

# Tibetan Nuns Project

Fall 2013

## Geshema Examinations Begin



### First Part Geshema Examination Begins

May, 2013 marked the beginning of the first ever Geshema examinations. After years of rigorous study, 27 nuns from 5 nunneries – 6 from Jangchub Choeling, 7 from Jamyang Choeling, 2 from Geden Choeling, 2 from Khacho Gakyiling (Kopan) and 10 from Dolma Ling – gathered at Jamyang Choeling near Dharamsala, India, to complete the first round of a four-year examination process.



### Important Sponsorship News

They were tested on a variety of areas of study, including the Perfection of Wisdom, the Middle Way, and other subjects such as Tibetan grammar and science through both written examination and demonstration of their debating skills.



### Progress on Construction

In July, just in time for the celebrations of His Holiness the Dalai Lama's birthday, the examination results for the first round of examinations were released with the very good news that 25 of the 27 candidates successfully passed the first round. If these nuns can continue to successfully demonstrate their knowledge over the next three years, they will be awarded the prestigious Geshema degree.



The Geshema degree will be the highest degree in Buddhist philosophy for nuns. A basic requirement for the nuns to take the exams is to have completed the full 17-year course of study with average marks of 75% or higher. The opportunity to take the examinations to earn this degree has been made available especially by the continuous support of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, the dedication of the nuns, and the Department of Religion and Culture of the



Kasur Rinchen Khando la meeting with the nuns

Central Tibetan Administration. The Tibetan Nuns Project has also played a significant role in making this landmark achievement possible, working over the past 25 years to increase the educational level of the nuns.

The higher-level educational opportunities that nuns have today were not always available, creating a gap between the education of monks and nuns. TNP has worked to close this gap and prepare the nuns to demonstrate their skills and learning. The debating practice that nuns undertake daily, as well as at the annual Jang Gönchoe inter-nunnery debate, have been highly beneficial to the nuns, expanding their understanding of the Buddhist philosophical texts and allowing them to develop the debating skills that are tested during the Geshema exams.

Congratulations to all the nuns who have successfully completed the first round of exams!



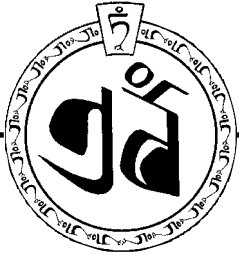
Oral debate examination



Written examination



Submitting exams to invigilators



## Tibetan Nuns Project

Established in 1987, the Tibetan Nuns Project provides education and support to more than 700 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.

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All donations are tax-deductible in the U.S.

## Nurse Phuntsok Wangmo



Taking care of nuns at the clinic

The intense Buddhist philosophical education provided at Dolma Ling Institute often attracts lay people who have an interest in the studies and life as a nun. Several years ago, a lay woman named Phuntsok Wangmo joined the nunnery and started her studies in monastic education, as she always wanted to lead her life as a nun.

As a lay person she completed high school from Tibetan Children's Village, Dharamsala, in the science stream. She continued her education by entering a medical college and completed a 4 year B.S. in Nursing from PGI in Chandigarh. After completing her nursing degree Phuntsok Wangmo volunteered at the Delek hospital in Dharamsala for two months. She also worked for a year at Max hospital in Delhi, attending cancer patients, post-surgery cases, and general problems.

Being a nun at Dolma Ling and busy with her studies has not stopped her from sharing her knowledge and caring skills with the nuns and staff of the nunnery. She is available at the nunnery clinic for an hour in the evenings, providing first aid and medication for minor illnesses, and attending to emergency cases at any time. This year especially Ani Phuntsok was of great help when two nuns faced psychological problems. She personally took great care of them, taking them for psychiatric advice, discussing their problems with them, giving them medicines on time, and following up on their health as needed.

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## Full Ordination for Nuns

A final period of intensive research on the issue of full ordination for nuns, (*gelongma* in Tibetan, *bhikshuni* in Sanskrit) began on August 1, 2012 and lasted for three months. A special committee had been assembled to do the research, and it handed over its results to Department of Religion and Culture of the Central Tibetan Administration. The committee gathered together all of the significant textual passages on the issue found in the texts on monastic rules, the *Vinaya Sutras* and later commentaries, and formed them into a book. That book was sent for printing, completed in September, 2013. It will be distributed widely, to the high Lama's of the various traditions, to monasteries, and to nunneries in India. It is intended that it will provide the necessary information for reaching a carefully considered resolution of the issue.

