6th Annual Buddhist Nun's Empowerment Program

28th April – 3rd May, 2014

College for Higher Tibetan Studies, Sarah

Funded by: Science Meets Dharma
Organized by: Tibetan Women's Association
27th April – 3rd May 2014
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The week-long ‘6th Annual Buddhist Nun’s Leadership Program’, held from April 27th to May 3rd, 2014, was attended by 33 nuns from 3 nunneries based in Garoh (Shugseb Ugen Dzong), Solan (Redna Menriling), and Bhuntar (Palpung Yeshi Rabgyeling). The training highlighted basic leadership topics including communication skills, strategic thinking, team building and management, gender empowerment, women and health, and conflict resolution. The participants were also given the opportunity to observe and participate in a panel discussion, and to take part in an educational tour of the Tibetan Parliament House to receive an address by the Honourable Speaker, Mr. Penpa Tsering and the Tibetan Political Leader (Sikyong), Dr. Lobsang Sangay.

PRE-TRAINING PREPARATIONS

The pre-training preparations began by connecting with the nunneries to request that they send nuns to participate in the weeklong program. Positive responses from the contacted nunneries made TWA more confident and eager.

The Coordination Team’s responsibilities included designing the program schedule; sending out invitations and applications to speakers, purchasing stationery, yoga mats, water bottles, group prizes and mementoes for trainers, panellists and guest speakers; confirming the training venue at the College for Higher Tibetan Studies (Sarah); arranging accommodation and setting the menu.
26\textsuperscript{th} April, 2014 – Registration

The Coordination Team set up the auditorium with TWA and Program standees, stationery kits, tables and chairs, sound system and electric equipment. Thus, the auditorium went through the necessary transformation to become an appropriate training space for the 33 nuns participating in the week-long Program.

As the nuns reported to the training venue, the Coordination Team welcomed them at the registration desk. A simple welcome dinner saw all the trainees and the Coordination Team getting briefly and informally introduced to each other at the dining hall.
Day One - 27th April, 2014

The morning yoga session was an eagerly anticipated activity, as many of the nuns were to experience yoga for the first time. The green lawn at Sarah was brightened by the colors of the yoga mats and the enthusiasm of the nuns. The yoga session was led by Mr. Choedhar Chugtsang, who had been trained by the well known Yoga Master Swami Ramdev.
TWA’s President, Mrs. Tashi Dolma began the training with a welcome note, greeting the nuns to the 6th series of the program. President’s introductory speech laid its focus on the objectives and the history of the Annual Buddhist Nun’s Leadership Program. TWA’s President gave a formal introduction of the Tibetan Women’s Association including its mission, ethos, significance, projects and programs.

TWA’s General Secretary Nyima Lhamo led the ice breaking session immediately after, wherein the nuns were paired and given 20 minutes to introduce each other and have their partner’s introduction in the form of a drawing. Nuns laughed as they introduced each other to the larger group through their drawings. The participants were then given a secret friend each whose identity was to remain unknown until May 3rd when the mystery would be revealed. After the ground rules had been set, the nuns were divided into 4 teams with a team leader and a time manager each. During orientation, Nyima briefed the nuns thoroughly on the week-long Program’s schedule. Trainees were informed of upcoming activities including the participation in small study teams, meeting influential personalities, designing and presenting
group tasks, taking part in ad-hoc panel discussion and taking part in the excursion trip. The orientation created a new platform for the trainees, arousing questions, curiosity and interest.

The afternoon session was based on the theme of Gender Empowerment for Tibetan nuns. The nuns were briefed and introduced to the Eight Point Women Empowerment Policy of the Central Tibetan Administration. They were then each given a policy point to discuss and debate. TWA sees the Eight Point Women Empowerment Policy as a benchmark initiative towards empowering Tibetan women. TWA finds this proposed policy highly laudable. For this reason, TWA established its ‘Empowerment Through Action’ Desk to spearhead TWA’s training and workshop initiatives.

