

GECHAK NUNNERY

Where The Female Practitioners Attained Rainbow Bodies

Gechak Nunnery

The roof of Gechak Nunnery

The First Drubwang Tsoknyi Rinpoche (1828-1904), an accomplished yogi of the Drukpa Lineage, was instrumental in establishing the biggest institution for female practitioners in Tibet - the Gechak Nunnery in Nangchen, Kham (Eastern Tibet). Drubwang Tsoknyi Rinpoche was recognized as the reincarnation of Rechungpa, Milarepa's moon-like disciple, and Ratna Lingpa (1403-1473), one of the great *tertöns* (*Tib.* revealers of hidden teachings, specifically teachings concealed by Guru Padmasambhava and his disciples in the 8th century AD). He fully mastered the practices of the Six Yogas of Naropa and became the principal guru of the Sixth Khamtrul Rinpoche Tenpai Nyima (1849-1907).

Drubwang Tsoknyi Rinpoche instructed his disciple Tsangyang Gyatso to build the famed Gechak Nunnery which, together with its many branches, eventually had about 3,000 nuns, most of whom spent their entire life in solitary retreat, practicing the revealed treasures of Ratna Lingpa and special yogini practices belonging to the Drukpa lineage. Many of them attained rainbow bodies and enlightenment within one lifetime.

The Third Drubwang Tsoknyi Rinpoche, who now lives and teaches mainly in Nepal and the West, periodically visits Gechak Nunnery where he is the spiritual master to the nuns. He has also established a sister nunnery to Gechak, in Pharping, a holy place located southwest of Kathmandu Valley.

Venerable Wangdrak Rinpoche is the present abbot of Gechak Nunnery taking care of its day-to-day running and the fundraising activities for the nuns. Here he is interviewed by Tenzin Chozom, a Canadian nun and helper for Rinpoche. The interview gives a glimpse of the spiritual activities of women who aspire to attain enlightenment within one lifetime.





Ven. Wangdrak Rinpoche with the senior nuns of Gechak Nunnery (also known as "Gechak Gompa")

Wangdrak Rinpoche on the Gechak nuns' system of practice

by Tenzin Chozom

Upon first entering Gechak Nunnery, each nun has to spend one year looking after the yaks and sheep. After that the 400,000 preliminary practices are completed in a four-month retreat. Then there are a hundred sets of Nyungnay (a two-day purification practice of Thousand-Arm-Thousand-Eye Avalokiteshvara. On the second day the practitioner may not speak, eat, nor drink, and on both days many hundreds of prostrations are performed), which take two hundred days to complete. Following that is the Vajrakilaya mantra accumulation retreat of about seven months.

After all of these preliminaries, the next retreat is the three-year retreat. However, only twenty nuns can fit in the retreat center and some

nuns may not be able to enter it immediately. There is a lot of work and roles of responsibility at the nunnery, such as disciplinarian, store-keeper and bursar. Either before or after their three-year retreat the nuns all have to learn and take on these responsibilities.

After completing the three-year retreat, the nuns then enter into one of the sixteen Retreat Divisions where they continue their practice based on their *yidam* (Tib. personal deity) for the rest of their lives. There are twenty Drubchens a year (Tib. a Drubchen means Great Accomplishment Prayer, undertaken by a group of people which goes on uninterruptedly for seven or more days), which they practice along

with their daily sessions in their retreat divisions. Once they choose their retreat division they rely on that yidam for their whole life, understanding that within it are embodied all of the yidams and Buddhas. They know that they are all of the same nature. Furthermore, in their retreat divisions they have a daily practice *tsa-lung* (Tib. yoga of the internal channels and vital energies). If there is no Drubchen or other ceremony, they practice *tsa-lung* in the morning. If there is a Drubchen or some other ritual ceremony to attend in the early morning, they will practice it at night. This practice of *tsa-lung* keeps their minds happy and their bodies free from sicknesses. Mainly they do these practices within their respective retreat divisions, but when they leave the room of the retreat division they maintain their practice in their minds, so there is continuous practice.

