

The Saathi Project™



**inter-community
school zurich**

EST. 1960

potential • passion • responsibility

Summary



Thank you for your interest in hosting a member of our Shree Mangal Dvip family. The ICS/SMD connection is a long standing one, spanning almost two decades.

This connection is a fundamental part of our school's identity, providing the opportunity for us to live out our values and to truly be internationally minded, global citizens.

What follows is detailed information relating to hosting one of our SMD students. In providing you with this information, it is our hope that you will consider the richness of the experience that comes with learning about the life of these determined learners.

It is important that once you have read this document, that you ask any and all questions of the School, so as to understand the role you would play in supporting our students in their final two years of learning.

Being able to provide this opportunity is one the School recognises is a significant decision, and one that we thank you for undertaking.

Thank you, for taking the time to learn about the children of the Himalaya, and the connection our children of ICS have with these most remarkable young people.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Lucy M. Gowdie'.

Lucy M. Gowdie
Head of School

The Saathi Project™



Introduction

WELCOME

Shree Mangal Dvip (SMD) is a School for the forgotten mountain children of the Himalayas. Established in 1987, by founder Thrangu Rinpoche, the School is centred on education and providing opportunities for young people to reach their full potential, which is made difficult by societal structure, prejudice, and poverty.

THE MISSION

The Mission of SMD is to preserve culture, language, and the Buddhist way of life of the Himalayas, and to give Himalayan Children the tools to build a better future, so they can help their own people when they grow up.

The importance of paying it forward is critical to the survival of SMD, and so it is that ICS forged a connection with them, almost two decades ago. ICS saw an opportunity to provide an education for students that would enable them to go onto further studies, and return to their communities to give back what they had learned.

This has seen some 23 alumni graduate from ICS, who came from SMD in Kathmandu and we are immensely proud of their achievements.

THE VISION

SMD and ICS envision a connection so profound it helps shape the purpose of our young people in their learning.

Our vision is to build a holistic programme that integrates education, the environment, and expedition, that transforms learning for every child in our respective schools.



Buddha's Teachings

The Buddha's teachings illuminate Himalayan life; all the art, music, colour and pageantry are expressions of devotion to the teachings of the Buddha. Note: Buddhism is non-theistic, meaning there is no creator or god, although village beliefs talk about 'gods'.

You will likely find your Himalayan student quieter and more deferential to others (particularly elders) than western kids. Why? From a western point of view, it seems to be a weakness; actually, it is seen as a strength in Buddhist society. ("Offer up all victory, take all defeat" is a motto of our lineage.) In Himalayan culture, it is seen as rude/challenging to make eye contact or to ask questions of an elder - this includes teachers. The students who go overseas are thoroughly schooled in making eye contact and 'coming forward', but they still find this cultural difference a difficult one to master, as is the constant need to express one's opinions, likes and dislikes.

Putting oneself forward or talking about oneself is seen as babyish in Asian societies. Expressions of anger and other negative emotions are understood to be the inability to tame one's mind. The Buddha taught that in a moment of anger, one can do great harm that one would never do in one's "right mind". He taught that it's crucial to guard our minds against negative emotions. Your student will probably not show anger and probably will be uncomfortable if you do, but not for the reason you expect! S/he will feel sorry that you are experiencing such mental suffering and s/he may also be embarrassed for you.

You may wonder what your student is doing when you would expect her/him to be angry...s/he is working inwardly, first, recognizing that anger is arising in the mind, and if mindful, transmuting the anger into gratitude and patience. Buddha taught that mind (or thought) becomes speech, which in turn becomes action. Motivation is the crux: if one is aware of one's mind and is determined to "generate a good heart", then one's speech and actions will also be 'wholesome' = not cause any harm.

Following from this inner stance is our kids' weakness in seeking help when it's needed...they are so grateful for all that you are doing that they cannot tell you when they are uncomfortable or in any way unhappy. They soldier on and usually don't even tell me. This must be watched (especially in home stays) and is one of the reasons we encourage them so strongly to keep in touch with SMD kids overseas.

The Beginning of SMD

Thrangu Rinpoche was an eminent Tibetan lama, recognized world wide in all Buddhist traditions as a great scholar and acknowledged as a meditation master. A refugee from Tibet, he arrived in Nepal with nothing except his vast knowledge and meditative wisdom.

