
JAMYANG FOUNDATION

AN EDUCATION PROJECT FOR HIMALAYAN WOMEN

2012 NEWSLETTER



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NEW YEAR GREETINGS TO OUR DEAR JAMYANG FOUNDATION FRIENDS,

This message comes to you from Vaishali, the sacred site where the Buddha's foster mother, Mahaprajapati, became the first Buddhist nun. Happily, 54 Jamyang Foundation nuns from all over the Himalayan region are able to join us at the 13th Sakyadhita International Conference on Buddhist Women. The nuns traveled 5½ hours by bus from Sanghamitra Institute in Bodhgaya, where they are happily studying away. The nuns are all delighted to have this opportunity to meet Dharma friends from around the world! Many thanks to all of you for making this amazing opportunity possible!

With Warm Wishes,

Karma Lekshe Tsomo

Karma Lekshe Tsomo, Director

LOST AND FOUND IN THE HIMALAYAS

By Hana Pruzansky

The summer going into my senior year, most of my peers were working at a 9-5 internship in a big city with a big corporate name, but I decided to escape to northern India to teach English in a Buddhist monastery. A good friend introduced me to the Jamyang Foundation, which he had learned about from his Buddhist Studies teacher, Ven. Karma Lekshe Tsomo, at the University of San Diego. After researching the trip on their website, I made my travel arrangements. The trip turned out to be the single most inspirational, eye-opening, and important experience in my life thus far. I consider myself to be well traveled, as I embarked on “Semester at Sea” the previous semester and have traveled extensively with my family. Nothing, however could compare to what I learned in India, not only about another culture, but also about myself.

Eighteen hours from the nearest airport, I found myself in a beautiful Himalayan village. My mornings consisted of a peaceful meditation service followed by three hours of teaching eager, smiling Zangskari Buddhist nuns from the ages of seven to thirteen. In the afternoons, I had one-on-one or small group instruction with the older nuns who had an interest in learning basic science, math, or English. I had a few minutes of internet once a week when I could travel from the monastery to the larger village. I spent most my time learning to meditate or going on walks through the village and speaking with locals. Towards the end of the trip, I became involved in the “Mothers of Zangskar” group, which consisted of Buddhist and Muslim mothers who met once a week to speak about peace between the two religious groups, but more importantly, to speak about the importance of education for their daughters. These young women are destined for farm life and arranged marriages.

Returning home from Zangskar was challenging, to say the least, but I was proud to share my experience with my friends, family, and peers. I soon found myself in an interview, where I was asked what my biggest success was during this trip. I found myself teary eyed as I reminisced about the time when I had successfully taught the nuns about evaporation in the water cycle. This was an important lesson, as the river that runs next to the monastery is a huge resource for the villagers. It took a bilingual local to help with the concept (and she had never heard of it either), but when they grasped the theory, they were beyond excited, and I saw their minds open up to all the possibilities of science. The next morning, a student yelled as she was making tea for the older nuns, “Teacher! Evaporation!” pointing to the steam coming from the cup. The next day, a student passing by the clothes drying outside yelled, “Teacher! Evaporation!” Their excitement and eagerness to learn was inspiring, causing me

to often feel overwhelming emotions of amazement. I wanted to share this experience

with the University of San Diego community; I wanted to let people know

anyone can volunteer for the program. It was so incredibly

rewarding, as it was such a valuable experience for me, as well

as the nuns. No matter what your plans for the future, don’t

be afraid to do something seemingly wild, like boarding

a plane to the outer reaches of the earth to touch and be

touched by people completely foreign to you. It may

turn out to be one of the single most important things

you do. This is what it was for me, and I thought that it

was an experience worth sharing.



