

# Friends of Taktse *UPDATE*

**Taktse International School**

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**June 2014**

***Taktse's First Graduation!***

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*Sagun Limbu is one of the three seniors in Taktse's first graduating class. She has won a scholarship to Endicott College in Beverly, MA where she plans to attend. This is one of her college essays.*

## Lessons from My Bajey

*by Sagun Limbu*

When I was four months old, my parents sent me to live with my grandfather in Nepal. I have lived with him ever since.

Noisy and observant, I was my Bajey's shadow. When neighbors asked about my parents, it was my "Bajey" who came to my mind.

From my bedroom window, I watched him climbing trees to cut leaves for his goats, massaging the soil with his fingers and watering his orchids. He wore torn pullovers, patched track pants and rain boots.

For much of my childhood, I resented that he couldn't help me with my homework like other parents. Ashamed of his lack of education, he never attended any of my school functions. Fees were sent in white envelopes where his name would be written with my crooked handwriting. But living away at Taktse International School for seven years has shown me that my Bajey's qualities are what I want to possess myself.

My grandfather embodies unannounced empathy. He does things for people in his quiet way without expecting anything in return. There is an old lady in my village, for example, who walks up the steep mountain every day with a basket full of vegetables to sell. She is a scrawny widow who supports her three kids by what she sells. We have our own little farm where Bajey grows mustard greens, tomatoes and corn but every morning he still buys from her, and sometimes even brings her a cup of tea. "Why are you buying when we have our own?" I'd ask.

"It's not much but it will give her the courage to walk up the mountain tomorrow," Bajey replied.

As an eight year old, I didn't understand but now I can see that my grandfather was quietly buying her vegetables in a way that allowed her to keep her dignity. Although this may not sound flashy, it is the kind of generosity that reflects my Bajey's world.

In addition to being sensitive to others with less, my Bajey taught me determination and support. There were nights where I got stuck with homework and I couldn't ask my grandfather for help. My friends had their parents helping



## Taktse's First Graduates

This spring Taktse graduated its first class of seniors; Simrin Tamhane, Tenchung Namgyal, and Sagun Limbu. These three extraordinary young women embody the efforts and aspirations of founders, teachers, staff, resource people, and supporters from around the world.



*Pema Namgyal is a founding member of Taktse's Board of Directors. His daughter Tenchung is one of the graduating seniors. Following are excerpts from his speech to the graduates.*

It is my honor to address this august gathering on the occasion of the graduation of our first students: Sagun Limbu, Simrin Tamhane and Tenchung Namgyal. This is the result of dedicated hard work by the principal, teachers, staff, and students since Taktse came to exist in 2004. The Taktse team should be applauded.

When the founders met His Holiness Dodrupchen Rinpoche to take his blessings and advice, His Holiness stressed the importance of getting the human form. His advice was, if we are here just to eat and to do nothing meaningful in life, then what is the difference between a human form and a bird, which can also find food for itself and its fledglings. This profound advice has inspired the group to take on bigger challenges. We saw the need for a quality educational institution that would excel in both the secular and the spiritual, blending east and west, retaining our roots while nurturing the next generation to be good human beings. We felt this was the best way to make a difference, and the seed for a new kind of educational institution was sown.

Now let me bring you back to a very important fact. Sikkim, or Bayul Demajong as it is called by the Sikkimese, is said to be one of the most important hidden lands of Guru Padma Sambawa or Guru Rinpoche. He has compared Sikkim to the copper paradise or Sang tok Palri. It was his prediction that Tibet would be taken over and Buddhism would be destroyed. At that time, Buddhism would be revived in Sikkim. Therefore he blessed this land and hid treasures to be revealed at the appropriate time. It is mentioned in the religious texts that when one makes an offering here it would multiply many fold.



## ***Lessons from My Bajey (continued from page 1)***



them but Bajey couldn't read or write in English, so he couldn't explain anything. I cried and felt so enraged that I refused to speak. My grandfather wouldn't say anything. He would fumble through the drawer, take out four candles and place them

on the four corners of the table. Then he sat across from me and waited. I could never have developed independence and determination without him sitting silently with me all those nights.

