

Ani Samten on teaching the monks at Ayang Rinpoche's monastery in Bylakuppe

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Why did I do it?

I was motivated to retire and be of service to Ayang Rinpoche by a friend and dharma sister who is a long time student of his, and already doing the same. When I told Rinpoche, he said he needed a teacher at his monastery in South India. My visceral response was 'YES', but I decided to visit for the month of February 2010 first, which was a good choice. At the end of thirty days it seemed like a good-enough match. Before I left, Rinpoche asked how soon I could return and how long I could stay. I hadn't thought about that. I retired December 31, 2010 and moved here February 2011, a year after my visit. I have now been here over three years, and will stay another 2 ½ years, until my passport and visa expire August 2016. My deepest desire is to renew them and return. Although I had been attending the Phowa course in Bodh Gaya, India every winter since 2006, I never had a burning desire to live in India. My burning desire was to be of service to Rinpoche.

Why do I stay?

I stay because I know I am meant to be here: it is a calling. The Indian and Tibetan people are intrinsically happy, despite their historical hardships. Living in their energy is inspiring. I have always been happy and content here; and most recently, I can say I really *like* being here. I can't think of any place I'd rather be, cultural differences and lifestyle challenges included. This is the least I can do to show my gratitude and appreciation for all Rinpoche does for the benefit of all sentient beings.

What does it involve?

First and foremost are pure motivation, immense compassion, and infinite acceptance, flexibility and humility. A sense of humor and ability to laugh at yourself (and the ideals we Westerners hold so dear)! You don't need to arrive with all of the above, but be willing to cultivate them! I can only say what my role entails: I am here to teach English, math and science to over 100 monks in Classes KG-6; teach English to the shedra (Buddhist College) monks; and tutor a few senior monks in English. In addition, Rinpoche asked me to teach Western standards of hygiene and sanitation (not part of the Tibetan culture), and to assist the cleaning monks in their jobs. He also asked me to teach the monks to care for the stray dogs at the monastery. Stray dogs are prolific in India, and basically ignored. Caring for them has required a huge change in cultural conditioning. I also help administer medication, raise funds for the monastery school and other projects, and anything else I am asked to do...or I see needs to be done. It is very difficult for me to overlook the needs of the monks (health and well-being, medications, eye exams,

hygiene items, computer/printer for the teachers, sports equipment, etc.). When a need arises, and they are endless in samsara, I do what I can to see they get met.

The teaching/learning approach is very different than the American way, and took me a while to adjust to it. I was a teacher for ten years before becoming a mental health counselor for twenty five. My training and experience in early childhood education and special education have been invaluable. However my staunch belief in hands-on learning, analytic thinking and deductive reasoning has been a handicap. Asian education is rote memorization, call and response, and copying from the board. When I arrived, the monks were unable to grasp the American way. I have had to let go of my ideals, and meet them where they were. Slowly, slowly I am integrating a more Western approach.

Most of the monks look and act about four years younger than the same-aged children in the US. Many would be identified as 'special needs'. Most are not from Tibet, and do not arrive speaking Tibetan. They speak Nepali. They are grouped according to their Tibetan skills, so most new monks start in Class KG. It is common to have teenagers who passed Class 4-6 in their native school, in the same class with the four year olds who have never been to school before. All the monks need a high degree of external structure, consistency and accountability, because they do not have the internal controls. Repetition is requisite because learning is slow. It is typical to cover only four topics in each subject, each year. Queuing (lining up), raising hands before talking, and waiting turns are not part of the culture, and have to be taught. Physical discipline is a part of monastic life, but in my class I successfully use positive reinforcement.

My classrooms are shared with monk teachers, who use them when I am not. They are equipped only with tables and benches (not desks and chairs) and a white board. Class periods are 45 minutes each, and each subject is held twice a week, which includes Saturday. There is no homework. Monks receive English and Math textbooks (which are not written in and reused annually), and notebooks for writing in. The textbooks are the same as used in the Indian public schools, but much of the content does not apply, so I pick and choose, focusing on functional skills. The classrooms are 'open' with street dogs, birds, geckos, and other creatures coming and going as they please.

All educational/teaching materials have been donated by our kind sponsors, or I have purchased them. I write, administer and correct the annual exams. I am expected to write questions directly from the textbooks, and prepare the monks for the exams by giving them the answers, which they memorize. Passing is a mark of 35. This is a religious training institution, not an academic one. Classes 4 to 6 often do not attend class for several days or weeks at a time because they are involved in pujas. Typical of all monasteries, if there is no one to teach academic subjects, the monks never learn them.

There is another academic teacher. He is a local, middle-aged Tibetan man who was hired in 2013. He is not a trained educator but is multi-lingual, speaking all the monks' languages and many of their dialects. He is a wonderful asset, willingly follows the lesson plans I give him, supports the hygiene and sanitation concerns...and the monks love him!