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Friends of Taktse **UPDATE** November, 2009

Taktse teachers are coming to America!
Three Taktse teachers; Mumta Rai, Riddhi Rai, and Umesh Pradhan; and staff member Rekha Jain will arrive in Boston on December 28 for a seven week tour of progressive New England schools. If you are interested in connecting with them, email Aka Denjongpa at oneaka@gmail.com

Ninth graders learn about World War II as they read The Book Thief
by Maria Lauenstein



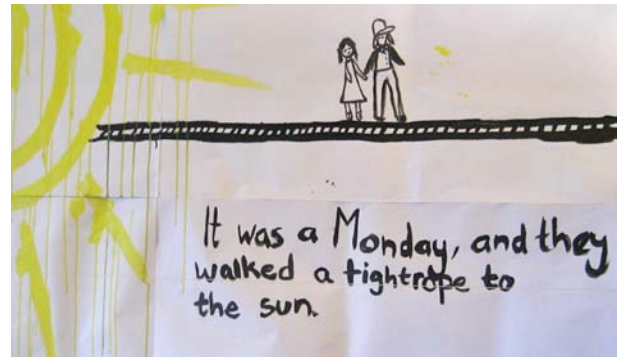
The hardest part of teaching The Book Thief by Markus Zusak to Taktse students is explaining the cultural and historical context. The students knew next to nothing about Europe or WWII when their teacher, Suman, first began reading it aloud to them. The Book Thief uses vocabulary that is challenging for students for whom English is a second language. The students groaned after hearing the first chapter. But Suman persevered, having the students post unfamiliar words on the wall, and now they are really into it.

We organized a Book Thief Workshop, which was a great success. In the book, the main character Max, a Jew hiding in the basement, makes a book for Liesel, the daughter of the family hiding him from the Nazis. Max paints pages of Mein Kampf white, and then writes his own book on the whited-out pages. The first line is, "All my life I've been scared of men standing over me." For one of our workshop projects, the students also painted over pages of old books like Max did, starting with: "All my life I've been scared of..." They produced amazing books. The students also



made posters of Max and Liesel walking on a tightrope toward the sun.

When I took over the class in July, Suman said, "I started out just wanting them to understand the plot." But they've gone way beyond that. They're understanding things like the metaphor of Max painting over the pages of Mein Kampf and writing his own story for Liesel. And the metaphor of walking on a tightrope toward hope and light, where one false step meant death.



It was hard for the ninth graders to understand why anybody would persecute people who hadn't harmed them or their families in any way. Before reading The Book Thief, they had already started studying the Treaty of Versailles, and what was happening in Germany after WWI. Going back and forth between their history text and The Book Thief, they've begun to grasp the enormity of the horror of WWII, and how it is relevant to their own lives.

One day I asked if any of them would have risked their own lives to hide Max. All of them said, "no." I then asked them to imagine a similar situation here in India, where say, Muslims were being persecuted, and a Muslim friend showed up at the door. At that point, some of them wrote that they would help the Muslim by disguising him as a Buddhist or Hindu. "The first thing I'd do is change his name and get rid of his Koran," one kid wrote. All wrote that it would be difficult and even selfish to do what they thought was right because they would be risking the lives of their family members, who might not want their lives risked. It made me realize how complicated these ethical questions can be, and how powerful family is here in the Himalayas.

Ninth graders speak out

Taktse currently offers grades K through 9. Following are essays by ninth graders. Taktse is hoping to add a grade a year so they can finish high school at Taktse.

Aanchal Agarwal:

The last four years of my life have been very precious and extraordinary. I didn't know that my life was going to change so suddenly when I came to Taktse. It has become a second home to me because I've made such close relationships here. It has cultivated me into a better human being and a smarter girl.

Taktse teachers can't be found anywhere else. Their way of teaching has been genuine all the way. They are learning with us.

Books always came at the end of my list of favorites because I



never understood them and their importance, but now they are my 2nd favorites. The first is ice- cream.

Pooja Tamang:

At Taktse we are getting an education that is understandable. Teachers are always there to support and help us. People are concerned about each other and everyone is like a family. Can you imagine a school where everyone eats together, and shares a whole lot of things, where everyone makes each other feel at home?

Taktse teachers use a different method, which we cannot find at any other school in India. I've never heard of another school where students greet in traditional manner, have morning meetings sitting on a carpet, have mini lessons, and actually talk to teachers without any sticks or scoldings.

At my previous school, whenever we had an examination, I would study for hours and hours trying to understand the lessons. I would study until 2:00 am but still understand nothing. It is important to pass examinations, but it isn't enough. At Taktse I've learned that understanding is more important.