DECHEN CHÖLING MONASTERY

By Daniel Schweitzer

I arrived here in Kungri on the 20th of July, 2012; I remember the day so well because it was two days before some new friends from Israel, Australia, France and the Netherlands sang "Happy Birthday" in front of my door at our home stay in Kaza. Normally, the trip from Kaza to Kungri is not a big deal, even though the roads are just rubble and dust the old Tata Buses carve their way through the steepest roads, but a landslide blocked the road, so our trip was saved only by a fortunate jeep ride. Someone told me there was a public teaching at the monastery, so as we reached Kungri, the village was bustling with hundreds of people, and not one single available bed. My heart dropped. No place to stay and no one knew where the nunnery was located. Thankfully, an Australian woman offered me a room for one night – what a fantastic thing to do! As the afternoon teaching was about to start I discovered a nun named Dawa. We agreed that I come up to the nunnery the following day, where they would have a room prepared for me. The teacher in residence was Dsongsar Kyentse Rinpoche who I had seen in an Israeli film entitled, "Words of my Perfect Teacher."

The next day five nuns picked me up from the guesthouse, and even carried my bags. We walked up the hill to the nunnery, with the sun already strong. They showed me the room where I could stay for the next few days – I was so thankful and relieved!

Due to the teachings the nuns were busy working that week and had no time for classes, but I shared a room with the Bodhi teacher, Lobsang, who took me under his wing. Together we went together to a ceremonial burning, where people offered food and worn clothes to Buddha, and two days later we got up at four in the morning to walk uphill to Rinpoche's blessing of a new retreat centre for the monks. Later that day Rinpoche himself come to the nunnery, he asked me what I am doing and said, "Please teach the nuns some German."

After Rinpoche departed I started the English classes, and for the first three days I attempted to establish the nuns' level of English. In the end, I decided that it would be most practical to run three classes; one for the beginners, another for the more advanced speakers, and in the afternoons I taught a volunteer reading class, since the focus during classes was on conversation, establishing dialogs on day-to-day situations.



A "HELLO" IN EXCHANGE FOR A "JULLEY"

By Kajali Laskar

My journey to Pangmo and Zangla began in early 2010, when a friend went on a trip to Spiti Valley. Her photos inspired in me the thought of volunteering to teach in a monastery. Before that moment, I had never heard about Spiti nor the Buddhist monasteries there – let alone the idea of teaching in one. In the busy humdrum affairs of life, such inspirations rarely make their presence felt. When they do, it's hard to not notice them.

In 2011, I contacted the Jamyang Foundation and Ven. Karma Lekshe Tsomo. I must convey my heartiest gratitude to Ven. Lekshe and Elles Lohuis for giving me the opportunity to participate in their project for educating Himalayan women. This amazing experience gave me a new direction and insight.

My trip to Pangmo was scheduled for July, 2012, followed by a trip to Zangla in August-September, 2012. The initial idea was five weeks in each monastery – Yangchen Chöling Nunnery in Spiti Valley and Changchub Chöling Nunnery in Zanskar Valley.

I arrived in the tiny but amazingly picturesque village of Pangmo on July 7th. The two-day trip from Delhi to Pangmo wasn't as difficult as I initially thought it would be, and the beautiful scenic route made it even more charming and interesting. At the bus stop, two sweet but surprised nuns, Chetan and Rinchin received me. They carried my backpack and handbag to the nunnery for me even after I told them I could manage. I must acknowledge that I was extremely touched by their hospitality and friendliness. At the nunnery, which is home to about thirty nuns, I also received a hearty warm welcome. Most of the nuns are between fifteen and twenty-one years old, and were typical enthusiastic teenagers (nuns in the making, yes, but kids are kids everywhere). It didn't take me long to gel with them, many of whom shared the same name – Sonam, Tenzin, Cherring, Rinchin, Lafjong, and so on.



I was given a pretty yellow and blue room, and the nunnery had a good toilet and bathroom. The ‘Spitian’ food, though new to me, was delicious – Momo, Timok, Thupka were quite delightful. Even more delicious, though, were the sweet peas that they grow in their fields. I spent hours filling my pockets with the sweetest peas I have ever tasted.

Most of the nuns know fairly good Hindi and it was easy for me to communicate with them, since I also speak Hindi. Some of them have “basic” English knowledge as well, which was a plus. They have a Tibetan guru, who teaches them Tibetan Language and Buddhist philosophy. They also have two nun teachers appointed by the Center for Buddhist Education who teach English, Hindi, and mathematics. I was told that they would like to take classes in basic spoken English, so we divided the classes into three groups. The first group consisted of the youngest nuns – about eight students. The second group of older nuns was made up of about ten to thirteen students, and the final group was a mixed age group of eight students who had very limited knowledge of English.

