



## Zangskar Nunneries

### Survey of Nunneries in Zangskar (2001)

#### Introduction

The Ladakh Nuns Association (LNA) organized a survey of eight nunneries in Zangskar. Three people traveled in the LNA jeep to Zangskar, from June 2 to 13, 2001: Sra. Tenzin Youdon from LNA; Jill Jameson, a volunteer with LNA; and Sra. Tenzin Lhadron, who is originally from Zangskar and has been studying at Jamyong Choling Nunnery in Dharamsala for the last 12 years. The following is the information that they gathered.



Tsering Dolma Mullens, a volunteer Tibetan translator from Canada, in traditional Zangskari dress

Zangskar is in a mountain range south of Ladakh. It is still an isolated place, cut off by snow for seven to eight months of the year, but the ancient cycle of rituals to mark the seasons, moon cycles, and events in the religious calendar continues. Winters are harsh, with temperatures falling below 30 degrees C. The snow is often deep, and has to be daily swept off the roof tops.

There are still few cars or motorized transport, and the only phones are found at military or security posts. Many of the traditional livelihood practices and basic self-reliance continue. Crops are cultivated and animals taken to higher slopes in summer.

The growing season is limited to three months of the year, with barley and peas as the main crops. Animals such as yak, sheep, and goats are provide transport, milk, meat, and clothing. In most villages, women spin the wool, men weave, and the cloth is sewn into clothes. Winter is a time for retreats, teachings, and festivals for both monastics and laypeople.

Zangskar is experiencing changes as a result of outside influences. The closing of the border with Tibet and the poverty of the region make it difficult to maintain the unique spiritual and cultural heritage of Zangskar. The monasteries for monks are in a slightly better position than the monasteries for nuns, because the village people are more likely to support monks.

From 1999 to 2001, there was very little snowfall and, consequently, a serious shortage of water. In some of the nunneries, water supplies were often limited to a small trickle flowing through the pipe.

Historically monasteries have been well-endowed. The situation in most of the nunneries is one of great need. Prior to 1988, the nuns of Zangskar were mostly working in their family's homes, where they cooked, cleaned and looked after the children and animals. They practiced meditation only in the winter months when their families provided tsampa for retreats. This survey is a brief attempt to document the current situation of the nunneries, and, through discussion with the nuns, explore their needs and vision.

### Survey Summary

The survey in Zangskar by the Ladakh Nuns Association in June 2001 covered eight nunneries. Overall, there have been significant improvements for some nuns of Zangskar in recent years, but their needs are still great and the nuns have a strong yearning to deepen their study of the Dharma.

Prior to 1988, most of the nuns of Zangskar worked in their families' homes or in their fields, with practice restricted to the winter retreat. Since then, three of the nunneries (Zangla, Pischu and Karsha) have received financial support from outside the region to provide food, robes, Dharma texts, and the construction of rooms. This support has given some nuns an opportunity they greatly appreciate: to live in a nunnery and have more time to study and practice the Dharma.



Teacher and students of Changchub Choling Monastery in Zangla Village, Zangskar

In the eight nunneries visited by LNA, two-thirds of the nuns were under 30 years of age. Out of a total of 82 nuns and 12 young novices, 45 were under 30 years and 27 over 50. Still, the nuns expressed great concern about a declining interest in ordination among young women and girls. The main explanation for this perceived declining interest was that the nunneries are rarely able to offer education or opportunities to study the teachings.

Although over the last 15 years there have been schools in Zangskar, and these days most parents want an education for their children, virtually none of the nuns had been to school. The medium of instruction in the schools is mostly in Urdu, so Zangskari children are forgetting their own language. All the nuns had learnt the Ladakhi script and could read the Dharma texts.

Two of the eight nunneries (Karsha and Skyagum) had a resident lama, and there were regular teachings at Tunгри nunnery. Most of the nuns had received only occasional teachings. Only Zangla nunnery offered a study program through the CIBS (Central Institute of Buddhist Studies).

Most of the nunneries made strong requests for a study program with classes in Hindi, English, Ladakhi, math, and Buddhist philosophy, such as offered by CIBS.



