near the nuns' sleeping quarters, spring water located near the assembly hall, and from the main water pipe for the local village. Results of the samples showed that bacteria were present at all three locations. In the spring water near the assembly hall, nitrate levels were above the Indian standard for drinking water. Ph, temperature and turbidity at the monastery were all within the normal range. Based on the results, I recommended that all drinking water be filtered or boiled prior to use, including water used for brushing teeth.

While visiting the monastery, we were lucky to witness two local festivals. At the first festival, the nuns and local villagers carried a statue of Sakyamuni Buddha and Tara, along with the Buddhist scriptures, from the assembly hall to the *stupa* (reliquary). As we passed local residences, the owners gave offerings of money, candles, and oil. As we circled back to the monastery, the teachers blessed the fields for a good harvest. At the second festival we witnessed, the villagers dressed in their finest clothes and gathered around the large village tree to honor the local god. Singing and dancing around the tree went on for hours.

In September 2011, I returned to Jampa Chöling with Justin and Delia Lacson, founding members of World Watershed Alliance (WWA). A



fundraiser for Jampa Chöling had been held in Seattle, Washington. With the funds, WWA purchased two ten-liter water filters and a 500-liter storage tank in Rekhong Peo, and made a donation toward a hot water geyser. We all held our breath as we watched the huge storage tank lifted by cable up the mountain to Meeru Village. Justin assembled the water filters and placed them in the kitchen.

During my visit, I had the pleasure of escorting Tenzin Dechen and Tenzin Chösom to Kaza in Spiti to pick up 20 solar lanterns from Ecosphere and purchase a new solar geyser, which is currently being installed at the monastery. Along the way, we had an opportunity to visit a few famous monasteries, including Tabo, Dankar, and Key Monastery. We spent one night at Dechen Chöling Monastery in Pin Valley and two nights at Yangchen Chöling Monastery in Pangmo. We were rescued by a road-angel twice, both times after our vehicle had a flat tire. Our taxi driver Kana also took us to see the famous Gue Mummy, the preserved body of a high lama who died during meditation some 600 years ago. We could still see his hair and fingernails, and how he held his *mala* (prayer beads). Then it was back to Kinnaur, with a stop in Rekhong Peo, where we purchased winter supplies for the nuns, including long underwear, towels, soap, toothpaste, and toothbrushes, thanks to donation from Dutch sponsors.

### I Don't Want to be Jesus & Time Doesn't Exist

By Helen Han

As we struggled along the bumpy path that continued up, up, and up, Julie Marner and I thought, "I don't want to be Jesus. This is too hard." Up in the Indian Himalayas, at altitudes above 12,000 feet, we had arrived smack in the middle of nowhere, in a region known as Zanskar. We had the feeling that we'd landed in a place where time doesn't exist. Here the full moon shines so brightly at night that five o'clock in the morning feels the same as five o'clock in the afternoon.

Little did we know that "smack in the middle of nowhere" were many earthly treasures that seemed divinely inspired. We found cathedrals of mountains to the north, east, south, and west. The sky rested softly on earthly bodies of water and the clouds hovered near great expanses of land. The stars twinkled, sang, and danced above us. Children, animals, and all living beings seemed as one family. Ignoring rumors of mountain lions, everyone wanders the landscape without fear.

Stopping to rest, we gazed down on the small village of Sani, where, we learned, everyone is literally family. People are always smiling, either to themselves, or laughing with others. Some say, "If you give a mouse a cookie, s/he'll ask for a glass of milk," but not in Sani. In this remote Himalayan village, people break bread (or chocolate) and share it with friends. I believe that Jesus would feel right at home here.



In this magical place, Julie and I broke bread with a group of Buddhist nuns – the residents of Tarhuntse Khachö Ling Monastery. "Gonpa" means "monastery" in Tibetan and the nuns left their doors open, as if to say, "My gonpa on the hill is your gonpa on the hill." A spirit of sharing and openheartedness spread through the community.

When our three hours of giving English lessons finished everyday (except, of course, the day of rest), Julie and I took a brisk stroll through the fields that the villagers work. The deep tans of their faces and deep wrinkles around the eyes revealed both their backbreaking labor and the good humor with which they work. Everyday, we strolled to and from the local village "market" with one vegetable shack and two "convenient stores." After trudging through the fields, a Coca Cola and Kit-Kat combo never tasted so good.