I taught most of my classes in the morning from 10 a.m. until after 1 p.m. As mentioned before, I had planned on staying in Pangmo for the month of July, but this was cut short by two weeks because approximately forty nuns from Morang visited for a two-week debate camp. Two weeks wasn’t a lot of time to teach basic English conversation, so I tried my best to give them some basic lessons in spoken English. Some of them learnt quickly and I do want to go back next year at a time when I can stay longer.

I traveled back to Delhi, where I caught a flight to Leh, which is a little more than 275 miles (450 km) from Padum in the beautiful Zangskar Valley. Zangskar valley is heaven on earth and breathtaking. The bike ride from Padum to the small village of Zangla was beyond amazing. The arid snow peaked mountains and the raging Zangskar River were mesmerizing.

Like Pangmo, the nuns in Zangla were also taken by surprise by my arrival, as I had no way to inform them about my trip. They were as warm and hospitable as the nuns in Pangmo, housing me in their cozy guest room, right next to the Tara prayer room. There are about twenty nuns in Zangla Nunnery, ten of which are under eleven years old, the other ten ranging from fifteen to ninety years old.

Zangla Nunnery has a small school for the young nuns who come to the nunnery for their classes in the morning and go back to their homes in the afternoon. Unlike Pangmo, there is a shortage of teachers and volunteers in that part of Zangskar Valley, and the local school lacks good responsible teachers. There is a lama teacher from Karsha Gompa in the valley who teaches the little nuns English, Hindi, mathematics, and Tibetan Language. He mentioned that it is very difficult to manage all ten students of different levels at one time and it helps a lot when a volunteer comes.

When I arrived, a Hungarian group was helping the local school and nunnery. We realized it would be more productive if we all coordinated with each other and volunteered in an organized fashion. Consequently, I taught Hindi and English

classes in the morning and afternoon, and held Hindi and English speaking classes for the eldest nuns in the evenings if they were free, which was not too often since it was the harvest season.

Locally, Hindi is not spoken, so an English-to-Ladakhi dictionary, and older students who did a little translating were very useful. It is also helpful to carry picture books and lots of visual elements, since it might be more difficult for foreign volunteers to communicate with the nuns easily, especially for teaching purposes.

I was in Zangla for thirty-five days, but a month is definitely not enough, since they only have one teacher. Some of the young nuns are very sharp and quick learners and they would do wonders if given the opportunity for a better education; a month's voluntary teaching is not enough. I met with a few interested people and organizations and we are trying to bring together all the foundations and organizations that are working in the region to coordinate and provide a flow of volunteers at least for six to eight months, so that there are proper classes without a break.

I had been away from India for almost a decade, so this trip has been such an eye-opener. A friend once quoted Swami Vivekananda who said, "Information gathered becomes knowledge only when it is shared with others and imparted in the correct way." I realized the significance of this quote today. I definitely plan to go back to Zangla Nunnery for a winter session and work with the local educational initiative to provide support to the nunnery and local school.

The nuns are also remarkably talented in knitting. I had a chance to learn how to knit, as well as learn how to cook momos and Zanskari food. The weather was very good, the food delicious, the people friendly and the experience priceless. A "Hello" in exchange for a "Julley" is not merely a cultural exchange; the exchange is spiritual, soulful, and human.

MUSINGS FROM A YOUNG VOLUNTEER AT THE SANGAMITRA FOUNDATION

By Mara Canizzaro



Sonam Ongmu and Mara Canizzaro volunteered at the newly inaugurated Sanghamitra Foundation in Bodhgaya, despite the summer heat of about 120 F!

