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# JAMYANG FOUNDATION

## CHANGING PERCEPTIONS OF WOMEN'S POTENTIAL

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2020 NEWSLETTER



5998 Alcala Park, San Diego, CA 92110 | [www.jamyang.org](http://www.jamyang.org)



Dear Friends of Jamyang Foundation,  
2020 has been a year of changes and challenges. Thankfully, the Himalayan nuns are all safe in the mountains, despite the intense cold and minimal amenities. The students at Sanghamitra Institute last winter stayed in quarantine for two months, until the Himachal State Government sent buses to take them to their monasteries. Thankfully, all are safe and healthy, except for the occasional malady. The Yangchen Chöling nuns are temporarily lodging in Manali due to a lack of water at their monastery in Spiti. Climate change is seriously disrupting the Himalayan region.

Sadly, we had to cancel our volunteer programs in India for everyone's protection. Visakha Girls' School in Bangladesh was closed by government mandate and is now cautiously reopening. We sent laptops to our fourteen scholarship students at Chittabong University. Donations have slowed to a trickle and the future is uncertain. More than ever, we appreciate your kind support.

May you be healthy and content in the coming year!

Karma Lekshe Tsomo, Director

### SNOW AND SURPRISES IN ZANGSKAR

*by Aisha Allen*

We can just forget about the long international flights endured before arriving in Ladakh. For me, the adventure began in Leh, the capital, when the jeep was loaded and we buckled up for the two-day jaw-dropping, picturesque drive to the Zangskar Valley. Did I mention the rocky road and multiple bumpy stream crossings? Wrapping our faces with a bandana against the dust, we embarked on a long, long ride with very few stops. The first surprise came from my iPhone lying on the seat. Except for a noodle lunch stop and two rest breaks, I hadn't gone anywhere, but the activity app said I'd walked 9.3 miles and climbed 257 storeys – quite the workout for never leaving the jeep! That certainly doesn't happen at sea level in Hawai'i.

The second surprise was how flawlessly our driver Wangchuk delivered us safely to Zangskar. This unsung hero was always in good spirits, played excellent music, recited prayers every morning, and never got lost. The jeep

never broke down, tires never went flat, and miraculously nothing fell off the roof rack. We owe an enduring debt of gratitude to him and the road workers.

At long last, we arrived at Karsha, more than 12,000 miles from home in Honolulu. It was the end of July in 2019, when international travel was still robust. I had the honor of traveling with Venerable Karma Lekshe Tsomo, a professor of Buddhist Studies at the University of San Diego and founder of Jamyang Foundation, who had visited Zangskar many times before.

As we settled into our rooms at Juchik Shelgon, the nuns' monastery, we were in for another surprise. Faintly, through the mud walls, we heard American voices next door. 'That's interesting,' we thought. Maybe after a cup of tea, we'd do some exploring and meet our neighbors. Gradually the voices shifted from the room next door to the roof above and then suddenly, out of the blue, a drone cruised by outside our window. Curiosity peaked, I decided to check it out and headed up a ladder to the roof. There, I found three friendly young American college students.

"You're a long way from home," I said. "What brings you to Zangskar?"

A young man named Blake replied, "I took a course at the University of San Diego with a professor who started education programs for nuns in Zangskar. After hearing about them, I wanted to visit and volunteer. This is my second visit."

"Would you like to say hello?" I asked. "She's downstairs." Imagine his astonishment to run into his professor halfway around the world. With delight, we all went downstairs for a cup of tea – an indispensable custom in Zangskar. This surprise meeting of old and new friends in the middle of nowhere is what Hawaiians call "small island."

As young as he is, Blake has contributed generously to Jamyang Foundation. On his first trip to Zangskar as a volunteer English teacher, he traveled with his mother. When he saw the colorful designs the young nuns drew, he decided to imprint them on hydro flasks and market them to raise funds to support the nuns' education. Gathering his friends and family behind the project, he worked hard to make a difference in the world.