# Important Sponsorship News

Through its sponsorship program, the Tibetan Nuns Project supports over 700 nuns living in 7 nunneries in northern India, as well as elderly nuns living on their own. These nunneries represent all four traditions of Tibetan Buddhism. Several are located near Dharamsala, one near Dehra Dun and two others are in remote Himalayan regions cut off by snow in the winter.

Sponsoring a nun at \$1/day helps provide all the nuns with food, clothing, shelter, medication and education. One hundred per cent of the money donated by our sponsors goes to India for this purpose.

The good news is that thanks to your support, we have come a long way in both improving the lives of nuns and in helping more women on their spiritual path. The bad news is that, due to the high inflation rates in India, we are unable to keep up with the rising cost of essentials for the nuns, including food and cooking fuel. Rather than increase the sponsorship cost of \$30/month for one nun – which has stayed steady since 1998 – we have launched a campaign to find 200 more sponsors.

In July we sent out an appeal letter explaining the situation and asking for support.

We're delighted that over 100 people have come forward to sponsor a nun, either as first-time sponsors or to sponsor a second or third nun.

Many thanks also to those who have reconnected with our sponsorship program.

We send a warm "Tashi Delek," welcome to our new sponsors and express our heartfelt thanks to all our sponsors – new and old – for your kindness and generosity. You are the truly the heart of our work.

We still have a ways to go in our campaign for more sponsors. If you can help, please visit our website at [www.tnp.org](http://www.tnp.org) or contact the US office in Seattle by email at [info@tnp.org](mailto:info@tnp.org) or by phone at 206-652-8901.



Older nuns performing a ritual



Day starts before dawn in the kitchen



Making offering tormas for puja

**"A donation to this cause benefits beyond helping just the nuns... it benefits the Tibetan culture, it benefits refugees from Tibet, it benefits education for women, it benefits the Buddhist religion and community and all of this spreads like a ripple of compassion for others beyond that community. This is not charity; it is an investment in humanity."**

**ELEN B., TNP SPONSOR, AUBURN, CA**



Tibetan language class



A choe ritual

# Dolma Ling

The basic structure of the Dolma Ling campus was completed in 2005, and the official inauguration by the Dalai Lama took place that December. In subsequent years we realized that the nuns' training would be enhanced by some additional infrastructure. Here are some details of those projects.

## Retreat Huts

The eight retreat huts that the nuns helped to build will give them the opportunity to undertake periods of sustained retreat, an important part of completing their spiritual training. The huts are now complete and thanks to your generous response to our campaign this spring and summer, they have all been furnished with beds, tables, etc. We are now preparing for the first nuns to begin their retreats.



Roofing for the debating courtyard

## Debate Courtyard

An essential aspect of the traditional Tibetan study program is daily practice of philosophical debate. Nuns debate from the beginner's level through the final years of Madhyamika (Middle Way), which requires 13 years. Afternoons and evenings, they debate outdoors in pairs or in groups to fully internalize their understanding of the texts studied in their morning classes. Each year for a month in the fall, nuns from six nunneries come together for the annual Jang Gonchoe debate session to improve their debating skills.

In order to provide a space for the daily debates, we constructed an open debate court with 5 covered areas and a platform with a statue of Manjushri, who who represents wisdom and learning. Regrettably, our initial fabric covering for the courtyard was unsuccessful and we are therefore seeking financial assistance to put up a steel frames structure with a coated metal roof. Because the weather in Dharamsala has become highly unpredictable with unusual amounts of rain and snow in the winter, blazing sun in the summertime, and the second highest recorded rainfall in India during the monsoon, it is essential that we provide a solid protective roof over the debate



Nuns planting hedges around the finished retreat huts

court. This is the most economic and satisfactory solution and will make use of the existing footings. The work is scheduled for completion in time for the start of the debate session in October this year.

Funding is still needed for this project.

