



Tibetan Nuns Project

Winter 2008

Nunneries Meet to Debate



Update on Bhikshuni Ordination

page 2



New Projects Enhance Dolma Ling

page 6



Matching Sponsors with Nuns

page 7



For 12 years the Tibetan Nuns Project has been sponsoring a month-long debating session called Jang Gonchoe, with different nunneries hosting on a rotating basis. Last fall at Dolma Ling, 120 nuns and 12 philosophy teachers from five different nunneries gathered: Dolma Ling, Geden Choeling, Jangchup Choeling, Jamyang Choeling and Kopan (in Nepal). This year's session, which is underway as this newsletter goes to print, is being held at Jamyang Choeling, just outside of Dharamsala. For the first time this year, nuns from Keydong Thukche Choling in Kathmandu are participating as observers, and nuns from Jampa Choling Nunnery in Kinnaur have come back for a second time.

The practice of debate cultivates deep logical thinking and leads to mastery of the complex philosophy of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. It is a difficult practice that takes many years to fully master, and is critical to fostering the nuns' ability to assume roles as fully qualified teachers of their tradition. It is very encouraging that many nuns are now debating with skill and confidence.

Besides developing the nuns' knowledge and debating technique, the annual Jang Gonchoe also helps develop community among the various nunneries that participate. Their growing knowledge and skills are applied not only to the direct topics of debate, but to other important issues as well.

For instance, the ongoing discussion about the possibility of introducing full ordination for nuns into the Tibetan Buddhist tradition (see story on page 2) relies on the vocabulary and style of philosophical debate. One of the reasons the discussion has not advanced further is that the nuns themselves, not having engaged in such studies, could not participate in the conversation. Now, they are able to follow the discussions and argue their own case. Further, as senior monks and scholars observe their growing skills, opposition to their full inclusion within the monastic sangha is steadily reduced.



Night-time debate in front of the Dolma Ling temple



Joyful Labor! Nuns Move into New Shugsep Nunnery

For full story and pictures,
see pages 4-5.



Tibetan Nuns Project

Established in 1987, the Tibetan Nuns Project provides education and support to more than 650 nuns in northern India. The Project is dedicated to:

Improving standards of food, sanitation, medical care, basic education and training in existing nunneries.

Working towards future self-sufficiency through innovative educational opportunities.

Establishing further facilities for refugee Buddhist nuns.

Patron

His Holiness the Dalai Lama

Director

Rinchen Khando Choegyul

Co-Directors

Elizabeth Napper

Ven. Lobsang Dechen

Project Co-Ordinator India

Dolma Tsering

Interim Development Advisor U.S.

Connie Moffit

Sponsorship

Tashi Yangzom – India

Kristina Sherman – USA

Many thanks to the following people who contributed to the design, content, and editing of this newsletter:

Tsering Diki, Ven. Lobsang Dechen, Connie Moffit, and Sue Guelke

WEBSITE: www.tnp.org

India: c/o Dolma Ling
PO Sidhpur 176057
Dist. Kangra, H.P.

Email: tnpindia@sancharnet.in
Ph: (1892) 246419

USA: 619 Western Ave, #22
Seattle, WA 98104
Email: info@tnp.org
Ph: 206 652 8901

The Tibetan Nuns Project is a 501(c)3 organization.
All donations are tax-deductible in the U.S.

Contributions are tax-deductible in Canada by making a cheque payable to

Tides Canada Foundation — Tibetan Nuns Project
and mailing to: Tides Canada Foundation, 680-220
Cambie St., Vancouver, B.C. V6B 2M9

OR go online to <http://tidescanada.org/donate/>

Message from the Director

It's been a number of years since the Tibetan Nuns Project came into being. When I look back, we have spent most of our time in fund raising, building infrastructure, and looking after day-to-day needs of the nuns. This was of course first on our priority list and the most important thing.

