

Report from TWA Empowerment through Action Desk

5th Annual Buddhist Nun's Leadership Training

17th – 23th April 2013

Tibetan SOS Vocational Training Centre, Selakui, Dehradun

Training Synopsis

We are proud to report that this year's Nuns Empowerment Program, held at the Tibetan SOS Vocational Training Centre in Selakui, Dehradun, was concluded successfully. It was the 5th training in a series organized by Tibetan Women's Association.

The week-long '5th Annual Nun's Empowerment Program,' held from April 17th – 23rd 2013, was attended by 26 nuns from 10 nunneries based in India. The participants came from nunneries in Ladakh (Ladakh Nun's Association), Drikung Samtenling and Sakya Rinchen Choekhorling (Dehra Dun), Tilokpur (Karma Drupgyu Dhargyeling), Orissa (Namkha Khungzong) Garoh (Jamyang Choeling and Shugseb Ugen Dzong), Solan (Redna Menriling), Sidhpur (Dolmaling) and Dharamsala-based Gaden Choeling.

The training saw various Tibetan community leaders holding sessions on vital concepts to empower and educate the nuns:

- Ms. Tenzin Dhardon Sharling, member of the Tibetan Parliament in Exile, provided a two-day training session called 'Building Effective Communication Skills on the Learning Curve' and 'Innovation and Self-reliance'.
- Ms. Tenzin Tseyang, Trainer/ Coordinator, Women's Empowerment Desk, CTA, held a day-long training session on 'Women Empowerment'.
- Mr. Lhakpa Dhondup, Director/ Principal of the Tibetan SOS Vocational Training Centre, led an evening session on 'Nutrition and Diet',
- Mr. Duke Tsering, Principal of TCV Model School Selakui, gave a lecture on an overview of 'Mind and Life'.

The sessions were all interactive and filled with mind games, group discussions, presentations and role-playing with breaks in between.

Pre-Training summary:

The TWA's coordination team made its way to Selakui on the night of April 14th, two days before the start of the 5th Annual Buddhist Nun's Empowerment Program on May 17th. The pre-training preparations were mainly: purchasing the training kit, communicating with the printing press and having the print materials ready, finalizing the resource persons and their travel mode, having the logistics set up at the venue. As we planned to welcome the nuns on the 16th, we started to set up the auditorium according to the topics of the training and number of the trainees for the next 7 days. The large, attractive stanchions displaying the logos of TWA

and *Science Meets Dharma* to reflect the theme of the training surely helped to establish a new and exciting atmosphere in the hall. We also looked into the electrical setup which required detailed work to ensure all presentations, videos and sound systems were functional and easily accessible. The team succeeded in making the training space at the Vocational Training Centre appealing and welcoming to the participants.

Registration and Welcome dinner - May 16, 2013

The nuns started reaching the venue early in the morning on the 16th and were guided to their lodgings where they could relax and refresh after their night-long travels. We began the registration at 3pm, distributing their training kits (notepad, files, schedule copy, water bottle, name tag, and yoga mat). A welcome dinner was served later in the evening.

Day one – May 17, Wednesday

The first session of everyday was the highly anticipated morning yoga session led by Rev. Lobsang Dhonden la. Many of the nuns experienced yoga for the first time and enjoyed it thoroughly.

TWA's General Secretary Nyima Lhamo welcomed the nuns and introduced the objectives and history of this training, which has gradually expanded since its inception in January 2009. The ice-breaker session challenged the nuns with fun puzzles and mind exercises. The goal of the mind games was to access one's self-confidence and ability to think creatively. As much as the nuns could laugh through the mind games, it also created enough space for them to reflect on life skills. The puzzles required them to think unconventionally, leading them to develop new perspectives that can extend to situations beyond those addressed at the training.

The participants then discussed ground rules they wanted to implement for the duration of the training. The nuns also picked a 'secret friend' to who they would write secret letters, send small gifts and request to do small fun activities during the training period. The identity of the secret friend is revealed at the end of training where they would present a gift to their secret friend. The real fun lies in keeping the secret throughout the session.

After the tea break, Nyima Lhamo gave a presentation called *Tips for Proposal Writing* to assist the nuns in composing their eventual group project proposal. The nuns also explored the past projects implemented by the previous trainees of the Nun's Empowerment Program.

A formal introduction session of TWA was presented by screening a few short videos highlighting TWA's involvement in the Tibetan community. The orientation round saw the participants grouped into teams and going through the schedule in detail. The documentary *Tibet – A Burning Question* was screened, followed by a discussion on why self-immolations are happening in Tibet.

The first day of the week-long program ended with a group strategy meeting.

Day Two - April 18, Thursday

The second day was specifically reserved for an education tour; the nuns visited the prestigious Doon School, a school modeled on the British public school in 1935, but aware of Indian ambitions and desires. The school administration very graciously arranged a half-day visit for the nuns to explore and discover the various educational conveniences enjoyed by the students at the school. The extracurricular activities provided for the students were shared with the nuns.

