A school full of children who can learn and be happy

written by Jitka Polanská



In Siliguri, a city in the Indian state of West Bengal, a boarding school was established almost six years ago for children from remote villages in the Himalayas of Nepal and India. The children from a poor background have blossomed quickly there and have got the same aspirations and dreams as their peers from well-to-do families. "I want to go on studying and then set up my own organic food business. In our mountains, all the food is organic," says Mamata, who is in the eighth grade.
(*The article was written for www.eduzin.cz, a Czech magazine about education, and later adapted for Speech of Delight).*

The day starts radically early here, by European standards. At 5.30 am, in an instant, the sound of children's feet outside my door turns the stillness of the night into a very busy morning. The room for the sick, temporarily converted into a guest room, where I am currently tossing and turning on a rather hard bed (which makes for a very light sleep), is located on the boys' floor next to the bathroom with toilets. I can hear slamming doors, boys' voices of varying pitch and intensity, and a mix of other, vaguer sounds. I wanted to experience the school from wake-up time to peace and quiet at night, but now I am not getting up, I do not want to disrupt the boys' comfort zone as they wash up and use toilets. They're super polite, I'm sure they'd greet me with a head bow, even while half naked, and some would say good morning Miss! – but I'd rather just imagine the bathroom

scenario. In half an hour, a few dozen children need to take their turns in the toilet and at the sinks, and the same is in the girls' ward, one floor above. In all, there are about a hundred and sixty children living here. By six o'clock, everyone must be usually dressed in tracksuits, to start thirty minutes of physical exercise.

I'm visiting the boarding primary school in Siliguri, West Bengal, India. THIS (Tise Himalayan International School) was founded by Khenchen Tenpa Yungdrung, the abbot of Triten Norbutse monastery in Kathmandu, and his team, but it is not a religious school, it is a social project, a school for children from remote Himalayan villages in Nepal and India, and especially – though not exclusively – for those belonging to the ethnic minority who speak Tibetan dialects. The main objective is to provide children from poor families with a mix of modern and traditional education based on the ancient Himalayan culture and values associated with Buddhism, such as peaceful co-existence of people and harmony between man and nature. Why did the children have to leave the mountains for the bustling city for such an education? Let me explain.



Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung with THIS students. Read about the history of the school by clicking on the picture.

Into the unknown, in search of happiness

Mamata Rokaya is sixteen and she is in the 8th grade. She came to the school six years ago when it opened. "Honestly, we couldn't put a sentence together in English back then," she says in her now decent English. She was excited to go to the school, unlike other children who, when asked, replied that they were a bit afraid of the unknown. She remembers the beginning as difficult, but "then we got used to it and now we are all friends, brothers and sisters," she says.

A multi-talented girl, top of her class and a great dancer, Mamata passes on her dancing skills to her

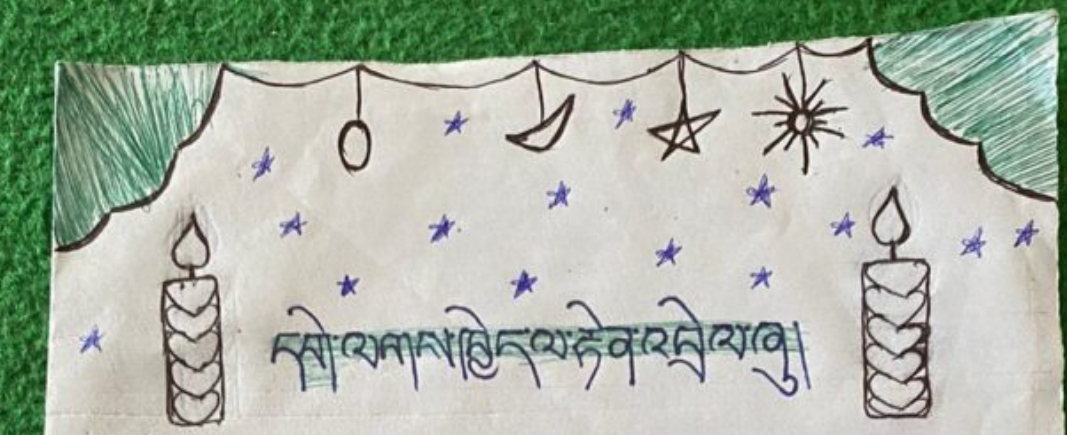
classmates, on weekends and holidays. Dancing is popular among the girls here, they learn it from each other and by following videos on Youtube. “Since childhood, I have always wanted to be a dancer. Then I realized that I wasn’t that good and now I rather want to go on studying and then set up my own organic food business. In our mountains, all the food is organic,” the dark-eyed girl says to me, smiling.