When he first reached Nepal, Rinpoche lived in what had been a cow shed in the hills near Kathmandu...in Tibet, he'd had a thousand people in his care and was the head of an enormous monastic system, including a 'shedra' - a university of Higher Buddhist Philosophy.

Rinpoche saw a dire need for education and health services in his adopted country and has spent his life in exile providing those services. Monasteries and nunneries provide full care and education, so many highland folk place their children in robes. Thrangu Rinpoche had ten institutions in Nepal and about two thousand Nepalis in his care. He continues to build free health posts in the mountains and has always trained nuns and monks to work as "amchis" (doctors trained in Tibetan medicine) or as with SMDers, Health Assistants (HA = health assistants = paramedics) who are licensed to run health posts - such training is fundamentally important for mountain folk: there is no healthcare in the mountains unless it is provided by monasteries or nunneries. The Thrangu family established three health posts and has or is training eighteen HAs. Our experience has shown that community service continues if it is under the supervision of a monastery like Nar Satek Thrangu Shenphen Clinic at our monastery high in Manang.

Not all children are cut out for monastic life, so Rinpoche opened Shree Mangal Dvip Boarding School in 1987 to offer secular education for lay students, nuns and monks. The main school serves children from the high Himalayas, ages five to twenty-something and offers instruction from Kindergarten to Class 10. We are too crowded to offer Classes 11 & 12. In 2002, Rinpoche opened SMD Branch School for young monks on the edge of the Kathmandu valley to relieve crowding in SMD's classrooms.

Between SMD and SMD Branch School, hundreds of children from the mountains of Nepal are getting free education housing, medical and dental care. Although they are Nepalese, culturally and linguistically they are Tibetan, and like the Tibetans, their way of life is Buddhist. Thrangu Rinpoche's aims are to help the indigenous people of Nepal's mountains to preserve their language, culture and Buddhist way of life. With an education, Himalayan children have the tools to help themselves and to help their people when they grow up.

Nepal

- Is one of the poorest countries in the world, on par with sub-Saharan Africa
- Is the least literate country in Asia
- Is the 'hunger hot spot' of Asia: 49% of children are stunted - among Himalayan children, 62% are stunted (this is a UN pre-Covid statistic)
- There are 0.91 physicians/1000 Nepalis and none in the mountains *Please see Appendix
- Has the highest child mortality rate in Asia
- Has the highest maternal mortality rate in the world
- 25% of the population lives on less than \$0.50 USD a day <https://www.wfp.org/countries/nepal>
- Nepal is one of the most corrupt countries in the world
- The wealth-poverty divide is the biggest in Asia and is widening

Caste thinking and the social, ethnic and gender barriers that come with it have marginalized the majority, more than 80% of the population. Huge disparities in wealth, power and access are the outcome. The caste system in Nepal, is essentially, a form of apartheid buttressed by (a misunderstanding of) religion.



The Context

The ten year civil war ended in 2006. A new constitution was promulgated in 2015, but it disenfranchised more than half the population, including women, the 'janajatis' - ethnic groups (like Himalayan people - Sherpas, Gurungs, Rais, Tamang, et al) and the Madeshis (the people of the southern plains). With the pandemic and the Russian war, Nepalis are hungrier than ever before - half the country is food deficit. Earthquakes, landslides and floods along with chronic instability and relentless price rises add misery to lives already blighted by hunger.

Nepal is unstable, corrupt and anarchic; even in the capital, sewers, electricity and telephones function poorly, if at all. A culture of impunity flourishes...forced disappearance and torture are not uncommon. In the chaos, criminals operate freely; they have formed cartels in concert with big business.

Mongolian in origin, Himalayan people are an ethnic, linguistic and religious minority in a country dominated by a conservative form of Hinduism. Until he was overthrown, the king was legally regarded as a god, at the apex of a pyramid of caste privilege and as such, above the law. Caste dominates every facet of life here. Every student we've placed overseas has been blocked by caste discrimination in dealings with government officials.

Caste is meaningless from the Buddhist point of view. Buddhist women in particular enjoy greater independence than their Hindu sisters do. For centuries, the mountain people of Nepal lived as subsistence farmers and semi-nomads, trading over the passes into Tibet for goods like metal, salt and fuel. Himalayan women worked alongside the men in the fields, with the yaks, and trading over the border into Tibet. Nowadays, cross-border trade is impossible, making life in the Himalayas even harder.

