

Tibetan Nuns Project

Fall 2020



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How the nunneries were impacted by the pandemic

The majority of the nuns are Tibetan refugees and part of a wider Tibetan diaspora while the remainder are from remote border areas of India. Living in close communities, with classes, prayers, dining halls, and shared rooms and bathrooms means that nuns are in many ways very vulnerable to the coronavirus. If the virus were to enter a nunnery, it would spread rapidly.

The Central Tibetan Administration based in Dharamsala, India, home of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, took strong, early measures to stop the spread of the coronavirus pandemic and to ensure that Tibetans in exile are safe and healthy. As early as January 24th, following the COVID-19 outbreak in China, the Department of Health of the Central Tibetan Administration proactively issued guidelines on preventive measures and ran awareness campaigns across Tibetan settlements in India. One week after the WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic on 11th March 2020, the Department created a COVID-19 Task Force to mitigate the potentially catastrophic impact of the disease, particularly in Tibetan refugee settlements.

The nuns and nunneries have benefited from this extra level of health care and focus. In addition to Indian travel restrictions, the Tibetan government-in-exile asked all Tibetans in India to refrain from travelling within or across the states especially in Himachal Pradesh. Some nunneries closed to visitors in the first week of February, shutting their gates and monitoring anyone who came in or out.



Nuns at Tilokpur Nunnery practice physical distancing while studying.



Nuns Pray for the Sick

In the spring, the Department asked all Tibetan monastic and religious centres to take part in a special prayer initiative dedicated to everyone suffering physically or mentally due to the pandemic, for all the health care professionals, and for a speedy end to the global crisis. The goal was to provide strength and resolution for the sick and the emotionally distressed so that they might overcome the disease. Through the special prayers, it also wanted to support the families of the deceased in observing unhindered prayer rituals according to the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. The department advised the nunneries and monasteries to limit large gatherings while convening the prayers.

The nuns at Sherab Choeling Nunnery in the remote Spiti Valley marked the holy month of Saga Dawa as always with prayers, the lighting of butter lamps, fasting, and vows. During the holy month, the nuns also received puja requests from villagers for their late family members and for their own well-being. The nuns also offered the Medicine Buddha ritual as requested by many people.

The nuns send this special message to all donors and sponsors: “We hope all our kind sponsors are well and keeping themselves safe. We pray for all in the world and our dear sponsors and supporters. Our deep prayers to all!”

The nuns are once again performing pujas. You can sponsor prayers via our website at <https://tnp.org/products/pujas-prayers/>



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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Helping the Most Vulnerable

On 24 March 2020, the Indian Government ordered the world's largest coronavirus lockdown. The Central Tibetan Administration called for a full 80 days of lockdown for Tibetan nunneries, monasteries, Tibetan settlements, old age homes, and schools.

Before the nationwide coronavirus lockdown, Dolma Ling and Shugsep nunneries were already well prepared and had bought a month's worth of rations to better withstand this sudden challenge.



Compassion in action. The nuns at Dolma Ling shared some their food rations with 100 poor Indian families living near the nunnery.

Masks and Physical Distancing

The nuns at all seven nunneries we support have been trying to maintain physical distancing as much as possible. For many months, they avoided gathering in large groups for classes, pujas, meals, or morning assembly.

At Dolma Ling Nunnery and Institute, the nuns from the tailoring section began sewing cloth masks for the nuns to wear, whereas they usually make prayer flags, nuns' bags, and nuns' robes.

The Tibetan Nuns Project is very grateful to Charles-Antoine Janssen for his generous gift of over 3,500 masks for the nuns at various nunneries.

During the holy month of Saga Dawa, the Dolma Ling nuns continued their annual tradition of reading the entire Tibetan Buddhist canon or Kangyur, the 108 volumes of the spoken words of the Buddha, sitting apart to do the reading.



Nun sewing face masks.

Education in the time of COVID



Nuns continue to study and pray on their own in their rooms or at safe distances outdoors.

