



Tibetan Nuns Project

Fall 2018



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Thank You to Venerable Lobsang Dechen

Geshemas Pursue Groundbreaking Tantric Studies Program



For the first time in the history of Tibet, nuns have completed the study of the core Buddhist philosophical and practice teachings of their tradition and have gained the Geshema degree. This degree (Geshe degree for monks) is roughly equivalent to a Ph.D. in Tibetan Buddhism. However, in order for the Geshemas to be fully qualified masters able to teach their tradition, they must additionally gain an understanding of the principles set forth in the tantric scriptures.

To set up this new education program for women, a committee of representatives from six nunneries approached His Holiness the Dalai for advice about the curriculum and how to proceed.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama very kindly gave detailed instructions about the treatises to be used, who should teach, and the location for classes. He recommended that the Geshema nuns study as a group at Dolma Ling Nunnery & Institute, one of the institutions founded and supported by the Tibetan Nuns Project, since it has a quiet and peaceful atmosphere, conducive to intense study.

The Geshema nuns who graduated in 2016 and 2017 attend classes together. Among the 23 students, 16

are from other nunneries but are living at Dolma Ling supported by the Tibetan Nuns Project while they pursue their two-year tantric studies.

The Geshema nuns attend morning classes at Dolma Ling and in the afternoons travel to nearby Gyuto Tantric Monastery for classes. We are very grateful to Gyuto for giving our Geshemas the opportunity to attend classes with Geshe from South India as well as giving them equal opportunity to attend any teachings and classes given by the Abbot and

other high lamas. We deeply appreciate their support of the nuns.

So that future Geshemas might have access to these teachings, Venerable Delek Yangdron and Venerable Delek Yangchen of the Nuns' Media Section are recording and storing all the teachings by the masters.

Thanks to all the supporters of this new Tantric Studies Program, especially to the Barry Hershey Foundation. The initial two-year program of tantric studies has been funded, but the Tibetan Nuns Project is seeking funding for the second two-year study program scheduled to start in October 2019.





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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WEBSITE: www.tnp.org

India: c/o Dolma Ling
PO Sidhpur 176057
Dist. Kangra, H.P.
Email: infoindia@tnp.org
Phone: (91-9805) 783104

USA: 815 Seattle Blvd. S, Suite 216,
Seattle, WA 98134
Email: info@tnp.org
Phone: 206 652 8901

Updates from the Nunneries

Sherab Choeling

63 nuns

The head nun from Sherab Choeling, Venerable Bhutit Dolma, made the long journey from Spiti to Tibetan Nuns Project headquarters at Dolma Ling in May of this year, after the mountain passes opened again. She told us that the nuns are in good health and their classes are going well, with no change in teachers. The most senior nuns have now reached the level of Uma class, equivalent to college level. Of the younger nuns who are receiving primary education (school education up to Grade 5 or equivalent), 12 have passed this level and are now being introduced to Tibetan Buddhist philosophy. Seven nuns are still in primary school.



This past winter the area around the nunnery did not receive heavy snowfall, and now water is scarce. The local administrator has been helping the nunnery to connect a water line from the natural water source at their old nunnery to the present one. This year the nuns grew spinach in their greenhouses, which they are finding helps to combat prevalent iron deficiency.



Sakya College for Nuns

58 nuns

Classes at Sakya College are going well and the nuns had their annual academic awards ceremony in March 2018, with chief guest His Eminence Dungse Asanga Vajra Rinpoche attending.

The nuns' health team at Sakya organized a series of training sessions for the nuns. Doctors from Sakya Hospital and a nurse from Rajpur Homes School presented health talks and introduced first aid and cardio pulmonary resuscitation (CPR), including how to use an automated external defibrillator (AED). For the first time, the nuns grew green leafy vegetables and it was a big success!