The nuns were given the debating guidelines and preparation time for the abovementioned activity. The actual debate and discussion proved interactive and it was striking to see how their ideas and pointers had societal impact and sway. The discussion saw a lot of questions being raised by the nuns to themselves as individuals, and to TWA as organizers as well.
Ultimately, the organizers decided to leave the questions for the nuns to think over, in hopes that certain concepts will be reflected upon seriously and thus better understood and applied.

The session after dinner was titled “River of Life”. Before the course started, the nuns spent some time preparing a visual representation of their journey through life, including significant events and turning points; they recalled people, friends and family who have had an impact on their lives, each in a different way. Hearing everyone’s journey was captivating; many felt motivated and inspired.

It was interesting to note how some of the turning points in the nuns’ lives came from conscious decisions to make a change. However, sometimes circumstances came upon us and it is only in hindsight that they saw the gifts these circumstances had brought.

The objective of this reflective activity was to help the nuns decide where they what they want in life and their next steps moving forward. TWA hopes that the activity helped the nuns to recognize which patterns and themes of their past had proved useful, helpful and supportive, and which had not.
Day Two, 29th April, Tuesday

All the participants appeared eager and excited as the day had an educational tour awaiting them. The nuns boarded taxis and headed towards Gangchen Kyishong, where the Central Tibetan Administration is located.

The first stop was the Parliament House where the nuns were addressed by the Honourable Speaker of the Tibetan Parliament in Exile, Mr. Penpa Tsering. The nuns were extensively introduced to the unicameral Tibetan Parliament in Exile (TPiE), the highest legislative organ of the Central Tibetan Administration. It was explained how the creation of this democratically elected body has been one of the major changes that His Holiness the Dalai Lama has brought about in his efforts and commitment to introduce a democratic system of administration. The nuns were then lectured on the number of Members of Parliament and the election system on the basis of the traditional provinces of Tibet. Additionally, they received information regarding the four members elected by Tibetans living in Europe, North America
and Canada; the four schools of Tibetan Buddhism and the traditional Bon faith.

The nuns were then briefed on the criteria of eligibility to contest Parliamentary elections, the tenures, number of sessions held, the composition of the standing committee, periodic tours of the members of Parliament to settlements; their responsibilities and the existence of Local Parliaments (scaled down replicas of the TPiE) established in major Tibetan communities.

The Honourable Speaker emphasized the importance of Tibetan language as the ultimate medium to master Buddhism, and therefore the need to study well and work hard to overcome the challenges of a life in exile.

The nuns visited the recently inaugurated Parliament House, and posed for a group picture with the Honourable Speaker Mr. Penpa Tsering to mark the conclusion of the Speaker’s address to the nuns.
After this, the participants walked to the Lhakpa Tsering Hall in the DIIR building where the program was to continue. Before the formal session with the Skiyong, the political leader of the Tibetans, Dr. Lobsang Sangay, the participants were concisely briefed about some of the well known women leaders of the world, Tibetan women leaders and women empowerment in general. They were also guided through the Kashag: the highest executive office of the Central Tibetan Administration, which controls executive and administrative responsibilities. It is stated in the Tibetan Charter that the seven members of the Kashag are headed by the Sikyong, who is directly elected by the exiled Tibetan populace.

Before beginning his speech, the Honourable Sikyong asked some questions regarding the nun’s Leadership Program, the nuns and their nunneries. The Honourable Sikyong’s address to the nuns focused mainly on women, women empowerment, self-confidence, self-esteem and self-belief. The Sikyong referred to TWA’s role since 1959 which has been to work towards strengthening the entire community as the only Tibetan women’s NGO. Sikyong also spoke about women
leaders around the world with reference to past and present female ministers of the Tibetan community. He highlighted the importance of having more women in the higher ranks of leadership. The nuns were encouraged to believe in themselves, to build their self-confidence and self-esteem and to continue with their monastic education to their best possibilities. They were inspired to avail of opportunities within and beyond nunneries and to be contributing members of the Tibetan community at large.

