



Tibetan Nuns Project

Fall 2019



The 25th Annual
Jang Gonchoe
Inter-Nunnery Debate



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The 25th Annual Jang Gonchoe Inter-Nunnery Debate



Tibetan Buddhist nuns debate outdoors at Kopan Nunnery in Nepal. They were taking part in the month-long inter-nunnery debate called the Jang Gonchoe.

This is a special year for the annual inter-nunnery debate, called the Jang Gonchoe. 2019 marks the 25th annual debate event for the nuns. The name Jang Gonchoe means “winter debate at Jang” and refers to the centuries-old debate event for monks in Tibet. For many nuns, taking part in this event is an essential component of working towards higher academic degrees, such as the Geshema degree, roughly equivalent to a Ph.D. in Tibetan Buddhist philosophy.

Traditionally, Buddhist nuns have not had the same access to education as monks. Prior to the 1990's, Tibetan Buddhist nuns did not receive training in debate. The Tibetan Nuns Project has worked hard to open up this opportunity for the nuns and make debate a core part of their education. The first Jang Gonchoe inter-nunnery debate was held in 1995, and, since 1997, thanks to our supporters, the Tibetan Nuns Project has been fully supporting the annual month-long event.

This year's historic event will be held in the holy city of Bodh Gaya, where 2,600 years ago Gautama Buddha attained Enlightenment under the Bodhi Tree. In past years, the event has rotated among participating nunneries, such as Kopan in Nepal in 2018. At least nine nunneries from India and Nepal are planning to take part this year. The scheduled dates are October 25th to November 30th.

Tibetan Buddhist debate is an essential part of monastic education in the Tibetan tradition combining logical thinking with a deeper understanding of Buddhist philosophy. The practice of debate takes many years to fully master and it is critical to fostering the nuns' ability to fully understand their philosophical tradition and assume roles as qualified teachers of that tradition.

The annual inter-nunnery debate is a major project for the Tibetan Nuns Project each year and wouldn't be possible without the generous support of donors who help fund the nuns' food and travel costs.

Although the nuns do now debate within their own nunneries, it is only by attending the annual month-long inter-nunnery debate, for extended debate with their peers, that they are able to advance their knowledge and gain the necessary confidence and experience to pursue the Geshema degree (Geshe for monks), equivalent to a doctorate in Tibetan Buddhism.

As in past years, the final week of the Jang Gonchoe will have the formal pre-degree *damcha* debate with the Geshema candidates, followed by the Geshema graduation ceremony. In August, 7 nuns took their fourth and final year of Geshema exams, and we are happy to report all of them passed and will receive their degrees at the conclusion of this year's Jang Gonchoe session.



Nuns line up to debate with the 10 Geshema nuns. This event is called a *damcha* and is the final hurdle for the new geshemas, as any and all are able to challenge them in debate.



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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The Jang Gonchoe Endowment Fund

It is our wish to make the annual debate event sustainable by fully funding an endowment to support it. In 2014, the Tibetan Nuns Project launched a Jang Gonchoe Endowment Fund so that the inter-nunnery debates can continue for decades to come. To date, \$230,000 of the \$600,000 goal has been raised, leaving a funding gap of \$370,000.

The Jang Gonchoe Endowment Fund, when fully funded, will help to preserve Tibetan religion and culture at a time when they are severely under threat. The Fund will sustain the opening of this centuries-old tradition to nuns, empowering them to become great teachers in their own right.

Supporting the Jang Gonchoe Endowment Fund is a profound opportunity to build capacity and equality for the nuns, to foster the dharma for future generations, and to ensure that this unique tradition continues and grows.



We are still fundraising for the Jang Gonchoe Endowment Fund so that the inter-nunnery debate can be self-sustaining. The benefit of this is inestimable and will be an enduring legacy for generations to come.



An archival photo from the early 1990's when the nuns had to practice debate in the fields.

50 Tibetan Nuns Sit Geshema Exams in August 2019

From August first to twelfth, 50 Tibetan Buddhist nuns sat various levels of the four-year Geshema exams. This year, the exams were held at Jangchup Choeling Nunnery in south India.

In 2012, an historic decision was made to allow Tibetan Buddhist nuns the opportunity to take examinations for the Geshe degree, known for women as the Geshema degree. Prior to this time, it was only open to monks. The Geshema/Geshe degree is the highest level of training in the Gelugpa tradition and is equivalent to a Ph.D. in Tibetan Buddhism.

To be eligible to take their Geshema exams, the nuns must first complete at least 17 years of study. The Geshema examination process is extremely rigorous and takes four years to complete, involving both written and debate exams and also the completion and defense of a thesis.

