
JAMYANG FOUNDATION

AN EDUCATION PROJECT FOR HIMALAYAN WOMEN

2022 NEWSLETTER



5998 Alcala Park, San Diego, CA 92110 | www.jamyang.org



New Year greetings to our dear Jamyang Foundation friends!

Warm greetings from the Jamyang Foundation students, teachers, volunteers, and friends! During the past three years, the nuns in India and schoolgirls in Bangladesh have diligently continued their studies and spiritual practices. During the month of July 2022, we organized a month-long English Training Program for Himalayan nuns just outside of Leh, Ladakh. Now that the pandemic is settling down a bit, 80 Himalaya nuns, large and small, have arrived at Sanghamitra Institute in Bodhgaya to resume their winter programs. All the nuns, teachers, and volunteers are delighted and feel deeply grateful to you for making these groundbreaking education programs possible. In 2023, with your kind help, we hope to build a small temple at Sanghamitra Institute ~ a place to be still and envision a happy, peaceful world.

Wishing you a safe, healthy, joyful New Year!

With warm wishes,

Karma Lekshe Tsomo
Director, Jamyang Foundation

LEARNING A LANGUAGE OF LOVE

by AnkitaParameswaran

On the day I landed in Leh, the capital of Ladakh, little did I know what lay ahead. This month of August 2023 would become a time of many firsts for me: my first time traveling alone, my first time visiting Ladakh and meeting nuns, my first time teaching a class of adults, my first time sleeping under the stars, and my first time thinking that my life was heading in the right direction.

That first day, I saw four young nuns from our English Training Program for Himalayan Nuns on their way to take a short walk around the neighborhood. My fellow volunteer teachers and I decided to join them. The nuns were walking about 15 feet in front of us and the only interactions we had were “Hello, what is your name?” and “Where have you come from?”

For me, things seemed pretty bleak that day. I wasn’t sure whether I would be able to handle this responsibility. I now wish I could go back in time to that day and tell myself about the last day of the program when we walked hand in hand with the nuns, making promises that we’ll visit each other’s hometowns.

We tackled spelling by dividing words into bits and pieces so it would be easier to retain. We showed them that spell check is definitely a very useful tool. Along with that, we introduced them to Duolingo, which proved to be an asset, since it can be adjusted to each individual’s level. The interactive nature of the app really grabbed their attention and they made good use of it in their free time. In the English classes, we moved on to conversational English. We practiced speaking not only in the classroom but also outside, to help them learn the language more quickly. Slowly, we introduced them to Dharma teachings online, starting with dalailama.com, and they took an instant liking to the site. Helping them differentiate between good information, bad information, and scams is of utmost importance and we grappled with that in several classes.

It would be an understatement to say that the nuns taught me more than I could ever dream of teaching them. Having spent the majority of my life in the city, I was now living in a quaint village alongside these beautiful human beings and learning about their culture was truly an eye-opening experience. By the end of August, the village of Nyerma had started to feel like home.

Although I took on the role of a teacher in the classroom, once class was dismissed, the nuns treated me as a sister or daughter. Their thirst for knowledge and determination motivated me to do my best. Most of the nuns had never seen or touched a laptop before the program began. It makes me very happy to think that those same nuns were enthusiastically sending me email messages by the end of the first session. I made a separate folder for all the messages and letters that the students sent me during our short time together and I hope that our little tradition of updating each other about our mundane activities doesn’t get lost in the bustle of life.

Learning a new language is no easy feat and it was definitely challenging for the nuns to pick up so many new words and concepts all at once. But no matter how difficult it got, they never gave up. I hope to adopt that same attitude in my life from here onwards. I remember how they would ask me questions even during dinner or before classes started. Sometimes they would also teach me their own language, which was definitely one of the most fun parts of our interactions. I wonder whether I managed to earn the title of “a good student.”

I am very thankful for the warm smiles that greeted me every morning and I know I will be coming back soon to see my dear students again. I want to express my thanks to them for the love they showed me in Ladakh. Certainly, I shall never forget this experience.



