GATSAL

NEWSLETTER OF THE

ISSUE No.25 DONGYU GATSAL LING NUNNERY MARCH 2011
The year 2010 has been a fairly peaceful and uneventful one at the DGL Nunnery.

After the annual 2 month retreat during the Rainy Season in July and August, the new term started in September. This time we welcomed two new Genlas named Lopon Yeshi Wangmo from Namdroling Nunnery and Gen Trinley Chozom from Jamyang Choeling Nunnery. We are so grateful to these more established Nunneries for sending us their learned senior nuns to help as teachers for our nuns.

Nowadays most of the building work is centred on our traditional temple that is slowly coming into being. The actual structure is now complete but the art work and decoration takes many months. We have a team of 15 Tibetan artists at work on the large canvas murals and the interior ornamentation. At present they are also painting the outside walls. The temple is the heart of the Nunnery and will look like a casket of jewels when it is completed.

Nunneries and monasteries established in exile are no longer supported by their local villages and families as in the traditional system. Most monastic organisations rely on their High Lamas to raise funds abroad, on donations and sponsorships, and on the offerings for ritual ceremonies. These sources of income are tenuous and uncertain. Therefore in recent years one of our main concerns has been to raise sufficient money for an Endowment Fund that will help secure the financial future for our DGL nuns.

With this in mind, last October we organised a fund raising event called a “Pilgrimage to the Cave”. This involved about 30 people from around the world gathered together to travel to the monastery and cave in Lahaul where I had spent so many years. Right from the start it was a very harmonious group of people and on the whole the journey was remarkably trouble free with plenty of laughter and good humour.

The pilgrims met with His Holiness the Karmapa and also the Nechung Oracle and the Dakini Tseringma. Then one of the highlights was the visit to our Dongyu Gatsal Ling Nunnery where all the nuns greeted their guests with khatas and smiles. The pilgrims were very impressed with the buildings of the Nunnery and especially overwhelmed by the warmth and friendliness of the nuns themselves. Later they attended some lively debating and a Chöd puja.

We were very fortunate with the weather while travelling across the Rohtang Pass and our stay in Lahaul - Land of the Dakinis - was blessed with clear blue skies. We were given a traditional welcome at the Stingri Village by the villagers holding khatas and flowers, along with the local band of drummers and a flautist. All these merry souls accompanied us up the hill to Tayul Gonpa carrying our baggage with singing and dancing. It was a moving experience for me to meet again the group of nuns with
whom I had shared my life for so many
years. Now they are very old and poor, but still active and jolly.

Early the next morning the pilgrims and villagers started off for the cave - the
goal of our pilgrimage. It was a tough walk at that high altitude scrambling
ever upwards along goat tracks with precipitous drops. I think that many
of us would have given up along the way and returned to the Gonpa, had it not been for the encouragement and help of the village girls - along with the
sprightly band to pipe us onwards. So after a 4 hour trek, we finally all arrived
there, exhausted but triumphant!

The overhang cave is now
overgrown and almost unrecognisable
apart from the magnificent view of
the snowy mountain ridge, as it has been uninhabited for over 20 years.
On arrival the local head of the Stingri Village announced that the villagers
had agreed to rebuild the cave the way it had been when I lived there - so it
can continue to be used as a hermitage for future practitioners!

This pilgrimage was recorded
throughout by a wonderful team of
film makers from Delhi and it will soon
be available on DVD - so watch out for
the announcement on our website.

Losar or Tibetan New Year falls
in March which is rather late since
the 11th month has been doubled
this year. As usual it will be a time for
making offerings to our Rinpoches
and enjoying food and games during
the picnics that are held over several
days.

On Losar morning the nuns start
prayers long before dawn for the
welfare of the world in the coming
year, before going over to Tashi Jong
to join the monks of the Khampagar monastery in their rituals.

We wish our many friends and
supporters around the world happiness
and well being in this Year of the Female Iron Hare. Thank you most
sincerely for all your help, interest and
encouragement.

Love and peace,

My name is Lekshe Dolma. I am seventeen years old and I come from
Arunachal Pradesh. I studied up to the 5th standard in my native village. My
parents had a farm growing rice and vegetables, and I have 2 brothers and 2
sisters.