The nuns are doing their best to stay on track with their studies during this difficult time. Classes within most nunneries have partially or fully resumed over the summer and the nuns are doing their best to practice physical distancing and safety. The nunneries, like schools and universities globally, have lots of educational challenges during the pandemic and have yet to return to their full normal system of classes and exams.

In lieu of face-to-face classes, some teachers recorded their lessons using an mp3 player and shared files with students.

Geshema News

The Geshema degree for nuns is the highest level of training in the Geluk tradition and is equivalent to a PhD in Tibetan Buddhism. For monks it is called the Geshe degree. This highest degree was only formally opened to women in 2012. To date, 44 nuns have earned the Geshema degree.

2020 Geshema Exams Postponed

Each year since 2012, the nuns sitting various levels of the four-year Geshema examinations have gathered together in July for one month of final exam preparations and then for two weeks of oral and written exams in August.

The venue rotates between the participating nunneries, and nuns often travel long distances to take the exams, such as from Nepal and South India. With the pandemic still continuing, the Geshema Examination Working Committee regretfully reached the decision that it would be necessary to postpone those exams until August 1, 2021.



Detail of photo by Olivier Adam

New Research Program for Geshemas

Five Geshemas have received scholarships to participate in a new Tibetan Buddhist philosophy research program. The historic research project organized by the Geluk International Foundation has seats for 30 Geshe and 5 Geshemas to do three-year research projects on the five primary topics of Buddhist philosophy studied to earn the Geshe degree.

In order to qualify for the program, the Geshemas had to have obtained 60% in their final Geshema exams, as well as to meet other criteria and supply formal documents. The Tibetan Nuns Project helped the candidates to complete the application process.

The new research wing is headed by Shartse Khensur Ven. Jangchup Choeden who is the director. The committee members include other eminent Geshe Lharamphas from major monasteries.

We thank all our sponsors and supporters for their valuable contribution towards the nuns reaching this level of training and study.



Geshema Tenzin Palmo is one of the 5 Geshemas chosen for the new research project.

Geshema Sworn in as Election Commissioner

Ensuring that democratic elections are free, fair, and credible is an important responsibility. For the first time, a Tibetan Buddhist nun, Geshema Delek Wangmo, has been elected to serve on the Election Commission for the Tibetan Parliament-in-Exile.

The general election for the 17th Tibetan parliament-in-exile will be held in 2021 at which time all eligible exile Tibetans registered to vote will elect a new Sikyong, the executive head of the Central Tibetan Administration, and the 45 members of the Tibetan parliament.



Geshema Delek Wangmo takes the oath of office. Photo: Tenzin Phende/CTA

Geshema Delek Wangmo is among the first group of nuns that came under the care of the Tibetan Nuns Project and was a part of the whole process of the Dolma Ling construction and introduction of an education system for the nuns. We are proud of such nuns for being mentally strong, focused, and dedicated towards getting an education and leading the way for the younger nuns. She started teaching philosophy at the nunnery from March 2019 after the completion of her Tantric Studies along with Geshema Tenzin Kunsel. Being the additional election commissioner, she attends office four days a week from 9am to 5pm. As she is free on Wednesday and Saturday, she is continuing with her classes at the nunnery while on other days her classes have been distributed among other philosophy teachers. She describes it as a whole new experience, having never before worked in such a field outside the monastic community.

In another action of public service, in the spring of 2020, the Department of Religion and Culture of the Central Tibetan Administration arranged a number of video teachings by Tibetan Buddhist scholars to help Tibetans cope with the crisis of the coronavirus pandemic. Geshema Delek Wangmo was asked to teach and gave a video talk in Tibetan on keeping a peaceful mind during a crisis through the practice of Tibetan Buddhism.

Tantric Studies

Seven Geshemas graduated in October 2019 of whom six are from Dolma Ling and one from Jangchup Choeling. These nuns would have moved on to attend Tantric studies provided by Gyutö Monastery. However, this had to be postponed until next year as Gyutö Monastery also decided not to hold any classes this year.