Most of Zangskar still lives in past millennia, when compared to modern ways of life, but we quickly realized that being "stuck" here is really being "free." Buildings of mud and wood, with piles of tree branches and dung on their roofs for cooking and heat during the winter are totally in tune with the environment. Occasionally, there are moments of electric power, but most villagers now rely mostly on solar power. Water is piped fresh water from streams that flow from atop the mountains. The nuns' generosity seemed to confirm the adage that "sharing is caring" and "to give is to live," as they graciously prepared our organic, homemade meals. Tea is a large part of the Himalayan diet, including rounds of both sugary Indian tea and salty Tibetan tea with butter. This "yak butter" tea takes getting used to, as the name suggests.

It was simple to see that the nuns way of life expressed Buddhist philosophy of mindfulness, peace, and loving kindness. Our experiences, both on the Indian plains and the heights of the Himalayas, were full of amusing and inspiring stories. As we traveled and jostled with a wide swath of humanity, we were delighted to discover our similar good intentions and our unity. The closer we get to our essence, the more we feel the love that erases the space between us. Julie and I didn't "help" so much as we "shared." For what can we give another person, from whatever region or village, but an abundance of heart? The fullness of love can help compensate for a lack of many material things. During

the holidays, it is good to remember that to become more like Jesus is to become more full of love. The love that we share becomes expanded and fills the spaces between us. Through learning, sharing, and breaking bread together with these humble nuns, we decided that we'd like to become Jesus after all.

### Teaching English at Karsha Monastery

By Anina Gyger



As I was walking up the hill to the monastery for the first time, I was not sure what to expect, because it was a completely different culture for me. But when an older nun saw me carrying all my bags, she quickly came with a huge smile on her face and helped me. Chomo Dorje, one of the monastery's managers, prepared lunch for me and gradually realized that I would be the new English teacher for the summer.

Teaching was a new challenge and a great experience for me. The nuns had lessons with the Tibetan teacher and English class from 11 to 12 in the morning. The younger nuns were very active learners and very good students. They already know some English and really wanted to learn more. Some of the older nuns didn't know the alphabet, so we worked on that first. When we had class after lunch, some nuns almost fell asleep, so I had to keep them busy! Sometimes the nuns had long *pujas* (chanting ceremonies), which they value, and we had to move the English lessons to the afternoon. Every morning when I woke up, I didn't know what the day would bring. I really liked that. Sometimes there would be a wedding in the village, but we never knew in advance. I joined the nuns in all their activities.

Gradually, in Padum or at festivals, I met all the other teachers from the monasteries for nuns. That was great, because we could exchange experiences and discuss our joys and challenges. We regularly visited each other on our days off.

I had an absolutely amazing time with the nuns at Karsha monastery and will remember this adventure for the rest of my life. I learned a lot from the nuns and others in Zangskar and I'm really thankful for the experience.

### LIVING LIFE FROM THE HEART

By Martina Holzach

Writing something about my time at Tungri Monastery is not easy, as there are so many great things to write about. For example, the nuns tried to spoil me with coffee, but used salt tea instead of water, then added sweet tea, then milk tea. In the end I had the perfect cup! Another time, the nuns learned how to use the dictionary and came up with many funny words. The more I think about what to write, the more stories pop into my mind, but the thing I really want to talk about is the love!

Spending nearly 24 hours a day with the nuns, we got very close. Even though I could not speak their language, I felt like I knew them and they knew me. There was nothing to hide, no space, and no corner to hide anything.

Back in the busy West, I realized how much the nuns taught me about life. It's all about love and living it from the heart. Life can be so easy, but our minds derange our view and create all kinds of problems that, in fact, do not exist!

Sometimes we only realize how much we have learned after we leave a place. And sometimes



we learn the most about life in places where we least expected to! Sometimes we only realize how much we liked a place after we leave it. Or, as a friend once told me, "We have to leave a place in order to be able to come back!" That is what I am hoping to do soon.



### **Memorable Summer** By Rae Schmidt

What a grand adventure...! My sister Kay and I really loved teaching English to the nuns at Changchub Choling Monastery. They are a tremendously hardworking group. Wangmo was especially helpful to us. Since we were in totally foreign territory, her help was indispensable. In addition to getting to know the nuns, it was enlightening to learn about village life in Zangskar. We had a tremendous time volunteering and would recommend the experience to anyone!