The children learn elements of traditional arts and crafts. (Mamata is in both pictures.)

Boarding schools are an unimaginable thing for many European parents, but in Nepal and India they are common. From the hill areas, many children leave for boarding schools located in a nearby or a more distant town before the age of ten, by twelve they are the majority. The trend has intensified a lot in recent decades. This is related to the increasing value of education as a social and economic lift, and also to the decline of traditional forms of earning in the mountains. The Himalayas are losing their population and there are not enough good teachers there. But children from the poorest families who cannot afford alternatives depend on the local public school in their village or one nearby, and they often don't learn much. "It used to happen that our teacher didn't even come," one boy remembers. "We liked not having to do anything then, but now I realize we were wasting our time," he adds. In addition, Nepal's and India´s state schools usually do not teach Tibetan language and Tibetan culture.

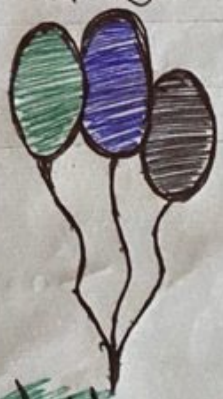


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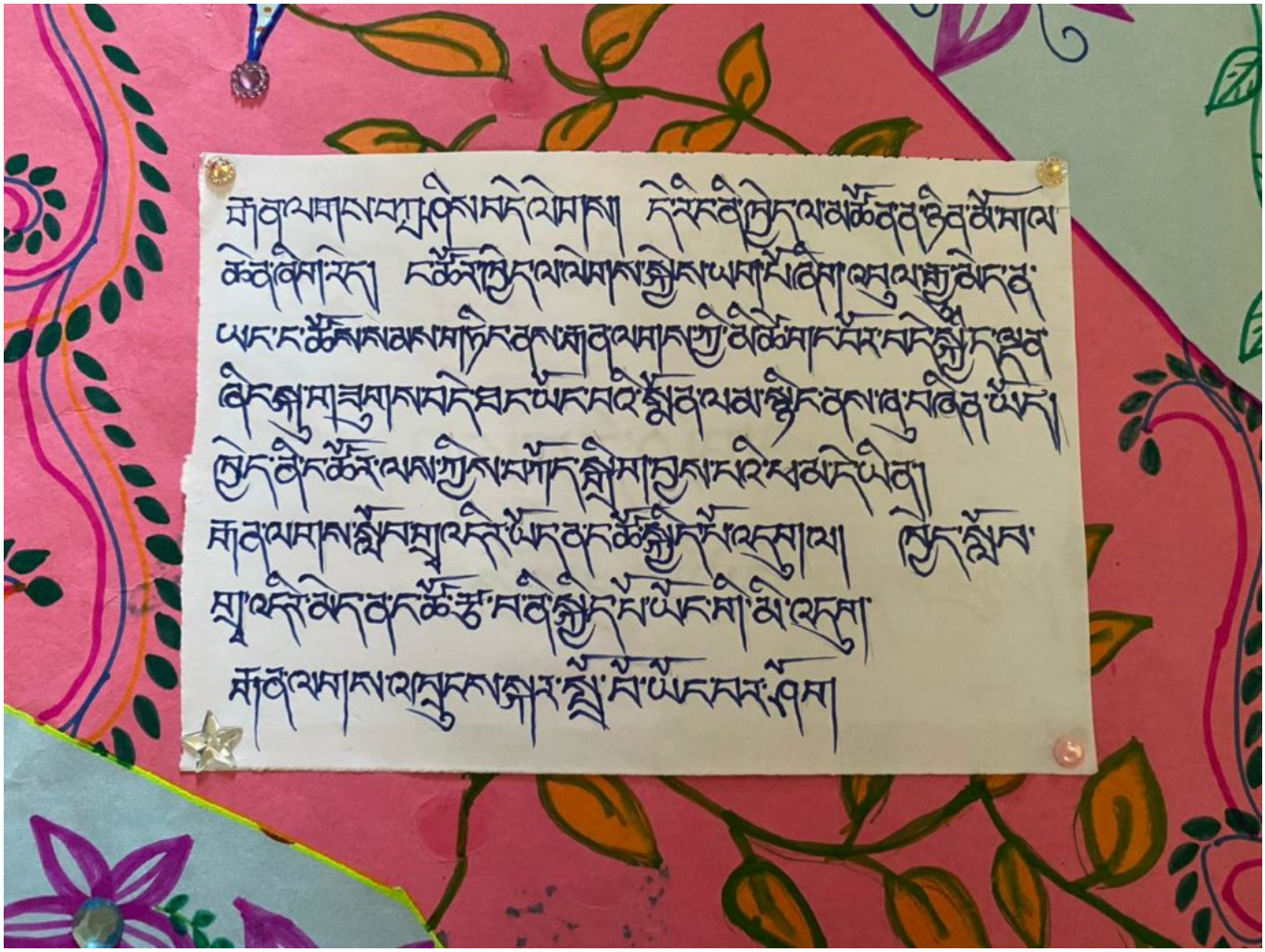
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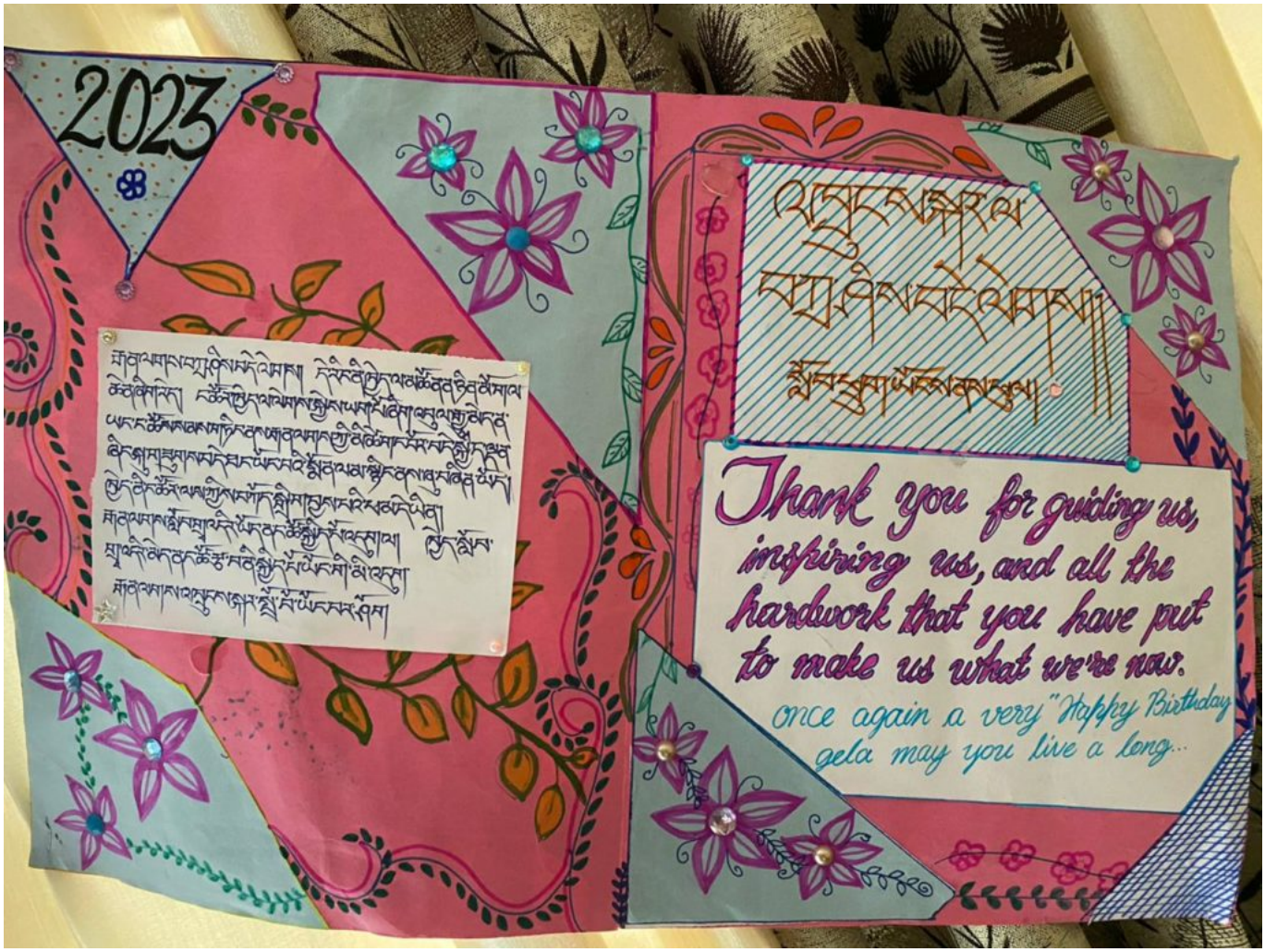
Happy Birthday

