

Tibetan Nuns Project

Life in the Time of COVID

Fall 2021



Life in the Time
of COVID



Geshema Exams
Postponed Again



Tough Monsoon
Season



Your Donations
in Action



Nun Wins
Science Scholarship



In Memoriam:
MN Ashish Ganju,
Architect of
Dolma Ling



Acts of Generosity



Help More Nuns
Become Geshemas



Current Needs

Good News About Vaccinations

Hundreds of Tibetan Buddhist nuns in India are now vaccinated. All nuns over 18 at Dolma Ling, Shugsep, Geden Choeling, Tilokpur, and Sakya College are fully vaccinated, having received their second doses in the late summer. The nuns have received the Covishield vaccine, the brand name of the AstraZeneca vaccine made by the Serum Institute of India. Once nuns under 18 are allowed to be vaccinated, the nunneries will do their best to get them vaccinated as soon as possible.



We don't have news from the two most remote nunneries we support, Sherab Choeling in Spiti (above) and Dorjee Zong in Zaskar. Normally some nuns from those nunneries travel south to Dharamsala each year bringing news, but because they are reducing their exposure, updates are limited. Health reports from Spiti indicate an almost 100% vaccination rate.

Nuns had many challenges getting vaccinated. At Dolma Ling, none of the 46 vaccination centers was within walking distance. In the second wave with the state in lockdown, the nunnery had to organize safe transport for hundreds of nuns to and from multiple vaccination centers. Some nuns had to travel over two hours one way to a center.

Booking appointments was also difficult. In April, the nuns could only register in groups of four. Indian guidelines restricted one phone number per group. Then the online registration site kept crashing. According to the *Hindustan Times*, getting an appointment was like hitting the jackpot. "Even those with high-speed internet and fastest fingers are at their wits' end as there is no guarantee that they will get a spot. Slots open for a fraction of second, one blink and they are gone," the paper said.



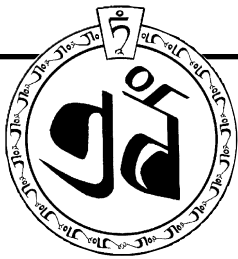
Indian newspapers reported that, on seeing pictures of His Holiness the Dalai Lama being vaccinated, vaccine hesitancy diminished dramatically among the people in the remote northern areas of Spiti and Lahaul.

Outbreaks at Some Nunneries

As the deadly second wave swept over India in the spring, there were several small outbreaks at the Tibetan Buddhist nunneries we support. Since they live in close communities, the nuns were vulnerable to the coronavirus.

At Geden Choeling Nunnery in Dharamsala, home to almost 200 nuns, nine nuns tested positive in May. Some had a fever and cough. They were quickly isolated in a separate block of the nunnery and were cared for by a COVID Management Committee led by a doctor from the Tibetan Delek Hospital, two nun health workers, and nine nun helpers. All the nuns have recovered. During the outbreak, all nuns and staff got rapid antigen tests and were negative. Geden Choeling is now prepared to tackle any new COVID cases and has medical supplies and a self-isolation ward.





Tibetan Nuns Project

Established in 1987, the Tibetan Nuns Project provides education and support to more than 700 nuns in northern India. The mission of the project is to:

Educate and empower nuns of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition as teachers and leaders;

Establish, strengthen, and support educational institutions to preserve the Tibetan religion and culture.

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Life in the Time of COVID (continued)

At the beginning of June, 23 nuns at Tilokpur Nunnery tested positive and were quarantined. The nuns wrote in August, "In comparison to others, the blessing of Buddha's grace kept us alive and has given us a chance to practice the inner value of Buddha's teachings on compassion and kindness and others. So far, our nuns are mentally and physically healthy, strong, and doing well during the critical time."

The Nuns Persevere

Since February 2020, the nunneries have maintained strict precautions to avoid infection. No visitors from the outside have been allowed to enter the nunnery compounds and the nuns are following COVID protocols – wearing masks, maintaining social distancing, and sanitizing. They sanitize goods at the entrance gates and isolate anyone who shows signs of infection.

The Tibetan Buddhist nuns in India are still able to perform pujas and prayers on request. You can see the various pujas that one can offer at tnp.org/products/pujas-prayers/. Throughout the pandemic, the nuns have been performing prayers and pujas for the health and wellbeing of all, but sometimes they had to restrict the number of nuns in the temple to maintain social distancing. At Dolma Ling, the nuns have been following

His Holiness the Dalai Lama's guidance to chant the Tara mantra to help ease suffering during the pandemic. They have even done 24-hour nonstop Tara chanting for the wellbeing of all sentient beings during these tough times.

The nuns are doing their best to continue with their studies, classes, and debate practice in spite of the many challenges. During the spikes of the pandemic, classes sometimes stopped for a period of weeks to maintain social distancing.

The nuns wrote, "We really would like to pay our gratitude to all the sponsors and donors who have helped us. You all will always be in our prayers."



