

# Please, Ma'am!

When a newly trained volunteer teacher arrived at Drepung Gomang Monastery in the Tibetan settlement in South India, she was handed a piece of crumbly chalk, and confronted with a large class of young trainee monks. Five years later, KRISTEL OUWEHAND tells of the extraordinary circumstances she still finds herself in as the only Western female among 1500 monks.

There I was on that first day, with no more than a year's teaching experience in Dharamsala, and unable to speak any Tibetan, standing in front of forty wide-eyed, expectant little monks, who had rarely seen, let alone been taught by a Western female.

Teaching aids were unheard of and non-existent. Whatever I needed, I had to make – I was spending more time in preparation than in actual teaching time. Resorting to charades, Pictionary-style cards, and generally learning the hard way in the classroom, I eventually picked up enough of the language to learn their names, discover personalities and find out what they did and didn't know about English.

Class sizes range from twelve students to over one hundred and twenty, sometimes with three or four students packed in to one two-seater desk. The students are mostly from the Northern Indian regions of Ladakh, Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh, but these Himalayan regions have retained many of the same customs, traditions and even use the same written language as Tibet. The spoken forms of the language have gradually become distinct dialects, which tend to cause chaos in Class I for the first year, when the students from

differing areas can't understand each other, let alone the teacher.

Kids range in age from the youngest at five or six years' old (this year there are two three-year-olds, one who threw tantrums until his parents let him stay in the monastery), to those in their early twenties. Classes are divided into eight grade levels. The majority of them are from extremely poor families; others are orphans or semi-orphans. A quarter of the school-age monks are refugees from Tibet.

The school day begins at 7:30 A.M., and there are classes until midday, when the gongs are rung in the main kitchen for lunch. Lessons continue after the noon siesta until dinner at 5:00 P.M. Classes start again after dinner, and finally finish in the evening at 9:00 P.M. The kids then go to their rooms to do homework and memorize, or do chores, until 10.00 P.M. or 11.00 P.M. It is a rigorous schedule, and discipline is strict, but it prepares them to join the main monastery routine when they are older.

It is difficult at times to maintain any sort of continuity in curriculum in a monastery school, as there are regular days of prayer, along with the frequent holidays on the Tibetan calendar. Add to that weeks and months taken off for exams and debate competitions, and we are lucky to get in one whole month of uninterrupted study. Health, too, is a problem, and most monks have to miss classes quite often. The younger children suffer from all manner of skin ailments, digestive problems due to the poor quality of food and lack of balanced diet, and, on a worse scale, cholera, ulcers and tuberculosis. The change in climate and altitude from the Himalayan regions to the low-lying jungle in the south doesn't help matters.

In that first year, as a young Western female, I had to work very hard to gain the trust of the monastery, especially the older monks, who couldn't see the benefit of monks learning English at all. I would be teaching a class, when suddenly all the students would become silent, and rise in their seats, and when I turned around, the abbot or disciplinarian would be at the door checking up on me.

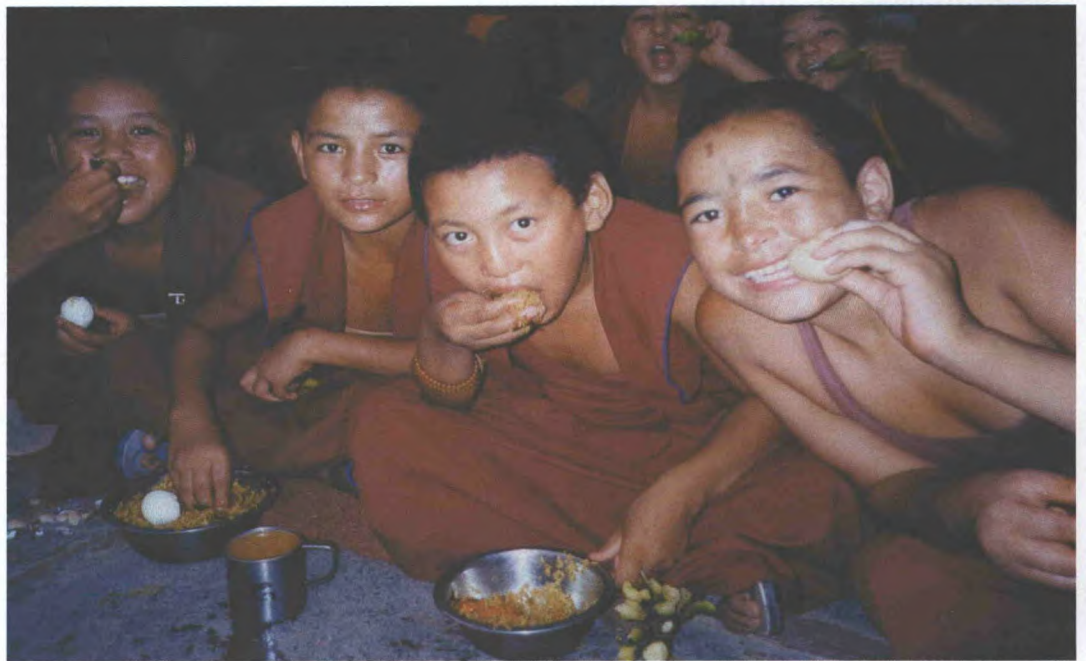
Because of the vast differences between the monastic educational methods, and the way in which we are taught in the West, it took time for me to adapt to the school habits.