To you

Norbu Gherda

By:- Danita Gaurung





The children are mastering three alphabets at THIS.

“In our village, we speak a language called ´khampa´, which is similar to Tibetan. Our family used to speak this dialect, but then we switched to Nepali because Nepali is taught at school and I was more fluent in it,” Mamata says. Families of the linguistic minority are slowly losing their cultural roots tied to their original language.

In this school (THIS), Mamata learns three languages, just like all the other children: Nepali (which is one of the official languages in West Bengal´s Darjeeling district), Tibetan and English. There is a 45 minute lesson a day for each language. Linguistic training is very intensive from pre-school onwards, with children having to master three different alphabets and three different scripts.

Education in self-confidence

This week, the usual morning PE does not take place, as the school is going through final testing in all academic subjects – I arrived at the very end of the school year. The kids got up at the usual hour but instead of jumping they had got the task of reviewing the curriculum before breakfast. Some went to the dining hall and repeating out loud what is written in their handbooks; others sit outside quietly, in pairs, threes, or alone. Some look focused, others a bit drowsy, under the hood of their sweatshirts.


Rinchen Thapa and her students

I am watching the exercises the students usually do in order to get their blood flowing in a couple of Sonam Norbu's short videos. *Kenla* (Tibetan word for teacher – that's what the children call him and the other adults) has been taking care of the children since it opened. Officially, he is the president of the founding organization, which in reality means that he is on the spot all the time, being in charge of the hostel and of the well-being of the children. He knows all of them by name and also by their story. He has visited many of the families where the children come for himself.

"I was part of the team that went to the mountains on a recruitment trip in 2017 to offer families a place in our school," he says. "We saw a lot of poverty there; some children had no mother or father, some fathers drank too much alcohol. Some children were herding cattle in the mountains all alone," says Sonam Norbu.