Nuns at Changchub Choling Monastery bridge generations

Many of the nuns worked in the fields of their families over the summer months when there was no support for food, and thus had less time for the study and practice of the Dharma. In a few of the newer nunneries, where most nuns were young, many were working as manual laborers during the summer to pay for the construction of their monasteries.

The nuns have planted small plantations of trees around all the nunneries, but some were being abandoned due to water shortages over the last two years.

Because of limited access to the teachings, there seemed to be a general lack of confidence among the nuns. They felt they lacked the knowledge needed to give even basic teachings to their families and communities. All the monasteries had close connections with their nearby villages and some had active community assistance in repair work at their monasteries and other projects. The local community came to make offerings and sponsor pujas on auspicious days, or requested the nuns to read religious texts for them.

The vision and hopes for the future of the nuns of Zangskar was seen mainly in terms of a longing for the teachings and the need to attract younger nuns. The two hopes were connected; if there were more young nuns, they felt they had a stronger chance of attracting a teacher, which would enrich the nunnery; if there were a teacher and a study program, that would also attract more young nuns. However, funds are necessary for this vision to be achieved. Funds are needed to build facilities (rooms for teachers, classrooms, and living quarters), as well as to purchase thankas, Dharma texts, and other religious items.

Some young nuns from Zangskar have been studying in Dharamsala, Mundgod, and Bhutan, and these nuns are being requested to return to Zangskar to teach the younger nuns when they complete their studies. Ways to support some of these nuns to return to Zangskar to give teachings and encouragement were also discussed.

## Padum Nunnery

There is no name yet for this nunnery, but about 10 years ago five nuns built a small temple near the Padum palace, on the top of a hill of boulders, overlooking the town of Padum stretching below.

The wide, mostly cultivated valley is a brilliant green, with new young crops of barley and peas, and individual houses dotted around. Earlier, the population of Padum and surrounding areas had been entirely Buddhist, but a majority of the population is Muslim. The valley is nestled in and protected by the massive snow-covered mountains.



Officers of the Women's Association, Zangla Village, Zangskar

The nuns visit the villages to collect funds and are trying to construct a small assembly hall and kitchen. The nuns did not gather for pujas the day we visited; usually they gather to perform these twice a month, or whenever laypeople sponsor pujas, which they also attend. We talked to Sra. Tsering Dolma at her small home in the precincts of Stackri Mo Monastery. She had taught Sra. Tenzin Lhadron, one of the nuns helping us with the survey, how to read Buddhist texts when she was about 12 years old.

Sra. Tsering Dolma is 61 years old and has been a nun since she was 25. The other four nuns were over 50. Three of them live in Padum, one lives in Shila, an hours walk away, and one lives in Shagun, three hours walk away. None of these nuns felt they were the poorest in the community. None of the nuns had ever been to school, but they had learned how to read the texts at nearby monasteries or from their families. Sra. Tsering Dolma received training from monks in making butter sculpture and how to play the ritual instruments.

The nuns, although not living in a nunnery, have their own daily schedule at home. Tsering Dolma, for example, has already completed the preliminary practices (ngondro) three times. She rises between 4 to 5 am to meditate and recite her prayers, and later prepares tea and milks the cow. During the summer days, she works in her vegetable garden and small field. In the evening, she performs chö (a tantric practice), with meditation, recitation, and chanting. The other nuns have a similar day, but do not include chö practice. Although no one is living at their small gonpa as shrine keeper, Tsering Dolma goes daily to light the butter lamps.

Tsering Dolma has received teachings from different lamas who visited Zangskar and has been to Bodh Gaya for teachings and received Kalachakara initiation from His Holiness the Dalai Lama. She said that to receive the teachings and empowerment makes practices more powerful. Otherwise, it is like making sand into a ball and squeezing it. Just as you cannot receive any oil from sand, you need a teacher and proper initiations for practice.