While there is little infrastructure in Nepal, there was never any in the remote villages our children come from. Himalayan villages have no roads, no electricity, no telephones, no sanitation, no running water, no hospitals and no schools. It is in 'yak country' (+ 10,000 feet - 3500 metres). Most of our parents are seasonal nomads and/or subsistence farmers. All are illiterate, their births, marriages and deaths largely unrecorded.

Brighter Futures

SMD Boarding School offers a full education following the Nepal government curriculum (Math, Science, English, Nepali, Social Studies, Computer, etc.) enriched by instruction in the Tibetan language and Himalayan culture. Classes are taught in English. The main school integrates nuns, monks and lay children. Instruction is given in the teachings of the Buddha and the children take part in prayer & meditation (Chenrezig) to generate compassion every third day. On alternate days, the children perform the Medicine Buddha prayer and meditation (to create healing for all beings) and they do the meditation and prayers for White Tara (a female meditational figure) who embodies compassion and offers healing to beings who are hurt or wounded.

The young monks and nuns have a more rigorous schedule. They study Buddhist texts and learn practices and rituals when they return to their monastic settings at the end of the school day.

Overseas sponsors wholly fund SMD Schools. In addition to educating children, the main school also offers training and employment to nearly 100 teachers and support staff.

Born in Tibet, Thrangu Rinpoche was a world renowned as a scholar and meditation master. He was appointed personal tutor to the 17th Karmapa by HH the Dalai Lama. Thrangu Rinpoche had dedicated much of his life to educating the thousands of young people in Nepal who have been placed in his care.

Rinpoche has five monasteries, a nunnery, two retreat centres, two schools, a publishing and translation project, a media organization and several clinics in Nepal. He has two monasteries in India, one of which is a 'shedra' - an institution of higher Buddhist philosophy. He also had two monasteries in Bhutan and a monastery in Vancouver, Canada and a retreat centre in Colorado, in addition to Buddhist centres in a number of countries.

His original monastery in Tibet was restored, then demolished in the Sichuan earthquake in 2010 but China helped rebuild the new Thrangu Monastery.

Rinpoche taught all over the world and had Dharma Centres and Study Groups in many countries, including Canada, the US, the UK, Germany, Holland, Switzerland, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Thailand and Malaysia.

www.thrangumonastery.org/

Tibetan Buddhism

During the 2500-year history of Buddhism, the teachings spread from India throughout Asia. "Tibetan Buddhism" is the form which is practiced in the Himalayan region, Tibet, northern Nepal and India, Sikkim, Bhutan, & Mongolia. Since the communist invasion of Tibet and the diaspora, it has also spread to the west.

Tibetan Buddhism is in the Mahayana Buddhist tradition, meaning that the goal of all practice is to achieve full enlightenment (Buddhahood) in order to help all other beings to reach enlightenment. All beings have the "Buddha nature" = potential of Buddhahood. It is the essential heart or nature of all living beings. In Mahayana Buddhism, the key is bodhicitta (a Sanskrit word meaning compassion = a good heart = the wish to help beings). All practice, prayer and meditation is directed towards one goal: achieving enlightenment in order to free beings from suffering.

From the Buddha's time, an unbroken transmission from generation to generation has preserved the teachings. In the 10th century, Tibetan writing was devised to carry the teachings from India back to Tibet and since that time, the teaching has been passed in an unbroken line, a lineage. Other Buddhist traditions such as Zen also continue the Dharma in lineages. They can also trace the teachings back, to the time of the Buddha, but the greatest repository of Buddha's teachings has been preserved in the Tibetan language. This is why we teach classical Tibetan.

There are four (some say 5) lineages in Tibetan Buddhism. The Dalai Lama is part of the Gelug lineage. Our lineage is the Karma Kagyu lineage; the head of our lineage is the 17th Karmapa, Orgyen Thinley Dorje.

www.kagyuoffice.org/

Homesickness

Most of the people the children admire are those who have dedicated their lives to serving others, taking nothing for themselves, our founder Thrangu Rinpoche and His Holiness the Dalai Lama are two examples. Our kids aspire to be like them.

By the time our students leave, they've spent most of their lives in the SMD Family and when they do leave, it's us they miss...they're homesick for the SMD family. For a kid leaving the communal life at SMD and going into western society, there can be a feeling of profound dislocation. They are going from an extremely close extended family, united by the Buddha's teachings, into another life where independence is prized and materialism is rife. They find western relationships paradoxically demanding (so much emotion) yet at the same time, westerners seem (to the kids) disinterested in others' welfare. Our overseas students tell us that adjusting to this paradigm, along with the spiritual dislocation this is the greatest difficulty they face overseas.