Some of the life story and instances shared by Sikyong made the nuns feel at ease and the Q&A session was met with enthusiasm as well as a good number of questions. A group picture with the honourable Sikyong marked the end of the session and boarding the cabs, everyone returned to the training venue.

The after-lunch session named ‘Women and Health care’ was led by Dr. Tenzin Lhadon from the Tibetan Medical and Astrological Institute. To begin with her lecture, Dr. Lhadon presented an overview of Tibetan traditional medicine. The nuns were then exposed to facts about health issues
that specifically relate to women; a variety of tips covering general health problems, symptoms, diet and nutrition were also given.

The Q&A session witnessed many nuns putting forth their queries to seek advice and help from Dr. Lhadon. This session made both nuns and team members realize the value of Tibetan tradition and culture, as well as the significance of Tibetan medicine. Moreover, the nuns took this session as an opportunity for self-care, taking note of their health history and discussing it with Dr. Lhadon.

The second day of the program ended with a walk into the woods and with an over one-hour-long informal dialectic debate between the groups.

**Day Three, 30th April, Wednesday**

Sonam Dechen, the Co-Director of the Tibetan Centre for Conflict Resolution (TCCR) was the trainer for the morning session. The Tibetan Centre for Conflict Resolution is a non-profit, educational organization dedicated to the non-violent management of conflicts in the Tibetan community and the world as a whole.
Sonam Dechen La briefly introduced TCCR to the nuns and then began her session by asking participants to brainstorm on the definition of conflict and to describe what the word felt like and meant to them. The participant’s responses written on the board included: anger, war, hatred, unhappiness, stubbornness, chaos, defeat, animosity, crisis, among others. Sonam Dechen La then stated that conflict should not always be viewed as negative because viewing conflict negatively produces negative and destructive outcomes. On the other hand, she argued that perceiving conflict positively leads to the opportunity to learn about the other person or group and can prove to be one of the best means of peace-building. It was concluded that the way in which conflict is perceived that sets the tone for the possibility of its resolution. It was important to note that most of the participants never thought of conflict in a positive way and inevitably questions emerged. Sonam La continued the session by identifying the causes of conflict: such as ideology, cultural differences, needs, interest and values.
The next topic was on building Conflict Resolution skills and the nuns were asked to discuss in groups what Conflict Resolution looked like for them, how conflict is generally resolved in Tibetan culture and how Buddhist practice and philosophy can be incorporated into Conflict Resolution. The participants suggested dialogue, awareness and mutual respect to be among the paramount features of Conflict Resolution. Buddhism teaches compassion for all beings and as Tibetans the nuns recognized their privilege of being able to learn the teachings of compassion and to practice them.

The nuns were asked to think of a conflict that happened in the past, either personal or public, in order to use it as an example and create the basis for a discussion on the different ways that the conflict could have been resolved. The nuns shared their instances of conflict in their personal life and space and their suggestions on how to work it out. Sonam Dechen La finally explained to the nuns some of the effective ways to resolve a conflict; such as being aware of interdependency, building trust, finding shared goals, values and interests and finding opportunities for creative energy.
The breathers given in between the sessions kept the nuns active and the morning concluded smoothly.

Venerable Lobsang Dechen, the Co-Director of the Tibetan Nuns’ Project led an afternoon session on the ‘importance of Geshema Degree’. Ven. Lobsang Dechen presented an overview on how the nuns were given ‘Geshema degree’ referring to the years of deliberation and to how the Tibetan Buddhist nuns are finally set to receive Geshema degrees. The Central Tibetan Administration reached this historic decision in May 2012 during a meeting attended by high lamas, representatives and heads of six different nunneries and members of the Tibetan Nun’s Project. A degree previously open only to monks is now available for nuns as well.

