



Jamyang Foundation



Tara's Story

I was raised a Buddhist and grew up in India. For many years, my family has lived in Bodhgaya, the heart of Buddhism. As a young girl, living in monasteries primarily for monks or pilgrims, I often wished to see how nuns fared in their own monasteries. During summers, my family usually travels to cooler Himalayan regions. One place I never had a chance to visit was the Buddhist region of Lahaul/Spiti, which only opened to visitors recently.

Last summer I got my chance to go to Spiti when a friend invited me to teach English at Yangchen Choling, a monastery for women. I traveled for days along high, treacherous mountain roads that were often washed away. Sometimes we had to push the jeep through waterfalls and avalanches, had to wait for hours to get past a mudslide or to fix the tires of the old jeep.

When I finally reached Yangchen Choling, I was comforted with a cup of hot butter tea, a plate of dry biscuits, and felt like I was in heaven. Soon the nuns packed me off to a cave on the mountain cliff with an amazing view. The only problems were my roommates--scorpions--and the broken window that let in the icy wind at night. Still, cuddled up in my warm sleeping bag, I rejoiced in my good luck at being in such a beautiful, quiet place.

Soon my teaching program started. We had two English classes a day, but really had to start from scratch with the ABCs. The nuns were eager to learn, even though it was not always easy for them to remember the foreign sounds or the strange-looking letters. It was convenient that I spoke Hindi, which many of them understood. They loved to hear stories, especially fairy tales. The sad story of Cinderella, told first in Hindi and then in simple English, brought tears to their eyes. The story of Snowwhite had them trembling in fear of the wicked stepmother. I soon realized that stories were the best medium of instruction. Within several weeks, the nuns had almost all learned to read and could speak simple sentences in English, which felt like a great achievement for me.

The nuns have a strong sense of community, with strong bonds of caring and affection. When one nun goes even to the next village, all the others will gather to see her off. They soon accepted me as part of the family, showering me with tea, snacks, and affection. Every morning three nuns would climb up to my cave to offer me a big glass of fresh goat milk and fried bread. Again in the evening before bed three more would appear with yet another big glass of milk, staying to keep me company and to make sure I drank it. They wouldn't let me carry the water I needed up to my cave myself and were concerned about my health when I decided to take a bath in the cool stream down the hill. They cared for me with so much love, like only a sister can give, and I never felt as if I were a foreigner.

The age difference among the nuns is quite great. In my class, I had little girls who held my hand and called me "big sister" and also older women who had seen quite a lot in their lives and regarded me as still very young. The young ones would stop playing and suddenly become very quiet and wellbehaved when I walked by. Some afternoons after class all of us would sit in the sun in the courtyard telling stories or trying to resolve certain problems. They included me in most of their discussions and would ask my advice and opinions.

The thing that was hardest for me to get used to was that they wanted to do everything for me. In the Buddhist tradition, it is considered great merit to serve one's teacher, so as their English teacher, suddenly I was an important person whom they served. I had to wash my clothes in secret; otherwise the little nuns would have pestered me to let them wash my clothes. Often they would run to the fields where fresh peas were growing and bring back apronsful to give me. Some days I probably ate a whole kilo of those delicacies.

When it was time to leave, the nuns did not want me to go. Everyday they tried to persuade me to stay for a little while longer. When they realized that I really was planning to leave, they quickly got to work: one was assigned to knit a pair of socks, two to weave a shawl, and the rest to arrange a little trip we had planned to take together the day before I left Spiti.

After a beautiful pilgrimage to Chandratat together, the nuns saw me off at Kunzom Pass, which marks the border of Spiti. Twenty white scarves (katas) were wrapped around my neck to wish me well and the nuns made me promise to return soon. The last time I saw the nuns, they were just little red dots in the middle of the vast mountain landscape.

(Tara Kranejak is a 22-year-old woman who was born in Austria of Austrian parents. An aspiring artist, she has lived most of her life in culturally Buddhist areas of India.)