DETERMINATION, LAUGHTER, AND FUTURE POSSIBILITIES

by Blake Bierwith

This past August, I had the wonderful opportunity to visit Zangskar for my third time. I began my two-day journey with my friend Lobzang, a Buddhist monk whom I met at Karsha Monastery four years ago. We took the newly built road that runs past Lingshed Monastery. I was thrilled when he told me the new road cut the car ride from 19 hours to 9 hours. However, the decreased distance was also accompanied by a dramatic increase in thrill! The road to Zangskar is not for the faint of heart. It seems to challenge the peace of mind of even the most advanced spiritual practitioners, not to mention the less advanced, such as myself. I am about 6 feet tall and completely unsuited to the ergonomics of Indian-made cars. I must have hit my head against the door of the car 100 times while we drove across boulders, rivers, ditches, and sharp turns with thousands of feet of vertical drop-off. I remember wondering what kind of bad karma I had accrued to result in this growing lump on my head.

Lobzang later told me how his teacher had escaped from Tibet, traveling through the Himalayas on foot for over one month all the while eating nothing but barley flour. He attributes the great struggles he experienced to be the fuel for his development of bodhicitta, the mind of awakening. Looking at my own discomforts from this perspective has shifted my perspective to one of gratitude. As we slowly descended through the snow-peaked Himalayas into the majestic Zangskar Valley, we finally made it to Karsha nunnery.

Although my original plan was to stay at Karsha monastery with Lobzang, the nuns told me that they had already prepared a room for me and hoped I would stay with them. Before arriving, I was nervous that they wouldn't remember me, because I hadn't seen them for three years due to COVID restrictions. In my heart, I was hoping to stay at the nunnery rather than the monastery because the energy at the nunnery feels more like a big family. I also had some trepidation about being a male and was worried about unconsciously breaking some of the rules. However, I soon realized I was thinking too much. All the nuns had been addressing me as Nono, which means "little brother." I decided to step out my perceived role as a guest and into the role of a family member.

It was surprising how natural it felt to see the nuns as sisters, aunties, and grandmothers. Although I was over 8,000 miles from California, I still felt like I was living at home. In my immediate family, we are always joking and playfully teasing each other. A sense of humor is an important foundation of our relationships. I quickly found out that the nuns also have a wonderful sense of humor. Here are some short stories that point to that.

At some point, I made the mistake of eating some raw vegetables and developed stomach problems for a few days. During that time, one of the nuns offered me an omelet for breakfast, but I declined. She gave me a quizzical look and then made an expression as if to say, "Ah, yes, your stomach is bad." She then looked at me, smiled, and made a loud farting gesture as she took the omelet away. Everyone was laughing so hard!

I have always had the strange ability of wiggling my ears. Sometimes at dinner, I would discreetly make eye contact with one of the nuns, wiggle my ears, then immediately look away and act as if nothing had happened. Her eyes would grow wide and jaw drop and then she would shake one of the sisters sitting next to her and exclaim, "Look at Nono! Look at what he's doing!"

In the dining hall, there is a pony wall that divides the kitchen from the dining area. Some days I would sneak up behind the wall with some tsampa (barley dough) and lightly touch the top of one of the nuns' heads while they were cooking. I would immediately duck back behind the wall so they couldn't see me. After a few times, they would shriek, "What is on my head?" perhaps thinking it was a spider. They would then turn around to find me standing there and we would all start laughing so much.

Even while writing this I am smiling, reminiscing about the uplifting and joyful atmosphere. I feel I could continue writing stories of the affable, familial environment. It was definitely fun, lightening life at the nunnery, which involves a tremendous amount of work, physically, mentally, and spiritually.