The nuns were then guided through the criterion to graduate with a Geshema Degree, the method of study and its composition, indicating that such a degree is granted on the basis of proficiency in dialectical ritualized debate. The Tibetan Nun’s project has always encouraged nuns to study and it kept an atmosphere of positive competitiveness to build
their confidence. The whole idea of sponsoring the month-long inter nunnery debate competition (Jang Gonchoe) by the Tibetan Nun’s Project is connected to our integral aim of assisting in the maintenance of the nuns’ proficiency and skills. Another aim is to take the nun’s intellectual abilities to a higher level that would help them to achieve the Geshema Degree. The group photo session marked the end of the afternoon session.

An evening with the Tibetan NGOs Leaders

The evening panel discussion was preceded by a networking dinner that included the representatives of the major NGOs based in Dharamsala. The dinner aimed to create a space for the nuns to interact with the NGO representatives.

The panel discussion saw the representatives of the four major Tibetan NGOs based in Dharamsala (Tibetan Youth Congress, National Democratic Party of Tibet, Gu Chu Sum Movement of Tibet, Students for a Free Tibet) address the nuns.
The discussion was named: ‘Youth, Leadership and Responsibilities’ and each NGOs gave an introduction to its respective organization, establishment, significance and projects. Most of the Tibetan NGOs were new to the nuns; however, during the Q&A session, keen interest and participation was shown by the trainees.
Day Four, 1st May, Thursday

TWA’s General Secretary, Nyima Lhamo led the day’s session whose focus was on ‘Building effective communication skills’. The nuns played the game ‘Finding the Animal Partner,’ which underlined lessons about communication and the significant difference between animals and human beings: the enhanced ability to communicate. The nuns were then introduced to concepts of communication and communication processes through presentations, exercises, role plays and group exercises.

After lunch, the nuns were briefed on how to employ SMART communication skills (strategic and creative communication) in daily lives, how SMART communication skills make things much easier, on the importance of being SMART in everyday life and even at work when delegating, chairing, negotiating, motivating, selling, leading or disagreeing. SMART communication skills are all about getting your point across in a firm, concise and empowering manner regardless of the position being held.
The nuns then had to produce a group presentation of an award winning television commercial; each group designed a product to sell, with a jingle for the product and performed the commercial to the larger audience. What had been learned during this session is that communication goes far
beyond the actual words that we say and the more important part is not what you say, but how you say it and the way they are said. Communication skills are not about personal or positional power but they are an art, a skill and an asset to become successful in different fields.

Every breather played highlighted the importance of all elements of communications: source, message, channel, encoding, decoding, receiver, feedback and context. The most interesting outdoor game was crossing the mine bridge with the bricks as a stepping stones. It was a light-hearted and cheerful method of being strategic in communication. Every breather tested the trainees’ application of strategic communication skills.

Evening session:

As the days passed, the topics discussed only got better. The evening session guided the nuns through the concept of Citizen Journalism and explained how it is based upon
public citizens playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing, and disseminating news and information. In teams, trainees had to discuss various social issues and decide on one issue for the group to create a photo story on the next day. The more they understood the whole concept, the more they became excited and busy preparing themselves for the next day’s outbound training.

The participants found the day’s topics challenging and fun as the material for discussion scaled higher throughout the day. Some of the nuns also admitted that they had never thought that these concepts to be so important before.

**Day Five, 2nd May, Friday**

The day’s task was to go around the town, meet people, conduct interviews, research and take pictures on the selected social issue. Ultimately they had to create a photo essay on the selected social issue and make a presentation to the larger group.
Team Dzi-Thang chose poverty and education as the theme of their group presentation; the team wisely contacted staff at Tonglen institute (Children’s support hostels) and planned their day ahead. As per their plans, they visited the Tonglen institute and later visited the slums and spent time with the children, trying to interact and share with love and compassion.
Pema-De did their photo essay on old age. They meet with the elderly in town, who were in much need of love, care and affection, and heard their stories. The team’s message to society and youth was that the elderly must be cared for and respected. Another key message was that of being grounded and connected to our roots.