Over the years the overall development of the nuns has been amazing, particularly their education, and I am extremely happy to share the feeling of joy with all who have been so kind to the nuns. Furthermore, I would like to inform you that this year I decided to stay in station and focus on the overall administration, the nuns' educational development and various new projects that are going on in Dolma Ling. And, most importantly, I have focused on completing construction of Shugsep nunnery. I must say that this has been a most encouraging and inspiring year for me. It also brought to my attention more vividly how everyone in the office and among the nuns is contributing towards our day-to-day work. I am very grateful to them.

I also used this time to reinforce to the nuns their responsibilities in terms of running the nunnery and various other projects connected to the nunnery. I am extremely happy to inform you that finally I have been able to convince the nuns to form a committee within the nunneries, and to undertake the day-to-day affairs of running their nunneries by themselves. The principals and teachers of the various nunneries have been very co-operative and supportive of this venture. As a result, now we have a fully set-up committee of nuns who are looking after the day-to-day responsibilities including the kitchen, income generating programs, and the monthly accounts. I am very encouraged by the way they have started handling it, yet at the same time I am standing by them in case they need my help. I am looking forward to the day when they will excel in their administrative ability and will not need my support any more, which I hope will not be too far away.

With deep appreciation, I would like to sincerely thank every individual and organization that has helped us to help the nuns in this manner. Without your help things would have been very difficult for us. The Tibetan nuns and the women of Tibet will ever remember your kindness and support.



Tibetan Nuns Project Director,
Rinchen Khando Choegyul

Debate Moves Forward on Full Ordination for Nuns

Following the suggestion of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, a two-day conference on bhikshuni ordination was held last April 28th and 29th in Dharamsala. Organized by the Department of Religion and Culture of the Tibetan Government in Exile, the conference brought together political and spiritual leaders, and monks, and included nuns as observers.

The topic of ordination for nuns is historically complex. Within the Buddhist tradition, there are two levels of ordination for monks and nuns—novice and fully ordained. In several Buddhist countries—among them Tibet, Thailand, and Sri Lanka—full ordination for nuns was either never established or died out. As a result, finding a way to establish full bhikshuni ordination within the Tibetan tradition has long been a top concern of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. To address the situation an international conference was held in Hamburg in July, 2007, that generated a great deal of information and ideas to help move matters forward. Even so, within the Tibetan monastic community, there is still no clear agreement on whether it is possible to bestow full ordination within the Tibetan tradition; and if it is, how best to proceed.

continues at the bottom of page 6

Progress Reports on the Nunneries

Sherab Choling Institute

Sherab Choling Nunnery in the Spiti Valley of Himachal Pradesh was founded in 1995 with the vision to educate Himalayan Buddhist nuns who would otherwise have no opportunity to receive any formal schooling or spiritual education. It is a non-sectarian nunnery that recognizes the beauty and value in all Buddhist traditions.

There are currently 50 nuns at Sherab Choling Nunnery. They follow a 17-year study program which includes Buddhist Philosophy, Tibetan Grammar, Hindi, and English. The broad education is intended to provide the nuns with necessary skills to educate future generations of nuns and the communities from which they come.

The focus of studies is the five great Buddhist philosophical texts. Thirteen nuns have completed Ngondo level (first-year preparatory studies including Tibetan language and memorization of prayers). Nine have completed the Dusda course (first year of Buddhist philosophy) and 10 nuns have completed the second year of the Prajnaparamita course (Perfection of Wisdom).

Despite these academic accomplishments, the nuns have had to put up with difficult living conditions including leaking roofs and limited accommodations. Sherab Choling needs more academic buildings and a prayer hall. Last year a property was found where the existing prayer hall and nuns quarters can be expanded. However, these are large scale projects which will need the support of many people.



View of the Institute from the entrance

Sakya Nuns Institute

Sakya Nuns Institute is situated in Manduwala, about 19 kilometers from Dehra Dun. This is the first Sakya nuns institute and it will follow the same curriculum as the Sakya College for monks. However, the Nuns Institute has still not started functioning academically.