The morning exercise, he explains, is basic Tibetan yoga. The children in his videos are lined up in rows behind each other and together they do different, dynamic movements, stretching their arms out in front of them or jumping up with their knees bent, shouting out different syllables during some of the exercises. Tibetan yoga, as well as short meditations in the morning and evening, typical folk dances in long-sleeved clothes that are waved gracefully in the air, or painting of Buddhist mandalas – all of this is taught to the children during art classes or in afternoon and weekend workshops. The school conveys elements of Himalayan as well as Indian culture and its customs to the children, and does so in an experiential way. There is definitely lots of singing, dancing and drawing. There is also a strong emphasis on environmental education, which is not considered a new, fashionable subject here, but a kind of continuation of the traditional veneration of nature typical for the Himalayan folks, and of their inclination to live in a sustainable way, in harmony with

the natural environment.



Tibetan yoga every morning

The third educational and upbringing goal – in addition to providing modern education and the transmission of cultural traditions – is one that comes about perhaps automatically when both of the previous ones are met. “We want the children to know their value, not being inferior to anyone, to know that they can have the same aspirations and dreams as anyone else,” says Khenchen Tenpa Yungdrung. In other words, the children’s sense of self-worth and dignity is as important for the founders of this school as much as their education.

Kids who can defeat boredom

The life of the school has a tightly structured schedule from wake-up to bedtime, which brings an interesting contrast to the liveliness and vitality of the children. They can completely calm down on command, but they are not sheepish at all. When they play, they play vigorously and make lots of noise. And they are left to play freely. “Everything has its time, if they play, let them play!” says Sonam Norbu laconically.





Some games are everlasting…

I like to watch the children playing, they are dexterous and resourceful and able to find their own way out of boredom. A group of five little girls, I guess six years old, are sitting in a circle under the staircase of the dormitory, throwing pebbles in the air. There are a lot of them – pebbles – here, unlike toys. They throw one, two, three pebbles with one hand and catch them again, in the palm of their hand and on the back, chattering, showing each other how to do it. Great exercises for motor skills.



Many boys and some girls enjoy football.

Football is very popular here. Especially – but not only – among the boys there is a lot of enthusiastic football fans and passionate players. Many of them dream of becoming famous footballers. Fifteen-year-old Binod gets up at 4 a.m. every day and trains himself. “Dreams don’t just happen overnight, you have to work for them,” he says judiciously. Love for football also makes the boys avid readers of the local newspaper (its sports section), which hangs on the school´s notice board.



Reading news about their favorite players…

No child has a smart phone. But occasionally I see a bunch of kids surrounding an adult who is showing them something on theirs. On Sundays, the children use the adults' phones to connect with their families.

The role of the extended family at the boarding school is taken over by the school team, teachers and caregivers. Many of the teachers and other members of the staff live in the school complex together with the students. "My wife and young daughter live in Kalimpong, which is about two hours away by car, and I visit them on weekends. During the week, I stay overnight at the school. I miss my daughter, but like this I dedicate more of my time to our pupils. Their parents are far away, so we adults try to replace them," says the head teacher Nikhil Khati.

The cardboard water cycle

Yungdrung Lhamo, a young teacher originally from far away Ladakh, also lives at the school. As a young girl, she also went through boarding school far from home and says it taught her to rely on herself. We are talking in the school's library where she is showing me what children created on her class subject. Yungdrung Lhamo teaches "social studies" which includes geography, and she has assigned to to the students to represent the water cycle in nature. "We have a lot of cardboard, so I encouraged them to make something out of it," she says. Her students made perfect use of the limited resources. Thanks to their skills and imagination, cardboard wrappers were transformed into evocative, pointy mountains, houses, and bridges with blue rivers flowing underneath. Cotton wool became clouds, leaves and pebbles formed nature. "They did great, they're clever and creative," the teacher praises the chilren.


Children can create something meaningful out of nothing.