Team Thundrok-Tsokpa covered their story on "Infrastructure" with specific emphasis on roads. They walked around the town meeting locals and interacting with them, asking questions about the roads in their locality, how convenient or inconvenient the roads are around. After a thorough exploration of the town, one of the team members expressed her concern about the roads from Kotwali to McLeod Ganj, especially considering the fact that the town is the Exile Home for Tibetan Spiritual leader and a highly touristic destination.

Team Trisong’s photo story revolved around ‘Environmental protection’. The team spread the message through their actions: they spoke to people along the roads explaining
the importance of guarding our own environment. They actually cleaned around town and at points the locals also joined and helped in the cleaning initiative. The whole idea was to spread the message of environmental protection and respecting Mother Nature.

After the group presentation, everyone looked content and satisfied at being able to touch the hearts of many; spend time with less privileged people; and being able to understand them a little better. Everyone was happy to have connected to the universal concept of oneness as human beings. Through multiple questions, reflections and thoughts, many expressed that this had been the experience of a lifetime.

**DAY SIX, 3rd May, Saturday**

Miss Tsering Choedon, Advocate and Coordinator of the project on Legal Empowerment of Tibetan Women in Exile led a session on ‘Legal Empowerment of Tibetan Women in Exile dealing with sexual harassment’. The session covered
the topics relevant to general Tibetans living in India, such as: Registration Certificate; Identity Certificate and other important legal documents; challenges faced by Tibetan women such as sexual harassment, domestic violence, their grievances and modes of grievance; reprisal available and access to justice etc.

The feedback on this particular session was interesting as many nuns shared what they learned and what they will take away from this session.

**Closing ceremony and conclusion**

A short informal presentation ceremony saw TWA’s President, Ms. Tashi Dolma and Dr. Nater hand certificates of participation to the nuns. TWA’s President gave the concluding note followed by an address by Dr. Werner Nater, the Managing Director of Science Meets Dharma. Dr. Nater thanked the nuns for taking the time and stepping out of their comfort zone to commit to a week-long training
program. The words of admiration and encouragement sent immensely positive feelings to everyone in the hall and TWA looks forward to taking this program to higher and greater scales in the coming years.

TWA’s General Secretary Nyima Lhamo led the concluding oral feedback session ‘Spin a yarn’. The oral feedback session was very productive with multiple suggestions for future work.

**Social Bonding/ Outdoor Trip**

After lunch, the nuns had a short outdoor trip to Tsuklakhang, the main temple, to pray and seek blessings at the Exile residence of our spiritual leader His Holiness the Dalai Lama. The nuns had a slow and easy hour at the main temple before we boarded the cabs and headed towards Gyuto Monastery.

The unplanned and never expected blessings and audience from His Holiness the Karmapa Rinpoche marked the perfect culmination of the week-long program. Many nuns got very excited and emotional. Every one of us had a brightened smile as we returned to the venue.
A farewell dinner was followed by the most awaited activity of the week-long program: revealing secret friends. It was great fun as everyone revealed their secret friends with tender hugs, laughter and exchange of gifts.

**Conclusion**

Tibetan Women’s Association remains thankful to our financial partner Science Meets Dharma based in Switzerland for supporting us with the much needed financial impetus.

TWA remains thankful to the nunneries for availing the opportunity offered and Sambhota Tibetan Schools Society for supporting us with a yoga master throughout the weeklong program.

The nuns shared a commitment to take strident steps in their everyday lives to better and perfect their leadership skills and to hold the mantle of female leadership, to continue with the legacy of women’s leadership and thereby secure a safe and a sound future for women across the globe.
The Tibetan Women’s Association remains committed to creating more platforms to empower our women to climb higher leadership scales in both personal and professional fronts. Over the week-long program, we saw and heard what needs to be changed and the women surely reflected that the much needed change is going to come from them.

Thank you very much!