

Summer days at a kids' camp

By Kasia Beznoska

My mother started bringing me to kids' camp when I was around two years old. I continued going year after year, making new friends but not really understanding what Buddhism was. I am now 21, learning about what life has to offer and what I can do to help others.

On a summer weekend in July 2007, Milarepa Tibetan Buddhist Center, located in Barnet Vermont, hosted an extraordinary kids' camp called "Buddha Camp" for children of all ages. Geshe Tsulga, from Kurukulla Center in Medford, Massachusetts, normally led kids' camp, but this summer he was in Germany, so under his guidance Ven. Sue Macy (Tsunma-la) acted as camp leader. And this year I was fortunate enough to be invited back as the first camp counselor! This was a really great experience, because I feel that working with children is extremely important.

Like me, these children who now attend kids' camp have the opportunity to meet new people, and discover what they can do to help other people in this lifetime. Children are so eager to learn and help in many situations, so involving them in activities that are beneficial for themselves and others is very good, especially by exposing them to the Dharma at a young age.

Two main concepts that Ven. Sue and I chose to focus on for kids' camp were that all beings (animals, insects, humans) are alike because we all want happiness, and also to work on being kind to each other, and to all other living beings. One of the outdoor activities was to create animal mandalas with nuts and seeds for the chipmunks, squirrels, and birds to enjoy. Ven. Sue explained to the kids that when making a mandala, they are creating a world out of everything they like, and then offering it to others. Everyone took turns asking all the Buddhas to bless the food that was being offered to the animals in order to help make them happy.

Each morning Ven. Sue invited the kids to join her while filling water bowls on the altar in the Gompa. She explained the importance of making offerings to the Buddhas in ways the young kids could remember. Each morning after breakfast I would lead the kids on nature walks outside where we would talk about the different animals while we were exploring their natural habitat. Parents were invited to join us on our excursions through the fields at the center, which gave them a chance to enjoy being with their children in nature. One of the most memorable moments for me was when the kids visited a small stream running through the property, and we paused to think about the animals that live in lakes, rivers, and oceans. By stopping for just a few minutes to acknowledge some animals



Children walk their wind-wheel-wishes around the stupa.

in the stream we were able to expand our minds out to all other beings, and we generated compassion for them.

At craft time we made animal liberation boxes, which were designed by Lama Zopa Rinpoche as a tool to catch small insects and remove them without injury from people's houses. We had yoga and meditation sessions in the Gompa with the kids, and we made wind-wheel-wishers. Ven. Sue explained to the kids that the wind carries sand on the beach, leaves in the fall, and can carry our wishes in the air for all beings to be happy. Everyone made their own wind-wheel-wisher work by blowing on them and making a wish to generate happiness for others. We then took a walk down to the Stupa at Milarepa Center and circumambulated it while holding our wind-wheel-wishers in the air, letting them blow in the wind. The kids also made one for Lama Zopa Rinpoche, and presented it to him during his later visit to Kurukulla Center as a thank you for his loving kindness to us all.

One camper, Oliver Morton, told me, "I liked everything! My favorite parts were feeding the animals every day and sliding on the slip n' slide!" The last night of camp we celebrated by having a bonfire and talent show. Two of the campers from Canada sang some of their favorite songs, one girl, Alexandra, played the fiddle, and the rest of us took turns singing fun 'camp' songs.

I feel very fortunate to have taken part in helping all of the children and their families at kids' camp this year. Coming back was an experience to remember, and is an experience open to anyone who wishes to join in at Milarepa Center. I truly hope that more people will be inspired to join us next summer for another great weekend! 🌀

Visit www.milarepacenter.org for more information on Kids' Camp in 2008.