Each year the nuns preparing to sit various levels of the four-year examinations gather together for one month of final exam preparations and then for about 12 days of exams. This year the nuns received over 100 messages of good luck from our friends around the world.

The results have just been posted by the Department of Religion and Culture of the Tibetan Administration. Seven nuns sat their fourth and final year of exams, and all passed. Now they will take part in a week-long formal debate session in front of hundreds of nuns at the Jang Gonchoe inter-nunnery debate session. The graduation ceremony will be held in Bodh Gaya, at the conclusion of the Jang Gonchoe.

We are extremely grateful to everyone who supported our 2019 Geshema Exams Fund. Your gifts enabled the nuns to take their exams by covering their travel and food costs for the study and exam periods.



Nunnery Updates

Dolma Ling

229 nuns

Rinchen Khando Choegyal, Founding Director and Special Advisor to the Tibetan Nuns Project, has always encouraged the nuns to assume leadership roles in their nunneries and to serve their different communities. Thus, Dolma Ling has hired two Geshemas – Geshema



Delek Wangmo and Geshema Tenzin Kunsel – as philosophy teachers. These two nuns had the highest scores among the seven Geshemas from the nunnery. They are now teaching about 10 junior classes a week and supervise the nunnery's evening debate sessions.

The nuns resumed their classes at the beginning of March. Annual extra-curricular activities included the inter-house quiz competitions in May and September and the flower competition in July. Everyone at the nunnery happily celebrated His Holiness the Dalai Lama's 84th birthday on July 6th with early morning prayer offerings, games during the day, and a performance of plays and songs by the nuns in the evening.

This year, 70 nuns from Dolma Ling are participating in the Jang Gonchoe inter-nunnery debate being held in Bodh Gaya. The nunnery had to change the

date of the nuns' final exams to October because the nuns would not have time to return from Bodh Gaya for December exams and reach His Holiness the Dalai Lama's teachings in South India on time.

Shugsep

92 nuns

In January, the majority of the nuns attended the Nyingma Monlam Prayer Festival in Bodh Gaya, after which they enjoyed a winter vacation. Classes began on April 5th and this year the nuns have new Tibetan and English language teachers. The nuns' committee members also changed and it was also decided that a Khenpo will be appointed as the head of the nunnery.

On May 16th, the nuns performed a Chöd Tsok offering to commemorate the anniversary of the death of Shugsep Jetsunma, the former abbess of Shugsep Nunnery in Tibet and a recognized incarnation of Machig Labdrön. On July 1st, the nuns performed a puja to mark the anniversary of the passing of Mipham Rinpoche. The nuns also held a debate and received teachings from senior nuns. The nuns had their written philosophy and debate exams in August.



From September 13th to 27th, the nuns gave teachings during the summer retreat or *Yarney*. See page 6 for news about the monsoon flooding and emergency.

Tilokpur

89 nuns

Nuns had regular classes throughout the year with all the same teaching staff apart from the English teacher. The nuns sit final exams in December after which they will go to Bodh Gaya.

Each winter, the nuns take part in the Kagyu Monlam Chenmo prayer festival in Bodh Gaya presided over by the head of Kagyu lineage and senior lamas. In 2019 it was held from December 15-21 and in 2020 the 37th Kagyu Monlam is scheduled for January 28 to February 9.

Before the start of the prayer festival, a special initial teaching by senior lamas is given to all nuns, monks, and lay people. This is followed by several days of practical examinations on daily actions and conduct, with results announced at the end of the Kagyu Monlam. Tilokpur nuns are pleased that they got 1st position once in the past.

The 2019 Kagyu Monlam lasted for eight days during which all the nuns, monks, and lay people took *sojong* vows and fasted after lunch. The Monlam concluded with a special prayer for the well-being of all sentient beings and the lightning of butter lamps. The nuns also participated in a debate competition during the Kagyu Monlam.

Geden Choeling

178 nuns

On April 10, 2019, the nuns held a welcome ceremony for the appointment of the new Khenpo (Abbot), Geshe Jampa Kalden from Sera Jey Monastery. Abbots serve for a term of three years and come alternatively from Sera Jey and Sera Mey monasteries.



Classes have been proceeding smoothly throughout the year. Two nuns, Ven. Lobsang Jangchup and Ven. Phuntsok Dolma, attended the Emory Tibet Science Initiative program held at Drepung Loseling Monastery from May 30th to July 5th. In June, all the nuns participated in a mass cleanup program in Dharamsala, organized by the Tibetan



Welfare Settlement Office. In August, two nuns participated in a three-day scholar and research meeting based on youth awareness and creativity in exile under the leadership and guidance of His Holiness and organized by the regional Tibetan Youth Congress at Sarah College. From September 3 to 20, eight nuns attended the first-ever Science Leadership Program exclusively for nuns, organized by the Library for Tibetan Works and Archives.

