



Tibetan Nuns Project

Fall 2004

Historic Convocations



His Holiness the Dalai Lama with the Shugsep graduates and their teachers

This year two ceremonies marked groundbreaking advancements in religious study for nuns. Shugsep Nunnery was the first nunnery to hold a graduation ceremony in the history of Tibetan Buddhism. On April 14th, eight nuns were recognized for being the first to complete the nine year Nyingma course, heading to the degree of Lopon. The graduation ceremony was inspiring as up until now only monks have had the opportunity to achieve such a high level of learning within their tradition. The ceremony was attended by nearly 200 people and was widely reported in the Tibetan press. The nuns received their degrees from Kyabje Drupwang Pema Norbu Rinpoche, head of the Ngagyur Nyingma Namdroling Institute and retired head of the Nyingma

tradition, Kalon Thupten Lungrik, the Minister of Religion and Education in the Central Tibetan Administration, also spoke as did the abbot of Shugsep, Khenpo Pema Sherap, and Kasur Rinchen Khando Choegyal, Director of the Tibetan Nuns Project.

Shugsep's recent graduates will now spend three years in the nunnery, where they will have the opportunity to do independent research on Buddhist philosophical topics. If they successfully complete three years of research, they will achieve the degree of Khenpo and will be qualified to teach throughout their tradition. During this time, they will gain some teaching experience by helping teach the younger nuns.



Dolma Ling graduates receive their certificates from Kalon Thupten Lungrik

On June 14th, Dolma Ling Nunnery and Institute held the first graduation ceremony for nuns who have completed the seven year course of study of Pharchin (Perfection of Wisdom) and hence achieved the degree of Pharchin Rapiampa. Some of these nuns finished the course last year, but the graduation

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Tibetan Nuns Project

Established in 1987, the Tibetan Nuns Project provides education and support to more than 500 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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Why Some Nuns Leave



Shugsep nuns who have completed a three year retreat in Nepal

Recently there have been many questions from sponsors about where nuns go if they leave their nunnery. Some nuns decide to leave for training courses in Tibetan language, teaching, computer training, or for intensive study of religious arts. After a nun has finished a training course, she might decide to return to the nunnery or to work in the community. This year, two nuns who had finished training courses returned to Dolma Ling. One is teaching Tibetan and the other is working in our computer section. Sometimes nuns decide to go into retreat. Some go for a short period of time, while others go into retreat indefinitely.

Many Shugsep nuns go to Nepal for three year retreats. The group shown in this photograph had recently completed such a retreat and returned to Dharamsala briefly. They will re-enter Shugsep here once we have been able to build the new facility and create space for them.

Once a nun has been accepted into a nunnery, she can stay there for the rest of her life and the nunnery will look after her if she becomes ill. However, some nuns who become ill decide that it would be better to live elsewhere, either with their families or on their own. Nuns also leave the nunnery because they decide that the institutional setting is not right for them, and some decide

that ordained life does not suit them. We believe that it is better for a woman to decide that she no longer wants to be a nun and leave than remain ordained while she is unhappy about her decision. This is why we emphasize a basic education, so that if some-

one does decide to leave, she can support herself regardless of whether she remains a nun.

Nuns who decide to leave will often go back to their homes, especially if they are from the border regions of Ladakh, Zaskar, Spiti, and Kinnaur. Some nuns decide to attempt the return journey to Tibet, particularly if they are extremely homesick or if a family member is ill. It is very difficult to predict the outcome of a journey to Tibet. Some nuns are turned away at the border, while others make it into Tibet but then cannot get out again, even if they intend to return. For this reason, when a nun leaves with the plan to go to Tibet and return to the nunnery, she remains on our roll for one year after her departure. That way, if she decides that she does want to return, her place will be waiting for her.



Back at Dolma Ling after a one year computer course

Nuns Meet for Annual Debate

Jang Gönchoe is the month long debate session that has traditionally been held between different monasteries in Tibet. The tradition has continued for centuries, but was only available to nuns very recently. Since 1995, TNP and the Department of Religion and Culture of the Tibetan government-in-exile have co-sponsored an annual Jang Gönchoe for nuns. Every year, nuns come from nunneries in India and Nepal to take part in the debating sessions. The inter-nunnery debate is very competitive and gives the nuns an excellent forum to practice their debating skills and improve their understanding of philosophi-



A morning practice session



A group debate

cal texts.