"Incredible India." This ingenious slogan provided by the Indian Bureau of Tourism in 2006 still makes me smile with its unabashed honesty, for India is unrelentingly and fantastically *incredible*. I've been here for almost two weeks, and I still cannot make sense of most all things I've witnessed. The question "Why?" does not compute here. Now when I see a cow halting four lanes of traffic, a pothole decked out with sacred flowers in a ditch, or a man selling street food so covered with flies that it squirms from inch to inch (and then someone *buys* it!), I return to my mantra, "Increeedible India."

I have no intention here to summarize India, for confining this land to my shifting perceptions and lackadaisical focus would do no justice to this mindblasting country nor to myself. No, instead I am writing this as a way to make meaning out of my time here on the other side of the world. So many thousands of miles and so many billions of strangers help me realize just how much it means to have an astounding support system of loved ones at home. I know no better way to express my gratitude than to share this experience, as I attempt to pluck these thoughts out of my mind and spill them out all over this page. May these words – arranged here in Bodhgaya beneath a purple mosquito net – transmit my current entanglement with nirvana masquerading as samsara. Indeed, this is a challenging riddle that life places sphinxlike before us.

My time here as a summer volunteer at Sanghamitra Foundation is more so than I could possibly have imagined, a monumental time for transformation in my life. Sanghamitra's brick and mortar is still under construction at this time, so it is in part my task to dream it into being while I am here. In a sense, this will be an initiation of sorts, or perhaps an invitation to be the ineffable *more*. Already, I am facing challenges beyond my comfort zone. Teaching 118 rowdy kids between the ages of two and thirteen years old without official

teaching supplies for the first time in my life is, well, an opportunity to become acquainted with who I've always wanted to be. I am by no means saying that I want to be a preschool teacher; in fact, I sincerely doubt I'll ever teach little children again (my voice is already shot from yelling the alphabet song over and over). To clarify, this experience is throwing me topsy-turvy into a world that I alone must navigate. All eyes are on me, and they are energetically wide open, and I can only hope to mirror back



the potential and the benevolence I see within each gaze. Now, in front of these endearing and grubby little children, I am a chant leader, yoga instructor, soccer referee, ever-constant white board demonstrator, and I am *empowered*.

I am also a total push-over. I can't get this one little boy to stop sitting on me whenever I move, and the swarms of reaching hands for mangos, guavas, chalkboards, stickers, or the very air sustaining my lungs has been something else. I am slowly learning key Hindi words like *sit*, *stop*, and *please stop screaming*, none of which as of yet hold no comprehensive value to anybody. This is week two and I am absolutely loving each moment. Bodhisattvahood, here I come...

A PLACE THAT IS CLOSER TO THE SKY

By Manuela Hess

At the end of May 2011, I finished my sabbatical, and a return to work was *not* what I really wanted. In the back of my mind I had already some idea of a volunteer project in the Himalayas, so after some e-mails with the Jamyang Foundation, I had the job! I was to teach English in a Buddhist nunnery in Zangskar, India at the beginning of July 2012.

Zangskar is a very remote area in the middle of the Himalayan mountains between Ladakh and Kashmir. It is a two-day bus ride from the city of Leh on uneven gravel roads. At one point, we stopped to use the bathroom, and the bus left without me – my backpack still on the roof! Luckily, with a taxi I caught the bus again and just thought to myself, “Be calm, these kind of things happen to you in India.”

We arrived in Zangskar at Manda, a small village with fifteen houses, a public school, along the river, surrounded by mountains, and the little nunnery Padma Ling Gompa with nine nuns. The oldest one was forty years old and the youngest ten years old. A warm welcome!

Their English knowledge was nearly zero – but why have you got hands and feet? The six weeks of teaching were a wonderful experience, but I had challenging days, times when I questioned the efficiency of my teaching – days when I just didn't understand the people's mentality and their understanding of school and education. Education cannot be taken for granted here. There is a compulsory education, but it doesn't mean that students go to school every day. If the fields had to be harvested, grocery shopping had to be done, or some relatives came for visit, then school had to wait. That's hard to understand for us in the West, so it took me time to get used to life there and to understand how people think.

I taught three to four hours each day of English and a little bit of basic math. Most of the nuns had never been to school; hence analytical thinking was difficult, especially for the older nuns. It was a challenge to my patience but at the same time a great happiness when they finally were able to say complete sentences in English or ask a question correctly.