Leaving Taktse after grade 9 would be hard. I'm sure I would miss Taktse. Other schools teachers are not going to be like the teachers in Taktse. These are a few of the reasons why I want to stay at Taktse through grade 12.

Sagun Limboo:

Thinking about leaving Taktse is hard for the simple reason that I love this place.

At Taktse we can feel free to express our feelings. The education is unique. In other schools, we were taught with sticks and slaps, but at Taktse, we are taught with a sense of understanding and love. The teachers here take the responsibility of being a teacher but also a friend. Not every day is good. Sometimes I get into trouble. Sometimes I miss home. But the thought of leaving Taktse gives me the creeps.

The other reason why I want to stay at Taktse is because I want to see it grow. I want to stay here until the playing field is finished, and until we have a swimming pool and a basketball court. I want to be here when we bring back trophies for our school.

If we have a proper soccer field and a pool, we can organize friendly competitions with other schools. We are not always going to win, but we'll learn how to train harder, and how to be good sports.



Every day I fear that I won't be able to see Taktse grow because the year is coming to an end very fast, and the playing field is still not finished. I don't want my Taktse life to end. I want to stay here and take pride in Taktse as it grows. I want everyone in Sikkim to know about Taktse.

Tseteej Shiwakoty:

At Taktse, the teachers encourage me to be brave and confident without scolding or hitting me. Our teachers are also our friends. We joke and sometimes irritate our teachers, but if we were to joke with teachers at other schools, we would get slaps and kicks because teachers at other school aren't friendly.



I want to stay at Taktse and grow up to be a good and a smart student. If I were at another school right now, I would be fighting instead of studying, because at other schools the teachers don't care what the students are doing.

Now I'm a different person. The teachers at Taktse don't just make us study but also care about us. That's the main reason we improve.

Nicha Kamnerdmanee:

At my former school in Thailand, we had a total of 55 students in the classroom. I didn't pay attention. I talked to my friends. The teachers couldn't control our classes. Sometimes they told us to keep quiet but after a few minutes we started talking again. At the time I liked it, but in fact, it was a bad thing.



At Taktse, we can't speak too much with our friends in class because classes are small and the teachers can control us. I like the way they teach us here. They teach us to participate and to be leaders in the future. They teach us slowly, clearly, and the students understand. It was the opposite at my old school, where they put too much emphasis on detail and it was hard to understand.

Here I have to adapt to many things such as languages, hostel, and food. Sometimes I miss home, parents, and old friends, but then I think about my objective. I came here to learn English so it makes me want to be here until grade 12, and my parents want me to be here too.



Yedzin Wangmoo:

When I first came to Taktse from my home in Bhutan, I was taught a lot of stuff I'd never come across in previous schools. I had a hard time coping with the teachers and their rules, or, as they call it here, "expectations."

My first weeks at Taktse were full of culture shocks, such as when I saw students sitting on carpets in the classroom. The books in the library weren't locked in cabinets, but were actually there for the students to read. The whole thing was overwhelming, especially because it was my first time being away from my country, family and friends for so long.

I hated my first months at Taktse. I found the schedule irrational and the holidays too short. I begged my parents to pick me up. Most of my nights were spent crying myself to sleep or consoling my eight year old sister, who was having an even tougher time than I was. It was hard for every one of us Bhutanese kids.

Now that I have been here a year, I have adjusted. I spend my time practicing a song for the school concert, making a prospectus with my class, and shouting at my sister to stop acting like Michael Jackson and go to bed. I've led some school assemblies and sung at soirees. I made a Thai friend. I've achieved things I never even thought about before I came here. Taktse is my gateway to new things like swimming, writing and typing. I've become better or faster at them all.

Participating in so many new things at Taktse has made me want to go to Japan, America or Thailand for new experiences. I want to go because Taktse has made me more adventurous. I feel the need to try something new. Now I'm what you might call a product of Taktse.



Teachers visit America

by Maria Lauenstein

This year we are planning to send Mumta Rai, Riddhi Rai, Rekha Jain and Umesh Pradhan to America during winter break.

Getting visas to visit the United States is really difficult. U.S. Immigration assumes that Indian citizens, especially those without property and large bank accounts, will attempt to stay illegally in the U.S., and often refuses to issue visas to them. Taktse teachers have to prove that they intend to return to India, so I escort them to the U.S. Embassy in Calcutta, for the interviews required for their tourist visas.