For our kids, SMD is more than a home, it is the kids' spiritual home.

"SMD School is my second home and arguably my first and best home. I basically grew up there since I left my village at the age of seven. SMD provided me with everything: education, clothes, shelter, friends and dharma...the Buddha's teachings. SMD has made me the person I am today, specifically the dharma has taught me to practice compassion and kindness in my daily life. It helped me adjust and survive in the West. This is true for all other SMD kids and that's why 'overseas goers' miss SMD more than their families as we have become attached to SMD."



Cultural Context

The most important holiday of the year is Losar (Tibetan New Year). It is lunar, and generally falls sometime in February or March. It is the time when Buddhist families all get together, to visit the monastery, get blessings from their 'tsawe lama' (root or main lama), and to eat special food. It is a little like Christmas in western countries. It is a time when SMD kids may feel lonely.

At Losar, everyone automatically becomes a year older if we count in the Himalayan way. At birth, a baby one year old...and if Losar falls the next day, the baby is two years old! Most of our kids reckon age in this way and some have had a little trouble in the west because of it.

Most Tibetan-speakers use double-barrelled "first" names and do not use surnames, or if they do use surnames, the names represent their ethnic group, for example, "Sherpa", "Tamang", "Gurung" & "Lama". There is not much variety in "first names", so the double-barrelled names help to identify people. For example, we probably have 80 "Tashis" at SMD, but there is only one "Tashi Sangpo". Be vigilant about culture gap. It is insidious because it arises from misunderstandings which both sides are blind to: both sides try to communicate for all they're worth, but they see through the lenses of their own cultures, interpret accordingly, and are unaware that there is no communication or connection. The danger is that relationships can be spoiled.

An example, I was told, that two of our scholarship kids studying at Institut le Rosey "lack ambition" because "they don't want to go to university". This was a misunderstanding. When asked by if they wanted to go on to university, our kids answered, "Yes, if we get scholarships. If we don't get scholarships, we'll go back to Nepal to help Thrangu Rinpoche." They were being pragmatic: there is no chance of going on to university without full support. Rather than trying to shape a future that hasn't yet manifested, they were striving to be mindful and trying not to "cling" to an outcome in the future. (Nowadays, one has a Master degree, and others are working on theirs.)

Himalayan people generally don't display anger (unless drunk or mentally ill). The Buddha taught that in a moment of anger, immense harm, even murder can come. It is therefore best to be mindful...to recognize anger as it arises in the mind, and transform into an emotion which will benefit oneself and others. This mode of behaviour, looked at from the outside can seem meek, even weak, but if you understand the inner discipline and maturity this practice takes (the Tibetan word is "lojong" = mind training) you will see that it actually demands keen awareness in the moment, mindfulness (of what is rising in one's own mind) and the inner strength to transform strong emotion.

In Asian society, one is expected to defer to elders. In Buddhist society, one always yields to others before oneself. Himalayan society is not one that encourages independence among the young. This too, can make our students seem weak because they are uncomfortable to put themselves (or their opinions) ahead of others, so they find the cut and thrust of western classroom discussions hard to break into. SMD kids need help in this.

Needs & Comforts

Tibetan-speaking cultures refuse an offer 3 times before accepting. When I first started volunteering for Rinpoche, I took my guests' "No thank-yous" as meant. A year later, I discovered I'd been rude in not pressing my guests 3 times.

Our kids come from villages where cash is not used. Even in Kathmandu, SMDers have very little experience with money and no experience with banks, credit cards or ATMs. They have no idea of the value of things in other countries, so if they ask you for something, they may ask for something outlandishly expensive simply because they are unaware of the cost. When they first arrive overseas, everything seems like the movies. It takes a while for them to get it all in perspective. To give you some idea: a new pair of prescription glasses here costs about USD 14.

Our kids grew up without cash in their villages and at SMD school...and then, when they go overseas to really posh schools, they sometimes are given heaps of cash, but they don't understand the buying value. You can help by making a bar graph of income/expenditure (with some key baseline values...the cost of pizza compared with the cost of a sandwich etc.) would help to objectify relative values/costs for them.

