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# JAMYANG FOUNDATION

AN EDUCATION PROJECT FOR HIMALAYAN WOMEN

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2013 NEWSLETTER



jamyang.org | +1-619-260-4600 x4921 | ktsomo@sandiego.edu

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*A senior nun teaches a young nun the mandala mudra in Padum (Zanskar) during teachings given by HH Dalai Lama. © Olivier Adam*

## NEW YEAR GREETINGS TO OUR DEAR JAMYANG FOUNDATION FRIENDS,

Thanks to your kind generosity, the Jamyang Foundation students have all had a wonderful year of studies and spiritual practice. In January, we were able to bring 58 nuns to Sanghamitra Institute in Bodhgaya and to the 13<sup>th</sup> Sakyadhita International Conference on Buddhist Women in Vaishali, where they gained valuable knowledge and experience by interacting with people from around the world. This winter again, the nuns from the mountains are gathering to study at Sanghamitra Institute in Bodhgaya and escape the harsh winter months in the mountains. Over the winter break, I am teaching Buddhist English to 60 dedicated students in three classes each day. The nuns all send you their heartfelt appreciation for making all these wonderful opportunities possible!

Rejoicing in your good deeds! Hope you have a happy, peaceful, and prosperous year ahead.

With warm wishes,



Karma Lekshe Tsomo, Director

# UNPREDICTABLY DELIGHTFUL

by Connor Self

India is easily the most unpredictable place I have ever been. Any plans that you might have had, or conditions you might have expected, are liable to change at a moment's notice. This can certainly be the most frustrating thing for someone traveling in India for the first time. Nonetheless, if one can learn to accept this uncertainty, it becomes a kind of freedom, and one can even learn to really enjoy it. Things always work their way out in India, and usually for the better. A few examples: I left for Leh not knowing where I was supposed to stay when I arrived or whether I would have a ride from the airport. Then, after my flight was diverted twice because of cloud cover, I expected to spend another night in the dirty hotel where I had spent the night before in Jammu. However, I finally arrived in Leh with no idea about where to go. In the end, I got to spend the night in a luxury hotel for the price of a simple guesthouse.

After a few days, I arrived at Phakmo Ling Monastery in Skyagam and began to feel at ease. I still had no idea what the next day would bring, where I would be staying, or how long I would be there, but the hospitality of the nuns and, indeed, most everyone in Zangskar reassured me that things would work out. I managed to visit eight nunneries in Zangskar during my stay and felt a sense of genuine welcome and security everywhere I went.

The day after I arrived in Skyagam, I expected to settle into life at the monastery, but instead I was taken to Padum, where nuns from all over Zangskar were gathering for a three-day *puja* (religious service). It seems that multi-day events are the norm in this area. Several times during my stay, the nuns had to travel to other villages to perform pujas for recently deceased villagers. The whole process took at least three days, because oftentimes the village would be a day's walk away. Pujas were not the only special events, though; weddings also involved multi-day celebrations. Sometimes I was invited to a monastery for a full day, just to share a few meals, and endless glasses of milk tea, butter tea, and salt tea. At the end of the day, the nuns pleaded with me to stay for at least another day.

One of the most striking differences that I felt while being immersed in Zangskari culture was the lack of urgency or busyness as people went about their lives. In my life in the United States, it seems that I always have a list of things I need to do – if not a physical one, then surely one in my head. But while I traveled through Zangskar, I was forced to slow down, and match my pace of life to the locals' who never seemed to be in a hurry for anything.

These prolonged visits make sense when one considers the fact that it takes several hours to travel between villages – that is, if and when a bus or pickup happens to pass by. But inconsistent transportation is not the only factor that encourages this slow pace of life. In this remote region, there is a lack of economic development and social mobility. From talking to locals in Leh and Zangskar, I learned that in most regions around Ladakh, and most of Jammu and Kashmir State, tourism is the only really thriving sector of the local economy. In Zangskar, in particular, other than in tourism, there aren't many alternatives to



Connor Self with a few of his English students from Phagmo Ling, Skyagam (Zangskar).



agrarian village life. When there is nowhere to go and no real prospects for significant improvement in one's standard of living, there is less of a need to hurry or be so busy in everyday life.