Life in the nunnery was simple. I shared a little house with a nun and lived in a little “cell” with a mattress on the floor and a big window with a nice view of the Zangskar Valley. On my days off or after school, I often went for a walk in the village, through a pasture with yaks and cows, to the river, or to a “little” mountain. The average altitude was 3,500 meters! I always met friendly Zangskaris, who invited me for tea, tsampa (roasted barley flour), or freshly made yogurt. These people were so unbelievably friendly and hospitable. Often I traveled around on pick-up trucks operating as taxis, which were always packed with local people, but I never saw anybody complaining about being squeezed next to each other. No, they were laughing and making jokes the whole time.

Thanks to my knowledge of a few words of Ladakhi, the language spoken locally, I was able to communicate in a small way: to say where I'm from, that I am an English teacher in a nunnery, and that I'm not married. That was always a big surprise for them and immediately they wanted to organize a “magpa,” a husband, for me.

Saying goodbye to my nuns was harder than expected, but nevertheless I wanted return to Ladakh at the end of August. Together with Anina, a Swiss woman who taught in another nunnery, I trekked back to Ladakh. Seven days over 4,000 and 5,000 meter passes, breathtaking mountain views, camping under a fantastic starry sky and yes, also some chilling zero degree nights, ancient villages and monasteries offering chats and invitations for tea with friendly villagers, monks, and nuns. In my heart I already knew that I would come back here, a place that is closer to the sky.

My journey was truly a wonderful time, another kind of school for life. I met, traveled, and lived with many interesting people who inspired me with their stories about life and many other things. Thanks to all you for an incredible time and so many wonderful moments.



TEACHING IN PADUM AND ZANGSKAR

By Anna Yarigina

After a long journey from Leh, through the mountainous landscape of northwestern India, I arrived at Karsha Nunnery in Padum to teach English. Five of the nuns could speak a little bit of English, while the others didn't know any. We organized small groups – two groups for the beginners and two groups for intermediate-level students, and in total, twelve nuns attended one hour of English class each day. Teaching English went slowly, step-by-step as they learned. Thus I found I couldn't go to Dechen Chöling Institute as initially planned. It seemed impossible to quit our study prematurely, so I decided to stay at Karsha Nunnery until the end of September 2012.

During the last weeks of August I also visited the nunneries of Zangskar:

Pishu Nunnery. I spent three days at Pishu Nunnery, which was the poorest of the nunneries I visited. They barely have enough water for daily needs. Perhaps even more than water, there is a need for consistent teachers of Tibetan and English. Their knowledge of both these crucial languages is very poor. Nonetheless they are wholeheartedly willing to study. The days I stayed with the nuns we studied the ABC's and the Devanagari alphabet used in Sanskrit and Hindi. Luckily, I found that my visit came at quite a calm and auspicious time, as the nuns normally have no time for study, as they work regularly in the village.

Zangla Nunnery. I was only able to spend one day at Zangla Nunnery, where thirteen nuns are studying. I was happy to find the nuns speaking reasonable English and Hindi. At the time of my visit the nuns had an English teacher, but no Tibetan teacher.

Sani Nunnery. During the three days I spent at Sani Nunnery, the nuns were busily cooking for the painters who were working on the puja room. I helped conduct several classes in English and Hindi, which some of the nuns knew very well. Many also have an interest in drawing and knitting. They told me that a Lama sometimes comes to the nunnery to give them Tibetan language lessons, but this nunnery has no proper school, which I found very disheartening.

Tungri Nunnery. I stayed at Tungri Nunnery for five days. The nuns were very interested in studying Hindi and English, and we spent many hours in the classroom. The nunnery has a school, and in the evening the nuns study Tibetan under the guidance of a teacher. Having seen their willingness to study so hard, I decided to spend October 2012 teaching in this nunnery.



For more information on the
Jamyang Foundation please
visit our website at;

<http://www.jamyang.org>



The nuns of Sani Kachod Ling Nunnery, Village Sani in Zangskar.