Jang Gonchoe Inter-Nunnery Debate Cancelled for 2020

The 25th Jang Gonchoe (inter-nunnery debate session) took place in the holy city of Bodh Gaya last year. The Kagyu Monlam committee was very generous to allow the nuns to use the whole complex free of cost, only accepting a small donation towards water and electricity usage.

Because holding the Jang Gonchoe there was so successful, the 2020 session was to take place in Bodh Gaya again. However, this too has been cancelled due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. This is the first time that the session has had to be cancelled since its inception in 1995.

Meanwhile, we will continue to raise funds for the Jang Gonchoe Endowment to ensure that this vital educational opportunity for nuns will continue. So far, we've raised \$314,245 of our \$600,000 goal. To donate, please visit our website at tnp.org or call our office in Seattle at 1-206-652-8901.



In 2019 in Bodh Gaya, 422 nuns took part in the 25th annual Jang Gonchoe inter-nunnery debate.

Special Convocation Ceremony at Sakya College



Nuns welcome guests to the special convocation ceremony.

The Sakya College for Nuns was established near Dehradun, India to train nuns in higher Buddhist philosophical studies. It is the only Sakya nunnery offering advanced studies.

In November 2019, a very special event was held at the Sakya College for Nuns attended by Geshemas and nuns from throughout India and the four schools of Tibetan Buddhism.

At a convocation ceremony, seven Sakya nuns received the Kachupa degree, the culmination of eight years of study. The Kachupa degrees were conferred by His Holiness Sakya Trizin Rinpoche.

In addition to the convocation event, the nuns held the first-ever Three-Day Nuns Seminar on the First Chapter of

Pramanavartikka by Acharya Dharmakirti. The seminar ran from November 13th to 15th, 2019. Eighty nuns from eight different nunneries took part.

Three leaders of the Tibetan Nuns Project were invited to the convocation: Rinchen Khando Choegyal, Founding Director and Special Advisor; Nangsa Chodon, the Director of Tibetan Nuns Project in India; and Elizabeth Napper, U.S. Founder and Board Chair.

The event included a special reception for His Holiness the 42nd Sakya Trizin, Ratna Vajra Rinpoche. Sakya Trinzin (meaning "Throne-Holder") is the traditional title of the head of the Sakya school of Tibetan Buddhism.



Seven nuns from Sakya College for Nuns with their Kachupa Degrees at the convocation ceremony in November 2019.

Dorjee Zong

Dorjee Zong Nunnery is one of the oldest centres of monastic education in Zanskar and has a long tradition of meditating nuns, some of who are famed for having reached high levels of realization. This remote 700-year-old nunnery now provides much-needed educational opportunities for young girls and women.

In 2019, Dorjee Zong began a major expansion project. Good progress was made during the short construction season in 2019. The housing block and the structure of a multi-purpose two-story building were completed before extreme weather shut down construction in October. The two-story building contains the kitchen, dining hall, storeroom on the ground floor and, on the upper floor, the prayer hall and a conference hall.



When the coronavirus pandemic hit India in the spring, we feared that no construction would be possible because most of the labor force comes from Nepal and strict restrictions put in place prevented their travel.

However, in July and August, the nunnery was able to move forward gradually with the building process using local labor. The nuns' committee decided to move forward to complete the interiors of the multi-purpose building with work such as plastering of the floors, electrical work fittings etc. They have also

undertaken the construction of the bathroom and toilet block needed to go with the housing block. Around six to seven local village workers were hired for this job and all labor work is now being done by local village people under the guidance of the working committee.

Currently, the housing block is being used as living quarters on the ground floor for the young nuns, while the top-floor rooms are being used for multiple purposes including as temporary classrooms, office, and a meeting room.