At Taktse International School, I studied the causes of the World Wars, played basketball, wrote spoken-word poetry and went to dinners with intellectual people. Yet, every time I go back to my village, I see Bajey feeding his goats. Later, we sit together for dinner and eat rice with our hands. There was a silent acceptance of his world in my Bajey that infuriated me when I was small. I didn't understand why he couldn't try to learn, and thought that he didn't have the courage to step out from his comfort zone. Now I see that there is dignity in accepting who you are.

I live in two worlds. At school, I learn to use new technologies, read Markus Zusak, ask questions and write poetry. But there is also Bajey's world, which is grounded; his world of four candles, silent waiting, torn pullovers and scrawny widows; his world with a value of its own. He is the embodiment of my eroding culture, and he chooses to live in it. His quiet groundedness makes it possible for me to live in these two worlds and to see the value of each. This is what he has done for me and this is how I will be: with one foot on the rich soil and the other in the library; my mind brewing with starting lines of poems and my heart etched with my Bajey's calm roots.







*Simrin Tamhane is one of the three seniors who graduated from Taktse this spring. She wrote this essay for her application to Ashoka University in New Delhi. She has been accepted at Endicott College in Beverly, MA, and plans to apply to colleges in Mumbai and Calcutta.*

## Bridges

by Simrin Tamhane

My story involves two continents, five languages, beef versus fish and two grandmothers who have never met. My father is half Maharastran and half English while my mother is Sikkimese. Being a Hindu with a few Christian beliefs raised in Buddhist Sikkim, home was a festive wonderland year round. I stuffed myself with cold-cut pork during the Buddhist New Year, laddus and kaju-barfis in Diwali and mashed potatoes and onion gravy on Christmas, adapting to the three contrasting cultures. But blending the three hasn't always been easy. Sometimes, I hate the fact that I come from such a diverse family because the constant switching from a shy, polite Himalayan girl to a confident, out-going Mumbai girl is like peeling an orange and immediately putting the peels back on.

Physically, I'm fair-skinned, freckled, and tall with wild curly hair. "What are you? You don't look Sikkimese." "I thought you were a foreigner." I hear this in Sikkim all the time. In Mumbai people gawk at me like I am an outsider because I don't have the typical Indian accent or the olive-skinned, big-eyed, freckle-less features that society has stereotyped as being Indian.

In Sikkim, I'm too active and out-going, which has led to many long lectures from my Sikkimese

grandmother; no slouching or laughing too loud or looking into elders' eyes while talking. In fact, let's cut out talking completely. A young Sikkimese woman has to sit and nod politely. In Mumbai however, my British grandmother publicly chastises me to talk more instead of being the demure young woman my Sikkimese grandmother would have me become.



*Excerpt from the graduation speech given by Andrew Knapp, PhD. Andy and his wife Debbie Hilbert are long-time volunteers and enthusiastic supporters of Taktse.*

One thing I especially admire about Taktse is that there is always learning going on – not only in the classroom, but in the library, in quiet corners of the courtyard, even the lunchroom with its big map of the world. And it is not just students who learn at Taktse – everyone learns, from the smallest pre-Ks to the founders.

You, the teachers, have worked as hard to learn as anyone here. As several of you have told me, you have had to learn how to teach in ways you yourselves were not taught. This has sometimes been a struggle. Your struggles and setbacks are a powerful inspiration to your students, and indeed to all of us. They illustrate in a very real way the effort required to accomplish something worthwhile.







*Molly Siegel of Dartmouth College is a volunteer at Taktse. Excerpt from her blog, [Spring in Sikkim](#):*

The few days leading up to graduation were a frenzy of activity as carpenters rapidly constructed a stage for the ceremony. It was a masterpiece of scenery

complete with pearly white Greek columns, and adorned with the eight lucky signs of Buddhism. A perfect fit for the day, which was a union of Western and Sikkimese tradition.