Loseling Monastery in South India, in which monastics are taught the philosophy of science, physics, neuroscience, and biology. The course is presented by faculty members from Emory and other distinguished universities. Students attend classes for six hours a day and are tested on the last day of each course. Classes consist of lectures, discussions, demonstrations, and hands-on experiments. Every year, nuns from Dolma Ling take part; this year 8 nuns attended.



Tilokpur

85 nuns

The nuns are pursuing their regular studies. Last December, most of the nuns went to the Kagyu Monlam in Bodh Gaya and participated in the debate sessions as part of the event. The nuns found that, although they were initially nervous, the debates really helped them to gain confidence and faith in their abilities. They had a one-month summer break in July during which some visited their families while others remained at the nunnery. Doctors from the Tibetan Medical Institute visit Tilokpur once a month because it is difficult for the nuns to travel to that clinic for treatment.



Shugsep

84 nuns

The nuns sat their year-end exams in December 2017, after which the nunnery closed for its winter break. The nuns travelled for teachings in Bodh Gaya and also attended the Nyingma Monlam, which is an important event each winter.

They returned to Shugsep at the beginning of March. In April, the nuns elected committee members who serve year-long terms as chief administrators of the nunnery. To celebrate the Maha Parinirvana Anniversary of Shugsep Jetsun Rinpoche, the nuns offered a special ritual, the *Chöd* Feast Offering for the entire day. Every year, the Shugsep nuns read the entire Kangyur, the 108 volumes of the words of the Buddha, to mark Saga Dawa, the birth, enlightenment, and paranirvana of the Buddha. On the day of the Maha Parinirvana Anniversary of Mipham Rinpoche, the nuns engaged in debate and written competition.

In July, the nuns had the oath-taking ceremony for the annual summer retreat, during which they had another debate and speech competition. The nuns completed their mid-term examinations in the summer and now continue with their day-to-day studies.

Geden Choeling

171 nuns

The academic year started smoothly and the nuns have been sticking to their routines. A few nuns from the nunnery had the opportunity to attend science workshops provided by different organizations. Two nuns participated in the Emory-Tibet Science Initiative workshop for the second consecutive year. While taking the workshop at Drepung Loseling Monastery, the nuns were also taught mathematics. Seven nuns also participated in a two-week Modern Science Workshop organized by the Department of Religion and Culture at the Tibetan Reception Centre.

One of the attending nuns said she was interested in subjects such as physics, biology, and neurobiology. She said, "Science tells how to see reality through wider experiment, and helps us to understand the truth. Quantum physics helps us to see that things do not have independent existence." She enjoyed the explanation of biology and the fact that we have common ancestors, as in Charles Darwin's metaphor of the tree of life. In neurobiology class, she learned much about our physical world and health, especially about the five senses which help us understand how the brain processes information.



Dolma Ling

247 nuns

Dolma Ling hosted the annual inter-nunnery debate, Jang Gonchoe, in the fall of 2017. A total of 376 nuns and 14 teachers took part, with 169 of the nuns coming from other nunneries. In December 2017, the nuns had their final examinations followed by a two-month winter break. The new academic year began in March.

Each summer since 2014, nuns and monks have had the opportunity to take part in the Emory-Tibet Science Initiative, a four-week program held at Drepung



The 2018 Geshema Exams and Results

From August 15 to 26, 44 nuns from four nunneries (Geden Choeling, Jangchup Choeling, Kachod Gyakhil Ling, and Dolma Ling) sat for the Geshema exams at Dolma Ling Nunnery. The Geshema degree is equivalent to a PhD in Tibetan Buddhism. Until recently, the opportunity to earn this highest degree was only open to men. This year 12 nuns took the first round of examinations, 14 the second-year exams, 8 the third-year exams, and 10 the fourth and final year exams.

The 11-day examination process is extremely rigorous. Each morning, nuns from two of the four levels completed written papers from 9 a.m. to noon, while nuns from the other two levels underwent debate exams. In the afternoons, from 2 to 6 p.m., the examinees gathered for their debate sessions in front of the examiners.