In the future, laypeople have talked of extending the buildings for the benefit of their daughters, but there has been no action as yet. The main contact with the local community is when individuals sponsor pujas. Tsering Dolma's hope for the future is that Zangskari nuns now studying in Dharamsala and Bhutan will come back and do something for young nuns. The older nuns in Padum know how to do the practices, but lacking the opportunity, do not know how to write. When asked why there were not more younger nuns, she said that young nuns prefer to go somewhere else to study, but will benefit the monastery if they return to teach. Changchub Choling Buddhist Monastery for Women, Zangla

Zangla village is located on a narrow track beside the wide river bed of the Zangskar river, with high snow-covered mountains either side. On the way, we passed Stonde Gonpa, an impressive monk's gonpa, located high on a rock face. Just before reaching Zangla village, there was a water channel across the road, so we had to walk for about 30 minutes to reach the nunnery. It is located at the far end of the village, somewhat separate and higher up. There was a large chorten (reliquary) at the entrance, and a range of buildings separated by neat paths and flower beds. Many trees have been planted and there was a greenhouse with an abundant supply of vegetables. There was a cow, a calf, and several dogs in residence.

Bhiksuni Karma Lekshe Tsomo has provided financial support since 1989 for building a classroom, supporting a teacher, and providing food for all the nuns. Munshi Tsering, a teacher in the village, helps manage the funds and keeps the accounts for the nunnery.

There are 18 nuns living in the nunnery and 15 novices who live at home, but come during the day. Our meeting with the nuns was held soon after our arrival, since a nyungne (fasting ritual) was to be held the following day. Of the 18 nuns living in the nunnery, six are under 30 and three are over 50. The youngest nun is 12 years old and the oldest is 78. Later, we learned something about the youngest nun, who offered to carry a bag for us. When we asked about her family, she said that her mother had died, she had three younger sisters and brothers, and her elder sister was disabled and unable to work. She lived at home, but came daily to the nunnery for studies.

Most of the nuns had been nuns since their teens. For most, the decision to become a nun was their own, while for some, it had been their parents'. None of the nuns came from the very poorest families. Most had not been to school, but had learnt Ladakhi from their fathers, lamas, or neighbours. Some of the younger nuns had studied up to grade 4, 6, or 8. One nun, Lobsang Ngedron, received health training at Sonam Norbu Memorial Hospital in Leh for one year and provides basic health care for the nuns. None of the nuns had been trained as an amchi (traditional medical practitioner), but there was one in the village.

The nunnery has an impressive range of buildings, including a gonpa, a library, a classroom, and adequate sleeping accommodation for the nuns. Each nun had two small rooms. When the novices are ordained, they hope that their families will support the building of living quarters for them. Decisions are discussed by all the nuns regarding religious services (pujas). Work around the monastery is managed by two storekeepers (nerpa).

Four Zangla nuns studied in Jamyung Choling Institute for Buddhist Women in Dharamsala for one year in 1988. With this inspiration, they wanted to establish a similar community for nuns in Zangla, and so they invited Geshe Tenpa Lhundrup, a monk from Tibet, to teach them. Geshe-la died in 2000 and in appreciation of his teachings, they are seeking another teacher.

The nuns' daily schedule involves rising at 4 to 5 am, and doing individual prayers, meditation, and chanting for about an hour and a half. After breakfast, the nuns are free to do a range of activities. Since their teacher died last year, the older nuns read Dharma texts in their rooms. Geshe Tenpa Lhundrup had given them daily teachings in Tibetan language, handwriting, grammar, and literature, as well as Buddhist texts, logic, philosophy, and psychology. The texts taught by Geshe-le included the Graded Path to Enlightenment (Lamrim), Perfection of Wisdom (Prajnaparamita), and Middle Way philosophy (Madhyamika). In addition, the nuns have studied English and mathematics when volunteers have been available to teach them.

The younger nuns and novices from the village study with a monk from Upti, following the CIBS curriculum of Hindi, English, Ladakhi, and math. These classes commenced last year and are held from 10 to 12 am and 1 to 3 pm. At the school, the medium of instruction is Urdu, severely disadvantaging the nuns. At midday, the nuns perform puja for an hour, followed by lunch together. In the evening they chant Tara puja for an hour and then prepare their own meals individually.