Nuns observe COVID protocols while taking exams at Sakya College for Nuns.



Since the pandemic began, the nuns at Sakya College for Nuns were unable to leave to visit their families. The College arranged for a meditation master to give a 10-day course in Vipassana meditation.



A nun at Geden Choeling Nunnery in Dharamsala gets tested for COVID-19.



Tibetan yoga trainer Tsering Yangzom gave workshops for the nuns at Sakya College.

Geshema Exams Postponed Again

Each year, the nuns sitting various levels of the four-year Geshema examinations gather together for one month of final exam preparations and then for about 12 days of exams. The Geshema exams are normally held each August. The Geshema degree is comparable to a doctorate in Tibetan Buddhist philosophy and is the highest level of training in the Gelugpa school of Tibetan Buddhism.

This year, for the second year in a row, the exams were cancelled due to the pandemic. The committee hoped that, by postponing the exams to October 1st, it would be safe to hold them at Geden Choeling Nunnery in Dharamsala. However, in September they decided that it was still too risky for the nuns and examiners to gather and also to then return home to their various nunneries and monasteries. To take the Geshema exams, some

candidates must travel long distances, such as from Nepal and South India.

In 2019, all 50 nuns who took various levels of their Geshema exams passed. To date, there are 44 Geshema degree holders. Until recently, this highest degree could only be earned by men.

In our spring letter, we told you the story of one nun, Tenzin, on the threshold of becoming a Geshema after 25 years of study. She was supposed to take her fourth and final set of exams in August 2020.

In the face of this setback, the Tibetan Nuns Project has launched the Geshema Endowment Fund to ensure the Geshema exams will continue for decades to come.

Learn more on page 8.

Tough Monsoon Season

This year's monsoon season began with disaster. On July 12th, torrential monsoon rains hit Dharamsala in the northern Indian state of Himachal Pradesh causing flash floods and devastation. Four of the seven nunneries we support are in the area which is the second wettest region of India. The nuns have been working hard with the surrounding communities to repair the water lines and channels.



Your Donations in Action

During the pandemic, the nuns in all the nunneries have worked very hard to keep things running by themselves, managing their own electrical and plumbing repairs and only enlisting outside help in emergencies, such as when a septic tank overflowed. Maintenance work has been very limited and no new projects requiring outside workers to enter the nunnery compounds were permitted. Until the virus recedes, it is impossible to consider any major construction or maintenance projects. For now, we are focusing on projects to improve the comfort and quality of life for the nuns.



Both Dolma Ling and Shugsep nunneries purchased new hot water boilers which the nuns very much appreciate, enabling them to take thermoses of hot water to their rooms. They really need this comfort especially when they spend so much time studying on their own.



The nuns at Dolma Ling and Shugsep are pleased with their new dough-making machines which they use daily to make bread, buns, and noodles. Mixing dough by hand was labor intensive, less hygienic and didn't produce as good results. One nun said, "I never knew it was this easy to knead dough. So soft and fluffy!"



It's been years since the libraries at Dolma Ling and Shugsep were replenished and many books were very worn. The nuns asked for new English textbooks, reference books, and storybooks. Thanks to a generous donor, they were able to buy a good selection. The nuns and teachers are delighted to have so many new books.



New fridges and freezers were bought for both Dolma Ling and Shugsep making it possible for the nuns to order more perishable items at one time, thus avoiding waste and keeping everyone safe by limiting contact with outside suppliers.



The Jang Gonchoe inter-nunnery debate is cancelled again this year, but the good news is that the Jang Gonchoe Endowment Fund is now fully funded. Thank you for completing this huge project!



The new rice cooker at Dolma Ling makes the daily job of cooking rice for 247 nuns safer and easier while also saving on fuel and producing more nutritious rice. Until now, the nuns were in danger of being scalded by boiling water and steam because they had to carry a huge cauldron across the kitchen. Venerable Samten Dolma in charge of the kitchen this year said, "Before I had to check regularly to see if the rice was cooked perfectly or not. Now, with the new rice cooker, I don't have to worry about the rice being undercooked or soggy."



Shugsep Nunnery and Institute is safer and brighter thanks to your help to purchase solar lights. The solar lights were installed safely by the nuns and staff at Shugsep, without the need of outside workers, thereby keeping the nuns safe from COVID. Thank you!



With summer temperatures in the high 90s, it was impossible for the nuns to be comfortable. Seventy-four fans were bought for the Dolma Ling dormitories, clinic and kitchen.



There have been improvements in the classrooms at Dolma Ling and Shugsep including purchasing some white boards to replace the messy, hard-to-read old chalkboards.



Privacy and security have been restored at Shugsep thanks to this new 8-foot wall funded by Tibetan Nuns Project supporters.



No more leaks! The Shugsep nuns are very grateful to have newly repaired and painted water tanks.