Tibetan Buddhist philosophy is one of the major subjects for the Geshema candidates, but they were examined on other subjects as well. In philosophy, nuns

taking their first- and second-year exams were tested on Perfection of Wisdom (Pharchin) and Middle Way (Madhyamika), while third- and fourth-year examinees were tested on Monastic Discipline (Vinaya) and Treasury of Knowledge (Abhidharma). All exams were followed by debate sessions.

In addition to their other exams, nuns in years 1-3 were tested on Tibetan grammar and science. Nuns taking their final year exams were tested on science and history. Each of the final-year candidates also had to write, in advance, a 50-page thesis and they were examined on their thesis papers during the Geshema exams.

This year, the philosophy exam questions were prepared by Geshes from the Loseling and Gomang Colleges of Drepung Monastery in South India. The science question papers were prepared by staff at the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives. The Tibetan and history exam questions were written and marked by



Six nuns received their Geshema degree in 2017. Ten more will receive their degrees in November 2018.

the College for Higher Tibetan Studies at Sarah. All of the question papers were sealed and only opened when the nuns were seated in the exam hall. Completed answer sheets were collected and sent back to the various examiner centers. The secured answer sheets on philosophy were checked first at one monastery and then sent to the next to be rechecked.

The nuns were examined on debating by four Geshes, one each from Sera Jey, Sera Mey, Ganden Shartse, and Ganden Shantse monasteries, all located in South India. There are different examiners each year.

1st year exams: 8 of 12 passed
2nd year exams: 11 of 14 passed
3rd year exams: all 8 passed
4th and final year exams:
all 10 passed



Nuns at Dolma Ling eagerly read the 2018 Geshema results

Our Project Wish List

Thank you for educating, empowering, and caring for the nuns and for helping them to become leaders and teachers.

We are always looking for more sponsors.

To sponsor a nun, you can:

1. Visit our website at www.tnp.org
2. Call our office at 1-206-652-8901
3. Or complete the enclosed form on page 8.

We are extremely grateful to our supporters around the world for your help with our wish list of current needs.

Please help fund these 6 projects:

1. Roof painting at Shugsep Nunnery: \$8,462 needed
2. The Jang Gonchoe Debate Endowment Fund: \$150,000+ needed
3. Maintain the Nunneries: \$14,770 needed
4. Media Equipment: \$5,550 needed
5. Yangchen Lophel Study Center: \$940,000 needed



Nuns Join Youth Interfaith Pilgrimage and Dialogue

From June 21 to July 7, 2018, two nuns took part in the 14th Interfaith Dialogue and Pilgrimage and traveled with 16 others to Bengaluru, Shravanbelagola, and Bylakuppe to receive teachings on various spiritual traditions. The event was open to those 18-35 and was organized by The Foundation for Universal Responsibility of His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama.

The goal is to celebrate diversity, foster tolerance, build cross-cultural understanding, and encourage spiritual enquiry. Among the Tibetan participants were two nuns from Dolma Ling and Shugsep Nunneries, two monks from Sera Jey Monastic University, and four Tibetan college students. The 18 participants stayed in monasteries, ashrams, and other

spiritual centers, studying and exploring the basic tenets of Christianity, Buddhism, Sikhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Jainism, and other lesser-known faiths. The diverse group represented 16 different educational institutes and included Indian college students from six different states in India and a participant each from Nepal and Vietnam.



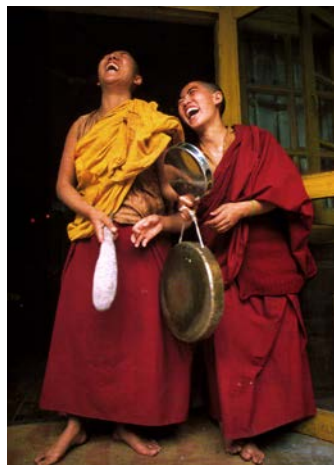
Laughing Nuns: The Story Behind the Photograph

My name is Brian Harris. Almost 30 years ago, in 1989, I travelled to India as a photographer. My journey took me to Dharamsala, the heart of the Tibetan exile community and home of His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

It was on this trip that I first encountered the Tibetan Nuns Project. One lunchtime, at Geden Choeling Nunnery, two nuns stepped out of the main entrance to the shrine hall.