Looking out over the remote Himalayan landscape, I see only earth, rocks, and a few scraggly plants. The wise women of Zangskar see much more. Despite the cold winds, they're out gathering tender young greens for this evening's dinner. Observing more closely, I can see the tiny edible plants that nature provides popping up in the high Himalayan desert. Their determination amidst the harsh terrain is an inspiration.

For a photostory of our adventures, see "Journey to Zangskar" on YouTube:



A Wee Break on the Mountain Path

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oqNk0qCaa1A>

Edited by Gillian Arnold Atlas.



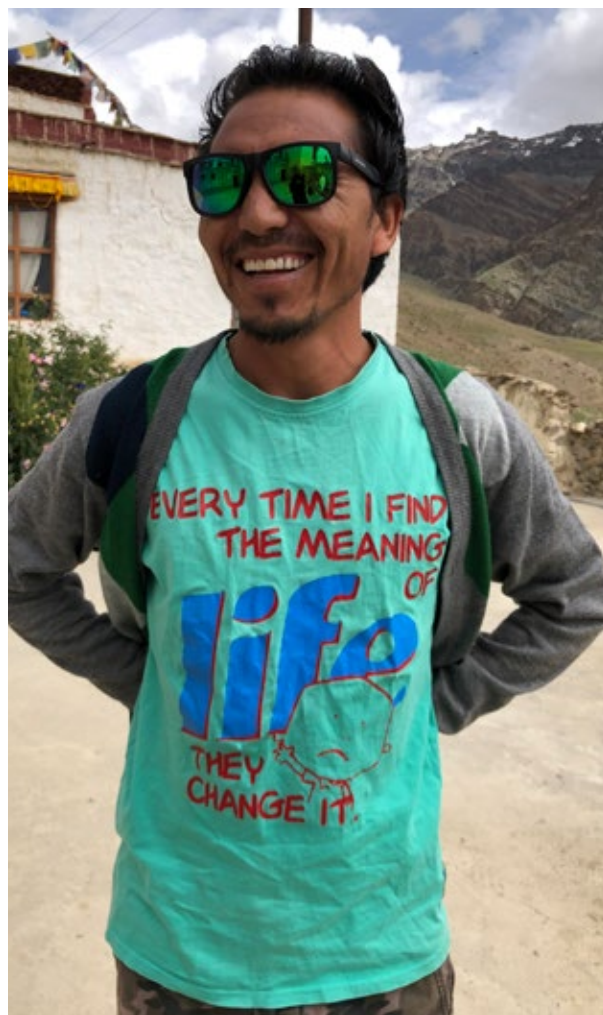


Monastery in the Sky





Loading the Jeep to Zangskar



Our Cheerful, Devout Driver



Route of the Yaks





Snacktime at the Nomad Camp



Gathering Herbs along the Way



Pishu Nun



Churning Butter with the Nomads





Cornelia 2024

## PEARLS IN THE HAZE

by Cornelia Principi

In the early morning, the cold reached all my limbs. During the first night, it was extremely cold and the bed so hard, I thought I would die. The humid air penetrated my joints. The first morning, I was careful with the water. Hygienic standards are quite different in India from what I am used to. Fortunately, I was able to adjust. Unless my plate was washed with boiled water, it scared me. But it was never a serious problem and I never got sick.

The sounds of endless reciting of Dharma texts resound across the grounds. The nuns have been awake for a long time and their voices are enchanting in the morning air, still veiled in a haze of mist. The sun was a rare guest, if it appeared at all during the first days of my stay in Bodhgaya. The rooms of the building were built for hot days, but they warmed up enough that we could concentrate on the lessons.

The nuns didn't seem to mind. Their "Good morning, mam!" sounded so pleasant and friendly that my self-pity melted. The warmth of their hearts outweighed the cold. It is hard to put into words how deeply these young women touched me, from the first moment on, as if we had known each other for a long, long time. It quickly became clear that teaching English was not the only reason I was there.

