It is 4:45 a.m. and the bell sounds for morning practice in the temple area. Everyone goes quietly, slipping off their footwear before they go in. It is as cold inside as it is out, but they settle in their places and prepare for their prayers and practice. Wafts of resinous incense mix with the sweet smell of the butter lamps on the altar, which illuminate the room with a flickering warm glow. Dawn breaks while they practice together and slowly the room fills with morning light—a new day.

In the Bumthang region of Bhutan, ordinary Bhutanese women with extraordinary aspirations come from across Bhutan for an unprecedented opportunity. Grateful and dedicated, they live and study in a new facility for girls and women and have become the nuns (anims) of Pema Choling Institute.

Some have never attended school so there is basic education in language, math, geography, and history. But what makes Pema Choling unique is its traditional nine year curriculum of Buddhist Dharma that spans from elementary to Master’s degree level, available to women for the first time in the history of Bhutan.

Many Bhutanese women have hard lives and are bound by cultural expectations. Most of the students have come from impoverished subsistence farming families, some enduring great personal hardship as a result of their resolve. Most of the 150 nuns are between 16 to 30 years of age, although a few are as young as 13 and as old as 60. Daily routines start before 5 a.m. and finish after 8 p.m., six days a week. During the seventh day, many travel to a local village to make money to buy a few personal necessities.

Cooking is a blessing—it is a joy to provide food, and in winter the cooking fire is warm. The nuns in charge have returned to the kitchen from the stream with more buckets of water needed to prepare the morning meal. The fire is stoked and the rice cooks. Once spring comes, the ice will thaw and water will run through the pipes making cooking much simpler.

Pema Choling Institute is part of a lineage that spans back to Bhutan’s “patron saint” Pema Lingpa and back further to Padmasambhava, who brought Dharma teachings into the Himalayas from India in the 9th century.

Pema Lingpa was born in Bumthang’s Tang valley in the 15th century. He was one of the Five Terton Kings prophesized by Padmasambhava. It is here, in the Tang valley, that Gangteng Tulku Rinpoche, ninth body incarnation of the Pema Lingpa lineage, established the Institute. The first class of 8 women graduated in 2011 and now some of them are teachers to students in the lower classes.

Rinzi was one of several determined women who gathered at Gangtey, the seat of the Pema Lingpa lineage in central Bhutan in year 2000. Thankful for the opportunity to study Dharma, she and the others lived in a cold, run-down cottage, packed together day and night. Rinzi
worked to support herself as she could, and began basic studies. In 2002, the nuns moved to the Tang valley when land became available for the Institute. For three years they lived in temporary buildings sheathed with plastic and newspaper. Once construction commenced in 2005, the nuns made bricks by hand and helped with carpentry. Now, after years of diligence, Rinzi is one of the first women in her country to be qualified to teach Buddhist studies.

The Institute has beautiful Bhutanese architecture. A central courtyard is surrounded by the living quarters, where nuns comfortably live, two to a room. The structure is richly decorated with colored symbols and motifs, each having significance. There is space for lessons, prayers and group practice.

Every year brings improvement. Electricity has recently arrived and there is intermittent power. Solar panels to offset the power cost and water catchment systems for garden irrigation are being explored. A computer lab is planned once power is stabilized. Every year there is progress with the construction.

Out of all the ongoing projects, the anims long for the Lhakang. This large structure is an important priority, yet to be completed. It will be the heart of the Institute, serving as a large hall for students and community to gather for special events. It will also house the main shrine with the symbolic elements and art which act as support for study and meditation.

Priorities have to be balanced. Basic needs, educational supplies, and maintenance are all necessary. Quality of food is an issue for Pema Choling, as it is for all monastic communities in Bhutan. Money, infrastructure, cultural, and religious considerations limit the availability of nutritious food year round.

The anims quietly line up by the kitchen with their bowls. As usual, the meal is a simple one: rice and chilies with onions. It will be the same at midday and evening meals; the same for the coming days and weeks. Each goes to her room to eat. Food is just food, and the anims do not think about it much. They do not eat any meat or eggs and vegetables are not available in cold months. Eventually the garden soil will be warm enough to work and they will tend the land and enjoy a variety of vegetables during the short growing season.

Pema Choling Institute is supported by international charities in Europe, the United States, and Canada. Ongoing support is necessary but it is important for the Institute to be as self-reliant as possible. An endowment fund exists but is not yet large enough to support the nuns. Vocational training is underway in religious art. This could eventually become a means to create income and also it helps the nuns to learn the intricacies of Vajrayana symbolism.

A Guest House is planned and once established, it could generate income with paying guests. This is in line with the long term goal of Pema Choling to become a learning centre for women from all across the Himalayas and beyond to other countries – a place for learning, for meditation, and retreat.

Many circumstances must come together to achieve these goals. Infrastructure is being developed but it is difficult to get seasoned wood to build with. Finding skilled labour is a
challenge since the local people need to work their land, especially since many of the young adults are drawn to the city to explore new modern influences.

Two women with hand saws go for wood. Everyone is equal, so they take turns with such chores. Small trees are felled and sawn into logs small enough to move and stack. During afternoon tea break, anims linger around the cooking fire to sip hot buttery tea and talk together. Even in lighter moments, sprinkled with laughter, their demeanor is discreet and peaceful.

Bhutan is changing. A cellular telephone network is already well underway throughout the country. With this, the internet and a flood of new ideas and mixed messages from the world media is becoming accessible to remote areas. In the centre of this changing Bhutanese fabric is the Buddhist view. Empowering women to take a place of leadership in their communities will have lasting effects. With time, more women become role models for others; they will be able to respond to changing conditions and will help their country adjust to the 21st century.

‘Women who study can bring benefit to the country of Bhutan and serve sentient beings everywhere. Legally, nuns and lay women in Bhutan have equal rights. But because of traditional habits, women do not have much education. Because of this, they are less courageous and suffer from a lack of self-esteem. Although women seem to be stronger than men, a lack of education equals a lack of resolve. A courageous approach is necessary. Study and teachings will allow them to look directly at life, without hesitation.”

Gangteng Tulku Rinpoche

Pema Choling Canada is a registered Canadian charity and can issue tax receipts for donations in Canada. For further information, please contact christine@pemacholing.com and visit our website at www.pemacholing.ca

For further information for the charity in the United States, please visit www.pemacholing.org