As soon as I spotted the lead nun holding a gong in one hand and a mallet in the other, I realized this might be a good photo opportunity. I pointed my camera and took one photo.

This was before digital cameras were common, so it was almost six months later when I was back in Vancouver and I finally developed the rolls of film from that trip. When I saw the photograph for the first time, I was stunned by its beauty and power. It wasn't the photo I imagined I had taken. I had thought I'd taken an image of a nun banging on a gong. Instead, it was a marvelous display of two nuns in full-bodied, infectious, joyful laughter. Little did I know that it would become an iconic image—one that so many people have come to identify with the Tibetan people's indomitable spirit and light-hearted, warm character.



Over many years, my association with the Tibetan Nuns Project has been a two-way relationship resulting in friendships and a deep satisfaction in knowing that my photographic gifts and project funds have been useful and kindly received.

Recently, my wife Paula and I have left legacy gifts in our wills for the Tibetan Nuns Project as a way of continuing our support of the essential role that Tibetan nuns play in the ongoing transmission of the Buddha's teaching.

Giving and Receiving

If you include a gift in your will to the Tibetan Nuns Project before the end of March 2019, I will send you signed prints of both photos as a special thank you. Just contact the Tibetan Nuns Project office by emailing info@tnp.org.

The reciprocal relationship of receiving while giving that I experience with the Tibetan Nuns Project is, I think, beautifully portrayed in this image that I took on my first trip to Tibet in 1987.



The 2018 Inter-Nunnery Debate



Photo credit: Kopan Nunnery

In October, hundreds of nuns gathered at Kopan Nunnery in Nepal for the annual, month-long inter-nunnery debate called the Jang Gonchoe. The nuns came from nine nunneries in India and Nepal.

The practice of debate is an essential part of monastic education in the Tibetan tradition and joins logical thinking with a deeper understanding of Buddhist philosophy. The inter-nunnery debate is a vital educational opportunity. Until the 1990s, Tibetan Buddhist nuns were excluded from this form and level of education.

Your support of the Jang Gonchoe helps to build capacity and equality for the nuns, to foster the dharma for future generations, and to ensure that this precious wisdom tradition continues and grows. We are deeply grateful to everyone who donated to the 2018 Jang Gonchoe and to our special Jang Gonchoe Endowment Fund.

Each year that the nuns take part in the Jang Gonchoe, they grow in confidence and ability. Debating at the Jang Gonchoe gives the nuns a chance to “up their game” and prepare for taking higher degrees such as the Geshema degree. Ultimately, this annual event helps the nuns to become teachers and leaders and to preserve the rich Tibetan Buddhist culture and religion.

We are still fundraising for the Jang Gonchoe Endowment Fund so that the inter-nunnery debate can be self-sustaining.



Photo credit: Kopan Nunnery

Acts of Generosity



OLIVIER ADAM

French photographer and teacher



Olivier has shared his photos with TNP and also sells them through Etsy to raise funds for the nuns



“I am inspired by the devotion of these nuns. The Tibetan Nuns Project is doing a wonderful job in educating nuns, not only in Buddhist studies, but in all aspects of education that a woman will need in this life.”



JULIE BRITTAIN

University professor, Sponsor since 2000



Julie has left a gift in her will to the Tibetan Nuns Project



“It’s so easy for me to support this wonderful project. It’s a privilege to be a part of it.”



BARB SPANNAUS

Minnesota donor



Sponsors a nun and gives to nunnery maintenance, including septic repairs and temple floor repair



“The dedication of the nuns is critical to maintain the Tibetan culture, language, and Tibetan Buddhist traditions.”