During the lockdown, the younger nuns from nearby villages temporarily left the nunnery to stay with their families. These young nuns were not able to stay at Dorjee Zong because there is not enough space to house them in separate quarters or to follow safe physical distancing measures. Their elder siblings who have returned home are helping the younger children with their studies.

Winter is severe in Zanskar, so the nuns always try to stockpile enough rations to last from September to May each year. The roads re-open in June and the nuns once again have access to fresh supplies.



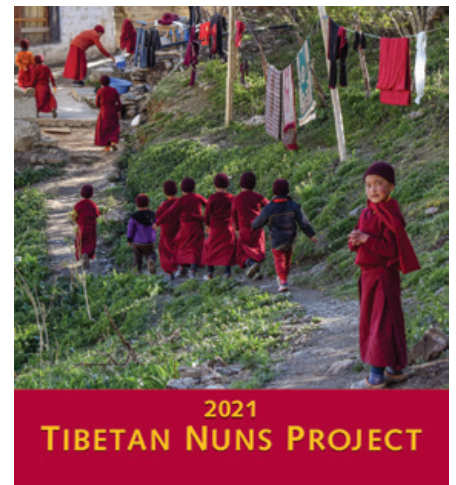
The Dorjee Zong school bus has been purchased and is at the nunnery but is not yet in use while schools remain closed.

Product Shipment Has Arrived!

Like everywhere, the coronavirus pandemic has changed how we work. Our small team now works remotely as much as possible.

Due to the lockdown and rising number of COVID-19 cases in India, the nuns at Dolma Ling who make most of our products have been unable to get supplies to make items like malas or to safely travel to Delhi to ship products for our online store.

Your health and safety are our priorities. In early March, we instituted strict COVID precautions in the office for product handling and mailing so that you can feel confident in ordering items through our online store at <https://tnp.org/products/>



2021
TIBETAN NUNS PROJECT

Science Projects

Every year since 2014, nuns from Dolma Ling have been taking part in the Emory-Tibet Science Initiative, a four-week program held at Drepung Loseling Monastery in South India. In 2020, the summer session was postponed due to the pandemic. This intensive course gives the nuns and monks an opportunity to deepen their knowledge of physics, biology, neuroscience, and philosophy of science, and to engage in



interdisciplinary discourses on Buddhism and science. Classes consist of lectures, discussions, demonstrations, and hands-on experiments. Organizers point out that Buddhist concepts like interdependence, impermanence, and relativity can draw examples from science and that monastics are uniquely positioned to make great contributions to neuroscience.

In November 2019, a group of nuns held a science fair at Dolma Ling Nunnery and Institute. The nuns chose topics such as the water cycle, environmental issues, the solar system, and the human digestive system. Since clean drinking water is an important issue, some nuns conducted simple experiments of home-made water filters. The science fair also gave the nuns a chance to practice their English and public speaking skills and helped them build confidence.

The posters and displays were written in English and the event was an excellent example of inter-disciplinary learning



because the nuns used their English skills to express scientific ideas and integrated many subjects into one project, such as English reading and writing, critical thinking, problem-solving, graphic arts, and public speaking.

It was a fun chance for the nuns to gain confidence in speaking. It makes science relevant by allowing students to conduct research and experiments based on their own interests.

Acts of Generosity



ROBERTA AND MICHAEL

Sponsors and volunteers



Roberta and Michael enjoy friends, family, time in their garden, volunteering, and hobbies such as stained glass and cycling.



"With their goodwill, study, and dedication the nuns of the Tibetan Nuns Project are helping everything and all beings. We are very happy to support them."



SUSANNE BALLARD DOWOUIS

Left a bequest in her will to help the nuns



Susanne passed away on April 14, 2019.



Susanne was very interested in Tibetan Buddhism and considered becoming a nun. Although she never did take this step, she was an active member of the Buddhist community. Her gift in her will to the Tibetan Nuns Project is an enduring legacy of her compassion and generosity.



MELISSA AND IAN

Adventurers and lifelong learners



Melissa and Ian used their wedding registry to give to TNP.