That said, it is amazing how much the tourism industry is affecting Zangskar and the daily activities of the nuns, depending on the location of the monastery. Since Skyagam is located off the route from Kargil to Padum, and Padum is the destination for many trekkers and tourists, the nuns at Skyagam are virtually unaffected by the inflow of foreigners. In Karsha and Zangla, however, where trekking groups often pass through, the nuns must be ready for groups of foreigners to show up at any time of day. While these visitors provide a significant source of income for those nunneries that see them, they also take the nuns away from their studies and daily routines. On the flip side, they provide opportunities for the nuns to teach foreigners about Tibetan Buddhism and local culture. Yet the nuns' ability to teach others is heavily dependent on their ability to get an education themselves. This is one reason why the nuns both need and want to learn – not only to learn English, but also to further their Buddhist education.

With a new road being quickly constructed that will connect Padum to Lamayuru, the influx of foreign tourists is sure to increase. Tourism in a remote region like Zangskar is a double-edged sword. It can bring lots of money into an area and raise the standard of living, but it can also dilute local culture and customs. While in Zangskar, I saw both sides of this reality. I met university students from all over the United States. Some were teaching in local schools and helping protect the environment, while others were studying anthropology and photographing the daily life in the village of Tungri. I also met Hungarians from an NGO working to build a school and restore an ancient palace in Zangla.

On the other hand, I saw many other tourists who passed through with little respect for the local people or customs. Indeed, the festival held at Sani Monastery was swarming with Western tourists, some of whom were getting in the way of the festival just so they could get a few good photographs.

In any case, I think the education of the nuns in Zangskar will be increasingly valuable, because their contact with foreigners is sure to rise dramatically. Hopefully, by increasing their knowledge of both Buddhism and English the nuns will be better able to protect their beautiful culture and have meaningful interactions with tourists, too.

## SHARING DREAMS: A VISIT TO VISHAKHA SCHOOL

*by Dr. Mong Sano*

The month of March, when the scorching summer starts to ramp up in full gear to broil the entire country, is not necessarily the best time to visit Bangladesh. The daytime temperature was already hovering above 90° F when we arrived in Dhaka at the end of February this year, but the temperature of the politics was even hotter than the air. Sporadic strikes and violence on the streets kept us locked in Dhaka about two weeks until we finally came to a realization that it was time to take the risk; otherwise, we would never reach home. When we finally arrived at our home village of Singhinala in the Mahalchari-Khagrachari District, roughly half of our scheduled one-month visit was already gone.

Among many other things, the visit to Vishakha School, located in the remote, isolated village of Manikchary, was a top priority on our itinerary. The school has been giving the rare opportunity of educating girls since 2006. Run on generous funding from Jamyang Foundation, it offers basic education to girls from very poor family backgrounds. The girls who attend school there are the first generation in their family to go to school. Most of them would not have had access to basic education had it not been for this school. I was thrilled to visit the place, and was humbled and gratified to receive very special attention just for being part of the project. But I made it clear that the school was founded and continues to thrive due

## BOUNDLESS CAPACITY FOR COMPASSION

*by Millada Belohlavek*

I was interested in a volunteer opportunity with Jamyang Foundation because I wanted to do something meaningful. At its core, the Jamyang Foundation's mission to provide funding for facilities and scholarships in order to empower women is the bedrock of its success. In Tibetan Buddhist culture, the nuns play a vital role in the moral structure and education of the community. Ultimately, helping these women positively benefits the entire region.

I got involved because I was tired of feeling stagnant and useless in a world that has so many things to offer and so many things to improve. I have traveled before and was aware of the learning that inevitably comes with new people and new places, but I could never have imagined the knowledge I would acquire. I set out to teach, but quickly realized that I was really the student. I will never be able to thank the nuns of Changchub Chöling Gonpa enough for all they shared with me and the care they showed me during my two-month long stay. They are truly superwomen. They have a boundless capacity for compassion. I was constantly amazed by the tenderness and strength of these women, and the community that they inspire. I have been genuinely changed by my journey.



*Marma students at Vishakha School appreciate the opportunity to study with a woman teacher who speaks their language.*

to the kind and generous donations of Jamyang Foundation, led by an American Buddhist nun who is concerned about the well-being of people thousands of miles away.

During the trip, I could see and feel that changes are underway even in the most remote parts of Bangladesh. But the difficult times that the indigenous peoples in the Chittagong Hill Tracts are experiencing remain more challenging than ever before. Their ancestral lands are increasingly being occupied by illegal Bengali settlers who have migrated from the plains. The burden on the local population, on their lands and other natural resources is making life even harder for the dwindling tribal population. The surrounding villages in the neighborhood of Vishakha School are some of those unlucky villages that remain beyond the reach of basic rights and services to meet their most basic human needs, such as clean water, basic education, and healthcare. Hope seems to be the rarest commodity in that part of the world, but a little project called Vishakha School has begun lighting the hopes of 80 young girls.

