

Hello to all of you!

Most of the children in our school come from Buddhist families and in the school do we teach and practice the Buddha's teachings on a daily basis. A lot of children have a genuine interest in Buddhism and in some of them this is so strong (remember Pumchay) that they want to give their whole life to practice the Buddhist teachings.

Sonam and Pema, two eleven year old boys from class 2 also got really inspired and sincerely wanted to become monks. In our village Bhuriakhop, 15 minutes climbing above our school is a small monastery which we visit with the children on a regular basis to do our prayers and to light some butter lamps. Since the beginning of this year the monk: Wongchuk who lives there started a small monastic school. Seven boys in the age from 9 till 16 years stay there in the monastery in a hostel and have become monks. They are learning the Tibetan script and language, they learn to recite prayers and texts in Tibetan and are taught the different Buddhist rituals and ceremonies.

I had asked whether 'our' Sonam and Pema could enter and study in the monastery and that was possible!!

We picked a date for officially entering into monastic life with help of the Tibetan calendar: certain days are favorable or not favorable for these kinds of things. Friday 18<sup>th</sup> November happened to be a good date for this event. I had bought maroon and yellow fabric for their monk dresses and the local tailor made it skillfully into monks robes.

18th November....

On Friday morning the boys are still attending classes in their blue school uniforms and at 12 O'clock they return their schoolbooks and uniform. Then all of us (children and teachers) are going up to the monastery...carrying bedding, clothes and offerings to the boys' new home. The boys are excited and somewhat nervous at the same time.....

On arrival at the monastery Sonam and Pema have to enter the gompa (Buddhist temple) while the kids have to wait outside for a bit. The boys have to offer their new robes to Wongchuk who will lead the ceremony. One of the younger monks helps the boys to put their new robes on, which is a little bit uneasy at the beginning wearing 'skirt and shawl'.

Then all the children and teachers may enter into the gompa and when all are seated on the floor, the whole gompa is packed!

Sonam and Pema look like brothers in their identical robes and they look beautiful!

They are seated on the floor in front of Wongchuk who starts the prayers and all other monks are reciting attentively with him. At some point Wongchuk takes scissors and cuts some of their hair from their crown, a sign that they actually enter into monastic life.

Then they light the first two of a whole row of butter lamps. They hold them up towards the Buddha statue with full devotion ....so beautiful! Then they make 3 prostrations towards the Buddha and sit down again. After this all children one after the other lights a butter lamp and soon the whole of space is filled with the wonderful light of more than 50 butter lamps. Every time it is so sweet and special to make a light offering to all Buddha's! Then all of us recite different prayers and mantra's together and the sound of the beautiful melodies and beautiful voices of the children is truly touching.

After this the two boys get up and are standing in the middle of the gompa where one by one the children and teachers offer them a khata (white silken scarf) around their neck. They look so proud, radiant and happy! Some give them a big hug, some shed a little tear...lovely. I look at it with a lump in my throat. Then it is finished and there is tea and biscuits for everyone.

Time to part....the children are saying goodbye to Sonam and Pema who from today onwards will live in the monastery.

"Do not be a naughty monk!" says one,

"Please pray for us!" says another,

"I will miss you"

"Please come to the school some time to play cricket!"

"You are so lucky!!"

"May you be happy!" and more of these things.....

What a beautiful happening....and I am sincerely happy that the boys have this opportunity to practice Buddhism so intensively!!!

In the meantime the winterholiday has started and all children are at home. I am in Bodhgaya (the holy place where the Buddha achieved Enlightenment) for a couple of months. I am volunteering in a Buddhist meditation centre and lead several kinds of meditations for westerners on a daily basis. This is also a very rewarding thing to do!

I will be back in Sikkim around mid February May you all be happy!

With love

Hedwig