I lost my mother when I was 14. She suffered from jaundice and was a
little sick for about a year. Her sudden loss was unbearable to me. I used
to think of her all the time. Her affectionate image would not go from my
mind, no matter how hard I tried to think of something else. I could not
understand why this had happened to my mother. She was such a kind and
helpful person.

It was soon after her death that I decided to become a nun. One of my
sisters got married soon after my mother died but she is not very happy and
has a hard life full of work and no chance of studying or bettering herself. I
discovered that this world is full of sorrows. There is nobody in this world
that is really happy and without suffering.

Some are hungry, others are sick, some are homeless and without shelter.
To me this world appears empty and without substance. There is nothing in
this world that can give us permanent happiness. We lose our possessions
and those we love leave us or die. We ourselves will also get sick and die.
There is nothing in our ordinary lives that we can do to make others really
happy.

Having thought about all this I decided to become a nun so that I could do
something to help in this unhappy world and to give support to the helpless
and destitute of this earth. Now I realise that by taking this decision I have
made my life purposeful and meaningful and I am working hard so that I can
use this insignificant life to be of benefit and achieve my goals.
At the last DGL Trust Meeting, two new nun Trustees were elected. Ani Tenzin Chokyi and Ngawang Dolma are replacing Drimay Palmo who has left DGL to do further study at Sarnath University, and Tsultrim Palmo who is now doing teacher training at Sarah College, an Institute for Higher Tibetan Studies near Dharamsala. They join Ani Dechen Chodron who has been a Trustee since October 2008.

Tenzin Chokyi is from Kinnaur and has been a member of the DGL nuns' committee since 2008.

She has done consistently well in both Philosophy and English and is currently one of two Nunnery Librarians. Ngawang Dolma is from Spiti. She is also currently on the DGL nuns' committee and has held various Nunnerly roles.

Two New DGL Nun Trustees

My name is Dechen Chodron. I was ordained as a nun in 2005. I have been given various jobs at DGL Nunnery since then. Whatever job is assigned to me I try to do it to the best of my knowledge, ability and capacity. I always try to shoulder these responsibilities cheerfully and with sincerity.

Just a few months back I was one of two nuns invited to be Jetsunma’s attendants.

Frankly, I was a bit apprehensive about it initially as I had never handled this sort of job before. However I knew that if I made a great effort and did my best it would be alright. So now, I am very happy to be doing this job and I am really enjoying my new work.

Actually, the job of an attendant involves accompanying Jetsunma to various meetings, and visiting monasteries and nunneries and other functions where ordained Sangha will be present.

We always ensure that she gets a good comfortable seat if she is traveling by bus, and if she is going by taxi we find a nice clean taxi with comfortable seats and a good driver. We also carry her bags or any heavy articles. We take care of her clothes and make sure she has a warm shawl if it is cold and that she has everything she may need in her bag.

Once there we arrange to bring her tea and refreshments. We know that Jetsunma does not eat after 2:00pm so we ensure that she is served her meal before that time.

When she is about to leave we try to ensure that she taken any important things that she will need.

On Sundays we clean her room for her. Whatever she says to us we try to follow it, so if she wants privacy and doesn’t want her room cleaned we don’t do it that week.

Sometimes we ask Jetsunma’s personal assistant if she would like us to do anything for Jetsunma. If she asks us to do something we do it promptly.

When Jetsunma has been away and returns to the Nunnery we invite her for breakfast or tea according to the time.

Whenever there is a special puja we always ask her if she would like to join in the puja with us.

Sometimes, if she has guests she is unable to join the puja. If there are any problems in the Nunnery we always inform Jetsunma and help to sort them out.

It was DGL Nunnery’s Project Manager Ms. Monica Joyce who appointed Ani Tenzin Chokyi and I as attendants to Ven Jetsunma. This job has given us an opportunity to learn a lot of things. We take great pride in doing this job and we both consider ourselves very fortunate to have this opportunity. We take it as a matter of great honour that out of seventy nuns who live here we were chosen to work so closely with our beloved Jetsunma.

We had never in our wildest dreams thought that we would get such a chance to work this closely with our beloved Jetsunma, and to serve her in whatever way we can to make her comfortable and happy. I am very grateful to have been given this opportunity.