## The Media Center

The final major building at Dolma Ling Nunnery is a center for media and language training, and includes an income-generating café operated by the nuns. The Center will help the nuns increase their skills, move towards self-sufficiency, and empower them to document their lives and tell their own stories.

It has been said that technology is the pen and paper of our time and the lens through which we experience much of our world. The Dolma Ling nuns have shown great interest and aptitude in learning how to communicate their stories and the stories of the Tibetan community to the wider world.

This building is a big project for the nunnery. We are seeking major support to complete the interior and equip the Center. You can read more about the Center on the Current Projects section of our website: <http://tnp.org/the-center-at-dolma-ling/>.



Good progress on the Media Center and Nuns' Café

# Media Training

This year we were happy to have Harald Weichhart from Austria return to Dolma Ling for a month to guide the nuns in video-making skills. This was his third visit to the nunnery. On his first visit in 2006, Harald introduced a large group of nuns to InDesign and Photoshop and the two head nuns of the media section as well as the Tibetan language teacher to video editing. He returned to teach video editing technology and photography in 2012 and again this year.

The nuns are leading the way with their technical skills. Harald said: “Dolma Ling is quite exceptional when it comes to computer and media knowledge. I have yet to find a Tibetan monastic community in India or Nepal where there is such a level of expertise in this field.”

Harald stayed for most of April and seven nuns attended the media training session. During this period, he and the two nuns in charge of the media section, Ani Delek Yangdrön and Ani Ngawang Choedon, focused primarily on a video “A Day in Shugsep” for which they also shot extensive footage at the nunnery. We hope to make that available soon. They also took many photographs of the nuns in their nunnery, while other nuns developed their photography and Photoshop skills.



Sharing camera techniques with the nuns



Teaching Photoshop & InDesign to the computer section nuns



Ven Lobsang Dechen with Harald and media nun Ngawang Choedon

# Daily Life and Education



One on one debate session

Dolma Ling started its new academic session with 16 new nuns, bringing the total in the nunnery to 246. Among them are 27 who are from either Bhutan or other foreign countries. They pay their own expenses, so are not part of our TNP sponsorship program, but attend regular classes with the other nuns. In addition, 14 nuns work as Tibetan and Buddhist philosophy teachers in other Tibetan institutes.

This year, 10 nuns from Dolma Ling were among the 27 women who sat the first of the four part Geshe



Milking the cow

examinations. Nine of them made it through to the next stage. Also, a number of nuns work in different areas of the nunnery such as the office, the Nuns’ Committee, the media room, computer room, kitchen, temple, cowshed and so on. Apart from regular classes in Tibetan, Buddhist philosophy and English, a few nuns also attend classes in ritual arts such as the creation of sand mandalas and butter sculptures. The nuns keep up with current affairs by reading newspapers, magazines and books in the library.



Issuing books from the library

# Nunnery Updates

## Sakya College for Nuns

The academic year began with three different levels of classes and the nuns are studying well. In an historic moment, the nuns performed a half-hour debate in front of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Sakya Trizin Rinpoche last fall during His Holiness's three-day visit to Uttaranchal. Ven Dechen Wangmo, Principal of the College said, "I personally felt very happy for the nuns. They gave their best and the whole event also highlighted them as good role models for future nuns."

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Debating in presence of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Sakya Trizin Rinpoche

## Geden Choeling Nunnery

The nunnery held their annual prize distribution ceremony and a welcoming ceremony to commemorate the appointment of a new abbot last April. The nuns have a daily routine of early morning and evening prayer sessions, morning classes in Buddhist philosophy, Tibetan, English and afternoon debate sessions. Some nuns also attend computer classes. In addition to small responsibilities in the nunnery, the nuns also undertake a thorough cleaning of their surroundings every Sunday. Construction of a building to provide additional housing for nuns as well as a debating courtyard is ongoing.

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English language class in progress

## Tilokpur Nunnery

Tilokpur is run by a committee of three nuns and an Abbot from Rumtek Monastery, Tsurpu Labrang, in Sikkim. Earlier one group of nuns undertook construction of a new nunnery to be an institution for study (a Shedra), while the rest remained at the old nunnery. With construction of the new Institute complete, the Nuns' Committee plans to merge the two groups. The younger nuns will pursue studies in the new facility while elder nuns can undertake retreats in the older nunnery. At present 110 nuns occupy these facilities.