Dorjee Zong Nuns Visit Dolma Ling

Last winter, Venerable Lobsang Palmo, one of the head nuns at the remote nunnery of Dorjee Zong in Zanskar brought nine young nuns to Dharamsala. She explained that, because most of the nuns' family members are uneducated, when the nuns return home for the holidays, they forget most of the things that they were taught in class.

Determined to foster the nuns' learning, Ven. Lobsang Palmo got permission from their parents to bring them to Dharamsala. The parents were very happy that their daughters would avoid the harsh winter in Zanskar and, at the same time, gain experience living



Nine nuns from Dorjee Zong receive donated knitwear from Wool-Aid.
Photo by Nuns' Media Team

with nuns from other nunneries. The nuns lived at Thosamling Nunnery from mid-November 2017 till mid-May 2018.

The young nuns enjoyed their stay in Dharamsala. Unfortunately, during that time, seven of the nine nuns contracted chicken pox. Thanks to immediate medical treatment, all of them recovered within two weeks.

During their six-month stay at Thosamling Nunnery, the young nuns had regular classes in Buddhist philosophy, and in Tibetan and English languages. Venerable Lobsang Tsewang, a senior monk from the Buddhist School of Dialectics in Dharamsala, taught the nuns Buddhist philosophy and Tibetan. Ven. Lobsang Palmo had asked Ven. Lobsang Tsewang to teach the nuns because he is also from Zanskar and could explain things to the nuns in their own language whenever needed. This really increased their understanding. The nuns also studied *The Wizard of Oz* in English with an Indian teacher, Ms. Meenakshi.



Nuns meeting Rinchen Khando Choeygal.
Photo by Nuns' Media Team

All the nuns at Dorjee Zong Nunnery are now in good health. At their nunnery, they grow barley and vegetables such as green peas, carrots, radishes, leafy greens, potatoes, cabbages, and cauliflower. These all grow very well in the nunnery garden and the nuns use their produce year round.

In Zanskar, schools usually close around mid-November so that the teachers who are not from the area can leave before the roads become blocked by snow. Schools usually re-open around March, with the teachers being brought in by helicopter from the city of Leh.

Thank You to Venerable Lobsang Dechen

Venerable Lobsang Dechen, Co-Director of the Tibetan Nuns Project, is retiring after working on behalf of Tibetan Buddhist nuns for almost three decades.

A nun from the age of 13, Venerable Lobsang Dechen studied at the Tibetan Children's Village (TCV) in Dharamsala until Class 10, before completing her schooling at the Central School for Tibetans in Mussoorie. She then attended St. Bede's College, a women's college in Shimla, and received her B.A. Degree followed by a B.Ed. Degree from Punjab University in Chandigarh. With her teaching credentials, she returned to Lower TCV where she taught English and geography from 1984 to 1991.

In 1992, she left her teaching career to join the Tibetan Nuns Project to

advance its efforts to make educational opportunities available for nuns throughout the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. Since then, she has helped to establish a system in which nuns could be nurtured into educated, confident young women.

Because Venerable Lobsang Dechen is a nun, her work towards the betterment of nuns has been very encouraging for the nuns. We will always be very grateful for her hard work, patience, dedication, and teamwork. She has personally seen the nuns grow mentally and emotionally into stronger women, and move beyond the unthinkable situations they had faced in Tibet. After years of effort, it is wonderful that

she has seen the nuns graduate with the Geshema Degree (Geshe for monks), a great milestone in the history of Tibet. Though we would have liked her to continue working with the Tibetan Nuns Project, we wish her all the best in life.



Venerable Lobsang Dechen speaking to the Geshemas in 2016. Photo courtesy of Olivier Adam



Tibetan Nuns Project

USA: 815 Seattle Blvd. S,
Suite 216,
Seattle, WA 98134
Email: info@tnp.org
Phone: 206 652 8901
www.tnp.org

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