This year Jang Gönchoe was held at Geden Choeling Nunnery in McLeod Ganj from September 20th until October 20th. Geden Choeling have a beautiful new wood floor and tables in their main hall that TNP funded this year, so it was sparkling for the opening ceremony. We sponsor twenty nuns each from Geden Choeling, Jangchup Choeling, Dolma Ling, Jamyang Choeling, and Kopan Nunnery in Nepal to attend the session. Some nunneries bring a few more at their own expense; this year there are one hundred forty-two nuns participating.

The opening ceremony was attended by the nuns' debating teachers, representatives from the sponsoring organizations and other community organizations. Sonam Topgyal, the former head of cabinet of the Tibetan government in exile, was the chief guest. He gave a wonderful speech about how challenging Jang Gönchoe was in Tibet and encouraged the nuns to work hard in the coming weeks.

The Abbot of Geden Choeling described the history and meaning of the Jang Gönchoe in Tibet. He discussed its development in exile and the recent addition of nuns to the Jang Gönchoe tradition. Kasur Rinchen Khando Choegyal, Director of the Tibetan Nuns Project, talked about how important it is for educated nuns to share their knowledge with others by teaching what they have learned. Throughout the month, the nuns met in pairs and also in groups to debate in the morning and evening. In the afternoon, they met with their teachers to discuss and prepare for upcoming debates.



New flooring and tables at Geden Choeling

Winter Courses

During the winter break, Dolma Ling hosts short-term training courses in useful subjects which nuns from all around the Dharamsala area are invited to attend. This year, follow-up courses in health care and computer training were offered. The health care training is in its seventh year running. Two nuns each from Shugsep, Geden Choeling, Jamyang Choeling, and Tilokpur nunneries attended. There were also four nuns from Dolma Ling. The

course was taught by Tsering Lhamo, a public health nurse, and Jo Gibson, a Tibetan-speaking British woman. Some of the nuns have been coming to the training for a few years, and some were new to the training. This year's topics were first aid, massage, and how to administer injections. They also expanded their medical vocabularies for anatomy and symptoms of illness. The health care trainees manage small clinics at their own nunneries.

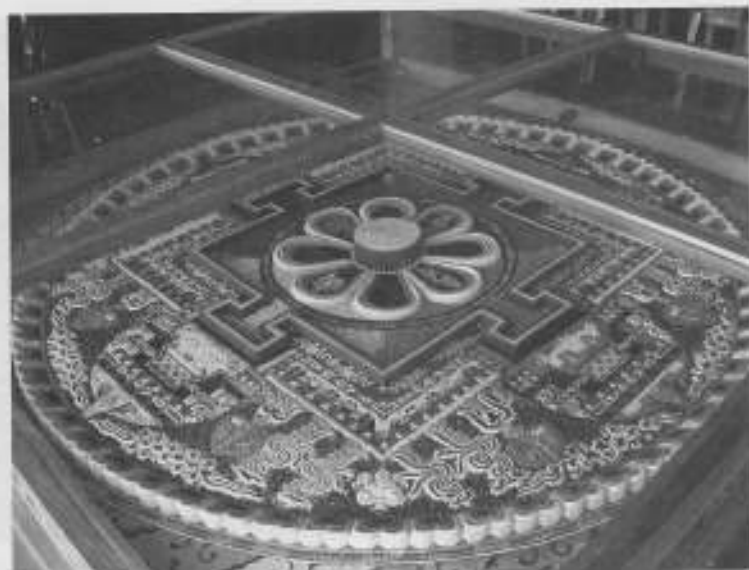


Training in CPR

A Year's Developments



Making butter sculptures for Tibetan New Year



Our first completed sand mandala is on display in the library



One of the nun librarians

This year has been very busy for the nuns at Dolma Ling. In addition to the graduation ceremony for two Pharchin classes, we also did further development of the overall curriculum. The next level of study, Uma, has been organized into an innovative two track program. This means that Uma students are able to choose between concentrating on Buddhist philosophy or on Tibetan language. Six of the nuns are taking the Tibetan course, which includes Tibetan history, language and literature. These nuns also have three periods of English each week and four periods of the Nyingma version of Shantideva's Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life.

Fifteen nuns are studying on the non-sectarian Buddhist philosophy track. They study the Madhyamakavatara, an Indian text written by Chandrakirti, six periods a week for three years. They are also required to read various Tibetan commentaries on their own. In addition to this, they have three periods each of Tibetan and English every week. The nuns are enjoying this new arrangement, which concentrates more on fewer subjects; it has shown great results so far.