The older nuns wanted to learn to talk together, but their English abilities were quite different. The nuns from Kinnaur were more used to expressing themselves in English, while the nuns from Spiti were shy to talk about themselves. Although the nuns were confident (some even shouted during daily philosophical debates), talking about their own feelings was new to them. Slowly over the five weeks, with gentle encouragement, they opened up about their lives as nuns. In time, deep and touching conversations unfolded about their visions and dreams. They talked about themselves and their families, whom they love dearly, and they shared their friendship with me. Our classes became exchanges among friends, a giving and receiving of gifts. Even as I write these lines, barely three weeks after my departure, my heart is still moved. I miss them dearly.

I took the younger nuns on a journey around the world. Only some of them realized that their homelands were in India or that India was on the continent of Asia. But thanks to their curiosity and inquisitiveness, we circled the entire globe in five weeks. By the time I left, I think each of them was at least aware that Peru is in South America and not in Japan.

I enjoyed every hour of our lessons and never got bored. The classes were utterly different from the endless classes I endured with unmotivated young people in Switzerland. If

all students were like Himalayan nuns, what a great joy it would be for any teacher's heart!

The warm atmosphere the nuns created drove the cold from the walls of the building and compensated for the inconveniences of the first days of my stay. As the sun began to warm the stiffly frozen town, the voices of the nuns in the garden sounded like music, mingling with the chirping of the birds. The monastery is a little paradise on the banks of the dry Niranjana River. In stark contrast to the bitter poverty and dirt of the town, Sanghamitra Institute is an oasis, and the nuns are shining pearls in the haze.

## BE GOOD

*by Hsingju Lin*

The first time I flew to India to visit Sanghamitra Institute was in 2012. A large group of nuns from the Himalayan monasteries supported by Jamyang Foundation had gathered in Bodhgaya for a winter study program. The nuns all stayed in tents while construction continued on the institute's new building. Despite the simple living conditions, the nuns were all very happy for the chance to study. And they were all lovely.

On that first visit, I was only able to stay a few days and wasn't able to closely observe the nuns' lives. On my second visit, in 2013 to attend the 13th Sakyadhita International Conference on Buddhist Women in Vaishali, I got to know them better. A busload of forty-five nuns arrived from Bodhgaya to attend the week-long gathering in the village where the Buddha's stepmother became the first Buddhist nun. The gathering included diverse panels, meditations, and workshops, and the nuns were again lovely.

After that, each year I hoped to visit the nuns' monasteries in the Himalayas but couldn't. I had left Taiwan for Germany, and was dealing with various challenges of living abroad. Nonetheless, the nuns were always in my heart and I still wanted to support their education.

In January 2020, I finally made it back to India and was able to visit them again in Bodhgaya. I was asked to teach basic computer skills to two groups of nuns ages 13 to 17. On the first day, I struggled to divert their attention away from the computer camera and games. Some of us can surf the internet anytime, but for these nuns computers were all new.

Although the Sanghamitra Institute had created an environment conducive to learning, the students needed to share laptops and power outages limited internet availability. Even so, the nuns were keen to learn computer skills. What basic programs should I teach them during my short three-week stay? I chose MSWord and PowerPoint, since these applications overlap and could be learned fairly quickly.



On the second day of classes, I introduced both applications and created a schedule for our course with a clear goal: for the final exam, each nun would create a Powerpoint and present it to the class. This assignment would combine English language learning and computer skills. Once the goal was announced, I asked the nuns to cooperate to achieve it, participate with full attention, complete all assignments on time, and feel free to ask questions.

The rules were clear but that didn't ensure the classes would run smoothly. The nuns had been studying Buddhist philosophy and Tibetan for years but had little experience with compact courses on specific subjects. Short-term courses like this are valuable but they end once the volunteers leave. On the other hand, educating young people systematically long-term requires many resources lacking in rural India. I asked myself whether it was possible to create a method for continual self-learning within three weeks.

We started by establishing strict discipline: no sick leave or incomplete assignments. Also, no nun could be left behind. Therefore, we relied on teamwork. Anyone who had finished an assignment automatically became an assistant teacher to tutor others in their mother tongue.