It is inspiring to watch the nuns work. One day, the steep road up to the nunnery was being repaired and the nuns had to walk about a quarter mile to pick up their monthly food supply. A quarter mile doesn't sound like much, but factoring in an altitude of about 13,000 feet, a very steep road, and bags of rice and lentils weighing about 45 pounds, that quarter mile feels like several miles! I speak from experience. I played American football up until college and have always been of athletic build, so I figured that if some of these older nuns could do this, it shouldn't be difficult for me. I strapped a few heavy bags of flour to my back using the traditional wooden basket and rope. I remember, after walking up and down the road a few times, trying to catch a breath of air while the rope was digging into my chest from the weight of the barley flour pressing against my back. I was light-headed and exhausted thinking, "How have they been doing this for so long?" I felt like I was reliving all my football conditioning drills!

But even with the hard physical demands of day-to-day life, the nuns always make time for their prayers and morning meditation. I had the pleasure of joining their morning puja on several occasions. The nuns have memorized several textbooks of Tibetan Buddhist prayers and chants and sitting in the nunnery temple is such a peaceful experience. I was always aware of the divine energy in the room, cultivated from decades of sincere spiritual endeavor. Specifically, I remember that on the tenth day of the lunar month, I joined the nuns for their Guru Padmasambhava Puja at 7am. They were engrossed in chants and prayers until after 10am! However, that was just the start of their day.

A large responsibility of being a nun is mentoring young apprentice nuns. These are generally children below the age of ten who may live with an older nun to become immersed in the Buddhist lifestyle. Each day, the senior nuns train the young nuns in Buddhist philosophy, Tibetan culture and language, cooking, cleaning, and much more. For decades, the older nuns at Karsha



and the other nunneries in Zangskar have been playing the role of mother, role model, teacher, and friend to generations of children who have walked through their doors. The goal is for the children to receive a full college education, generally in Dharamsala or South India, and hopefully to become fully ordained nuns in order to serve the world at a high level. There is a great documentary on YouTube titled, “Becoming a Woman in Zangskar” (<https://dharma-documentaries.net/becoming-a-woman-in-zangskar>). It features Thukje, one of the Karsha nuns, and her journey to bring a younger nun to Dharamsala to become a nun. They had to travel for several days in the dead of winter over an ice river carrying heavy packs without any proper accommodations. Such is the determination to bring others to a future full of possibility.

There is a quote by a great Indian saint named Swami Sri Yukteswar regarding taking vows of renunciation: “Remember that they who discard their worldly duties can justify themselves only by assuming some kind of responsibility toward a much larger family.” Over the past few years, I have seen first-hand how the nuns have admirably taken on this responsibility towards those who cross their path. I feel that the nunnery at Karsha has become my spiritual home and I am grateful to the Jamyang Foundation for introducing me to this unparalleled experience.

A JOURNEY OF LEARNING

by Padma Dechen

I would like to start by thanking Jamyang Foundation and Dr. Karma Lekshe Tsomo and everyone else involved for giving me the opportunity to organize this English Training Program for Himalayan Nuns at my nunnery – Chattnyanling Nunnery, located in Tikse, south of Leh, Ladakh. Thank you for placing your trust in me. This is the first workshop that I have directed since retiring from my teaching days and I am very happy that everything went so well.

This program was a very useful experience for me. There is a huge difference between leading young students and senior nuns, so there were many new things that I learned thanks to this program. The nuns who came from the various other Himalaya nunneries taught me how to manage myself and my nunnery in a better way. They helped me grow as a person and supported me throughout the journey by encouraging me and giving me strength.

With so many nuns and so many classes every day, sometimes things were a bit difficult to manage. However, the experience was very well worth it. The nuns, teachers, and staff shared many great moments together. The three volunteer teachers did a very good job of educating us. They were all very cooperative and worked harmoniously with the nuns. I feel very grateful to them

for this. Talking to them regularly helped me pick up new English words. I became more confident in writing English and plan to continue practicing what I learned. In this way, I can continue to improve into the future. The nuns all benefited greatly from the training. They will surely be happy to continue taking part in programs like this.