Two of the graduates have volunteered to take on the management of the Dolma Ling library. Along with a third nun from another class, they received training last year from Karen Saginor, a TNP board.



A nun works on the second Tibetan nuns magazine



The annual inter-house quiz competition

and Progress at Dolma Ling

member who came to Dolma Ling from California for a month to help with the library. Now the nuns are running the library largely on their own.

Dolma Ling is known for its academic program, but there are also many non-academic activities that enrich the lives of the nuns. Dolma Ling hosts various training sessions during the winter break each year. This year seven nuns from Dolma Ling attended the computer training course. They are in the process of producing the second Tibetan nuns magazine, and women from other nunneries are invited to submit pieces. The nuns who took the computer course will compile and publish the magazine themselves.

Last year we introduced Tibetan medicine as a subject for interested nuns. We are now looking for a Tibetan doctor who can teach them full time. An initial class of twenty nuns was taught twice a week by a doctor who runs a clinic near Dolma Ling. From that group twelve were selected for future intensive study. There are very few doctors in the community who are also nuns, and the nuns are excited to change that situation.

There has been continued training in the art of sand mandala. Four new nuns joined the class this year. A teacher from Tsechokling monastery teaches them three times a week after their regular classes. This year they have learned how to create two different designs, including the Chenrezig mandala which they completed on His Holiness the Dalai Lama's birthday as a

blessing for his long life. It is displayed in Dolma Ling's library for everyone to enjoy.

We continue to teach butter sculpture, and also offer training in the making of ritual offerings to all members of the new incoming class. They meet for an hour each day, five times a week throughout the year. The nuns make beautiful butter sculptures for the Tibetan New Year.

Another annual activity is the inter-house competition. The nuns are organized into four "houses" that cut across class lines. Each year a variety of competitions are held, such as essay writing in both Tibetan and English, Tibetan calligraphy, and there is a quiz competition in which all the teachers ask the nuns questions on general knowledge. At the end of the year the class with the most points takes charge of a trophy to hold until the next year.

There is also an annual flower show that gives the nuns a way to display their gardening talents. It was held on July 5, and lasted the entire day. The flower show is an inter-class competition in which the participants enthusiastically represent their class. Each class organizes their efforts and together they submit a group of flowers. Dolma Ling teachers are the final decision makers of this competition. The judges considered features such as variety and imagination in the presentation of each group's flowers. It is a day that everyone enjoys and the winning nuns take great pride in their efforts.



Practicing debate



The first nun to complete a training course and return to teach at her home nunnery



Lighting lamps in the butter lamp house



Winners of the inter-class flower competition

Shugsep and Dolma Ling Graduation cont'd.



A Shugsep graduate receives her certificate from Penor Rinpoche



The huge audience at Shugsep's graduation ceremony



Lunch after the Dolma Ling ceremony

ceremony was held this year so that there would be a substantial body of students to move on to the next level. There were more than 200 guests at this ceremony and speakers included Kalon Thubten Lungrik, TNP Director Kasar Rinchen Khando Choegyal, TNP Co-Director Losang Dechen, and Dolma Ling Principal Rigzin Chodak.

The next step for most of the nuns will be to move on to study in the Uma class, which requires at least three years of intense philosophical study. The new Uma curriculum has two tracks: one for those who want to focus on Buddhist philosophy and another for those who are primarily interested in studying Tibetan language.

We are very proud of the graduating nuns and inspired by how hard they have worked to reach this point.



Dolma Ling nuns who finished Pharchin last year



Speakers at the Dolma Ling ceremony



This year's Pharchin graduates

TNP USA

Path of Promise:

In April 2004, TNP launched our "Path Of Promise" photography exhibition at the Moat Gallery in Vancouver's Public Library, British Columbia, Canada. The exhibit is designed to build awareness and outreach, and to assist in fundraising. San Francisco based photographer, Jeff Davis, captures the essence of the nuns. The "Path of Promise" combines an overview of the history, mission, programs, and goals in eighteen stunning images that offer an intimate glimpse into the daily experience of the dedicated women TNP serves.

We extend a huge thank you to all of the volunteers in Canada who helped to make this event happen. Very special thanks go out to Ruth Payne of The Ferry Building Art Gallery, everyone at the Vancouver Public Library special events, and Vesna Golac who so faithfully watched over the exhibition through its duration.