It's a long trip; a whole day driving over tortuous, pot-holed mountain roads to New Jailpaiguri, and then a stuffy, overnight train to Calcutta in the cheap, non-air conditioned compartments ("More money to spend on books for our library!" as Suman said last year). The train arrives early in the morning. We make our way through the throngs of passengers and beggars, and get a taxi to our lodgings at Sikkim House, where we wash up, eat and practice for the following day's interviews.



For the last two years, our teachers were lucky enough to get tourist visas. Strong, passionate letters of invitation from American friends, teachers, schools and the Marion Institute made this possible. We are counting on them again this year. I will feel relieved when the visas are actually in hand.

While getting visas is an arduous process, it's just the first step of the journey to America. Traveling halfway around the world is scary, but the Taktse teachers who have made the trip return with ideas, impressions, and, most importantly, confidence. It comes not just from visiting American schools, but also from a barrage of new experiences such as going to museums and plays, traveling around New England, speaking in public, and meeting people who are making the world a better place.



Our teachers distinguish Taktse from other schools in the region. When Suman, Reshma and Sandhya returned from their journey to America, they assumed leadership roles at Taktse. They have introduced other teachers to innovative teaching methods that they learned in America.

Some people have asked if it would be possible to provide Taktse's teachers with a comparable experience by visiting India, and in fact we do send our teachers to professional development programs in New Delhi, Bangalore and Calcutta. But these have not made the same kind of impression that visiting the U.S. has made. The trips to America offer exposure to a very different world, along with progressive approaches to education and personal connections with dynamic educators. Most of all, exposure to American culture builds confidence to lead and take risks.

These trips are only possible with financial support from our generous donors. We are deeply grateful for your contributions.

Spiritual journey: impressions from a trip to Yuksom

by Ms. Dawa Yolmo, Grade 8 Homeroom Teacher

[Introductory note: People in Sikkim talk about miracles, like lamas flying or changing into rainbows, but nothing could be more miraculous than a lama emerging from 22 years in a prison camp without bitterness, numbness or rage. Yangthang Rinpoche, now in his eighties, spent much of his adult life in forced labor camps in Tibet. People recount how he gave up his food for the sick and the weak, how he sat with people as they died, and how he kept his compassionate prayers and meditation flowing. Hardened prison guards fell at his feet and wept when he left.]



We decided to take the 8th and 9th graders to Yuksom to see the throne where the first king of Sikkim was coronated, and the Drubdi Monastery, built by Lhab Tsen

Chenbo in 1701, the first monastery in Sikkim. But mostly we wanted them to meet Yangthang Rinpoche, and receive the Manjushri (Buddha of wisdom) empowerment. An empowerment is a way a great lama gives power through blessings.

We set out from Taktse on an ordinary day—a warm morning with a pleasant breeze, nothing unusual. Little did I know that this ordinary day would prove to be quite extraordinary.



As we left the school, I was concerned about the journey and the road conditions, but stopping at a splendid waterfall eased my worries. When the bus stopped, all the kids ran towards the waterfall, and the teachers had to submit to their whims and follow. As we approached the waterfall, I was awed by its power and beauty. We didn't even notice that the spray was soaking us until we headed back to the bus.

When we arrived at Yuksom, we decided to hike to Norbugang, where the first king of Sikkim was coronated, but it was getting dark and we didn't see much. The next morning we set out walking to Drubdi Monastery. It is located on a hilltop about an hour's walk from Yuksom. The hike up was quite challenging. I sat to rest under an ancient tree, feeling the cold moss through my trousers. I thought about how close we were to history, and yet so far away.

The monastery was enchanting. Surrounded by the smell of incense and fresh pine, and the sound of ancient prayers, I felt that we were being watched and blessed.



Yangthang Rinpoche conducted an empowerment ceremony for us. As I entered the shrine and saw the Rinpoche's serene face, I felt intimidated. I am the kind of person who thinks about religion and God only in dire circumstances. I worried that the Rinpoche might be able to read my mind. Would I be caught off guard by evil thoughts? Even though I wasn't thinking of anything in particular, sitting in front of such a holy soul made me question my spirituality. I wished my mother, who is very spiritual, had been with us.

When the empowerment started, I was nervous that the students might not sit still for three hours. We sat as the Rinpoche chanted in a language most of us don't understand. But he was really wonderful, not just with giving the empowerment but also explaining it, and having the kids visualize themselves as Manjushri. At one point,

he put us at ease by laughing and saying, “Don’t worry. We’re getting near the end.” Then he touched our foreheads, the crowns of our heads, and our hearts with pictures of Buddha, and other powerful, sacred objects. It was an experience I won’t forget for a long time.

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