



Tibetan Nuns Project

Record Number of Nuns Aim to Become Geshemas

Fall 2023



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The 9th Geshema examinations began in Dharamsala, India on July 21st with a record number of Tibetan Buddhist nuns taking various levels of the four-year exams. This year, 132 nuns from seven different educational institutes in India and Nepal sat exams for the Geshema degree. That is 38 more nuns than last year's record of 94.

The Geshema degree is the highest academic degree in the Gelugpa tradition of Tibetan Buddhism and was only opened to women in 2012. Like the Geshe degree for monks, it is roughly equivalent to a PhD in Tibetan Buddhist studies. The rigorous written and debate exams take four years to complete, with one set held each year.

The 2023 exams were hosted by Jamyang Choling Institute and began on the holy day of Chokhor Düchen. On this auspicious day, over 2,500 years ago, the Buddha taught the Four Noble Truths shortly after attaining enlightenment.

Prior to the first graduation ceremony in 2016, there were many people who doubted women's ability to earn this degree on an equal footing with men. At the end of 2022, there were 53 Geshemas in the world. There's a growing recognition and influence of the Geshemas in their nunneries and in the Tibetan exile community.

Now the Geshemas are taking on many prominent roles in the Tibetan exile community including as teachers and leaders in their respective nunneries, providing online teachings in Tibetan during the pandemic to help ease people's stress, teaching Tibetan to refugee children, and as commissioner for the elections of the Tibetan government-in-exile.



10 Tibetan Buddhist nuns receiving their Geshema degrees at the 2022 Geshema graduation in November in Bodh Gaya. Photo: DRC.

As our Founding Director and Special Advisor Rinchen Khando Choegyal has said, "Educating women is powerful... It's about enabling the nuns to be teachers in their own right and to take on leadership roles at a critical time in our nation's history."

A growing number of nuns joining the nunneries say that they want to pursue the rigorous 17-year training that precedes the Geshema exam process. They look up to the Geshemas and are inspired to follow in their footsteps. We anticipate that the number of nuns who take exams each year and the number of graduates will increase over time.

The Geshema degree enables 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.



The Geshema program is gaining momentum. A record 132 nuns took exams for the Geshema degree in the summer of 2023.



Tibetan Nuns Project

Established in 1987, the Tibetan Nuns Project provides education and support to more than 900 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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Unless otherwise stated, photos are taken by the nuns at their respective nunneries.

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Geshemas as Role Models, Teachers, & Leaders



On May 17, the Geshemas from Dolma Ling, Geden Choeling, and Jangchub Choeling had a special audience with His Holiness the Dalai Lama at his residence in Dharamsala. Photo: OHDL.



In May, the Geshemas at Dolma Ling Nunnery and Institute organized a Buddhist teaching on the Four Noble Truths in Tibetan via Facebook live with the help of the media nuns. Geshemas from other nunneries attended to learn how to deliver teachings to the lay community.



Sharing Wisdom. In June, Geshema Tenzin Kunsel and Geshema Delek Wangmo spoke to Indian students during the 27th annual Gurukul program which seeks to revive the centuries-old relationship of exchange of ideas between Indians and Tibetans.



Each winter, Geshemas at Dolma Ling help refugee children improve their Tibetan reading and writing skills during the children's school holidays. These nuns hold the equivalent of a PhD in Tibetan Buddhist philosophy so it's akin to being taught by a university professor. Meanwhile, inside Tibet, the Tibetan language which is the key to Tibetan culture, religion and national identity is being steadily undermined under Chinese rule.

Nuns Learning Science

On September 13th, Science for Monks and Nuns held a one-day exhibition on “Secrets of Particles” for the Dolma Ling nuns and staff. It was attended by over a hundred nuns from different classes. His Holiness the Dalai Lama wrote in *The Universe in a Single Atom*, “To a Mahayana Buddhist exposed to Nagarjuna’s thought, there is an unmistakable resonance between the notion of emptiness and the new physics.”

Also, from March 12–30th, Science for Monks and Nuns held a special Neuroscience Workshop for nuns that covered a wide range of topics such as neuroanatomy, neurological diseases, nervous system disorders such as depression, anxiety, and PTSD, the ageing brain, memory and learning, and meditation.



Senior Shugsep Nuns: From Illiteracy to Academic Greatness



The nuns arrived from Tibet with nothing, 99% not knowing how to read and write, traumatized in the prisons, beaten by the prison guards, and with all kinds of health problems. *Photo: Susan Lirakis/1991.*

The story of the Tibetan Buddhist nuns at Shugsep Nunnery and Institute is one of perseverance, dedication, and hope.