T - Tenzin Chozom W - Wangdrak Rinpoche

Nuns reciting prayers

T: Do the older nuns themselves teach the younger nuns how to practice tsa-lung and trul-kor (Tib. yogic methods which prepare for the practice of the internal channels and the vital energies)? And do they also give them teachings on the nature of mind?

W: Yes, yes. The older nuns teach the younger nuns all of these yogic practices, as well as give meditation instructions and mind teachings. Teachings on the nature of mind are also given by visiting lamas when they come to give the empowerments and transmissions that are required before beginning their retreats.

T: How long are the nuns allowed to take leave from Gechak?

W: Since the beginning of Gechak Nunnery, the rules have remained the same. If a nun is sick,



Gechak Nunnery

if a parent is sick, or in order to meet one's family - there are allowances for cases like this. If a nun has a good reason for leaving, she can obtain special permission. But if a nun leaves for longer than one month, without good reason and without having received permission, she is not allowed to return to the Nunnery.

There are many jobs and responsibilities the nuns need to take on in the Nunnery: storekeeper, disciplinarian, herdsman, cooks, looking after the protector chapels, supervising the branch nunneries, and so forth. There are many roles and tasks to be performed.

There are two general storekeepers for the nunnery, and two that work for me in managing the Food Fund. The storekeeper must take on these responsibilities for three years.

[Rinpoche asks a nun who has completed three years as a disciplinarian, "What are the main responsibilities of the disciplinarians?" And she replies, "To maintain all of the outer and inner

disciplinary rules of the nunnery."]

T: Is this difficult?

Nun: Yes, it's a big burden! Every evening we have to make sure that all of the nuns are keeping to their meditation sessions in their retreat divisions. Likewise, we have to ensure that all nuns are present at all prayers and Drubchens. If a nun breaks any of the rules, her punishment may be prostrations or offering butter lamps. If she breaks the rule again in the future she'll have to pay a fine.

T: If the nuns require an empowerment, whose responsibility is it to request it from a Rinpoche?

W: The disciplinarians will request the empowerment from the Gechak masters if they are present, or from a master living elsewhere. Giving empowerments is the responsibility of the Rinpoches.

The kitchen of Gechak Nunnery





A nun in her meditation box

T: Who delegates the different responsibilities in the nunnery? Who are the main decision-makers of the nunnery?

W: Besides the disciplinarians and bursars, the sixteen Drubpons (*Tib.* retreat masters) of the retreat divisions along with the Rinpoches meet to discuss and make decisions for the nunnery. All together about thirty people attend the meetings, which they hold regularly. The other nuns always know when there is a meeting because their Drubpons will all be absent. They'll wonder what amendments are being made to the rules, or what changes are going to happen in the nunnery!

These decision-making nuns all cooperate and make decisions by consensus. There are over three-hundred nuns in the Nunnery that have to be considered, so it wouldn't be fair if only one individual made the decisions alone. Together with the Rinpoches and lamas, in total about 30 people attend the meetings to discuss the issues of concern and decide what approaches are best.

This is a particularly good arrangement which leaves everyone satisfied.

Because the nuns are mindful and conscientious they naturally maintain the discipline of the Nunnery, and not many problems occur. They don't often need to be told what to do and not to do. Each nun has entered the nunnery on her own volition; she does her work and guards her discipline on her own volition. Each nun takes care of herself.

T: When they entered Gechak Nunnery as young nuns, did they already have a strong aspiration to be there?

W: None of them were forced to enter the Nunnery. Knowing about the system of practice at Gechak, and seeing the excellence of the practice of the senior nuns, they were inspired and entered the Nunnery wanting to do the same practice themselves. None of them were forced by anyone else to join the Nunnery. They decided for themselves.

