

# A NEW ERA FOR GELUG NUNS:

GESHEMA DEGREE BRINGS OPPORTUNITY AND RESPONSIBILITY



ABOVE AND LEFT: NUNS IN CLASS AND  
ON THE DEBATE COURTYARD AT  
GEDEN CHOELING NUNNERY,  
DHARAMSALA, INDIA



We must put emphasis on education for all. Women must be more involved in our societies and participate in building a more peaceful world with more solidarity and less violence.” – His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama

The sun had already disappeared behind the fir-tree-covered peaks that surround McLeod Ganj, located in Upper Dharamsala, India. At Geden Choeling Nunnery – a Gelug nunnery founded in 1973, making it the first nunnery in exile – the din of lively philosophical debate spreads out over a concrete roof, where more than 75 nuns are engaging in dynamic exchanges that go on for more than two hours in the evenings.

Debating, which uses the knowledge that a nun has gained from Buddhist philosophical study, showcases the depth of a nun’s understanding, her strength of memory, and the deftness of her logical reasoning. This intellectual exercise is a hallmark of the Tibetan monastic education system and integral to earning a Geshe degree, which is the equivalent of a Ph.D. in Buddhist philosophy and the culmination of nearly two decades of in-depth study.

Nuns were excluded from debating until 1995. Twenty years later, they have integrated debate into daily nunnery life, and the annual inter-nunnery debate called *Jang Gonchoe*, or “Jang Winter Debate,” is well attended. The name “Jang” refers to the region in Tibet west of Lhasa where the tradition of month-long inter-monastery debates originated. The 2015 Jang Gonchoe took place at Geden Choeling in October with 359 nuns from seven nunneries, including Kopan Nunnery, participating.

Rinchen Khando Choegyal, the sister-in-law of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, joined with other women in the Tibetan exile community in Dharmasala and founded the Tibetan Women’s Association in 1984. Responding to His Holiness’ prompting, they created the international non-profit organization the Tibetan Nuns Project (TNP) in 1987 to improve the well-being and education of nuns coming from Tibet and living in the Himalayan region.



At that time, there were only two nunneries near Dharamsala, neither with proper facilities nor educational programs. Today, Rinchen Khando continues to serve as TNP’s director and more than 700 nuns in eight communities in India and Nepal receive the organization’s support.

The development of educational programs for nuns is under way even in isolated areas like Zaskar and Spiti in far northern India. The centuries-old Dorje Dzong Nunnery, a historic Gelug nunnery that receives support from TNP and sits perched at an altitude of over 3,000 meters (9,842 feet) on the steep slopes of the Zaskar River, has recently opened its school. During the summer of 2012, seven nuns – two of whom were over 80 years old – took part in the schoolhouse’s construction by shoveling and transporting sand, making earthen bricks and cutting wood. A year later, the school opened and 17 young nuns from the surrounding area began to study Tibetan, English, Hindi and mathematics with a teacher chosen by the Central Institute of Buddhist Studies in Leh, Ladakh.



## NUNS OF SHERAB CHOELING NUNNERY IN SPITI, INDIA

In the highlands of the Spiti River valley, further east between Ladakh and Tibet, the women of the new Sherab Choeling Nunnery, a non-sectarian nunnery rebuilt in 2005 on the Spiti's most accessible river bank, liven up the central courtyard every morning for one and a half hours and every evening for two with debating. Over 40 nuns between the ages of five and 30 spar with each other under the nunnery arches. Each summer for the last four years, these nuns, who are far from Dharamsala, organize a debating contest with their sisters from Yangchen Choeling 458 kilometers (284 miles) away. During a 10-day period, they debate together under the encouraging and sympathetic eyes of their philosophy teacher. These repeated exercises not only deepen the nuns' understanding of Dharma but also increase their self-confidence and enable them to take more responsibility within their communities, which they will eventually manage on their own.

In May 2012, with encouragement from His Holiness the Dalai Lama, the path was finally opened for awarding Geshema degrees to nuns who have completed geshe studies programs at their nunneries. A year earlier in April 2011, the German nun Geshe Kelsang Wangmo became the first female geshe in history after completing the geshe studies program at the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics in Dharamsala (see *Mandala* October-December 2012).

In May 2016, 20 nuns from five different nunneries in India and Nepal, including two nuns from Kopan Nunnery, will be taking their final Geshema degree examinations. The degree and

exams are overseen by the Central Tibetan Administration's Department of Religions and Culture and the Tibetan Nuns Project. To qualify for the exams, a nun must have studied the five great texts for a period of 18 years and achieved a mark of at least 75 percent.

The geshema exams take place over a period of four years, with one exam each year. If nuns fail an exam they can retake it one time. If they fail again, they cannot continue. The exams cover *Prajñāparamita*, *Abhisamayalankara*, Madhyamaka philosophy, the *Pramanavarttika*, vinaya, Tibetan grammar and poetry, and scientific topics. There is also a debate component.

The advent of the Geshema degree opens a new chapter in the development of Tibetan Buddhism; nuns will now be able to serve as teachers. The Dalai Lama himself has urged the future geshemas to take up this new responsibility: "Until now you have relied on monks to teach you, but in the future it will be very important that there are also nuns to teach nuns. More than that, we also need nuns to teach in our secular schools. I request you, after your studies, to consider going into retreat, and after that, resolve to teach others."



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