The amphitheatre known as the 'Rose Bowl' built by the pupils amazed the nuns. It can hold up to 1,000 people and is used for numerous theatre productions, musical performances and ceremonial speeches. The music school houses a music library, concert hall and several teaching rooms where students learn western and Indian instruments also sounded interesting and enticing.

The best part for the nuns was the Doon School Library which provides academic resources for all constituents of the school – students, faculty and staff. The library strives to make resources readily accessible, working to enhance and promote the total growth and development of the students. The nuns also had the opportunity to interact with the students of the Doon School.

The next stop of our tour was the Forest Research Institute, an institute of the Indian Council of Forestry Research and Education acclaimed all over the world in the field of forestry research in India. It is the oldest of its kind, founded in 1878 as the British Imperial Forest School and re-established in 1906. It is now available as research and training centre for the Superior Forest Service officers.

It was a beautiful place to stopover; set in a lush green area, with the Himalayas forming the backdrop, the institute's main building is an impressive display of Greco-Roman architecture. The majestic building houses six museums on forestry for tourists. Most of the people who go to the institute end up becoming the first officers. The nuns displayed ample interest as they walked through each museum and took notes of the things exhibited.

Our education tour ended as we left the Forest Research Centre but the program surprised the nuns when they were given the task of drawing a graphic depiction of 'A day in my life' on a sheet of A3 paper. One side of the paper gave the pictorial illustration and the other side showed 'what the participant aspires to do to make this world a brighter place for children.'

Mr. Lhakpa Dhondup, Director of the SOS Vocational Training Centre, Selakui, led a session on 'Healthy ways of Living.' It was impressive not to find a single tired face in the hall after an incredibly exhausting long educational tour. Mr. Dhondup emphasized that being healthy is not only about how you exercise and whether you have a beauty regime or not, but that it is also

very dependent on how you feed your body. He also guided us in the right direction regarding food choices and how we can make our diet more interesting and nutritious. It was also stated that the common illness prevalent in our community is nothing but a consequence of unhealthy eating habits.

An interesting view expressed by Mr. Lhakpa Dhondup was that *'healthy eating habits have nothing to do with one's pocket / bank balance; it's all about intelligence and knowledge. Thus I am happy to see this session being included in such training programs.'*

Day Three - April 19, Friday

We had Tenzin Tseyang, Coordinator/Trainer for the Women's Empowerment Desk, Central Tibetan Administration as our session leader. The topic of the day was 'Women's Empowerment'. The session helped the nuns open up and highlighted many ideas and stereotypes at hand which were collected through group discussion and presentations. After the discussions, the term 'gender' had a more informed meaning for the participants.

The Kashag's policy on female empowerment was also a point of discussion. We especially talked about the need to strengthen women's role in the administration and politics of the democratic Tibetan community and thus the need to empower Tibetan women. The first point of the policy clearly states that the CTA should provide the required assistance and facilities for Tibetan nuns to improve their learning of major spiritual texts and to continue its on-going efforts to restore the Bhikshuni Sangha ordination of Tibetan nuns. After many meetings and discussions and with extraordinary constant guidance from His Holiness the Dalai Lama, 27 nuns from various nunneries are finally sitting for their first round of Geshema exams as we draft this report, being held at Jamyang Choeling nunnery in Garoh.

Tseyang la engaged the nuns through group discussions, role playing and interactive games, thereby creating enough space for them to discuss issues frankly and openly.

At the end of the day, the nuns seemed to have understood that a lasting change can only be achieved when women have access to both knowledge and resources. An empowered woman can be defined as being in control of her own life; the nuns took home the message that for empowerment it is important to know the person you are through one's strengths and weaknesses as well as knowing one's wants such as goals or dreams of life. Tseyang la encouraged them to discover the answers to these questions and to develop by themselves. The participants took a group picture with Tseyang la to end the day's program.

Day Four - April 20, Saturday

The subject of the day was 'Building Communication Skills on the Learning Curve' led by Dhardon Sharling, a member of the Tibetan Parliament in Exile. The first activity was 'Animal

Kingdom,' a fun game related to communication skills followed by a quick introduction to the basics of communication.

The first session covered the basics, as well as the process and types of positive communication and SMART communication. After lunch the session focused on advanced communications: tactics, strategy, enactment, covering the fissure. The nuns were introduced to plenty of smaller activities related to effective communication skills to better understand concepts.

An important lesson of the day was that communication skills are not about personal or positional power. It's an art, a skill, and an asset for you to become successful in your field. It will help you tailor your communications to maximize your effectiveness.

20th April, 2013, Saturday, the 10th day of the third month in the Tibetan calendar (Pan-Chu), was an auspicious day. A mass prayer led by the 26 nuns of different sects and nunneries, was attended by the school's students and staff.