On the day of the event, many of the teachers rose at 5:00 am to finish last-minute preparations. I awoke to a delightful surprise out my window. Earlier that morning, several strings of prayer flags had been hung between the roof of the school and the trees, traversing the lower courtyard where the ceremony was to be held. The day was perfect, and the prayer flags soared in the breeze against a blue sky. An auspicious day indeed.



### New Hampshire Readers

A group of volunteers from Exeter, NH recorded themselves reading from children's books. These recordings are being used to aid Taktse students learning to read in English.



### Bridges (continued from page 3)

Despite the who-am-I struggle that gnaws at my mixed brain, being three people in one has its own power. I like to think of myself as a bridge. The Maharastran, the Sikkimese and the English live, laugh and co-exist within me. For example, when my momo-making, Sikkimese-speaking, Himalayan grandmother sends a 'Sikkimese' gift to my Yorkshire pudding-making, English-speaking British-grandmother, I'm there to explain that the 'spinning thing with the ball in the end' is actually a 'mani' that contains mantras that you spin while you pray. I'm bringing together my Sikkimese grandmother's humility, my English grandmother's fizzy confidence, and the quiet contentment that rests peacefully in my paternal grandfather's soul.



I've spent seventeen years being the bridge builder in my family and I want to go to Ashoka University to expand this bridge building skill. I want to not only bring my family together but I also want to build a bridge between the hot, crowded, bustling city of Delhi and the cool, quiet and peaceful mountains of Sikkim. I want to study Shakespeare and John Maynard Keynes in an interdisciplinary fashion. I want to know what the King of Sikkim was doing while Marie Antoinette was dressing up for parties.

I would like to study with professors who are building bridges themselves. For instance, when I read Professor Jonathan Gil Harris' bio on the Ashoka faculty page, I feel inspired by his interest and research into Indian identity. This area of inquiry is profoundly personal to me. Likewise, Professor Madhavi Menon's exploration of the 'politics of desire and identity' would allow me to expand my understanding of other people's experiences.

My Sikkimese grandmother would cringe at my bragging about myself. But for now I will pull out that Maharastran confidence that was left in cold-storage and tell you that I will bring to Ashoka a keen ability to observe, endless enthusiasm, seven years of rigorous education at Taktse, and an intense desire to become like the Sea Link Bridge in Mumbai: strong, helpful and capable of making it easier for people to connect.



*Tenchung Namgyal is a member of Taktse's first graduating class. In June, she will begin her studies in psychology, English literature and journalism at Mt. Carmel College in Bangalore.*

### **Rathongchuu Baby** *by Tenchung Choden Namgyal*

Rathongchuu Baby is one of my six names—the one with the story. In 1995 and 1996, the governments of Sikkim and

India planned to dam the sacred Rathong Chuu River. HH Dodrup Rinpoche, Sonam Sir, Mr. CL Denjongpa, Lok Babu Sir, late Auntie Chuki, my mother and father, and many other concerned citizens of Sikkim acted against this scheme. Amidst all the chaos and mayhem, my mother, Chumden, was often seen running around with an enormous, ill fitting black overcoat trying to hide a baby bump which was me eighteen years ago. When the dam project was stopped, and the cat was out of the bag about the surprise baby my mother was carrying, Sonam Sir thought of the name Rathongchuu Baby. The name stuck.

Sometimes I feel like my pre-natal pro-Sikkim, pro-religious exposure is what brews such strong emotions in me when I'm told snippets of Sikkimese history, folk tales and stories of the past. However, there are times when I'm torn between religious and mythical beliefs and what text books in school teach. For instance, am I supposed to believe that when people die, their body goes but their soul stays on for 49 days in the house? Or am I supposed to believe that after a living being dies, the body disintegrates along with the soul? Am I supposed to believe that when my great-great-grandfather was in meditation, a female yeti used to bring food for him in return of him saving her from the pain of a stuck splinter? Or do I believe that yetis don't exist—or they only do on Mt. Everest whenever Tin-Tin tries climbing it? All these conflicts within my own soul challenge me.