Exercise is gained through gardening and planting trees, as well as walking in the area. Health problems were mainly headaches and colds in winter. Due to the harsh winter and high altitude, only a few vegetables can be grown during the summer, such as radishes, potatoes, and natural greens collected from the fields. These are eaten with rice, lentils, and chapattis. In autumn, summer, and spring some greenhouse vegetables can be harvested. While we were at the nunnery, meals consisted mostly of tsampa soup or porridge, with a little dried yak cheese, and no vegetables.

The origins of the nunnery are quite ancient and the older nuns have lived there since they became nuns. All the nuns appreciate living in the nunnery, as this gives them more time for their practice and pujas. There is no philosophy teacher now and the nuns have asked Karma Lekshe Tsomo to help them find another one. Having a philosophy teacher is seen as a very important means to gain meritorious imprints for future lives, as enlightenment is regarded as a distant goal.

There seems to be limited contact with the community, though laypeople from the village visit the nunnery occasionally. The nuns are asked to read texts for people in the village and are able to give informal teachings, though formal teachings are not requested. When someone dies, the nuns go to their house to perform pujas and prayers.

Almost all of the nuns, along with Geshe Tenpa Lhundrup, attended the Sakyadita conference organized by Bhiksuni Karma Lekshe Tsomo in Leh in 1995. Two of the nuns attended the Vinaya training in Karsha in 1996 organized by Sra. Tenzin Palmo.

Asked about their hopes for the future, the nuns expressed the hope that more young nuns will join the nunnery. They felt that this would help them obtain a new teacher, and enrich the nunnery. The nuns felt that it was generally due to the changes in society that not so many young girls were not becoming nuns. This is a decadent time and young people do not seem as open to the teachings.

We mentioned His Holiness the Dalai Lama's comments that monks and nuns in the future will need to be more involved in the community and asked what sort of training might be useful. The nuns felt that general education was the most important, as well as training to help them become more confident. While we talked with Jamba Chodron in her room, she was polishing her copper water bowls and making wicks for butter lamps. During all our meetings with the nuns, we were delighted by Jampa's sense of humor. We were also struck by her strong energy when we met her out in the fields.

Jampa was born in Zangla village 67 years ago, and had nine brothers and sisters. She became a nun at 11 years old, at a time when there were 10 nuns. After ten years, there were another 10 nuns, but never more than 20, due to the lack of adequate accommodations. When she first came to the nunnery, there were no trees, classroom, or gonpa, which was built just seven years ago. Back then, the nuns lacked Dharma texts and statues, and the living accommodations were much more simple. Now each nun has two small room, including a kitchen and bedroom. Before becoming a nun, Jampa had worked with her parents, caring for the goats, sheep, and cows.

For Jampa, the most significant thing is her practice as a nun. The most significant practice for her is the offering puja, Lama Chöpa, which expresses guru devotion and is a daily Gelukpa practice. Combined with the visualization of Tara, no other practice is needed.

Jampa was using Tibetan traditional remedies to cure her cold and cough. After our interview, Jampa was going to a spring by the Zangskar river to bathe, and to collect water and mud at the bottom of the spring, which is considered beneficial for colds, pain in the bones, and other ailments. The mud could later be heated, like purified butter, and applied to pressure points, using cotton or wool. Another remedy is to heat dried finely ground cow dung in a cloth and apply it to pressure points. There were two amchis living in Zangla village, but now there is only one, and most of the nuns go to Jampa instead.

### **Namgyal Choling Nunnery, Pishu**

It was a short drive to the footbridge over the Zangskar River, and almost an hour's walk across a gentle, stony slope to reach the nunnery. Pishu village, consisting of 25 families with about 200 people, was nearby and situated slightly lower than the nunnery. We were welcomed very warmly, despite the day-long Monlam puja that was in progress.

Many people from the village were present. The youth group was building a stupa, eight senior men were reading a text in the courtyard in front of the gonpa, laywomen were preparing the meals, and some laywomen and men were weeding the vegetable garden, planting vegetables and collecting natural greens to go in the soup. The Women's Alliance is active in Pishu village, and one of its members, Nima Buti, was leading the outside work that day. We sat in the gonpa during the puja, until an appropriate time came to involve the nuns in our survey. We were impressed by the musical skills of the nuns in their use of the trumpets, horns, symbols and drums.