In June, Khenpo Gyamtso Rinpoche of Sakya College visited the Tibetan Nuns Project and met with Director Rinchen Khando. They discussed the Nuns Institute and agreed training should start there next January if all goes well.

The Institute has found a sponsor for a water-tractor but they have yet to work out a major problem with the water supply. Hopefully the institute will overcome this problem in time to start the long-awaited Sakya Nuns Institute by January, 2009.



Inner view of the Institute

Geden Choeling

The nuns of Geden Choeling have shown remarkable progress in their studies. In December of 2007, seven nuns completed the Pharchin (Perfection of Wisdom), and they are now studying Uma I (Middle Way Philosophy). The seven have been good role models to the younger nuns in the nunnery.

The education program in Geden Choeling nunnery is going smoothly. Khenpo Geshe Lobsang Tsultrim has been leading the nuns' education, with the assistance of a five-member committee of nuns. These nuns are gaining in experience, and in understanding of their responsibilities in the nunnery.

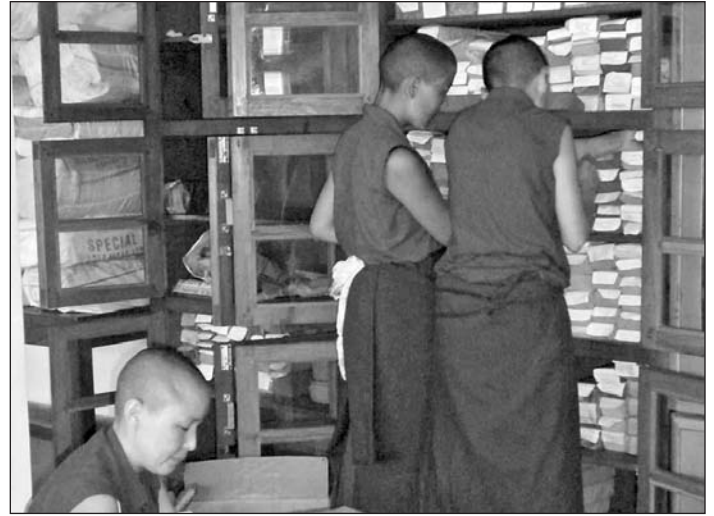
Construction of new living quarters at Geden Choeling nunnery remains delayed, as the nuns continue to wait for Himachal Pradesh government permission. Work will begin as soon as approval arrives.



A nun teaching an English class



Monks from Dorjee Drak in Shimla perform a fire puja



Stacking library books

Shugsep Nunnery

On May 10, just in time to beat the monsoon rains, 58 Shugsep nuns moved into their new nunnery. Much remains to be completed, but the nuns were very happy to be in their new clean, dry and airy rooms before the monsoon arrived. They expressed gratitude to all their friends who have contributed with great kindness and generosity to enable them to live in a wonderful place without having to worry about the heavy monsoon rains anymore.

It will take at least another year to complete the whole facility, but already the nuns have clean dry housing and a functional kitchen and dining hall. They also have full access to the institute block, including its four classrooms (two equipped with tables and chairs and two with traditional Tibetan seating), a library, and a lecture hall. The lecture hall on the ground floor temporarily serves as a prayer hall while the temple is being built.

Other projects still being completed include the final septic tank, the solar heating system to provide hot water to



Moving a wooden cabinet into place



Cleaning a room before moving in



Settled in a new room



Using a new classroom for English lessons



Working at a computer in the office

A New Home at Last!

the kitchen, and the water filtration and chlorination systems. The new garbage disposal facility has been designed to keep out monkeys. A two-part composting bin for kitchen and bio-degradable waste, and an incinerator, have also been constructed.