I feel that because I am my parents' daughter, I have to nurture the religious and Sikkimese side of me. I have to remind myself to be modest and not dress up while going to the Chorten (monastery). I have to remind myself to treat every elder with respect. I have to remind myself to carry myself as Pema Namgyal's daughter and not Tenchung. There are times when I act like the rebellious teenager my parents and especially my sister have come to know. I ask for material things like clothes and shoes and make up.

*Rachel Schiffan and Jane Randolph (JR) Johnston of Greensboro, NC are volunteers at Taktse. Excerpt from their blog, [www.jrandraydoindia.wordpress.com](http://www.jrandraydoindia.wordpress.com)*

Due to uncertain weather, most of the outdoor decorating was left until the morning of graduation. This meant waking up at 5:00 a.m. What was supposed to be a quick "finishing touches session" lasted until 8:00 a.m. After we finished, JR and I ran back and got ready. Luckily, we had both water and electricity. The teachers had to wear traditional or formal dress to graduation. Since we had neither, the Taktse teachers dressed us up in traditional Sikkimese bakus.



Graduation was a huge success—a beautiful mix of cultures from all around the world. Buddhist monks performed a spiritual prayer. We sang the Indian



National Anthem, observed Tibetan and Nepalese dances, listened to a commencement speech by an MIT alumnus, watched as the graduates threw their caps into the air, and feared

for our lives as actors dressed as crazy yaks barged into the audience.

JR and I shed some tears as the three graduates spoke and gave parting words to their families, the board members, and Taktse teachers and students. This graduation was especially significant to the school because it was the first graduating class ever. One of the graduates spoke of the strong bond of trust that was built between the parents and the teachers when sending a child to a brand new school that is unlike any other school in Sikkim. The uncertainty of how a child's education might pan out is unnerving, yet each of these remarkable young women is an amazing example of the good that came of this trust.

The graduation song is still echoing in our heads:

*As we go on, we remember  
All the times we had together.  
And as our lives change, come whatever  
We will still be friends forever.*



## Taktse Wish List

Please support Taktse students by donating books and ebooks to stir their imaginations. See Taktse's book wish list at [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com). Amazon gift cards help too!

Other valuable teaching aids:

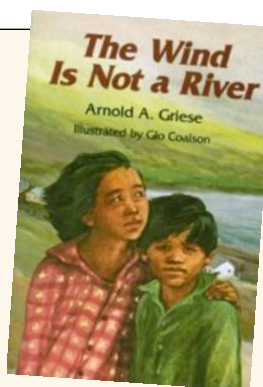
- [Simple Touch Nooks](#)
- [V.readers](#)
- [Legos](#) (Taktse kids LOVE Legos!)
- [littleBits](#) (discount available)
- [Digital Microscopes](#)
- [iPads](#) (any version, new or used)
- Apple (Mac) computers (especially laptops)
- Apple Store gift cards for educational iPad apps, educational movies and TV shows
- [Engineering is Elementary curricula](#)
- Subscriptions to magazines such as National Geographic, National Geographic Kids, Scientific American, The Economist, Discover Magazine, Hopscotch for Girls, Boys Life, Odyssey, Faces, Science Focus, BBC Knowledge, Click, Make Magazine, and Parents Magazine.

Mail subscriptions to: Taktse International School  
PO Box 90, Gangtok, Sikkim, India 737101

Donated items can be sent to:

Taktse International School  
c/o Lonnie Friedman  
4 Gavins Pond Road  
Sharon, MA 02067

Are you acquainted with authors of children's books? Help us connect with them, so our students can write them letters! You can send their contact information to: [lonnie.friedman@comcast.net](mailto:lonnie.friedman@comcast.net)



## Rathongchuu Baby (continued from page 5)

Sometimes I'd rather watch a documentary on the Buddha than implement his teachings. Then again, I'm a different Tenchung while doing the Chepo (daily offering to the gods), saving the lives of insects, pouring hot water over my grand father's millet beer, and feeling compassionate.