Forty-nine Shugsep nuns have now attained the Lupon degree, equivalent to a Master’s degree. This is one of the highest degrees the nuns can achieve in the Nyingma tradition of Tibetan Buddhism.

It is a historic achievement for nuns to reach this high academic level and their success is even more remarkable given the many obstacles on their path.

Until very recently, Tibetan Buddhist nuns had little opportunity to receive training in Buddhist practice and knowledge. Nuns were considered to be second rank.

These senior nuns are now qualified to teach. Nine of the Lopons have taken on regular teaching responsibilities at Shugsep. They also teach yearly at Tashi Choling Nunnery in Arunachal Pradesh on a rotating basis.

The Lopons teach philosophy to the nuns at Shugsep, as well as teaching the youngest nuns reading, writing, basic Tibetan Buddhist philosophy, rituals, and the basics of debate. This gives them the groundwork they need before they merge into the mainstream Nyingma education which takes nine years to complete and receive the degree.

“In a way 30 years is a long time, but when it’s creating history it is not very long,” said Rinchen Khando Choegyal, TNP’s Founding Director and Special Advisor.

It is only through education that women will rise and attain equal footing. For Tibetans, struggling to preserve their culture and religion in exile, it is even more critical.

The original Shugsep Nunnery in Tibet was destroyed during the Cultural Revolution and the nuns forced to leave. The nunnery was re-established in India by the Tibetan Nuns Project and officially inaugurated in 2010. It is now home to about 100 nuns.

Shugsep traces its Buddhist heritage and practices to some of Tibet’s most influential female practitioners including Shugsep Jetsun Rinpoche (1852–1953), one of the most illustrious female practitioners in Tibetan history and a recognized incarnation of the revered tantric yogini Machig Labdrön (1055–1149).



On October 28 2022, Shugsep Nunnery and Institute held a historic graduation ceremony in which Pharchin, Uma and Lupon nuns were given their graduation certificates.



The nuns of Shugsep are holders of a rich tradition dating back to the great female practitioner or yogini of the 11th century, Machig Labdrön. *Photo of the Chod practice by Brian Harris.*

Your Donations in Action



BEFORE



AFTER

The expanded debate courtyard at Dolma Ling provides an additional 2,500 square feet of covered area to shelter the nuns during their daily monastic debates. Thank you to all the supporters, especially to the Barry Hershey Foundation, for increasing the covered debating area by 60% and protecting the nuns from the harsh sun and monsoon rains.



In the summer, work began at Shugsep Nunnery and Institute to build a circumambulatory (kora) path so the nuns can practice traditional Tibetan walking meditation and have safe, regular exercise. There is no safe area nearby where the nuns can walk. The nunnery is on a steeply sloping hillside so it has been challenging to design and build the path.



In April, 35 Tibetan Buddhist nuns took part in a science workshop at Dolma Ling Nunnery and Institute. Teachers from the Library of Tibetan Works & Archives taught topics such as atoms, parts of the cell, and physics.



The major expansion and improvement project at Dorjee Zong Nunnery in Zanskar is nearing completion and will have a huge impact on the lives of girls and women in this region for generations to come. We are very grateful to the Betsy Gordon Foundation and the Deep Roots Himalayan Foundation. A new solar lighting and heating project will help solve problems with power supply to the nunnery.



Thanks to the extraordinary support of the Donaldson Charitable Trust and other donors, the Shugsep nuns purchased a new 10-seat multipurpose vehicle to replace their dangerous old vehicle that could not be repaired. *Photo: Shugsep Nunnery.*



The annual inter-nunnery debate event called the Jang Gonchoe is being held once again in the holy city of Bodh Gaya. This month-long program provides intensive training in monastic debate to hundreds of nuns from India and Nepal. Thanks to TNP donors, the costs are covered by the Jang Gonchoe Endowment Fund. *Photo: Olivier Adam.*



Nuns at Dolma Ling help repair the drainage system. Taking care of a large community is like taking care of a village. There are many expenses behind the scenes essential to the smooth running of the nunnery. The nuns do as much work as they can themselves.



Thank you to the 34 donors who helped purchase a new vehicle for the nuns at Sherab Choeling Nunnery after their old one was beyond repair. The nuns' sign says, "We the nuns of Sherab Choeling Institute, Spiti, Morang would like to extend our heartfelt thank you from the bottom of our hearts to all the kind sponsors for this wonderful vehicle. PS: A picture of the nuns with car gifted by you."



Each year, your support helps fund teachers' salaries at different nunneries in India. The annual cost of one teacher's salary ranges from \$1,500 to \$5,000, depending on the location of the nunnery and the skills of the teacher. The ultimate goal is to empower the nuns to become teachers and leaders in their own right and to help preserve the Tibet's unique culture and religion.