The rest of the construction is coming along well, with the foundations completed for the remaining buildings: clinic/bath house, guest house, and office. The temple is progressing well. Three large statues, which will be the central images of the temple have been ordered. We were very fortunate to receive a gift from Beverly and Bruce Gordon in honor of Betsy Gordon, which will cover the full cost of those statues.

We are grateful to Betsy Gordon for the funds to complete the construction, and look forward to the day when the whole of the new Shugsep Nunnery is completed according to the plan envisioned many years ago. We are hoping for a full completion date in approximately one year and will have a formal inauguration ceremony at that time.



The spacious and sunny dining hall



Interior of the prayer hall



View of the first and second housing wings and roofed pathways

New Projects Enhance Dolma Ling

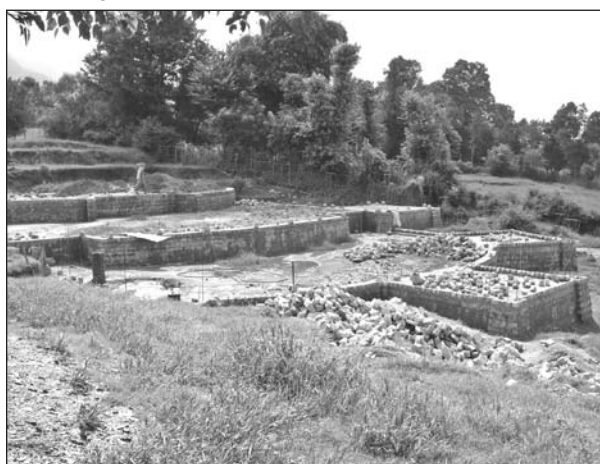
This year the Tibetan Nuns Project began construction of a solar water heating system and a new debating courtyard for Dolma Ling Nunnery and Institute. Both projects are sited on a beautiful piece of land adjacent to the nunnery.

Winter months are very long and cold here, and Dolma Ling has had no way to provide nuns with hot water for bathing. The water used in the nunnery comes down from the mountains and becomes excessively cold for everyday use during winters. Electric water heating is expensive, and hot water geysers are very expensive to set up, as well as unreliable and difficult to maintain. Therefore, the most practical and sustainable method of heating water is solar energy.

A new building to provide solar heated water for bathing is being built on a site adjacent to the fourth housing wing. The water supply is plentiful there, and the land's natural slope provides suitable angles to catch the most solar energy. Twenty-two solar panels will be mounted on stepped roofs faced south-southeast to catch the optimum amount of sunshine.

When the project is complete, the ground floor will contain eight shower units with dressing and waiting areas, as well as two toilets. The upper floor will contain three rooms, each with their own kitchenette, and a shared bathroom which will be used for special-case nuns. There is also a room on the ground floor that will house our paper-making project. This building is now fully funded and we hope to complete it before winter sets in.

Another important project underway is a new debating courtyard for the nuns. The core subject taught at Dolma Ling is Buddhist philosophy, and it is taught in the traditional manner, with daily sessions of intensive debate every afternoon and every evening in the courtyard. As the nuns use the logic of debate to probe the ramifications of the topics they are studying, they deepen and widen their knowledge of Buddhist philosophy.



Site for debating courtyard



Solar bath house

As the number of nuns engaging in this program of traditional Buddhist education has increased year by year, the present courtyard has become very congested and is stiflingly hot when all the nuns engage in debate in the summer afternoons. When it rains, the nuns have to confine themselves to the verandas, or cancel the debate session. It has also become very loud with the noise of more than a hundred voices and the clapping that accompanies the debate. Hence, it has become important that we provide a large, open, covered area off to a side of the nunnery.

Relocating the debate courtyard to the beautiful plot adjacent to the nunnery property will greatly improve this situation. Construction has started on approximately 500 square meters of paved yard, half of which will be covered by a coated high-tensile fabric awning. Such a facility will greatly increase the nun's spiritual development and will enhance the atmosphere of the institute. We are still looking for funding to complete the project.