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Few of the senior nuns at Tilokpur nunnery

## Shugsep Nunnery and Institute

Shugsep held their prize distribution in March, after which the new academic session began. Classes are going well with regular sessions in Buddhist philosophy, English and Tibetan.

Khenchen Pema Sherab, one of the most senior Abbots in the Nyingma tradition and one of the three Khenchen, or Great Abbots, of Namdroling Monastery in South India, visited Shugsep nunnery in late July. He stayed for two weeks, during which he gave transmission of the *Heart Essence* preliminary practices and teaching on the *Sevenfold Supplication*.



Choe Ritual

# Sherab Choling Nunnery

This year the nuns faced a long harsh winter with heavy snowfalls. During winter the region is cut off from neighboring villages so the nuns must stock up their daily supplies well before the onset of harsh weather.

The nuns are pleased to announce that the work on the prayer hall that was suspended last year for lack of funds has been started again this year. The nuns are happy living in their quarters, but in winter they hold their classes, prayers and meetings in the kitchen because it is warmer and helps to save wood. The nuns take a one-month annual holiday, during which most return to their families in nearby villages.



Nuns walking to clear the path to their nunnery



A few of the younger nuns in Tibetan language class



## Heartfelt Thanks

We extend our deep appreciation to all of our sponsors and donors. We wish to recognize all of the individuals who continue to donate to the Nuns Project year after year as well as the new friends we made in 2013. It is you who support the nuns and make the success of our projects possible. Thank you!

## Seattle Office Update

Our US office continues to be a hive of activity. Located in an historic building in the heart of Seattle, our US staff includes Executive Director, Lisa Farmer, and Program Associate, Sarah McHugh. Sarah joined our team in July, replacing Tiffany Lin who has returned to art school. We thank Tiffany for her assistance and wish her every success.

One of our major goals this year has been to improve communications with you. Early in 2013 we sent a survey to our supporters asking for feedback. 77% of people told us they wanted more news via email, so this spring we started sending monthly e-updates, sharing the information that you've told us matters most – stories, photos and videos from the nunneries. (It's not too late to take the survey. We'd value your input at <https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/tibetanunnsproject>)

Our new website launched in October 2012 makes it easy to use to make donations, set up monthly gifts or sponsorships of nuns, purchase products made by the nuns such as prayer flags and malas and to request prayers by the nuns. In May, we added a blog that you can subscribe to get the latest news. Please go to: <http://tnp.org/youcanhelp/>

We couldn't do what we do without amazing volunteers. This past year four professional photographers spent time at some of the nunneries documenting the daily life of the nuns through images, video clips, soundscapes and stories. If you would like to see more photos and show your support, please "like" us on Facebook.

Our special thanks to New York artist Miya Ando who raised over \$4000 for the nuns through an online auction of her series of prayer flag paintings.

Thank you to our great office volunteers Constance Trowbridge, Marianne Kenady, Puget Sound Business Journal and to our awesome summer interns Devaswa Bhagawati and McKenna LeClear who have all been wonderfully helpful this past year.



Working in the Dolma Ling tailoring section on prayer flags for sale in the TNP online shop



Monk dolls made by nuns

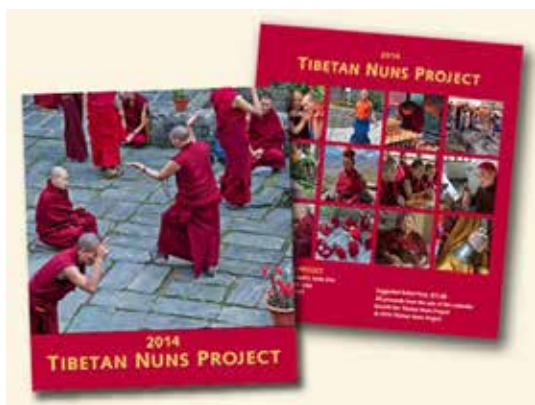


# Tibetan Nuns Project

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### Sponsorship

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Semi-Annually (\$180, €133)  Annually (\$360, €266)

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