

14-11-2005

It is Monday morning, 5.30....it is still cold, dark and the children are outside squatting around a small fire outside.

Pumchay (13 years) has packed her things and is ready to leave. For a while already does she have the strong wish to become nun and we managed to find a place for her in a small nunnery on a quiet spot in the forest just outside of Gangtok.

I am going to bring her there today and make sure that the last necessary arrangements are being done for her.

The jeep arrives to bring us to Gangtok. All children are present to say a final goodbye.....one by one they put a khada (small white scarf) around her neck as a traditional farewell. It is a very touching moment and especially her best friends and Pumchay herself are in tears. The evening before during our daily prayers in the evening we had a nice little farewell moment where many of the kids were very sad to say goodbye....many were crying whereas Pumchay sat amongst them with a big smile on her face.....But now at this very moment of leaving she is very sad too. It is a beautiful but very touching moment.

On arriving in Gangtok first we have to buy maroon- yellow robes because Pumchay will not be allowed to wear 'normal clothes' anymore. We also buy different offerings like fruit, biscuits, snacks, incense as altar offerings and tea, sugar, milk and bread to make a tea-offering to the other nuns who stay in the nunnery.

After all this we are going to the nunnery with a minivan. The road does not even reach there and the last 10 minutes do we have to walk via a small path through the forest. The we arrive at the monastery, situated on a very peaceful spot amongst trees, prayerflags, flowers and singing birds. We are heartily welcomed with tea and a lot of curious glances from the other nuns varying in age between 12 and 25 years. We get to know them nuns and they are all very friendly, gentle and helpful.

In a house just above the monastery lives Khamtrul Rinpoche. In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition a Rinpoche is a lama (monk and teacher) who at his birth has been recognized as being the reincarnation of a very highly realized lama that has passed away.

On the following day the actual entry into the monastery and into 'nun hood' takes place and is being done through certain rituals and formalities.

First of all Pumchay has to offer her new robes nicely folded on a tray to Rinpoche. She goes ahead of me climbing up the steps to his house and I think: "There you go...., you are so brave!!" And I am so happy for her that she has this chance to live such a highly meaningful life.

Khamtrul Rinpoche is a very old lama 80 years....90 years.....? Who knows..... it is difficult to tell. He is seated cross legged in his room where he receives visitors. We enter into his room, make the usual 3 prostrations, make some offerings and sit down on the floor in front of him. Rinpoche asks Pumchay some questions in Tibetan (originally Rinpoche comes from Tibet but fled the country during the Chinese invasion) and another nun translated everything in Nepali. Then he does some prayers, takes a pair of scissors and cuts some of her hair from her crown, throws some rice on her and blows on her head. Then one by one he blesses all her robes and the newly bought mala (rosary) and puts it around her neck..... a beautiful gesture. Rinpoche then takes a piece of paper with her new name written on it...it is custom when one enters a monastery to receive a new name. Hers is Pema Paltsen.

We talk a bit more in a conversation that goes from Tibetan into Nepali into English because I do not understand all the Nepali being translated.

We go outside where two nuns shave Pema's head. She is kneeling on the floor and her thick black hair falls on the ground in front of her. One of the nuns looks up at me with a big smile on her face and asks in Nepali...."Shall I shave your head too?" and I answer smilingly...."not yet".

Then Pema looks up at me, completely bold but with a radiant face and I ask her “How does it feel?” “Oh miss....sooooo wonderful!!!” They help her into her new robes and she looks absolutely beautiful! It is amazing to see such a transformation....The last two days she had been very quiet and somewhat introvert and absent..... and now without shaven head and new robes she looks wonderful and so shiny and happy!

We go back to the monastery where the other nuns started a prayer session in the meantime. They sit as is usual in two rows facing each other and chant with their beautiful voices the different prayers in Tibetan and use the ritual musical instruments (horns, drums, bells and conch shells) at the same time. On entering the gompa we make the 3 prostrations again and Pema brings all the offerings to the altar. Then we offer tea and bread and Pema goes around with a big teapot, pouring tea with a radiant face for all the nuns and the monk who is leading the prayer session. Then she takes place on the low bench between the other nuns....it looks so natural as if she has been sitting there for many years already!

After lunch it is time for me to leave. Pema walks me to the gate. I give her a last hug..... do not have my own children but somehow it feels as if I am leaving my own daughter behind.....

I am looking back one more time....there she stand...in red amongst all the green.....a beautiful sight....and I think “Bye, my dear....may you be well....see you again in February when I will come to visit again....”

I leave with a lump in my throat....but with a very warm and happy heart!

Many blessings to all of you!!

Hedwig