Bhikshuni Ordination *(continued from page 2)*

While the April 2008 conference did not bring a resolution, support for full bhikshuni ordination seems to have grown. Samdong Rinpoche, Prime Minister of the exile government, opened the conference with a very positive speech. Sixteen participants, monks from the four schools of Tibetan Buddhism, had a lively discussion. Further, by the request of Tibetan Nuns Project Director, Mrs. Rinchen Khando, sixteen nuns (four from each of the four local nunneries in Dharamsala) were permitted to attend as observers. His Holiness the Karmapa—who was himself attending the meeting as an observer—asked that the nuns be given a chance to speak, as they would be the ones taking the vows. Several nuns responded by saying that while they certainly do want full ordination, if possible, they prefer to receive it from the Mulasarvastivada lineage (as Tibetan monks do), rather than Dharmagupta lineage followed in the Chinese Buddhist tradition, which is what nuns in the Tibetan tradition who have received full ordination have followed to date.

The Tibetan Nuns Project was also represented at the conference by Dolma Ling Institute Principal, Geshe Rinchen Chodak, by Geshe Lharampa Rinchen Ngodup, and by Shugsep Khenpo Sherap as observers.

Matching Sponsors with Nuns



Thanks to the generous support of our sponsors, the number of nuns supported by the Tibetan Nuns Project increases each year, limited only by the size of facilities in India. We now serve nearly 700 women living in six nunneries and on their own, a wonderful development that brings with it many administrative complications. Here are some of the challenges we face to keep the program running smoothly and sustainably.

Doubling Up on Sponsors

While every supporter of TNP has a relationship with one nun per sponsorship, we try to give nuns two sponsors. The money is used collectively within the particular nunnery to provide food, education, medical expenses, clothing, a new pair of shoes each year, and a small amount of pocket money. We do this for two reasons: first, we want to hold the level of sponsorship at \$360 a year, an amount which has proved to work well for our many generous sponsors; and, second, we need to ensure that the nuns' basic needs are covered even if a sponsor falls behind in payments or forgets to let us know that they are withdrawing their support.

Updating Records Takes Time

Pairing up sponsors and nuns takes time on both ends of the relationship. Potential sponsors first contact TNP in the U.S. Every two weeks these requests, updates and changes are sent to India, where sponsors are matched with nuns. New sponsors are then sent a copy of their nun's case history, along with her picture and a sponsorship policy letter. If a nun leaves her nunnery, the India office

notifies the sponsor and requests that she or he sponsor a different nun.

As new nuns join our program, we prepare case histories about them in order to be ready when sponsors appear. Over time these case histories become old, and updating them can be challenging—many different nunneries are involved, and some nuns are in retreat situations or living on their own, making it very difficult to get in touch. Sometimes photographs for the case histories are too old or damaged to be useable, and it can be a long process to work through intermediaries to get a new picture taken and delivered. And further, the slow Indian postal system adds to the delay in getting the information out to new sponsors. It's a great opportunity to practice patience!

Maintaining Communication

The hundreds of nuns in our program communicate with their sponsors by writing an annual summer letter and a winter greeting card. The letters and cards are checked by our sponsorship secretary before being sent, due to the significant language challenges faced by many of the nuns. Often, when they arrive from Tibet they have little or no education of any kind. English is new to them, and it's difficult for them to express their hearts in letters to sponsors. Sometimes they need a lot of help just to be able to copy a simple message clearly. English is being taught in the nunneries and progress is being made. "The nuns' English is definitely improving," says Elizabeth Napper, TNP's Co-Director. "Following this summer's letters, we had a lot of very pleased sponsors."

U.S. Office Update

The TNP Office in Seattle, Washington, has had a very busy year, thanks to our kind North American donors. Despite the slowing economy in the U.S., most donors have maintained their support—in fact, sales of TNP products were up about 20 percent!