### **Hollyhocks and Sunflowers** By Kay DeWeese

After a challenging two-day jeep ride all the way from Leh, we arrived in the village of Zangla and received a very warm welcome from the nuns of Changchub Choling Monastery. They happily showed us to our comfortable room overlooking the monastery courtyard. The courtyard was surrounded with brilliant hollyhocks and sunflowers. The nuns ensured that we were warm enough, providing extra thick blankets for our sleeping mats.

The classroom was equipped with a whiteboard and markers. These were essential for our lessons. We were happy to see that previous teachers have left behind some other teaching supplies, too.

One particular delight was watching the little children from the monastery school eat their lunch in the courtyard. A nun prepared the midday meal for the children and for us, even if the rest of the nuns were away from the monastery. The servings were always more abundant than I could possibly eat.

A favorite memory is knitting with Tsultrim. She taught us new stitches and showed us the beautiful caps and socks she had knitted. Fearing that I would be too cold when I went walking in the early mornings, Tsultrim knitted me a warm woolen cap.

It was a memorable summer in the beautiful Zangskar valley.

### **A Place of Their Own in Bodhgaya** By Chick Alsop

For years, Karma Lekshe Tsomo realized the need for a center where Himalayan nuns could study during the winter. Their monasteries are snowed in for months at a time and the bitter cold makes studying next to impossible. Such a center could also be a place where women from Nepal, Bangladesh, Laos, and other countries and cultures could congregate during the winter months to meditate, do workshops, and learn from each other. She had this vision in mind, but how to bring it to fruition?

In 1995-96, Lekshe was teaching for Antioch University's Buddhist Studies Program in India, located at the Burmese Monastery in Bodhgaya. One day, the abbot told her that a Korean nun had asked him to find land to build a monastery. The abbot found a nice quiet piece of land across the river, but the Korean nun changed her plans and didn't need it. The abbot approached Lekshe the next day and asked, "What should I do with this land?" She responded, "Can I get back to you in the morning on that?" That evening, she realized that such a choice piece of land in Bodhgaya was too good to pass up. As it happened, she had just received a donation that equaled the cost of the land and the decision was made to launch Sanghamitra Institute.

I spent a month volunteering as a project supervisor on the Sanghamitra project and it proved to be a real learning experience. When I got to Bodhgaya in October, I discovered that there was only a bare outline of a foundation to mark the

spot where Sanghamitra Institute would be built. A quiet location by the river in Bodhgaya is highly desirable. Bodhgaya is the most important pilgrimage site for Buddhists from around the world, because it is the site where the Buddha became awakened. Now, with the construction of Sanghamitra Institute, women will have a place in Bodhgaya where they can become awakened, too.



I quickly became involved in local politics. Working with Chullu, the 33-year-old local contractor on the project, was a window into village life and culture. He taught me a lot about Indian construction techniques

and his personal vision for the Institute's structure. Because I was able to communicate daily with Lekshe by email, progress on the construction accelerated. The crew, often barefoot and shirtless, worked all day in the hot sun -- laying bricks, mixing cement on the bare ground, carrying heavy loads on their heads, and somehow it always came out right! The workers continue to labor willingly and diligently for a very modest wage.

During the past four years of volunteering for Jamyang Foundation, every project has been rewarding and educational. I am proud to be part of these accomplishments. With the dedicated help of Chullu and his team, and support from Jamyang Foundation, women from around the world will soon have a place to study and meditate in one of Buddhism's most revered sites.

### **The Lucky One** *By Patricia Hunt*



First of all, I can't stop thinking about the Zangskar Valley. The nuns were so kind and welcoming. It's a place that's very far away, in both space and time. I learned something valuable there. I miss the nuns. What a cheerful and giving spirit in that place!

I found out about Jamyang Foundation from reading an article on the front page of the Sunday travel section of our local newspaper, *The Honolulu Advertiser*. A large, wonderful photo of the nuns in the Zangskar Valley was featured. At the end of the article, I found the phone number of the writer. This lead me to Jamyang Foundation, which lead me to Zangskar.

I traveled to Zangskar with two other women, who also volunteered. I taught English at Tunгри Monastery from July 28 until September 6. During that time, I attended large festivals at Karsha and Sani and a smaller festival at Tunгри. I also visited the monasteries for nuns at Zangla and Manda. To me, each nunnery was very different – the place, the nuns,

and the atmosphere – and it was interesting to visit three different places.