Upcoming dates for Path of Promise:

Oct. 9 – Nov. 10, 2004: Shakti Vinyasa Yoga & Art Studio, 2238 NW Market St., Seattle, WA (206)297-9642

Dec. 15, 2004 – Mar 15, 2005: Mountain Culture Centre, Banff, Alberta, Canada

For information on how to book the Path of Promise exhibit in your area please contact Debi at (510) 647-3423 tnpusa@igc.org

Path of Promise Internship Opportunity:

In the upcoming year, we will be offering an internship to a qualified candidate to curate the Path of Promise exhibit. If you have experience or are pursuing a degree related to the Arts please contact the US office for more information.



Path of Promise at the Moat Gallery, Vancouver, Canada

Outreach & Events:

This year TNP participated in over 17 events to celebrate Tibetan culture and non-profit work. Some events included tabling at talks by His Holiness the Dalai Lama in the U.S. and Canada. We also sold nuns' products at Tibet festivals in Seattle, San Francisco, Washington DC and Edmonton, and other fair trade markets such as the Global Fair Trade Expo in Santa Cruz, CA and the Whole Earth Festival in Davis, CA.

Overall the events not only increase our sales of products made by the nuns, but also this type of outreach allows us to spread knowledge about Tibetan women and their involvement in monastic life. "I've seen monks before but I had no idea there were Tibetan nuns!" is a common reaction we get from people at festivals.

Festivals and fairs have also been a fantastic medium to allow volunteers to help the nuns. The nuns at Dolma Ling are very busy not just with their studies but with handcrafting beautiful items such as handmade paper greeting cards, prayer flags, door curtains, hanging dorjees and wheels, and especially the popular prayer beads and handsewn bags, all to promote their own sustainable income generating projects. If you are interested in volunteering at any of these events, or if you know of similar events in your area that would be appropriate to table for TNP please contact the US office. Products are always available for purchase on our website at www.tnp.org

Tides Canada!

In April 2004, we were fortunate to partner with the Tides Canada Foundation which enables us to offer tax-deduction to our Canadian supporters. To send a donation to Tibetan Nuns Project for sponsorship or general donation please make your check payable to Tides Canada Foundation-Tibetan Nuns Project Fund, and mail to: Tides Canada, 680-220 Cambie St., Vancouver, BC V6B2M9 or make a donation by credit card at: <http://www.canadahelps.org/special/tibetannuns.aspx>

More Thanks:

The magic of running TNPUSA is through the wonderful volunteers that come to us. Foremost we would like to thank Jeff Davis for his tireless efforts for TNP. The 2005 calendar is the second year in a row that we feature his exquisite images of the nuns we support. We are also greatly indebted to Jeff's production of the Path of Promise exhibit. It not only features his photography but also showcases his commitment to raising awareness about the women of Tibet through his design and production.

The energy that people get from helping the nuns is endless! Proof being two of our former board members, Dianne Armer and Carroll Johnson, who both so graciously dedicated their time and expertise to working with Mr. Davis to bring the Path of Promise to life. Not only do our volunteers shine in the spotlight of exhibition but also behind the scenes in our small Berkeley office. Without the dedication of our volunteer staff such as Makoto Miyazaki from the USF Pacific Rim Studies program and Jennifer O'Boyle, we could not provide great support to our sponsors and donors. Special thanks to Tashi Tsering for his donations of delicious Tibetan food for our volunteers and board meetings. And, thanks to everyone who comes regularly or even once to our appeals for volunteers.

Lastly but never least, please check out the fabulous work of our website volunteers - Yolanda O'Bannon and Lopsang Wangdu for their continuing web-support and Zubin Mathai for his amazing shopping cart page. Now TNP products can be easily ordered worldwide through visiting our "How to Help" page and paying by credit card through PayPal.

Our Wish List

Please check our website for a list of current items needed for the office. Of most necessity these days are gifts of time and expertise. We are always on the hunt for graphic designer volunteers and donated office supplies. In India, work would be greatly facilitated by the donation of a quality digital camera.

Thanks!



Tibetan Nuns Project



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Calendar 2005 now available!



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.

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I'd like to sponsor a nun for \$30/month. I will send payments

- ☐ Quarterly (US \$90, CAD \$105) ☐ Semi-Annually (US\$180, CAD \$210) ☐ Annually (US \$360, CAD \$420)

Make checks or money orders payable to: Tibetan Nuns Project.

Enclosed is my check for \$ _____ or charge my credit card for \$ _____.

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- ☐ I am interested in volunteering. Please send me information.