The water project at Dolma Ling now provides the nuns with a safe, reliable supply of water. This big project, half funded by you and half by the government, includes the catchment, storage, chlorination, and piping of the water for Dolma Ling's community of 400 nuns and teachers. Previously the nuns had to rely on this reservoir for much of their water and they had to empty and clean it annually.

Leave a Legacy

We are very grateful to those who leave a legacy to help the nuns. VR wrote, "I believe that through educating women and giving them the tools they need to lead a fulfilling life, we all become stronger... After I am gone, this need will continue. Because of this, I have left a gift in my Will to the Tibetan Nuns Project. It makes me smile to know that the work of the nuns and the Tibetan Nuns Project will continue in some small way because of this gift."



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Thank you to long-time TNP board member Vicki Robinson who stepped down from her role in June. She began offering advice to TNP in 2008 and joined the board in 2014. Here is Vicki at the TNP table during His Holiness the Dalai Lama's visit to Vancouver, BC in 2014.

Sikyong's Visit

In September, Sikyong Penpa Tsering, the political leader of the Central Tibetan Administration, visited three nunneries supported by the Tibetan Nuns Project: Shugsep Nunnery and Institute (shown here), Dolma Ling Nunnery and Institute, and Geden Choeling Nunnery. His visits were part of his assessment tour of the Tibetan refugee community in India. He met with Rinchen Khando Choegyal, TNP's Founding Director and Special Advisor and Nangsa Chodon, Director of TNP in India.



Sponsors Needed

More sponsors of nuns are needed. It costs just \$1 a day to sponsor a nun and provide the necessities of life. When you sponsor a nun, you are connected directly with her.



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Our sponsorship program supports over 800 nuns in seven nunneries in northern India. Jan wrote, "I can make an important change in the life of a particular woman on the other side of the world whom I don't really know. Every month when I write a sponsorship check, I have a moment of freedom from my own self-preoccupation and a moment of deep gladness that I can be of use to someone else."

Long-term Stability Fund Launched

After close to 40 years of work, our biggest wish is to put our core programs on a solid footing and build a stable future for Tibetan nuns living in exile in northern India. No matter what the future of Tibet holds, you can help these dedicated women to preserve their culture and spiritual traditions.

In December 2022, we launched our Long-Term Stability Fund, a quasi-endowment to support nuns' education and basic needs. We have a long way to go to reach our goal, but we've made a start and we hope that our legacy campaign may also help with this. We are very grateful to those who have decided to include a gift in their wills to help the nuns.

Ever since TNP was founded in 1987, we have fundraised to meet the needs of the nuns and nunneries. This leaves the nuns and education programs very vulnerable to the economy. We never know in advance if we will be able meet annual needs.

As Elen, a supporter, said, "A donation to this cause benefits beyond helping just the nuns... it benefits the Tibetan culture, it benefits refugees from Tibet, it benefits education for women,



it benefits the Buddhist religion and community and all of this spreads like a ripple of compassion for others beyond that community. This is not charity; it is an investment in humanity."

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.

LONG-TERM STABILITY FUND: Build a strong and stable future for Tibetan nuns living in exile in northern India. No matter what the future of Tibet holds, you can help these dedicated and courageous women to preserve their culture and spiritual traditions.

TEACHERS' SALARIES: We need help to fund teachers' salaries at various Tibetan Buddhist nunneries in India. The annual cost of one teacher's salary ranges from \$1,500 to \$5,000, depending on the location of the nunnery and the skills of the teacher.

AREA OF GREATEST NEED: To enable us to help the nuns with any urgent needs, please 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, Suite 418
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





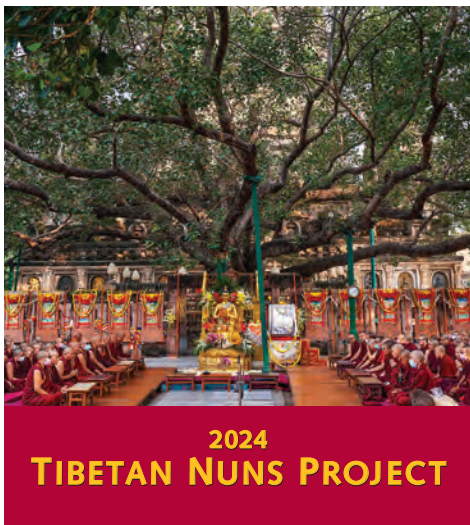
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- Leave a gift in your will
- Support one of our Current Needs
- Give a tribute card
- Give a gift of stock



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