There are some new people staffing the office, a no-frills space on the fourth floor of a turn-of-the-century warehouse (near Seattle's famous Pioneer Square), now turned into a collection of lofts occupied by artists and non-profit organizations.

In February 2008, Kristina Sherman joined TNP as Project Administrator. Her main duties include bookkeeping, donor funds administration, sponsorship, handling Internet orders, working with volunteers and many other contributions, large and small. Kristina's kind and steady help has been most welcome and valuable!

Annie Wilson, who had been with TNP since the summer of 2006, has left the office. We would like to thank her for her heartfelt efforts on behalf of the nuns.

In order to assess the personnel needs of our U.S. office—with a view to keeping our costs down while building our capacity to raise funds in the future—TNP has hired Connie Moffit as Interim Development Advisor. Connie started in September and will be with TNP for three to six months, with the goal of creating clear procedure manuals and making recommendations for the administrative structure of the office. Elizabeth Napper, TNP's Co-Director, is generously spending substantial time in Seattle to supervise this phase in TNP's development.

Finally, we say THANK YOU to our many volunteers. They accomplish so much, so generously—to list all their names and services would take volumes! From the bottom of our hearts, we are grateful.

A Friendly Reminder to Sponsors and Donors
Please keep TNP up-to-date with your contact information
If you use Pay Pal for payments,
please keep that information current as well.

THANK YOU
FOR YOUR DONATIONS & ORDERS!

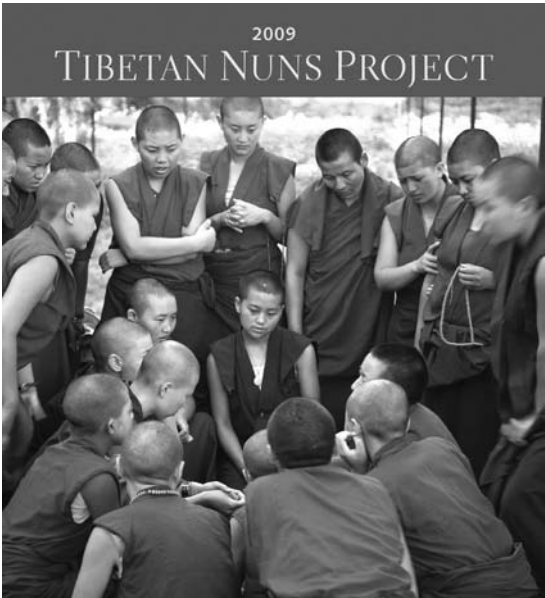


Tibetan Nuns Project

619 Western Ave. #22
Seattle, WA 98104
USA

NON-PROFIT ORG
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
SEATTLE, WA
PERMIT NO 681

**2009 Calendar
Now on Sale**



This wall calendar (6.5" x 7") is filled with beautiful color images of Tibetan life and culture, as well as inspiring quotes for each month. Included is the Tibetan lunar calendar and ritual dates for those who do Buddhist practices, and major holidays in the U.S. and Canada.

◆ Are you willing to help with sales in your area? ◆
Please contact us.

Calendars

I would like to order:

_____ copies of the **Calendar 2009**

Price: U.S./CAD \$10.00, €7.50 £6 (Shipping and handling \$1.50 per calendar)

Please contact our U.S. office (info@tnp.org) for shipping worldwide

Donation

I would like to make donation of: _____

Please use it towards the greatest need.

Please use it for _____

Sponsorship

I'd like to sponsor a nun for \$30, €22, £17/month.

I will send payments:

Quarterly (\$90, €65, £51) Semi-Annually (\$180, €130, £102)

Annually (\$360, €260, £204)

Make checks or money orders payable to: Tibetan Nuns Project

Enclosed is my check for: _____ or charge my credit card for: _____

Visa/MastercardNo. _____ ExpDate _____

Name _____

Address _____

Phone _____ Email _____

I am interested in volunteering. Please send me information.