During my stay, there was a young Tibetan teacher at Tungri. He taught the nuns Buddhism and Tibetan grammar from 9 am to 12 noon. I taught English from 3 to 5 pm. I understand that I was the second English teacher to volunteer at Tungri. The previous teacher, a woman from Switzerland, had departed the day before I arrived.



The nuns chanted in the morning, called by the blowing of a conch shell. I would sit with them in *puja* sometimes. We ate breakfast and lunch together. Nuns often ate dinner on their own. I became acquainted with sweet tea, salt tea, tsampa, and barley noodles. The food was good and plentiful. I learned to hide my bowl to keep it from being filled up again and again.

Toward the end of my stay, in late August, the harvest season began. I went a few times with the nuns as they harvested peas. It was great to walk through the fields and meet families and villagers. I felt lucky. I taught the nuns the phrase, "I am lucky," and explained it to them.

It was lucky to have seen the article by Chick. In Honolulu, Chick and Aisha were available and helpful, as were Ven. Karma Lekshe Tsomo and Elles, the volunteer coordinator. It was lucky that my friend Kay was willing to travel with me. I am not sure I'd have gone alone. It was lucky to be able to go and lucky to stay well while I was there. It was lucky to have ended up at Tungri Monastery. What good fortune I have had!

### **Girls Rock!**

By U Thowai Maung Marma

The students in the Chittagong Hill Tracts are doing great. Every year, the schools accept new students and start a new class for them. Classes now include Kindergarten to Class 5. Students learn all the subjects required by the Ministry of Education of the Government of Bangladesh. In addition to Bangla, English, and mathematics, students learn their own Marma language, rhymes, and songs. They also sit in meditation for 15 to 20 minutes a day. Even though the students are very young, they find that meditation helps them develop a peaceful mind.

A new law in Bangladesh requires that students from Class 5 onwards must participate in the government school exams, just like high school students. In the last two exams, the students had a 100% success rate! We expect that the students succeed just as well next time. These results are really heartening for the students, parents, and teachers alike. For girls from such remote, disadvantaged areas to place so well in the exams is a tribute to the hard work of all of them. Seven students from the Mahamaya Moitry School participated in the government exam this year.

The big news at Mahamaya Moitry School in Rajasthali, Rangamati, is that the students have a new hostel! The hostel was funded by Firefly Mission in Singapore. Earlier, girls from remote villages had a hard time attending the school. Unless they had relatives nearby, it was too dangerous for them to walk to school everyday. Thanks to Firefly Mission, 30 girls are now able to stay in the new hostel at the school. In the beginning of 2011, a representative from the Firefly Mission visited the girls' hostel and school. He was happy to see girls getting



a proper education and staying safely at the hostel. He also expressed that the girls at Visakha School also need a hostel for safety. Jamyang Foundation provides meals for the students everyday and a salary for the cook. The bamboo classrooms are now getting old. Studying is such dark and a damp room is unhealthy for the children. We hope to get support for new classrooms soon.

A girl from the first class started at Mahamaya School, who participated in the

government exams three years ago has now been admitted to class seven in Dhaka and took first place in the final exam this year. She will be studying in class eight next year. If she hadn't had the opportunity to study at Mahamaya School when she was young, she would now be working in the fields to support her family. Now she dreams of being educated and helping her community one day.

There is more big news at Visakha School in Manikchari. Firefly Mission helped construct four large classrooms for the children. The children's parents happily crowded in to help inaugurate the new classrooms. The children's teachers are very dedicated. They could get jobs elsewhere that pay better, but they are sincerely committed to helping these poor children get an education. Together, the students and teachers have planted a lovely garden, hauling water up the hill to make sure the garden grows well. Just like the garden, the children are also growing well! We are very grateful to Firefly Mission and to all the kind donors who are giving these needy children an opportunity to learn. Last year, four students participated successfully in the government exam and all are now studying at the local high school. But they don't have accommodations. At present, a college teacher is helping them with accommodation. We are hoping to build a girls' dormitory, if we can get funding.

The students, parents, and teachers are keeping the kind donors of Jamyang Foundation and Firefly Mission in Singapore in their hearts. May they all be happy and peaceful!