During the first week, it was quite stressful to maintain these strict protocols and it wasn't clear that our efforts were



moving us in the right direction. During the second week, I wondered whether it might be better to relax the rules and my expectations. But gradually I saw improvement in both the groups and the individuals! The students saw it too. They realized how much they learned from each assignment by following the schedule and attending all classes, recapping what we had learned from time to time. The second week was a turning point for me: the students were progressing in MSWord and their discipline seemed effortless.

The next step was to learn PowerPoint. The assignment was for each nun to introduce herself, her nunnery, and her favorite subject. Each was expected to create a project to present to the class. Teaching became very satisfying the moment I saw them help each other prepare their presentations using a variety of Powerpoint features. There was a very harmonious atmosphere among them.

Working with them on their projects was the first time I learned about their family backgrounds. I had often heard stories about the harsh environment, poverty, and lack of educational opportunities for girls in Himalayan mountain areas. I wondered how each family felt about their daughter's decision to lead a religious life.

After a few practice rounds, the nuns were ready to give their final presentations. When I saw them stand confidently in front of the class, well-prepared, and ready to interact with the audience for Q&A, I felt very proud and was pleased to see how well they performed. Not only were they individually competent, but they also demonstrated how well they worked together. With strict self-discipline, they

had all successfully completed the three-week course.

The nuns clearly have great potential. I kept asking myself, 'What if they had the learning resources we have in our schools? Aren't they equally capable of collaborative learning? If this three-week program was such a successful experiment, imagine what they could do if we offered them more resources and supported their projects steadily for three to five years?

One evening during activity hour, we held a drawing workshop. Each nun was instructed to pick a word that represented a value, such as compassion, wisdom, honesty, or kindness, that she would like to achieve in her practice. After each nun selected a specific value, she was to give it form, design it, and paint it.

One little nun about ten years old asked me for help forming the word "good." While I wondered how she might understand "good," I had great fun drawing it with her. Other little nuns gradually joined us.

A few days later, the word "good" inspired me to think of my own goals. "Good" felt more comfortable than expecting myself to be compassionate all the time. "Good" felt positive and attainable. "Good" felt like the nuns' progress over the three weeks. It was an overall "good" result.

Soon after I returned to Germany, we faced our first lockdown. During this time, I created three paintings of the ocean, inspired by the word "good."

I would like to thank Jamyang Foundation, Elles Lohuis, Karma Lekshe Tsomo, and the nuns for making my three-week holiday such a profound experience.





The Eldest Nun in Zangskar



A Young Nun of Tungri

## THE COVID CRISIS

The pandemic has led to many changes for the nuns of Yangchen Chöling. This winter there was no snow in Spiti so there was no water at their monastery and their philosophy teacher, Geshe Jampa Gyatso, and some of the nuns came down with hepatitis. In October, the nuns and their teacher had to move from Spiti Valley to Manali. They rented a house in a quiet village outside of Manali where they stay inside quietly studying and reciting prayers for the health and safety of all sentient beings. Despite the upheaval, they completed their exams a week after moving. They are currently focusing on the *Commentary on Valid Cognition* in preparation for Jang Kunchö, the nuns' intramural debate tournament. Three Spiti nuns share their reflections here.

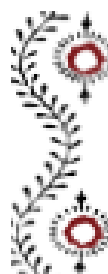
*2020 has been very sad for everyone. It was very difficult for everyone to suffer through this crisis. We said lots of prayers and prayed for the world to be free from the pandemic soon. The situation was especially difficult for people in Spiti to survive because the region lacks facilities. We don't have good doctors, the cold is intense, and people suffer from a variety of illnesses. We hope that everyone who is suffering from the pandemic will recover soon and we will have a happy world again.*

—Chhetan Dolma

*These days, everyone's studies are disrupted, and work has stopped. People are dying due to the virus, which is very sad for everyone. We pray that COVID-19 will soon be eradicated and a disease like this will never come into the world again.* —Tanzin Dolma

*This year, the world is facing tragic challenges due to COVID-19. Sadly, many human lives have been lost due to the virus. Millions of people who are living in poverty are going through unbearable crises and do not have the essentials they need for survival. We pray for them all and hope that the world will get back to normal soon.*

—Tenzin Desal



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Jamyang Foundation please  
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