

Interview with Ani Choying Drolma

Ani Choying Drolma is an exceptional singer, admired by fans in Nepal and throughout the world. People are moved to tears by the plaintive purity of her voice, and the haunting melodies of her ancient songs and hymns, passed from master to pupil for many centuries.

Ani Choying has always believed that nuns have a great desire and potential to make the world a better place, if only given equal opportunities. Arya Tara School, opened in 2000, aims to equip nuns to help and to serve their communities in a professional and humanitarian capacity.



Nuns Welfare Foundation of Nepal (NWF)

Ani Choying Drolma is the founder on NWF. Established in 1998, NWF is a non- profit organization promoting the education and welfare of Buddhist nuns. Arya Tara School is the flagship project of NWF, opened in 2000. Arya Tara School is a free boarding school for nuns which specialise in combining traditional Buddhist studies with modern education. The NWF is currently fund raising to accrue the necessary funds for a new three-phased school building in Seti Devi VDC, Pharping, on the edge of the Kathmandu Valley, which will allow enrolment to increase more than 100.

Can you tell us about your family background and your childhood memories?

I was born in 1971 in Bouddha, Nepal. My parents were illiterate, but my father used to read Buddhist hymns and chants. My family was influenced by Tibetan culture and traditions. So my parents had a Tibetan name as well as Nepali name. My parents had three children, I have two younger brothers. One has settled abroad with his family, and the other is helping me in Nepal.

There was no visible discrimination between sons and daughters, but my work at home was to clean everything and look after my brothers. Being a Nepali family, my parents were socially and culturally influenced by Nepali traditions. My father was a sculptor and my mother was a typical housewife. Simply speaking, I was born in middle class family of Nepal.

Fortunately I was only sent to school till grade five. My formal education started and ended at Bouddha Pre-Primary School. Most of my childhood was spent cleaning the home, looking after my brothers and doing household chores like cooking. During my childhood, I had my brothers as playmates because I was not permitted to leave them any time. But at the age of thirteen, I joined Nagi Gompa, a Buddhist nunnery on Shivapuri Mountain on the northern slope of Kathmandu Valley. I guess you could say I had an uneventful childhood rather typical of any Nepali child.

How did you become a nun and who or what inspired you on your journey?

I was always aware that in Nepali society females were dominated by males. As I grew older I saw women compromising more than they needed to. I find that females often feel inferior to men because our society is not yet free from discrimination. Like many people I simply wanted to live a happy life. Witnessing such discrimination made me realize that I could never be happy if I was to become someone's wife. There was only one alternative option, and that was to become a nun. I am totally inspired by my religious guru Tulku Urygen Rinpoche, Nagi Gompa, who supervised my education and spiritual trainings at the meditation centre.

I have no formal higher education. After my grade five education, I joined Nagi Gompa, a Buddhist nunnery at the age of thirteen. I was taught in Buddhist meditation, chants, rituals and ceremonies and quickly advanced to the position of the chanting master in the nunnery. Later I resigned from this position to become Tulku Urygen Rinpoche's personal health attendant, and served him until his death in February 1996. From seeing his altruistic lifestyle, always giving to others, without considering his own welfare, I developed a sincere desire to use whatever capacities I have to benefit others as much as possible. Because Tulku Urygen Rinpoche himself held nuns in the same regard as monks, I believe that creating more opportunities for nuns to study and to develop their own capacities for compassionate action is the best way I can dedicate myself to my teacher's vision throughout my life. I am committed to do whatever I can to promote the advancement of nuns, not only for their own benefit, but because they will then be better prepared to serve and benefit others.

My parents fully supported my decision to become a nun. After my parents passed away, my brothers have continued to support me in my service. Being a nun I free from any obstructions in my life and work unlike many other married sisters who face challenges in their lives.

Can you tell us about your present position?

I am the founder of the Nuns Welfare Foundation (NWF) of Nepal. Through this organization, I have been serving the society through social work and by networking with other organizations. The NWF is a registered non-governmental organization, established in 1998 to promote the education and welfare of nuns, so that they may in turn serve the larger community. We established Arya Tara School as the flagship project of the NWF in 2000. It provides both secular and religious training in Tibetan, Dharma, Nepali, English, Math and Science to more than fifty young nuns.