Day Five - April 21, Sunday

Dhardon la focused on the three guiding principles of the Central Tibetan Administration as the theme of the day's training. To begin, the three principles were introduced to the trainees in detail. The trainees made the most of the learning experience as they had ample opportunity as teams to discuss and work on group work. Very interestingly, the nuns had to come out with their innovative product, with a tag line and an advertisement to sell the product; the bottom line was to communicate creatively.

A short documentary called *Lhamo Tso – Behind the Sea* was screened and the task was to illustrate the three principles from the documentary and the teams had to replicate it.

The nuns posed for a group picture with Tenzin Dhardon Sharling as the day ended and the groups met for their final group strategy meeting.

Day Six - April 22, Monday

There was immense curiosity and some reservation over group projects, as it was the day for groups to present their projects. Finally, the hours of project proposal group strategy meeting came to an end, with the teams ready to present. All the teams had drafted their project well, with the work very clearly distributed the work among the group members, and they had suited their project to the time allocated and the budget. It was difficult to choose the best of the best.

The presentations were all exceptional and demonstrated a great amount of creative talent, though the group Pema-dhe took the bonus prize.

The team **Dophen** decided to spend quality time with the children at the Ngoenga Tibetan School, the one and only kind of special school for Tibetan community in exile. They took five fruit bearing plants to the school's orchard and educational kits for the female students at the hostels. The school today has more than 40 students with a range of disabilities including autism, dyslexia, epilepsy, polio, Down Syndrome, mental retardation and cerebral palsy. The teams were deeply touched by the children there and they also had time to interact with the teachers and home mothers.

Team **Metok** was very clear with their project and focus. They planted trees, a mix of fruit bearing and non-fruit bearing trees on the school campus.

Team **Gangyiki** made a visit to the retirement home in Rajpur to spend quality time with the elders living there, giving them some health advice and also took fruit bearing trees for the home.

Pema-De, the winning team, had a project to organize a mass solidarity prayer at the Sakya nunnery. The nuns led a mass prayer at the nunnery in solidarity with the Tibetans who self-immolated for the Tibet cause.

The nuns had 5 hours to implement their project and report back to the training venue. At the end of the day, the nuns again sat in groups, prepared their project report, and shared their feelings and experiences with the larger group.

Day Seven - April 23, Tuesday

Mr. Duke Tsering, Principal of the TCV Model School in Selakui, led a session on 'Mind and Life', giving the nuns an overview of the origin, history, values, vision, and the mission of the TCV Vocational Training Center. The nuns liked the session so much that a few of them suggested keeping longer sessions of the type in the future. The coordination team also felt the same way and have plans to implement changes as requested.

The final session of the program was the handing over of certificates to the trainees. This was done in a very informal but meaningful way.

The nuns then enjoyed bonding time: an outdoor trip at the Bhagirathi Resort. They revealed their secret friends and exchanged gifts. A final farewell dinner served as a networking dinner for the nuns, the staffs and students who helped to coordinate the program. This was a chance to interact and an experience that will be cherished forever. The 'Spin a Yarn' activity marked the conclusion of the week-long program.

The nuns expressed that this program assisted them in realizing their skills and reinforced their beliefs and self-confidence. TWA hopes to see nuns pursue leadership roles in greater numbers and at higher levels. We look forward to organizing another enriching and empowering program to be held in 2014.

TWA remains thankful to our sponsor Science Meets Dharma, based in Zurich, for the much-needed annual financial support. We remain thankful for their involvement with TWA since 2009. We thank our participants without whom the implementation of this project would never

have been possible. Finally, we would like to thank Tibetan SOS Vocational Training Centre, Selakui and its director, staffs and students for their support, cooperation, and for providing us the space for this workshop.

NOTE: pictures from the training can be viewed here

<https://secure.flickr.com/photos/tibetanwomen/sets/72157633317052388/>

Quotes from the Participants

“Each day proved better, interactive, and filled with good experience and exposure. I have lived 12 yrs in Dehradun, but never been to Doon School or Forest Research Institute. This training program took me to these educational sites.” - Tenzin Choedon, Drikung Samtenling nunnery

“This is my first ever participation in training sessions, and I did many new things such as project writing and implementation, yoga, swimming etc.... I was shivering and nervous on day one, but I am amazed to see the level of transformation from shyness to slowly holding onto our confidence and belief.” - Lamdon Dolma, Dolmaling nunnery

“I will suggest this training to other nuns to attend in the future; it will be helpful to others as it has been to me.” - Tenzin Choedhen, Gaden Choeling nunnery

“Thank you TWA for creating such a platform for nuns. A week here at Selakui has given me many new skills and friends.” - Disket Dolma, Ladakh Nun’s Association

“This has been a good learning experience, from traveling to learning about the new concepts to teamwork, effectiveness and project work. Thank you very much TWA for this opportunity to experience it all.” - Kunsang Wangmo, Namkha Khungzong nunnery, Orissa