Jetsunma’s Attendents
In October 2010, Ani Tsultrim Palmo began a study course in Tibetan Grammar and teacher training at Sarah College near Dharamsala. Sarah College is a branch of the School of Dialectics in Dharamsala and is an Institute for Higher Tibetan Studies.

Ani Tsultrim Palmo was one of the first young women from Ladakh to enter Dongyu Gatsal Ling Nunnery at the beginning of 2000. She completed her 6 years of Philosophy and continued to study Philosophy, most recently with DGL Khenpo Ngawang Sangpo. Also in recent years Ani Tsultrim has taught Tibetan Grammar to the junior DGL nuns. She has always done well in her exams and in 2010 came 1st in both Philosophy and English. Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo and Khenpo Ngawang felt she would be a good candidate for further study so approached Sarah College who agreed to accept her as a student.

Ani Tsultrim has enjoyed teaching the younger nuns and says ‘I am very happy to be doing this study at Sarah College and hope that in the future I can benefit my DGL Nunnery’.
We are the Medical Nuns at DGL Nunnery. Every year in the elections the nuns vote and choose 2 medical nuns to help the sick nuns for one year. At the last election we were chosen to do this job.

We both come from Spiti. We had passed Plus Two exams at Hindi Government School in Lahoul Spiti. We became nuns at DGL Nunnery in 2005 and are now doing the 6th year of our 10 year course in Philosophy and English. We can now write and speak English and philosophy quite fluently.

Let us tell about our duties as Medical Nuns. When the nuns become sick they come to us. We have to take them to hospital and give them their medicine. If they stay in hospital one of us will stay with them to take care of them.

The nearest hospital to our Nunnery is 10 kilometres away. The patients can feel very helpless so we try to encourage them to feel better. If it is not serious we take the patient on the bus, but sometimes it is more serious, so we call a taxi to go to hospital.

Sometimes the nuns are suffering from high fever and cannot attend class, so we get permission from Jetsunma and take them to the hospital. If it is not a serious problem we give the medicine here, and check that the nun takes every dose of the medicine. We check the patient nicely every day, and make sure she is getting better.

If we don't understand which medicine is good for the patient, we ask Jetsunma's assistant Heather to help us. She has come from Australia. She has good experience with medicine because she was a nurse, and she can give injections also, which saves us from taking nuns who need follow up injections by bus to the hospital every time. One day recently a nun fell down the stairs when they were wet from the rain. She hurt her ankle and foot and could not walk well. Heather put some medicine on her foot and taught us how to bandage it and change the bandage every day. The nun became better after only 2 days.

I think we should be careful of everything we do, eating, playing, walking, studying and do it mindfully to avoid accidents. We should do exercise at the proper time as it is a great benefit to our body. Hard work is impossible without good physical health. When one is weak, one can fall sick very easily and get tired quickly. Also a sick person cannot concentrate on their studies.

On the other hand a healthy person can work very hard, she does not tire easily. She completes every task successfully because she works with a lot of concentration. She needs fresh air to purify her blood and good exercise to keep her fit. This gives more energy, therefore it is important to do regular exercise.

Our respected Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo has always advised proper care with diet and exercise and yoga for us. We are grateful to her for her kind advice and generosity. We are really fortunate to get this golden opportunity, to study in such a Nunnery.

We are sure we will do our very best in our medical duties, and we give thanks to her for giving us this new lease of life. We are very proud of our Nunnery.
How did I feel when I heard that I had been appointed disciplinarian?

The news of my selection as DGL disciplinarian came as a big surprise to me. I had never expected that the choice would one day fall on me. But, all these jobs responsibility come out of the annual elections and by rotation, so that at some time each nun should experience these roles.

I knew that it was a job of great challenges and that it was sometimes very difficult.

I did not know initially how to go about it.

I realised that as there was no escape and that I have to do it, why not do it cheerfully and in a dedicated manner. I decided to set an example for everybody else. Usually the other nuns look down on the disciplinarian. I decided that I wanted to prove them all wrong. I had learned from books and my elders that nothing in the world is too difficult or impossible. It is our thinking that makes things appear so difficult.

In order to change our life and achieve success we must change our mindset. I wanted to put in my best efforts to do this job.

To my great surprise from day one, I found it was quite easy and exciting as I was trying to deal with the nuns and the day to day problems, with a positive frame of mind.