The nunnery has received a certain amount of support from Bhiksuni Karma Lekshe Tsomo since 1993. This support has been in the form of many volumes of the classical texts, robes for the nuns, the building of a guesthouse with classroom, and the provision of food for the winter so that the nuns can do retreat.

There are eleven nuns in residence, two of whom are under 30 and five over 50. The oldest is 84 years and the youngest is 25. All became nuns in their teens, parents and older nuns advising them that they would be happy with this decision. All the nuns are living in the nunnery and each has her own individual rooms. They indicated that before becoming nuns they were all very poor, because the nearby village is poor and does not have a good water supply. None of the nuns has been to school, but all had learnt Ladakhi from their fathers or from those who could read. The nuns have received periodic teachings from visiting lamas, but none has undertaken higher studies.

The nunnery buildings consist of a gonpa, a recently constructed guesthouse with classroom, and individual accommodations for all nuns. Their accommodations include a small room for winter situated below one which is used in summer. Although there is no library, the nuns have many classical texts. They would like to build a library on top of the new classroom.

The nuns' day starts around 6 am. After washing and cleaning, they perform their morning prayers individually for one and a half to two hours. Prayers are shortened when they are invited to the village to read texts. Breakfast is cooked individually when there are no communal pujas or prayers.

In summer, the younger nuns engage in a range of activities, including trips to the mountains to collect cow dung and wood, reading texts, and sometimes, when asked by their families to help, work in the fields. Because they depend on their families for food and support, they feel obliged to help out. Both lunch and evening soup are cooked individually. If the nuns are present at the nunnery in the afternoon, prayers are recited. In the evening, Tara puja and other prayers are recited.

The ceremonies held during the year include bi-monthly pujas on the 10th and 25th days of the lunar calendar, a winter puja held in the first lunar month, one in the fourth month, 17 days of Monlam prayers, and a 3-day fasting puja in the fifth month.

The nuns agree that staying in the nunnery makes practice easier; if they stayed in the village, there would be more work and it would be more difficult to practice. The nuns occasionally receive teachings from lamas from Karsha Monastery, when the monks have time. In the last two months, lamas have come on two occasions, giving one-day teachings on Lamrim and Guru Puja. Obstacles are regarded as being both inner and outer (such as hearing problems), and are regarded as greater for younger nuns, who are more likely to disrobe than older nuns.

The nuns organize themselves by selecting two nuns every three years take responsibility for organizing the pujas. All of the nuns gather together periodically to discuss the accounts, which are managed by an accountant from the village.

There is strong cooperation between the nunnery and the village. The Women's Alliance has been assisting the nunnery over the last three months. After talking together to see what work was needed, they drew up a program that includes repairs to the stupas, plans for laywomen and nuns to read texts on auspicious days, and preparation of food by the Women's Alliance. When buildings need repairing, families from the village often bring a pile of wood and other materials for helping with this work.



Nuns visit people's homes in the village, and sometimes villagers visit the nunnery. Twice a year, the nuns take the texts to the village to read, which is seen as bestowing blessings. The older nuns give teachings and Dharma-related advice. All of the nuns go for alms in the village at harvest time and visit nomadic areas to collect butter. When someone dies in the village, the family requests the nuns to perform pujas. As they expressed it, the nuns very much depend on the villagers, but the village also needs to bring them young nuns.

The only recent training involved two nuns who attended the Vinaya training at Karsha Monastery.

Their biggest hopes are for younger nuns to join the nunnery and for study programs, but there are many obstacles. They felt that girls would only be encouraged to become nuns if their parents encouraged them to learn to read Dharma texts from the nuns. Most parents these days send their children to school, but the medium of instruction is Urdu, so the children are forgetting their own language. The nuns also commented that, in the past, people came more frequently to study texts at the nunnery. They felt that, if only they had a resident teacher, more people might be interested in Dharma study. We explored whether LNA or INEB might be able to work with the nuns to present Dharma to young people in a more accessible way. The basic problem seems to be for nuns, who have not been to school, to connect with young people, who have been.