Nuns practicing in their individual meditation boxes





The great yogini, Sherab Zangmo, of Gechak Nunnery

T: In their retreat divisions they live so closely together, day and night. Is it sometimes difficult for them sharing their space with fifteen to twenty other nuns?

W: No, they never get anxious because of this. In the entire history of Gechak Nunnery there has never been any serious dispute among them. They are very harmonious. Even spending their entire lives together in their retreat divisions, there isn't the slightest incidence of argument. It's a joyful place! Because of a special karmic connection and mutual relationship between them, they are very happy together.

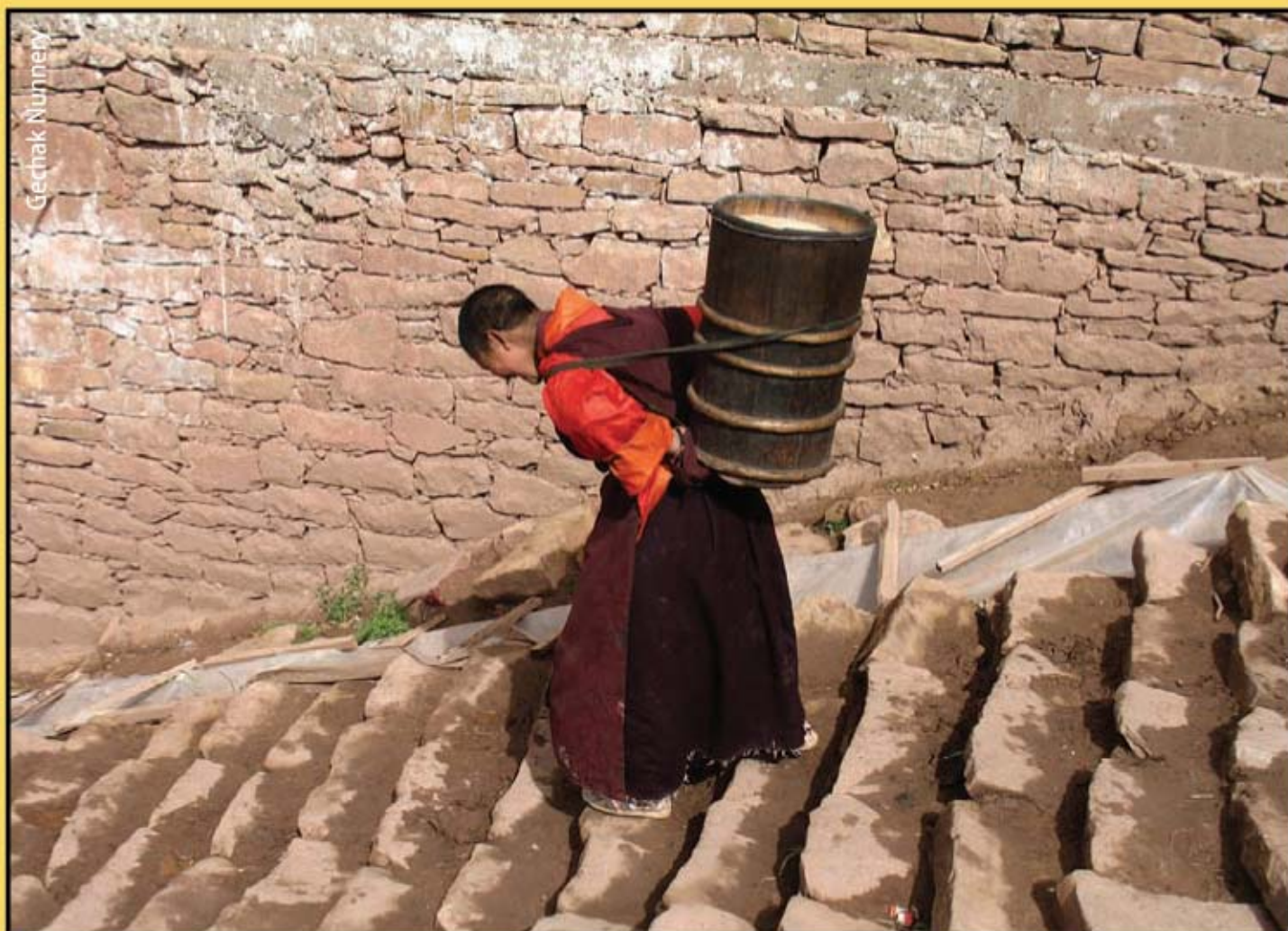
T: The nuns engage in very intensive meditation practices. Do they ever experience any mental problems, such as depression or other imbalances?