Riding on the back of my friend's motorbike, I arrived unannounced at Vishkaha School a couple of days earlier than planned, accompanied by some good friends and the elected vice-chairperson of the Mahalchari Upazila Council. The school's teachers did not know that we would be arriving

that day. When we had arrived at the school around 2:45 pm, the preschooler children and first-graders had already been dismissed, but the students from grades 2 to 5 and all the teachers were there. We took some pictures of the classes and later sat down with teachers for about an hour. Later, we also walked hill terrains to reach a number of small villages in the neighborhood the school serves.

After visiting Vishakha School, we were able to meet with a few students who graduated from this school and are currently attending Manikchari Junior High School. My aim was to encourage them to go for higher studies. Since the junior high school is located in Manikchari proper, these girls have to walk hours each way, every school day, over hilly terrain, rain or shine, just to attend school. The area is not safe for girls, so they walk in groups in order to continue their schooling. An encouraging fact is that most Vishakha School girls have gone on to junior high after finishing primary school. If these girls can continue to college and find better jobs in the future, the little villages surrounding Vishakha School will change for the better. That is the hope that I took away from this trip.

Many thanks to the donors to the Jamyang Foundation for their continued support for Vishakha School and for providing these children with educational opportunities.



## FROM DREAM TO REALITY

by Linda Bortoletto

In mid-August last summer, I arrived in Padum, the capital of Zaskar, by night, relieved to get down from the noisy Tata truck whose driver nicely accepted to drive me till here. It was pitch dark outside. No electricity. No moon. I could just feel the curious eyes of some people still outside at this late hour. I am used to traveling alone and, as a young woman, it's usually like this. People wonder why you are alone. But that is the best way to immerse yourself into the culture you want to discover. I had decided to travel to this remote place, amazingly located in the heart of the Himalayan mountains, to discover traditional Buddhism as practiced by the nuns who have decided to devote themselves to this religion.

Why this desire? Actually, everything began with a dream. A real one. It was more than one year ago, but I can remember it down to the last detail. I was in the middle of very high mountains, on a plateau – mountains that I've never seen before, with sharp ochre-colored stones. I could hear the sound of a strong river flowing in the surrounding area. On my right, there was a kind of natural hole inside an imposing rock where a wonderful object was standing, like a precious jewel waiting only to be touched by the eyes. It was made of a big golden sphere surrounded by blue petals that were ornamented with very fine golden paintings on the edges. In front of me, a tall man dressed in a red and blue robe was looking at me

in silence with the most peaceful smile I've ever seen. When I woke up, I had a strange feeling and decided to do some web research about that object. I figured out that it could be a blue lotus flower, and very quickly, I discovered some clear connections with Buddhism. Before that, I have to admit that I knew just a little about Buddhism. That dream marked the starting point of my desire to learn much more about it.

Caught up in the stream of life, months went by until I finally stumbled upon a book written by a French ethnologist talking about Buddhist nuns. Very quickly, I became interested in meeting them. Maybe because I am a woman. I wanted to understand their choice and to discover their lives. That is how I got in touch with Jamyang Foundation and, more particularly, with Karma Lekshe Tsomo. I told her about my wish to discover the lives of the Buddhist nuns, especially those who are living in wild and remote areas, who are still close to traditional Buddhism. Zaskar appeared to be the place of my dreams.

Everything then went very fast and, a few weeks later, here I was! In Padum, eager to meet the nuns and to immerse myself in Buddhist culture. I decided to spend time in three monasteries: Karsha, Zangla, and Pishu. Each of my stays was truly amazing. Each of these nuns' monasteries had something very special and different, because of the location as much as the personality of the nuns, that created a very unique atmosphere throughout their community. I can't forget the smiles, the laughs, and the gazes full of joy and goodness that



*Linda Bortoletto relaxing with the nuns of Khachoe Drubling after lessons.*

I discovered in all the nuns I met. I also can't forget the amazing scenery that I could see every day, from dawn to dusk. Zangskar certainly has some very special quality, being surrounded by such beautiful mountains that radiate a strength everyone can feel.