Actually, I now think that trying to be a disciplinarian in a Buddhist Nunnery is not much of a problem at all. The reason is that most of the nuns come from humble backgrounds in remote areas. They have a strong family life and ties with built in discipline. They look upon institutions with great respect and reverence.

There can be a few exceptions sometimes, especially among the youngest girls.

But, in such cases the problem can usually be dealt with carefully and tactfully. With love one can guide them in the appropriate manner.

If one is kind, nice, a bit tactful and awakened, it sets an example and the other person cannot afford to be otherwise.

This is what I try to do in my duties and so today I am enjoying my job as disciplinarian very much.
How to Support the Nuns at DGL Nunnery

by Monica Joyce

Perhaps not many DGL supporters know how the Nunnery is run on a practical basis. Over the years we have developed a system where the nuns take a very hands-on role. This way, they become more involved in and responsible for the development of their Nunnery.

Each year, usually in October, and some weeks after the beginning of the new academic year, the nuns of DGL hold elections for the various office bearers. It is always a very enjoyable day with a delicious special lunch attended by teachers and staff, and an afternoon of games which are especially fun for the younger nuns.

Election time is in the morning and is presided over by Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo. The Nunnery has a committee of 5 senior nuns who meet weekly with Jetsunma and who make important decisions about the running of the Nunnery. At election time, a list of 10 of the more senior nuns is put forward by the Committee and all but the newer nuns vote for the most important jobs of Chotrim (Disciplinarian) and Nyerpa (storekeeper). The role of Chotrim is a difficult one as it is not always easy to be disciplining your peers, but it is a great service to the Nunnery and so is undertaken with goodwill. The 2 Nyerpas are responsible for the purchase of all Nunnery food and have a weekly budget for this, with extra allowances available for special events. They must buy at the best possible rates and seasonally, and this is a great responsibility with more than 75 nuns at DGL. It also helps their understanding of what it costs to run a nunnery. The Nunnery cooking is shared by all the nuns on a weekly rotation of 4 cooks who also make sure the kitchen, dining and food storage areas are always kept very clean.

Then there are the two Denkhang Dakpos who look after the Nunnery puja equipment and furniture and buy and distribute the nuns’ clothing, study materials, and other requirements.

All the other office bearers volunteer for their roles. Three medical nuns take care of anyone who is sick, taking them to the doctor or dentist and purchasing medication. There are also maintenance nuns who report for repair any problems in the Nunnery buildings; recycling nuns who make sure that all plastic, glass and other materials are put into recycling bins and collected regularly by local recycling people; gardening nuns who water and weed the dormitory gardens; and nuns who oversee the cleaning of the Nunnery buildings.

Importantly, 2 nuns deliver food to the long-term retreat nuns in the Retreat Centre. They enter the kitchen through an outside door, leave the food and ring a bell before they depart. The retreatants then come into the kitchen from their internal door to collect their food, leaving a note for anything special they need which is taken by the delivery nuns when they come to retrieve the empty food containers. It’s a good system which works well.

The Study Centre Library shelving has been made and the Library will soon be set up so the 2 nuns who are Librarians will be trained and able to help catalogue the English books and Tibetan texts.

So the elected and voluntary office bearers contribute greatly to the smooth running of DGL Nunnery, and in so doing fulfill Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo’s vision of service as part of a nun’s life.

How to Support the Nuns at DGL

Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo and the nuns at Dongyu Gatsal Ling Nunnery thank our supporters in a most heartfelt manner. Your kindness helps our Nunnery to flourish and keep the Dharma alive. Sponsoring a nun costs the equivalent of US$365 a year.

Cheques should be made payable to ‘Dongyu Gatsal Ling Trust’ and posted to:
Dongyu Gatsal Ling Nunnery
Village Lower Mutt, P.O. Padhiarkhar, Via Taragarh
Distt. Kangra, H.P. 176081, India

Anyone wishing to make a donation to DGL Nunnery via Tenzin Palmo’s account in their own country by Swift or Telegraphic Transfer, please email Eliz Dowling for details on eliz_palmo@hotmail.com

For further information or to contact Tenzin Palmo please email DGL on dgloffice@gatsal.org
Dongyu Gatsal Ling Trust is registered in India as a charitable organization designated for the support of Dongyu Gatsal Ling Nunnery and its activities.
Each year in May the Nuns take their annual examinations in English, Philosophy and Tibetan Grammar. The nuns sit the exams in late May and they are given two weeks off beforehand to catch up on their study. It is a rather anxious time for them as they take their studies very seriously and they all want to do well.