W: While they are doing the seven-month Nyung-nay retreat they eat very little food (no meat at all), and they have to perform a great number of prostrations. If they become physically weak they may suffer from a wind disorder, and sometimes these kinds of mental illnesses can arise. When their parents pass away they will of course experience sorrow. On the most part, though, the nuns are physically and mentally healthy here, because they are skillful in their practice of trul-kor. If tsa-lung is practiced well, then the blood and winds flow properly in the channels. If they don't know how to properly meditate, the karmic winds enter the channels and the mind becomes sick and unstable.

T: How is it that the nuns here are so expert in trul-kor and tsa-lung?

W: During their three-year retreat they practice

A nun carrying tea to serve the other nuns in the prayer hall





Ani Jigje, a senior nun of Gechak Nunnery



Sherab Zangmo, a teacher for the nuns

them over and over again, and become skillful practitioners. Because they know how to practice skillfully the Gechak nuns don't face these problems of mental illness.

T: What would you say is at the heart of the nuns' practice?

W: Having devotion, pure perception, and a good understanding of Dharma, they enter their retreats and gain experiences and realization. These increase their mental strength. Based on this and their practice they are able to deal directly with desire, anger, *etc.* and are not overpowered by them.

For one who doesn't understand how to practice Dharma, then desire and other negative emotions become overpowering and lead to stronger and stronger self-grasping. Once you know

how to practice with certainty in your Buddha nature, there is nothing to be afraid of. Once you gain decisive experience you can no longer be overpowered by the disturbing emotions of desire, anger and so forth. All humans in the world are the same in experiencing desire, anger and the disturbing emotions. The differences between us lie in our ability to deal with them, which depends on whether or not we've received Dharma instructions and done the practice.

The main reason that the nuns are able to stay here so happily is their determination. They spend their entire lives in practice, knowing that they are leaving the three realms of samsara behind and ascending towards a pure realm at death. Based on this conviction, desire, anger and other disturbing emotions that arise don't grow out of control. These emotions are all simply mind. If one is not distracted by various outer

objects and conditions, then the mind is stable. On the other hand, if one is full of doubts and speculations - thinking that perhaps the life of a layperson would be better, or that another place would be better - then desire, anger and other delusions increase and become overwhelming. The same applies to both monks and nuns. If one is decided and happy to remain in the nunnery, together with other nuns whose inclinations are the same, then there is little basis for anger and desire to arise.

Mind is the most important. Buddhism teaches that the whole outer world depends on mind, whether good or bad. We are all the same in this world; we all experience anger, desire, jealousy and so forth. We differ in how we think, in our determination to practice, and in our abili-

ties to deal with the disturbing emotions.

In most other countries the environment is quite difficult; wherever you go there are so many different factors and conditions that affect us. About ninety per cent of the countries in this world have histories that were fuelled by negative emotions. Tibet, however, is a country of Dharma and the people live with an understanding of what is right and wrong. At times they receive teachings from lamas on impermanence, on the uncertainty of the time of death, and on the preciousness and rarity of human life. In general, though, it is rare for women to find fortunate opportunities to practice the Dharma and as householders they face many difficulties. So the nuns here feel a special sense of appreciation for their lives. They are very blessed. བུ་ལྷོ་ལྷོ་

The nuns sewing the fur for the cold winter

For more information on Gechak Nunnery, please visit the nunnery's website: www.gebachakgonpa.org