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Traditionally, monks are taught through memorization – pages and pages of ancient philosophical texts and prayers committed to memory – and after that, they begin training in debate. When I turned up, with my modern ways, such as playing games in class, having students get up and move around in the classroom, and putting up posters and pictures on the walls, it took time for us to adjust and adapt to each other. Still, I found that any little thing I would do – play hangman with new vocabulary words, make wall displays with pictures cut out of *National Geographic* magazines, any new concept or teaching method – would fascinate them, and they learned in leaps and bounds. Other things didn't work as well, so we figured out together what worked, compromises were made on both sides, and over the years it got easier.

Various extracurricular activities are very well received. A “green peace” club spent the better part of one day picking up garbage around the camp in an effort to stop people littering. An art competition was organized during the Gaiea festival, and was open for anyone in the settlement, including the surrounding Tibetan com-

munities. An overwhelming amount of material was contributed, and thousands of visitors came to the displays. We have also held several school programs, with traditional songs and dances performed by both the monks and children from the



*Kristel Ouweland's students are mostly from the Northern Indian regions of Ladakh, Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh*



*Tibetan monks learn through memorization – it took some time for them to adapt to Ouweland's 'modern' teaching methods.*

## A PERSONAL STORY

"Since an integral part of Tibetan culture is the respect and honor monks show to their teachers, it is probably much easier than teaching in Western countries. The only real difficulty now is staying up on the pedestal of respect that I have been placed on, and trying to live up to the ideals they have of me. Being a paragon of virtue isn't the easiest job description."

secular schools. During our school's two-month summer vacation, we also provide a summer school for the village children, where they have the opportunity to study written Tibetan grammar and basic philosophy, both of which they don't get in the Indian school system. Older students from our school, as well as other monks from the mainstream courses in the monastery, volunteer to teach these classes.

Since an integral part of Tibetan culture is the respect and honor monks show to their teachers, it is probably much easier than teaching in Western countries. The only real difficulty now is staying up on the pedestal of respect that I have been placed on, and trying to live up to the ideals they have of me. Being a paragon of virtue isn't the easiest job description, though it definitely is an incentive to behave well when a few thousand monks see you as a model of compassion and intelligence. My mother probably laughs to herself when she hears about it. I was amused at the beginning when the monks took to calling me "madam," as it sounded so much like an intimidating brothel keeper, and made me feel much older than my twenty-four years.

As for my off-work hours, there aren't very many of them. I have twelve classes a day, three of which are 45-minutes long, the others an hour each. I have a small room attached to the monastery clinic, just beside the school, but it

doesn't get used for much apart from sleeping. Many people ask me about being the only female, and what I do for friends. I do know a few girls in the surrounding communities, but most of my good friends are monks and my students. Once or twice a year, I pry myself loose and go for a trip to the beach. Privacy and solitude isn't really a concept in a monastery. Monday is the official day off, but that tends to be spent translating or writing letters for monks who have sponsors.

Life as a respectable school ma'am in a Tibetan monastery is certainly far from anything I ever would have imagined doing years ago, but I think I am lucky to be able to wake up each morning and look forward to the day ahead. I have learned far more from my students than I could ever hope to teach them. ☸

Kristel Ouwehand (Tenzin Dolma) is a 28-year-old Dutch-Canadian who started her travels as a volunteer house builder in Central America. She went on to work her way around Europe, doing everything from grape picking and sheep shearing to selling donuts on a nudist beach and a brief stint with a circus. She headed via Turkey to Jordan and Israel, where she got a job on a scuba diving ship, which traveled the Red Sea, especially the north-eastern coast of Africa, and Yemen. Then across to India, and an accidental trip north into Nepal and Tibet, where she fell in love with the people and culture. She taught for nearly a year in Dharamsala, and then ended up in the monastery, where, "at the rate I'm going, I will spend the rest of my life!"



## DREPUNG

The original Drepung Monastic University was founded in Tibet in 1416 AD by Jamyang Choje, a disciple of the great Je Tsongkhapa, the founder of the Gelugpa sect of Tibetan Buddhism. At the time, it was the largest Buddhist University in Tibet. At its height, before the invasion of Tibet by Chinese communist forces, Drepung had nearly 8,000 monks, and the Gomang, the largest of its four colleges, had 5,500 monks who had come from all over Tibet, as well as from Mongolia and Russia.

When communist China completed their invasion of Tibet in 1959, only about 100 monks were able to follow His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama into exile in India, with the goal of preserving and maintaining cultural identity and

religion. Ten years later, 60 monks succeeded in re-establishing Drepung Gomang monastery in a Tibetan settlement in South India, on land donated by the Indian government.

Close to 1500 monks are currently studying at the monastery, with about 150 new arrivals annually. In 1998 there were 221 from Tibet alone. Children as young as six years old continue to flee Chinese-occupied Tibet to South India and arrive at the monastery penniless to study their own language, culture, and religion freely. Monks from India, Nepal, Bhutan, the Czech Republic, New Zealand, Mongolia, and Russia are also studying at the monastery. The University provides facilities to everyone wishing to study the great texts in a monastic setting.