My parents have helped me feel at peace with the Sikkimese daughter Tenchung. They are my source of inspiration for being a compassionate human being. Between trying to fit apples in my mouth in the morning and driving me hurriedly to school whenever I miss the bus, they tell me to read prayer books and relate their own life mistakes to prevent me from making them. My sister and my friends help me keep alive the teenage girl in me with screen shots of shoes and clothes that we love, going on fruit diets and watching chick flicks. The school has nurtured the mixed Tenchung. Between going to America and trips to Yuxsom and Tashiding, the school has taught me to embrace the roots of tradition growing through the soles of my feet, yet has given me the opportunity to fly to another world.

I do not know what I want to be in life yet. Perhaps I want to be something that lets all three Tenchungs grow. There are many Tenchungs in the world. But I've never come across another Rathongchuu Baby. Maybe with what my parents, sister, friends and the school have given me, I'll be able to do something as great as my father and his friends and truly be the Rathongchuu Baby.



## Vision for a Sustainable Future

Taktse is proud to partner with Sungevity to promote clean solar power for a more hopeful future. Sign up for Sungevity's solar energy lease program and they will donate **\$750** to Taktse. Plus, you'll receive a **\$750** credit! Click [HERE](#) to get a free quote!

Sungevity leases solar panels in the following states: AZ, CA, CO, DE, MA, MD, NJ, and NY. For a reference, contact Paul Lauenstein at 781-784-2986, or [lauenstein@comcast.net](mailto:lauenstein@comcast.net).



## Share Taktse with a Friend

Do you enjoy receiving the news from Taktse? Do you have a relative or friend who might also like to receive this newsletter? If so, please send their name and email address to Lonnie Friedman at: [lonnie.friedman@comcast.net](mailto:lonnie.friedman@comcast.net).



## Are you a teacher? Make a difference at Taktse!

Taktse is seeking high school teachers in science, history, math, literature, economics, geography, writing, and A-level examinations for three to nine months. We need experienced educators and teacher trainers who are sensitive to cultural differences, who can teach and influence our community.

Taktse is in session from March to December. Food and lodging are provided. An honorarium is negotiable, depending on experience. For more information, see [taktsefellowship.org](http://taktsefellowship.org), or email Sherry Dickstein at [sadingso@gmail.com](mailto:sadingso@gmail.com).



## What is TAKTSE?

*by Phuntsog Namgyal Bhutia  
Dean of Academic Operations*

Taktse is a learning place where old ideas are respected and new ideas are appreciated.

It is the early morning sound of the iron gong on a quiet hill bringing people together from all sections of the building.



It is a joint understanding between student and teacher as they read the morning message together.

It is the feeling of being heard every time an announcement is made during wrap up.

It is a captured moment of colourful dresses shining on campus during the Traditional dress day.

It is the roar of laughter in the library during every professional development on Saturday.

It is the intense brainstorming in the Board room and eating tonnes of sugar to ease our brains.

It is the joy of capturing photos of students speaking their mind during group discussions.

It is to experience the power of silence during a group meeting.

It is the hearing of students humming words during the reading assembly.

It is connecting with our traditional values as we flutter prayer flags, or educating students on how to use Google Drive to store and share information.

It is a feeling of achievement after having planted rice as a school and learning the value of hard work that goes into it, or learning how to create a robot with endless programming.

It is a place where travelling is an integral part of our learning experience, where students and teachers explore the ancient, (the Mughal Empire) and the modern (Google Corporate Offices).

It is a culture based on enquiry and collaborative learning where teachers get an opportunity to become students every day.