The monasteries all had a warm and peaceful atmosphere that encourages you to stay longer and makes you forget everything from the busy western life you've just left a few days ago. No matter how little I could communicate with the nuns (even though some speak very good English!), no words were needed when it came to transmitting love and compassion. And these are the values that tend to be dramatically forgotten in modern societies. I was so happy to be with the nuns and to help them in any way I could – teaching them English, helping with their everyday life, taking care of the little nuns in the monastery school. The six weeks I spent in the monasteries went by very fast.

When I was in Pishu, I realized that the nunnery was almost never visited, unlike Karsha and Zangla, and that the nuns there would really like to have an English teacher for a few months. So I promised myself to get back there next year, during the wintertime, to help them. Then I will be able to discover even more of the magic of this wild area. Finally, what about my dream? Did it become true? Oh, I think it would be too easy if things like that could happen! All I can say is that the mountains I saw in my dream were exactly the same as the ones that I saw in Zangskar. And I deeply feel that, for some unexplainable reason, I was destined to go to this place and that my life has now taken a good path.

## MARMOTS SCAMPERING FREELY

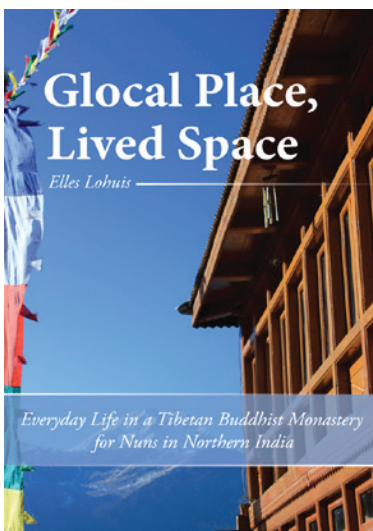
*by Spencer MacDonald*

The two day drive from Leh to Zangskar upon bumpy, unpaved roads, felt as if we were driving through what Mars must have looked like if it was ever habitable. Vast desert valleys with towering, snow-peaked Himalayas on all sides, with horses, yaks, donkeys, and marmots scampering freely all over. Having just graduated from a busy California university, I had no idea that our planet still possessed such remote, accessible places. Arriving to Zangskar pushed me to boundaries of my comfort zone that I had previously never visited. I felt very nervous and out of place.

Once I first saw the faces of some of the nuns, all of my anxiety was relinquished. When they found out that I had come to teach them, they instantly lit up and treated me with the most warmth, compassion and love that any group of people has ever shown me. I instantly felt as if I were in the hands of my own mother. They show the utmost respect to teachers and took me in as a member of the family. Never once did I feel uncared for.

What impressed me the most was their desire to learn. Although our classes had an informal, laid back atmosphere, the nuns were incredibly present and did not waste one second of our class time. Even nuns in their sixties and seventies would attend class with the desire to learn English and other foreign concepts. Watching them practice outside of class and using the phrases that I had taught them was incredibly rewarding, and I knew that my time spent teaching them was not in vain.

The nuns of Chuchukjal are the most appreciative, welcoming, loving group of people I have ever come across. While in the eyes of many westerners they may appear to be “uncivilized,” the simple lives that they live can teach all westerners how to find meaning in our busy, cluttered lives. The atmosphere of the breezy hillside upon which the nunnery lays, is constantly charged with the laughter of the nuns, who never miss an opportunity to be lost in the moment laughing or in appreciation of everything that they have. The nine weeks that I spent in Karsha village was the most transformative, meaningful experience that I have ever had. No matter where I go physically, my mind and heart will always remain at the Chuchikjal Nunnery in Karsha village of Zangskar.



## AWAKENING THE ACTIVIST

*by Elles Lohuis*

In 2006, I went to the Northern Himalayas of India as a volunteer teacher with the Jamyang Foundation. With the intention of teaching English just for one summer I met the 23 nuns of Jampa Chöling in Kinnaur. From the beginning, I was overwhelmed by the determination of the young nuns who had built their monastery with their own hands in 2000, with the support of Jamyang Foundation. Teaching at high altitude in a different culture with little facilities proved to be a challenge but I soon noticed I wasn't the only one challenged. Keen and most dedicated to get a Buddhist education, the nuns ran into all sorts of obstacles in their daily lives.

The nuns' eagerness to learn awakened the activist in me. I wanted to contribute firsthand as a volunteer by teaching and developing a curriculum with the nuns that would benefit them the most. At the same time, as I tried to understand the issues surrounding education that the nuns brought forward, the whole process awakened the researcher in me.