The Thanka Painting School, another project under the banner of NWF, was established on 25th March 2007 at Arya Tara School premises in Pharping. This is the first and only school to teach Tibetan art from the Thanka Painting to nuns in Nepal.

With help and support from my well-wishers, Heri and Margret Wirth, Water for the World, Germany, I also built a water reservoir with the capacity of one hundred and fifty thousand litres of water in the Seti Devi Village which was completed on November 21, 2006. This project is dedicated to the rural women of this region for whom the duty of carrying loads of water every day from nearby water resources has been tremendously reduced. Recently I have become a board member and trustee of the Lumbini Development Trust. As Puja is a leader and attends to Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche, Nagi Gompa. I led all the religious ceremonies and rituals at Nagi Gompa Hermitage, home to some 100 nuns. As a singer I have performed many concerts in various cities of the world which is helping me to raise funds. Steve Tibbert from the USA helped me to release my first religious album in 1997 in the US. All the earnings from my albums help me to provide donations for various social projects in Nepal.

What do you feel are your main achievements and challenges?

The main achievement in my life is the satisfaction that I get from my work. I am totally satisfied so I sleep soundly from evening to morning. I have been successful in making others happy. I am passing my day to day life with happiness, which is a big achievement, isn't it?

I have performed different musical concerts all over the world since 1998 and I receive increasing requests to perform at functions. My income from these concerts is helping me to invest in many important social work programmes. Funds from my musical work support all of these activities.

I have performed all over the world including America, France, Germany, UK, Switzerland and Singapore. In 2003 I completed a concert tour in 25 cities in Europe and I also gave concerts for the

spiritual gathering at Mirik, Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Kurseong and Pokharelung, India. I have continued to perform all over the world on an annual basis. I have been fortunate to perform at a range of festivals all over the world.

I have won recognition and awards from various organizations of the world in different events and I was awarded the Image Channel Award for the Best Female Vocal performance for my song 'Phoolko Aankhama' from my album, 'Moments of Bliss' in May 2005. I was also awarded Best Devotional Album by the Tibetan Music Awards held in McLeod Ganj (Delhi) on October 2005. I was an honorary guest in the Abraham Conservation Awards organized by WWF, Nepal in June 2005 and I was declared as the Ambassador of World Kidney Day in the first ever launched 'World Kidney Day' celebrated in Nepal on the 8th March 2006

Similarly, I had the opportunity to participate in various conferences, such as the World Women's Conference, Beijing plus Five (2000), U.N. Headquarters, New York, Sakyadita 6th International Conference of Buddhist Women (2000), Lumbini, Nepal, Women of Peace Conference (2001), Torino, Italy, Harvard University Bridge Builders Conference (2003), USA and the World Social Forum, Mumbai, (2004) India. I also performed at the celebration of the 100 years of Buddhism in Hamburg, Germany in 2007.

Besides all these achievements, I have faced different challenges from various sectors. We especially face challenges when we start new programs as not everyone in society is ready to accept the work that we do. I am proud to say that I have done some beautiful works for society, and I know that many people admire the work that we do. Being a human being sometimes I get disturbed and agitated and I do not always feel fully satisfied with myself. As the time passes and I grow older, this will be the next challenge I face in my life.

What plans do you have for the future?

Ooh! I have many desires. How can we stop our wants, desires? I have visited many places over the world. I had made many people happy and entertained by my songs. I feel this opportunity has been given to me by God.

Now I am planning to go again to a meditation retreat at the Gompa. I think I will do this when I am 47 years old for 3 years and 3 months. The time period will be according to our Monastic tradition. So that is the plan for my near future.

Do you have any suggestions for women reading this?

Suggestions! What suggestions can I give? I am myself a student; but I have to say to everybody that the answers to every question that you have in life can be found by looking into your core soul. We shouldn't have to follow others please focus on your own internal aspirations and you will achieve success.

Qualitative Analysis in Action

Qualitative Analysis in Action provides open access to interviews undertaken with inspirational women of Nepal. In doing so it creates an environment where these women experiences can be explored, examining the gendered experiences of meanings of inspiration.