This year, ten nuns from Geden Choeling took their Geshema exams at Jangchup Choeling Nunnery in Mundgod, taking levels 1, 2, and 3 of the four-year exams. Almost 60 nuns will take part in the 2019 Jang Gonchoe inter-nunnery debate being held in Bodh Gaya from October 25th to November 23rd.

The nunnery started the construction of 25 living quarters for the nuns in August and expects to complete the building by April 2020.

Sherab Choeling

62 nuns



Classes have been going well. In addition to classes, the nuns perform pujas at the homes of local families every Sunday and second Saturdays. Each year, the nuns have 15 days of holiday during which they can visit their homes as well as 7 days of holiday usually after exams.

The nuns have finally set up a small retreat facility on the site of the old nunnery. The facility has three rooms and will be available for the few elder nuns over the age of 60.

The nuns are extremely grateful to their philosophy teacher who has been teaching them for 14 years and enduring the extreme weather of the Spiti Valley. They have asked him to continue teaching them until age 60, after which he can, if he wishes, stay at the nunnery in one of the retreat rooms instead of returning to his monastery in South India.

The nuns have received permission to hire an additional philosophy teacher because they would like to start participating in the Jang Gonchoe, the annual inter-nunnery debate. Having two teachers will help the nuns gain confidence and skills as well as thoroughly study topics relevant to Tibetan philosophical debate. Since the senior philosophy teacher is unable to travel far, the second teacher will be able to attend the inter-nunnery debates with the nuns.

The head nuns received funding from the local government for tin roofing for the existing flat-roof buildings. Getting government grants takes time because of all the formalities and different offices involved. While the roof work was going on, the nuns replaced all the windows with the help of money they received from sales of green peas they had grown, as well as from donations received from local villagers. Most of the funding came from Ms. Tina, a regular visitor to the area.

Sakya College for Nuns

57 nuns



Nuns with their teachers

Unfortunately we did not receive an update from the nuns this year.

Dorjee Zong

19 nuns

Project for Dorjee Zong Nunnery

Dorjee Zong is one of the oldest nunneries in Zanskar and was founded in the 14th century. Currently there are 19 nuns at the nunnery. The eldest are in their late 80s, while the youngest is 5. Young nuns are provided primary education at the nunnery up to Grade 5 and a teacher has been sent by the Central Institute for Buddhist Studies to teach them. Around 9 other nuns



have completed their Grade 5 education at the nunnery and are now attending classes at the government school 6 miles away. Generous donors have funded the purchase of a school bus to enable the nuns to make the 12-mile round-trip journey and to continue their education.

Until this year, the nunnery had one main building that was used for everything – a single classroom, sleeping facilities for the teacher, young nuns and volunteers, a common kitchen and a single washroom for everyone.



With the growing number of students, the nunnery needed a well-organized and expanded facility. The nuns' committee asked the Tibetan Nuns Project for help and, after much discussion, we decided to pursue their project.

The nuns' committee were delighted to hear that they had funding to start the school project for Dorjee Zong Nunnery. We are exceptionally grateful to The Betsy Gordon Foundation for funding the building project. Construction began this year and the hostel block is complete.



Emergency at Shugsep Nunnery and Institute

On July 17 2019, disaster struck Shugsep Nunnery and Institute in northern India.

After weeks of heavy monsoon rains, a huge tree was unearthed and came crashing down onto the newly painted roof near the temple.

Fortunately, none of the nuns were injured. But a large section of the roof was crushed and some of the supporting pillars were damaged.

Meanwhile, vast amounts of water were rushing through the campus and threatening to flood the library and the ground floor hall.



Without urgent action to channel the rainfall away, the buildings would be severely damaged.

The Tibetan Nuns Project immediately reached out to you, our supporters, with news of the emergency at Shugsep.

Thanks to your generosity and compassion, we were able to reassure the nuns that help was coming and they could immediately begin repairs.

Shugsep Nunnery and Institute is an important Nyingma nunnery and is home to about 90 Tibetan Buddhist nuns.

The nunnery was re-established in India after the original Shugsep nunnery in Tibet was destroyed and many of the nuns who lived there escaped into exile.

When the emergency struck, the nuns worked hard to remove the fallen tree and to help with the urgent repairs. They removed all the logs and branches that they could.

Workers built a large storm drain to release the water that collects behind the nunnery during the heavy monsoon



downpours that are now happening more and more often.