A thorough analysis of the issues in and around the monastery would contribute toward facilitating future Jamyang Foundation projects. When I returned home after the summer, I applied for funding from the Department of Education in the Netherlands to pursue a Ph.D. and started researching the effects of education on the nuns' daily lives.

I conducted my research in collaboration with the nuns of Jampa Choling, working with them in an equal partnership as much as possible. I lived with the nuns in their monastery for 14 months from 2006 to 2010 so as to understand their lives from the inside. Living according to the monastic schedule and taking part in all activities gave me the most valuable insights and perspective on the nuns' lives. Everyday I gave classes and observed the nuns wherever possible, inside and outside the monastery. In addition to living at Jampa Choling for so long, in 2008 and 2009 with Bhiksuni Karma Lekshe Tsomo, I visited eight other monasteries supported by Jamyang Foundation in Zangskar. In 2008, I also spent three months as a volunteer teacher at two of the Jamyang Foundation monasteries in Spiti and visited them again in 2009. Bhiksuni Karma Lekshe Tsomo granted me a lot of her precious time, something that I am so grateful for.

What did I find? I first noticed the huge variety in the monasteries. The monasteries in Zangskar have nuns ranging from 8 to 80 living together, while the monasteries in Spiti and Kinnaur have nuns ranging from 12 to 50 years of age. Some of the monasteries have only six nuns while others have more than 30 nuns. The geography varies from barren high-desert altitudes with little water to luscious green hills with monsoon climate. The religious surroundings also differ. Whereas Spiti and Zangskar are predominantly Buddhist societies that have a history of supporting monastics (monks, mind you, *not* nuns), Kinnaur has become mostly Hindu over the last centuries. Buddhism is fading there and the local population does not support the nuns at all. Amidst such diversity, what all these nuns have in common is that Jamyang Foundation has enabled them to build their own monastery and live a full-time monastic lifestyle with studies. Making full use of Jamyang Foundation's donations, all the nuns have successfully established new monasteries for women in line with Jamyang Foundation's vision: a dedicated monastic life with educational opportunities.







*A senior nun mentors a small munchkin with loving kindness at Khachoe Drubling Monastery in Karsha (Zangskar).*

Making full use of all that Jamyang Foundation offers them, the nuns have transformed their lives through their monastic communities. The nuns have succeeded in setting up a secure and safe home for future generations of female Buddhist practitioners. Life at the monasteries is settled and the monastic communities are slowly growing. The traditional societies surrounding them still do not support the nuns to sustain their monastic lifestyle, however. The nuns' families either do not have the financial means to support the nuns or are not willing to fund their daughters' choices. Even though traditional environment is showing signs of change, it is not likely that the surrounding communities will provide much support for the nuns anytime soon. Jamyang Foundation's support to help the nuns develop their monastic communities will be vital in the coming decades.

It has been seven years since I first met the Jampa Chöling nuns on their mountaintop in the Northern Himalayas. In awe of their enormous dedication to serve the Dharma and their own monastic community, I have personally witnessed how the nuns' commitment has borne fruit beyond their own expectations. Teaching Rinchen Dolma her first English words in 2006, I observed how she passed the knowledge she gained on to new sister Tenzin Dechen in 2010 by showing her how to write the letter "e" of the English alphabet. Recalling this incident, Tenzin Dechen told me "Teacher, when we first built our *gonpa* (monastery), I never thought I could become a teacher. Now everything has changed and I know, I really feel that I will be teacher someday."

The world has opened up for the nuns on the mountaintop, offering possibilities that the nuns are avidly taking up. Speaking on the phone to Tenzin Dechen in July of 2013 and taking stock of the nuns' achievements since 2006, she told me "Teacher, in six years so much changed. Just think, when you sit with us in our kitchen, when we are old and look at all young nuns in the *gonpa* doing debates really good. I sometimes think of this teacher, and that makes me very happy, just thinking about this."

In June 2013 I successfully defended my dissertation, titled "Glocal Place, Lived Space: Everyday Life in a Tibetan Buddhist Monastery for Nuns in Northern India." The thesis is available at Amazon.com and all proceeds will go to Jamyang Foundation. I have taken a sabbatical and will return to India to teach the nuns at Sanghamitra Institute in Bodhgaya for 4 months this winter. Needless to say, I'm looking forward to witnessing another fruitful seven years with Jamyang Foundation!



For more information on  
Jamyang Foundation please  
visit our website;  
[jamyang.org](http://jamyang.org)