Another useful exercise: your student should see a balance sheet that shows the monthly expenditure that is made on her/him. Go to: <http://www.xe.com/ucc/full/> to convert it into Nepali rupees. That will help your student to understand.

SCAM ALERT

Since SMD kids started communicating by email, we've had several instances of adults posing as SMDers in order to extort money from unsuspecting sponsors. If your homestay student is in any way demanding or ungrateful, it could be that pressure is coming from an adult family member. If you think this may be happening, please write Shirley immediately

FAMILY DYNAMICS

If you are offering a homestay for a Himalayan student, you may want to consider this: your family dynamics could change with the addition of a teenager from another culture. At the start of a homestay, our student will be needing extra help and guidance. Your own children may find this stressful and may become insecure and even jealous. Another thing to consider is that our kids' socialization and Buddhist training make them mature, emotionally. If they know the Dharma well, they will not be given to a lot of 'ego display', so there will be few adolescent moods.

SEX EDUCATION

Our students have had sex education, a programme designed by specialists in human sexuality from the University of Montreal. SMDers understand physiological development, transmission of sexually transmitted diseases, prevention of pregnancy and differing sexual orientations.

SMDers come from traditional cultures that do not countenance dating. Romance is not valued or even expected; marriage is an economic arrangement, as in most of Asia. We do not encourage dating and we raise our kids to think of each other as sisters and brothers which has a tendency to smother romance. SMD kids have more important things on their minds: getting an education and coming back to Nepal to help their own people.

Nepal is a country of arranged marriages. All of our students have seen the suffering that comes from early marriage (child marriages are common in Hindu society, but even Himalayan girls and boys are also married off at 15 or 16 years of age). Of our + 200 nuns, most have taken ordination in order to avoid marriage. As one exclaimed when asked why she became a nun, "Married women have to work like donkeys!"

CRITICAL THINKING

Almost half of Nepal is illiterate, predictably, illiteracy is greater amongst females. Given the state neglect of mountain communities, all our children's parents are illiterate. Characteristic of illiterate societies, received wisdom and formulaic expression is prized - collective history is mainly oral, so revision or improvisation are discouraged. The school system and university education are structured around rote memorization. Asian culture is deferential to age and authority - these are also factors in monastic education.

All these facts mitigate against independence, creativity, critical thinking and analysis. Our children get intensive training in these areas in their Gap year, before they go overseas, but they do not have as much experience as western children have and they will need a lot of guidance. SMD is an ethically sheltered environment - our kids do not have any 'street smarts' - and our students are completely naive in the face of ill will.

Holidays

All our students who are overseas know they have Rinpoche's trust - he has expressly directed all overseas goers not to abuse their visa status - stay or work illegally. Overseas goers have all given a year of service (except the young ones who study pre-IB (Grades 10, 11 and 12).

High school students must come home on the long summer holidays. I build this into scholarship agreements.

Rinpoche had expressed the wish that his students consider higher studies in the medical and education fields - that is exactly what is lacking in the mountains. Not all students are cut out for such career paths.

- SMDers need to think about what they will do and how it will benefit beings
- They need to think how it translates back into Nepal. Does it address a need, or does it lock them out of Nepal. (Nursing locks kids into the West - foreign qualifications are not accepted and nursing is the very poorly - paid preserve of high caste Hindu women.)
- We encourage SMDers to come back after finishing their education
- Paths to consider: public health, psychology, nutrition, public administration, human rights, the environment, etc.
- 'Street smarts': our students are completely naive in the face of ill will
- Nepalese people need visas almost everywhere, sometimes even to transit airports. Nepali passports are about as welcome as Pakistani at frontiers.
- When you are making travel plans please do three things:
 - Write to me first. I know the angles
 - Do not listen to your travel agent about visas for Nepalese kids
 - Buy tickets that allow for changes and cancellations

If you want to travel with your Himalayan student, you have a better chance of getting the visa in your home country.

Some of our host families have been successful in getting several visas for their guest students...they appeared with the student when filing the application.

Director: Shirley Blair
himalayanchildren@gmail.com
Mobile: (977) 98510-68106
Skype name: himalayankids
Available on WhatsApp



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school zurich**

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potential • passion • responsibility

ICS Inter-Community School Zurich

Strubenacher 3
8126 Zumikon
Switzerland

Website: www.icsz.ch

Email: contact@icsz.ch

Tel: +41 (0)44 919 8300