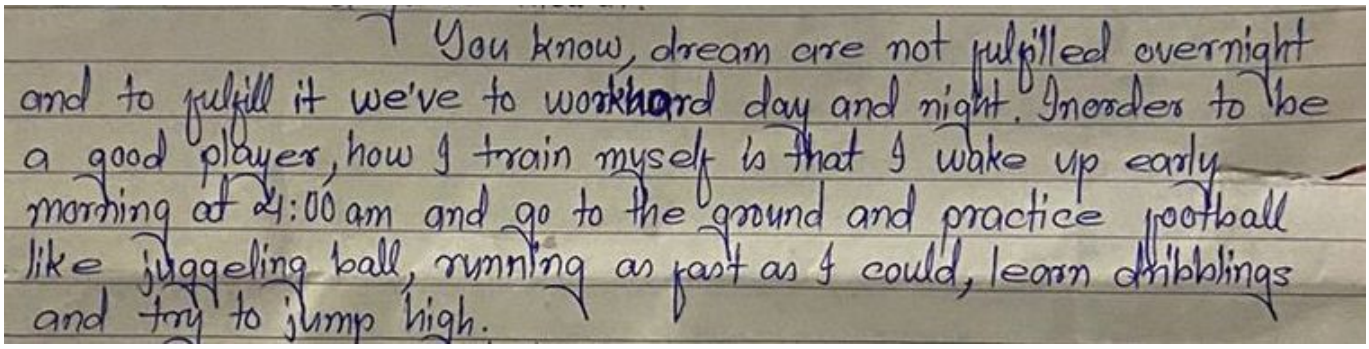
Another young member of the teaching staff is Rinchen Thapa. She graduated in political science and English and teaches English to the second and eighth graders. Rinchen comes from a village close to the city of Darjeeling, which is eighty kilometers far from the school. She is from a Tibeto-Nepali family, but is only now catching up with Tibetan as an adult. “When I see children learning it, I myself feel like learning it properly,” she says.

Compared to Tibetan, English is not a complicated language, she thinks. “I mainly try to make the students use it actively,” she says, adding: “With twenty five children in a class it is not easy but I still want to involve them as much as possible.” Some children commit to continue learning languages out of the school hours. “We girls in our dorm made a vow to only speak Tibetan or English to each other when we enter the room so that it would get more in our blood,” Mamata tells me. Such an attitude certainly makes teachers´ work easier and the students´ progress quicker.


Spelling Bee 2023…

Yungdrung and Rinchen are also “house masters”. All children of the school are divided into four formations, so-called houses. Each house has its own color and is named after one of the four important Asian rivers: Indus, Brahmaputra, Sutlej and Karnali. They all spring at the mount of Kailas in Tibet (which is named Tise in Tibetan and the school’s name, Tise Himalayan International School, is derived from it).

Yungdrung Lhamo and her colleague Sonam Tashi Bhutia lead the yellow Indus, while Rinchen with her colleague Sweta Rai are leading teachers of the blue Brahmaputra, helped by Sonam Palden and Kenrap Gyatso – just as an example. House masters are reference teachers for forty or so children of different ages of their “house”. The school holds competitions in which teams from each house engage. They include public speaking, art projects, sport events or dance performances. “I try to encourage even shy kids to participate. Recently I convinced a girl to perform in front of others, she built up her courage and got more confident afterwards,” says Rinchen Thapa.


You know, dream are not fulfilled overnight and to fulfill it we've to workhard day and night. Inorder to be a good player, how I train myself is that I wake up early morning at 4:00 am and go to the ground and practice football like juggeling ball, running as fast as I could, learn dribblings and try to jump high.