Nun Wins Science Scholarship

A senior Tibetan Buddhist nun from Dolma Ling Nunnery and Institute has won a scholarship to study science for two years at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia starting in September 2021. Venerable Kelsang Lhamo (bottom right) is one of three nuns and four monks chosen for the Emory Tenzin Gyatso Science Scholars program.

As *The New York Times* wrote in 2013, a big challenge in teaching science is the lack of a Tibetan lexicon for many scientific terms. "How does one create new words for concepts like photosynthesis and clones, which have no equivalent in the Tibetan language or culture?" Over recent years, thousands of new scientific terms have been added to the Tibetan language.

**Tenzin Gyatso
Science
Scholars**



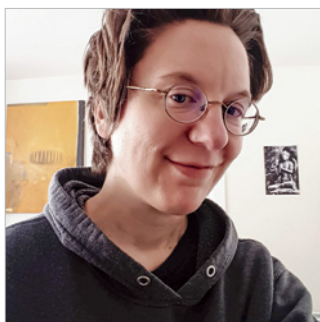
In Memoriam

We are very saddened by the passing of Munishwar Nath Ashish Ganju, the architect of Dolma Ling Nunnery and Institute and long-time friend of the Tibetan Nuns Project. He passed away at age 78 on May 5, 2021 due to COVID-19. The nuns and everyone at the Tibetan Nuns Project send our deepest condolences to his family, friends, and colleagues.



MN Ashish Ganju, Architect of Dolma Ling

Acts of Generosity



CHRIS LASTOVICKA

Web designer, classical musician, and graduate student



Gave funds from Master's course to create a matching gift for the Geshema Endowment



"I meditate with malas made by the nuns, and every time I hold them in my hands, I feel inspired. I am grateful for them and want to support them to reach their potential."



**CHERYL BRINK (RIGHT) WITH
LIFE PARTNER LAURA SHORT**

Retired San Francisco jewelry artist



Sponsors two nuns and has left a legacy gift



"In my 20s, our class was asked to list what we each had such a sufficiency of that we could give half away and still have enough.

I glanced at my best friend's page and hers said: Everything. This rocked my mind to the core. Since then, anytime I receive anything, I now give half and TNP is the foremost benefactor in my estate plan."



WENDY ARBEIT

Author on Pacific Island culture and crafts



Sponsors two nuns, supported butter sculpture training, and has left a gift in her will to TNP



"I'm delighted to provide a girl with access to education that would otherwise be limited so she may be able to succeed in her life goals and be a model to others."

Help More Nuns Become Geshemas

In May 2021, the Tibetan Nuns Project created a Geshema Endowment Fund to ensure the long-term sustainability of the Geshema program.

The Geshema degree is the highest level of training in the Gelugpa tradition and is comparable to a doctorate in Tibetan Buddhist philosophy. This degree was only formally opened to women in 2012. To date, 44 nuns hold the Geshema degree.

This degree enables Tibetan Buddhist nuns to become teachers, leaders, and role models. It makes these dedicated women eligible to assume various leadership roles in their monastic and lay communities reserved for degree holders and hence previously not open to women.

At the conclusion of their 17-year course of study, the nuns must successfully complete a 4-year series of examinations in order to attain the Geshema degree. In 2020 and 2021, the Geshema exams were cancelled due to the pandemic.

The Geshema Endowment Fund will help cover the costs involved in training and qualifying more Geshemas. This includes the costs of travel, food, and accommodation for the Geshema candidates to attend the exams. The fund will also cover the cost of administration and materials for the exams, and providing each new Geshema with a set of nuns' robes and yellow hat that signifies the holding of the degree.



Our fundraising goal is \$200,000

The Frederick Family Fund has kindly offered to match all gifts up to a total of \$20,000 and another donor has offered to match gifts up to \$1,500!

**To donate visit tnp.org,
call 1-206-652-8901, or mail a check**

Current Needs

Here is our wish list of current needs and projects for the nuns and nunneries:

SPONSOR A NUN: Sponsor a nun for just \$1 a day and provide her with education, food, shelter, health care, and opportunity.

GESHEMA ENDOWMENT FUND: Enable more nuns to become teachers and leaders by ensuring the long-term sustainability of the Geshema exam process.

TEACHERS' SALARIES: The annual cost of one teacher's salary ranges from \$1,500 to \$5,000, depending on the nunnery location and the teacher's skills.

AREA OF GREATEST NEED: To enable us to help the nuns in whatever way is most urgent, you can donate to the Area of Greatest Need.



To Help You Can

1. **Make a gift online** at tnp.org
2. **Call our office** in Seattle, US at 1-206-652-8901
3. **Mail a check to:**
The Tibetan Nuns Project
815 Seattle Boulevard South #216
Seattle, WA 98134 USA
(Please include a note about how you wish your gift to be used.)
4. **Donate securities**
5. **Include a gift in your will** to the Tibetan Nuns Project



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- Support one of our Current Needs
- Give a tribute card
- Give a gift of stock



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