The most recently ordained nuns do not take exams for the first year and they continue their classes at this time.

In addition to the annual exams the nuns take ongoing assessments throughout the year to monitor their progress.

The nuns don’t take exams in debating, but Khenpo-la and the two Gen-las assess the debating skills in the daily afternoon classes. Debating is an opportunity for nuns who are normally shy and reserved to show their knowledge in an active, vocal and assertive way.

Gifts and presentations are made to those who come first, second and third in the exams. These presentations are made at the annual picnic in September when the monsoon retreat is finished.
Dongyu Gatsal Ling Nunnery commissioned one of India’s great Tibetan thangka painters Kelsang Damchoe and his team of 15 Tibetan apprentices to paint some large murals on canvas for the walls of the magnificent DGL temple. The team is painting a total of 17 canvases.

These include 2 canvases of the 21 Taras which are both 15’6” by 9’. The temple will also contain a large canvas of Milarepa and his female disciples, a large Heruka canvas, one with Vajrayogini and one of Vajradarah.

In addition a number of smaller canvases are being painted for the Nuns’ Puja Hall.

Rather than paint these murals directly on the walls, Kelsang and his team are painting onto canvases which will be attached to the inside walls of the temple. This protects them if the walls are damaged by damp or cracking.

They arrived about a year ago and this painstaking and finely detailed work should be finished in about mid 2011.

Kelsang draws all of the images onto the canvas first and then the apprentices do the painting, some sitting on the floor, others are on bamboo scaffolding. Their work is astonishingly detailed and one sees different details every time, such as tiny beautifully painted ducks swimming in the pools, every feather outlined perfectly, or jewels in the trees, stunningly realistic flowers of different types and of course the perfect images of the deities and their accoutrements.

Kelsang is a very modest and humble family man and we asked him to give us some information about his life. We asked how he came to choose this occupation which is an outlet for pure devotion.

Kelsang was born in Amdo province of Tibet and was ordained as a monk when he was young. Like many Tibetans, he heard of many educational opportunities in India and in 1998 he and two friends made the difficult journey to India. At the time; restrictions on travel had temporarily eased so they arrived safely and without incident.

They left Amdo with only 125 yuan (15 cents), a stove and a large basket of butter. They performed pujas on route to earn enough money to buy the train and bus tickets to Lhasa. They then walked 15 days to Shigatse and then to Sakya and Mount Kailash. Kelsang laughed as he said that they walked without food or water for two and a half days.

As the journey progressed he admitted that he became a little nervous. During their trek from Kailash to Nepal security guards became more obvious and it was necessary to pay drivers to help them get past police checkpoints in the middle of the night. Once they crossed the border to Nepal, they took a bus to Kathmandu and spent a relieved and happy week in a refugee camp, before catching the bus to Dharamsala.

Soon after arriving in Dharamsala, Kelsang and his 2 friends joined a group of 40 other refugees and fulfilled his long time dream of meeting His Holiness the Dalai Lama. His Holiness asked Kelsang what he wanted to do and Kelsang who was still a monk said that he would like to study Dharma at Drepung Monastery.

India was not at all as he had imagined He had thought it would be more industrialized and prosperous with plentiful food and free education for all. It was more difficult to make a life in India than he had thought, but even so he believes that the opportunities in India have given him a much better life than he could have had in Tibet.

Kelsang studied Thangka painting at the Tibetan Children’s Village in Dharamsala from 1992-1998. He then joined the Thangka Painting School at the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives where he practiced according to an established and precisely transmitted standard. He studied under the guidance of Master thangka painter Ven. Sangye Yeshe.

In 1997 he decided that he could offer more as a lay Tibetan and he disrobed. He began working as a professional Thangka painter in 2002, and now has many students working under his guidance.

Before coming to DGL, he was commissioned by Sogyal Rinpoche to go to Lerab Ling in the South of France to paint 1000 small Buddhas, a Guru Rinpoche mural and a 21 foot statue of the Buddha.

Kelsang is now married, has 2 children and lives in McLeod Ganj.
BY AIRMAL

To:

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