Binod: Dreams are not fulfilled overnight, we have to work for it.,

The children also learn a lot just by being involved in the running of life in the hostel. On Sundays they collectively clean up. Every day brings many interactions with classmates of different ages, peer learning is a matter of course here. As the children get older there are more duties and responsibilities waiting for them. Older pupils help the younger children in the food line to keep their plates straight, while they are served by others; in the morning they have to ensure that all the children get up and dressed on time. Each of the four houses has a captain; and he or she has the most responsibilities. Mamata and Binod the footballer were or still are captains. “Taking care of

others and organizing things for them is a lot of work, but sometimes it is fun," Binod says.

Some people don't get the chance

I am looking at a photo of parents with the first group of children who arrived at school in 2018. The wind-swept highlanders often look far older than their biological age. Life in the mountains has been getting easier slowly slowly, roads are being built, infrastructure is improving. But the situation of small farmers who work in the fields or keep cattle sometimes gets even worse, as traditional trade disappears and competition grows. Most parents of THIS students do hard manual labor, and they look accordingly. Even their children in shabby clothes in the photo look different from the children I meet at school, yet they are the same children. It's as if their faces have brightened.



Parents and children heading for the school.

Nawang Sherpa is the vice-head teacher and he received the first wave of children at the school. They had to be taught everything from the very beginning, including basic hygiene, as he remembers. He has always encouraged his team to communicate a lot with the children, emphasizing English in particular. "Children are smart and can learn a language by imitating adults," he says. "My advice was: in the classroom, keep the textbooks closed and mainly talk to them. Tell them stories, talk about what interests them, and give them space to respond!" A very skillful pedagogical attitude, I would say. Children are in good hands here.

Thank to all the mentioned educators and other men and women working at the school that I didn't have time to talk to or make them fit into the text, the children are in a very different situation than the trajectory of their families' lives would have predicted. They are planting a seed for a better life

than their parents have.

Hopefully there will be more kids to come and get this opportunity. The school collects no tuition and is financed by donations only. It doesn't live high on the hog. In the photos, the school uniforms look elegant, but on closer inspection you can see many other things, like a hole in a shoe. The food is also modest. Eggs and bread or boiled chickpeas for breakfast, rice, potatoes, lentils and vegetables for lunch, noodle soup with meat or vegetables or rice, potatoes and vegetables again in the evening. For snacks the children have tea with milk and sugar and roasted rice, sometimes fruit. Different, more fancy meals are served on special occasions, maybe once a month, sweets very rarely. But the diet is well thought out, the children look healthy, have white teeth and sparkling eyes, and some of the boys have outgrown me already.



Praising the food before meals.

I look at the children's writing, drawings and other evidence of learning (how it is called in modern pedagogy) and see that the pupils can concentrate and achieve results. Also, when they play, they do it eagerly and joyfully. And it's clear from what they tell me that they understand education is their chance. A chance which many people of the mountain communities of Nepal and India were not given. "Many intelligent people I know well could not study, their potential remained unfulfilled, which is sad to observe. The problems in our communities are largely rooted in the fact that people could not study," says the school's founder, Khenchen Tenpa Yungdrung, who himself comes from a mountain village in Nepal. He, together with Sonam Norbu and other members of the staff believe that the school they established can break the chain of adversity that binds poor families.

I wonder what plans they have for the children when they grow up and leave the school. Don't they

expect the graduates to return to the mountains and devote themselves to revitalizing their villages? Some of the similar schools invite their students to commit to their communities´welfare.

“Of course, if they return home, it will be good, it would help their communities, but we don’t expect only that and it wouldn’t be realistic either,” says Khenchen Tenpa Yungdrung. “If young people want to broaden their horizons and go elsewhere, we should not force them to stay. It wouldn’t work anyway,” he articulates his philosophy. And after a moment of reflection, he adds: “Actually, it might even be a good thing if they go out into the world. That way they can share the values this school has transmitted to them with other people and influence the world positively.”

THIS school leaves a vast space for children´s dreams.

Pictures: Jitka Polanská, Tise Himalayan International School
The article was originally published in www.eduzin.cz, a Czech magazine about education.