

GUEST POST: WELCOME TO THE JUNGLE—OF PEACE

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Today's blog post and images come courtesy of Carleton Cole, who documented two volunteer teachers' work in a Buddhist monastery with RCDP Volunteer Nepal. You can view RCDP-Nepal's website here, and its Facebook page here. Thank you, Carleton!

Welcome to the jungle

In the words of Guns 'N' Roses, "Welcome to the jungle, we've got fun and games." The rock song perfectly fits the typically overly jovial atmosphere in a recent English-language class for Tibetan Buddhist monks, who were initially unruly until their generally laidback but professional 23-year-old teacher, Chuck Donovan, applied attention-capturing learning devices.



"As a person with formal teacher training, it's been a good and challenging experience, trying to differentiate instruction to match the needs and levels of comprehension for the various students," says Donovan, who hails from the Northeastern US state of Massachusetts. "It's very different from the Hollywood scene that I had expected. I had this expectation that the monks would be very reverent. With the absence of older monks, the monastery feels more like a summer camp, than a monastery."

His classes take place in a classroom on the windy, majestically hill-crowning Neyndo Tashi Chuling Monastery in the countryside village of Banjyang, a pleasant 30-minute amble from Pharping town, about 20 kilometers south of the Nepali capital of Kathmandu, in the lush Kathmandu Valley. On the roof and from the classrooms, there are grand views of the valley and backdrop hills. Fog occasionally appears and even wafts straight into the high-up classroom. The volunteer project is run by the Kathmandu-based Rural Community Development Program-Nepal. More information on RCDP programs can be learned at www.rcdpnepal.org. Volunteer programs run from a few weeks to a few months.

In the classroom

Donovan comes armed with an assortment of carrots and sticks and doesn't hesitate to apply them with equal measure. He informs the monks that if they each give him three sentences each about the jungle, they will be rewarded by being asked to give three more sentences on something closer to their hearts than nature.



"Raise your hand if you play Grand Theft Auto," he asks. Only two or three shyly extend their arms. He asks again more determinately and this time all of the crimson-color robed monks—who range in age from nine to 15—raise their hands. While catching up on email in Banjyang's lone Internet center, he regularly spots young novice monks crouching around many of the three terminals there, avidly getting kicks on the computer game's Vice City version.

But back to the jungle. Gradually, monk after energetic monk, calm descends on the classroom like manna from above, even though they are not ready for sentence construction. With the now quieted group,

Donovan asks for the simpler task of just providing the names of animals that live in the jungle. The group replies with parrots, tigers, lions and monkeys (and, misguidedly, rabbits and zebras). After a few rough spots, like applying green and black to describe the color of an elephant, the monks successfully grace the animals with descriptions. Making the rounds to check, monk by monk, if the lesson has been learned, Donovan comes to a slow learner and gently brings him up to pace. Then the class returns to a somewhat freefalling atmosphere, and Donovan wields his corralling tactics, mildly admonishing one monk who has just returned to class after a too-long session in the bathroom, "I know you're playing around in there," and scolds another one: "Why are you out of your seat?"

"There's a kind of energy..."

In another setting, though, Donovan is full of praise for the monks, who get up at 4am or 5am every day to get the day wonderfully started with chanting. "I've enjoyed listening to their chanting and prayers," says the teacher of the sonorous, soothing sounds that fascinatingly are made by the same people—boys will be boys—who create a boisterous raucous much of the rest of the time before they turn in early for the night. "To see them chanting, banging their drums, and blowing their horns is very interesting. There's a kind of energy which envelops the monastery when they're praying. It's a good time to reflect. Nepal is a place that's so encompassed with religion—Buddhism and Hinduism—that it's hard not to feel it. Whether it is on a smaller scale in the monastery, or visiting towns with many monasteries, this is a country engulfed in religion."



"I like the simplicity of monastery life. It gives me more than ample time for spiritual reflection and hiking up to area monasteries. I was raised as a Roman Catholic, and while I identify with its basic principles, it leaves no room for interpretation." A buddy of Donovan's gave him a book on Buddhism—*8 Steps to Enlightenment, Awakening the Buddha Within: Tibetan Wisdom for the Western World*, by Lama Surya Das. It stayed on his bookshelf for a couple of years until he was going through a low point and looked to Buddhism for solace.

"I found it to be a guiding philosophy, not a list of do's and don'ts. It was a good counterbalance. I identified with it. It was a breath of fresh air. Between my visits to various Tibetan gompas [monasteries] in Pharping, and just from my Buddhist readings, I think I've had a lot of spiritual growth."

An ear-to-ear smile fills the face of happy young Karma Youten, a young monk in Donovan's class who says that he loves both his English and Tibetan classes.



Lisa's class

Many of the even younger monks—ranging from about five to 10—are in the classes of volunteer teacher Lisa Kolde. A recent one started with her reading and showing pictures from the book "The Monkey and the Crocodile", in which she vividly described how the jungle dweller outfoxed the reptile one step at a time.

While most kids are getting into the story, Kolde, who hails from northern Germany, has to gently remind them to be quiet a couple of times. The monks are fairly well-disciplined—as long as the teacher can catch possible disturbances early and nip them in the bud. "I really like the monks, but the language differences are difficult," she says.

"I had heard about volunteering and it sounded interesting to me," says Kolde. "I went to university for a while but kept coming back to the idea of volunteering. I'm majoring in physics and see many parallels between physics and Buddhism. I like how Buddhism is very logical. Karma is like physics—actions result in other actions."

The contemplative German thoroughly enjoyed a one-week spiritual retreat in Kopan Monastery, which is east of Kathmandu, with its many daily hours of instruction on Buddhism, plus time for meditation practice. "Meditation is difficult," she says. "I thought it would be easier. I tried to think of nothing and focus on my breath. But I really felt better afterwards. I was more aware of everything around me."

"I can live like this with cold showers and dhal baat (Nepali lentil soup) twice a day because I know it's temporary for me."

"I think this has been a very good experience for me. It is part of my growing up," says the 20-year-old. "I had never lived away from my parents for so long. I learned how to be independent. My spiritual growth has been great as well. I have great new ideas on how to learn every day."



Teaching Buddhist monks in Nepal is an adventurous odyssey. The challenge lies in informing the monks, lest they want to leave the monastery someday, that in addition to their eventual mastery of Buddhist spirituality, their knowledge of English will be exceptionally useful for what lies beyond.