"It was important for us to incorporate the values and causes we care about in our wedding celebration. We appreciate Tibetan culture and traditions, and we are grateful to TNP for its work in supporting Tibetan Buddhist nuns."

10th Anniversary of Shugsep

Preserving an ancient spiritual tradition

December 7, 2020 is the tenth anniversary of the inauguration of Shugsep Nunnery and Institute by His Holiness the Dalai Lama. It is also a celebration of the bravery, determination, and dedication of the Shugsep nuns, many of whom were imprisoned and tortured in Tibet and who escaped to India seeking freedom and education.

Shugsep Nunnery was re-established in northern India on the outskirts of Dharamsala and is now home to 76 Tibetan nuns. Many of those nuns risked their lives fleeing their homeland to seek sanctuary in India. These nuns wish nothing more than to live, study, practice, and teach in accordance with their spiritual beliefs.

Prior to the construction of the new nunnery, the nuns lived in an overcrowded building that was falling apart. The rooms were damp and filled with mold and one nun lived under the stairs because of lack of space. There was no road to the building and everything had to be carried more than a kilometer.

In May 2008, 58 Shugsep nuns moved into the nunnery that was still under construction. On December 7, 2010, His Holiness the Dalai Lama officially inaugurated the nunnery. Shugsep is one of two nunneries built and completely supported by the Tibetan Nuns Project.

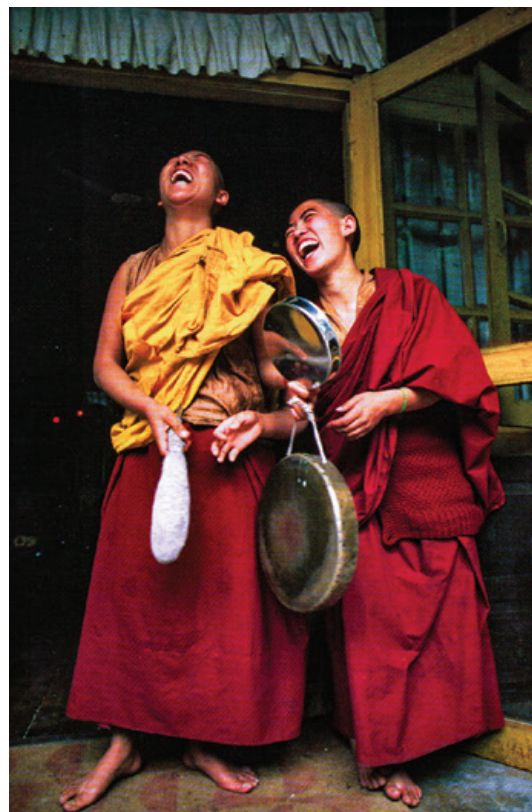
A Nyingma nunnery, Shugsep traces its rituals and practice to some of the most illustrious female practitioners in Tibetan history. In the previous century, Shugsep Nunnery was home to one of the most famous teachers of her time, Shugsep Jetsunma.



A nun studies in a damp, moldy room.



Shugsep Nunnery and Institute now. Photo by Dustin Kujawski



Laughing Nuns by Brian Harris

Legacies of Compassion

Photographer Brian Harris has left a gift in his will to the Tibetan Nuns Project and wants you to join him. He's donated two 8x10 prints of two of his most famous photographs as a gift for anyone who includes a bequest to help the nuns. Email info@tnp.org if you have left a gift or if you would like our *Legacies of Compassion* booklet.



Current Needs

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

Please help with these top 3 priorities

1. More sponsors needed! Sponsor a nun for \$1 a day. Visit tnp.org or call 1-206-652-8901 today and we'll pair you with a nun.
2. Support teachers' salaries
3. Provide intensive training in Tibetan Buddhist debate by giving to the Jang Gonchoe Endowment Fund.





Tibetan Nuns Project

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



All product orders are handled with your health in mind.
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