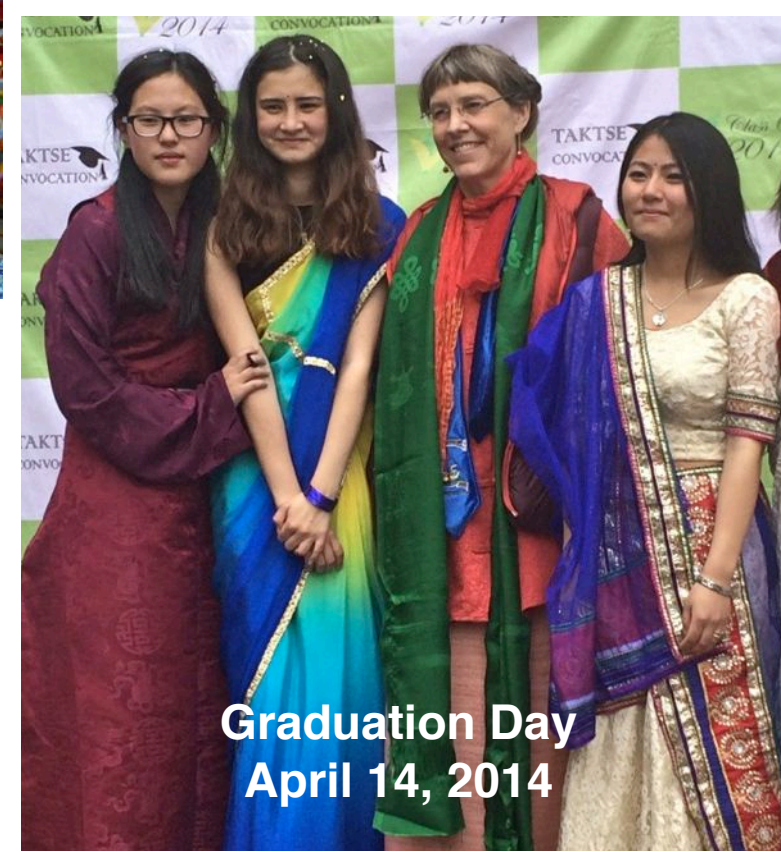
It is learning how to chant an opening prayer during a Dharma class, or how to give a visa interview to travel to America.

It is a showcase of smiles during family math night, or tears of joy after having won a trophy during the interschool basketball tournament.

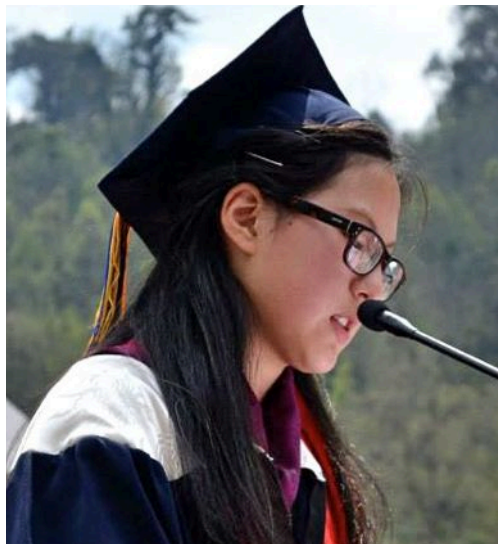
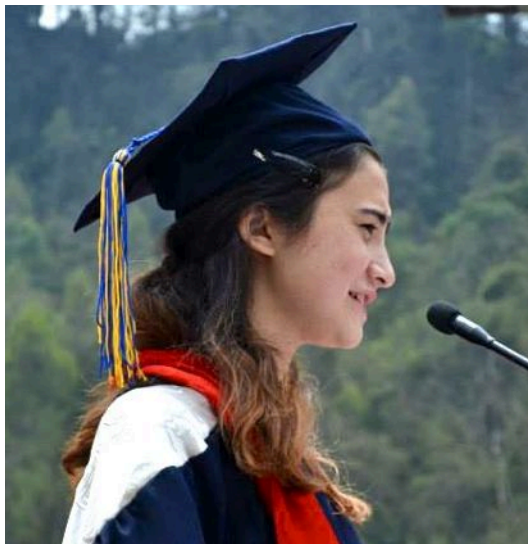
It is the little learnings that students and teachers accumulate throughout the years which help them reflect on who they are and what it is that they want to be.











Click [HERE](#) to see  
a magic moment!