This much larger drainage system will lead the water away from the nunnery buildings, thereby preventing damage to the foundations and walls and avoiding dampness inside the rooms. The library and its precious books will be kept dry and safe.

Thank you for your amazing support of the nuns during this time of crisis. The head of the nunnery continually says thank you and the nuns are beaming!

Acts of Generosity



ANGELINA

Activist of Universal Responsibility



Sponsors a nun, supports current needs such as the school bus and the Geshema exams, and orders pujas



"I love the Tibetan Nuns Project because it allows me the opportunity to put into practice the paramita of generosity. Even though the nuns live and study far away from where I live, through the practice of generosity and the power and devotion of the nuns' prayers we connect as one."



PEMA CHÖDRÖN FOUNDATION

Dedicated to preserving and sharing Pema's inspiration and teachings.



Has provided three grants to help support the Geshema exams and the annual inter-nunnery debate, the Jang Gonchoe



"If one wishes suffering not to happen to the people and the earth, it begins with a kind heart."

Pema Chödrön



NORMAN STEINBERG

Buddhist practitioner, father, grandfather and Tibetan Nuns Project volunteer



Supported vital projects including the Jang Gonchoe Endowment, Geshema exams, tofu machine and flatbread stove.



"The nuns embody and exemplify integrity and compassion. They are inspirational in what they do as experts in their own fields while focusing on the needs of others. They expect the best, are supportive of others and lead by example."

A Nun's Story

I was born in Dolpo, a village near the border of Tibet and Nepal. My family were nomads and farmers. There was no school in our village so, from a young age, I would help my parents with farming and care for my three younger siblings and a yak. I never had the opportunity to study.

At sixteen, I went with my family on pilgrimage to Nepal. My mother got sick due to complications from her pregnancy with my youngest sibling. My father returned home to care for the farm and animals, promising he would return and take us back home. But we didn't hear from him for a long time. We became worried and called our neighbors only to learn that father never reached home, but died in an avalanche on the way.

My mother and I were both shattered with the news and decided to stay in Nepal. She sent one of my younger brothers to become a monk at Romtang Gumpa at Bodha, and another one to school to study. I, being the eldest, became the main breadwinner.

I sold things by the roadside and transported things across the border. Once, I was robbed, but luckily the robbers did not do anything to me. I returned home empty-handed.

I got married at age 18. At age 19, I gave birth to a baby girl. I was so happy. My



Photo credit: Dustin Kujawski

mother looked after her while I worked.

But that happiness was just temporary. In 2000, my husband left us for another woman. In 2001, my mother passed away due to illness and that hit me hard. I did not want to stay in Nepal

where I faced betrayal and loneliness, so I decided to go to India.

Since I never had any education, I made sure my daughter would be educated and sent her to the Tibetan Children's Village school. While she was studying, I worked in a restaurant and, during winter, I would sell winter clothes. I saved up money and was finally able to run a restaurant of my own.

It was very challenging and exhausting running a restaurant all on my own. At first, a lot of people came, but gradually I had fewer customers. It was a competitive business and also the rent was raised. I was not able to attend His Holiness's teachings when they happened in Dharamsala. I would cry myself to sleep because of all my suffering.

I realized that what I have been through in this life is all due to my past life deeds. My siblings and my daughter are all working and living by themselves. For once, I wanted to do something for myself. As a Buddhist, I believe in next life; if I want my next life to be good, I have to earn good merit in this life.

I decided to follow the Buddha's path. Even though it was late, I wanted to use the time I had left in my life. I asked my uncle who is a monk to help me because I wanted to become a nun. He told me about a nun's life and he took me to Dolma Ling Nunnery and Institute.

Dolma Ling Nunnery was so quiet and peaceful, surrounded by trees and birds singing. I liked Dolma Ling from my first glance. We went to the office and the principal interviewed me. I told them my story and kindly asked to be allowed to become a nun, and they agreed. I felt so happy and blessed. I promised myself that I would be a good nun.

For the first few weeks of my stay at Dolma Ling, I felt like I was in another world. It was my first time to line up to get food. I had no clue as to where to go or what to do. I got confused a lot. Now, I am used to nunnery life. I am glad I chose to become a nun. I am so at peace. I became a class monitor since I am the oldest. For now, I just wish to study hard and do my duties properly.



Photo credit: Oliver Adam

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.

Please help fund these 6 projects:

1. Jang Gonchoe annual debate and Endowment Fund
2. Tantric Studies Housing for Geshemas
3. Teachers' salaries
4. Jeep for TNP India office
5. Yangchen Lophel Study Center
6. Maintain the nunneries





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