

# Friends of Taktse *UPDATE*

Taktse International School  
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U.S. 501(c)(3) agent:  
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### Planting Rice in Sajong

Our children's future depends not only on intellectual development, but also on the environment, food sustainably, and preserving the goodness of traditional ways.



How does it feel to be calf-deep in mud, cultivating a rice paddy with a team of oxen? How does it feel to cooperate with others to accomplish a hard job? How does a delicious home cooked meal taste after toiling for hours planting rice?



Taktse's annual trips to Sajong, a traditional rice farming village, help students appreciate the effort and expertise needed to grow their food.



Mr. Sonam Wangdi's family generously hosted us at their farm again this year, showing us how to plant rice, teaching us how to guide the oxen, and feeding us a delicious meal.

Taktse teachers worked alongside the children, persevering to finish the job when the rice paddy seemed endless. Afterwards, students captured their experiences by free-writing, and then bid farewell to their hosts.



### Contents

Sikkim Science Center .....	2
Himalayan Book Fest .....	2
A Pair of Star-crossed Lovers .....	3
Planting Pumpkin Seeds .....	3
Making Books with Anna Vojtech .....	4
Once Upon a Time .....	5
Death of a Salesman .....	6
Sharing Ideas: Mallya Aditi School .....	7
Brooksby Village Presentation .....	8
Faculty Meeting, Taktse-Style .....	8
Photo Gallery .....	9



### Taktse Principal Harvard-Bound

Taktse Principal Pintso Lauenstein is taking a one-year leave of absence to attend the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

Mr. Lauenstein will return to Taktse next year with a Master of Education.

This amazing professional development opportunity will expose Mr. Lauenstein to leading experts in education, which will benefit Taktse when he returns next year.

Mr. Lauenstein was awarded grants from Harvard and private sponsors to defray the cost of the program.

Ms. Maria Denjongpa, who teaches English and trains teachers at Taktse, is serving as Acting Principal in Mr. Lauenstein's absence, ably assisted by Ms. Suman Pradhan and Ms. Rekha Jain.

The faculty and students miss Mr. Lauenstein, but realize that this is an incredible strategic opportunity to further strengthen Taktse.

## Sikkim Science Center Field Trip

At Taktse, hands-on activity is an important aspect of formal education. Every experience has the potential for learning. The trip to the Sikkim Science Center at Marchak was a reward for the 5th and 6th graders, who did so well on their recent exams.



**Taktse's Second Himalayan Book Fest** *A little girl was crying because no one came from her home and she wanted to buy books. Then someone took her aside and bought books for her. The girl held her new books as tightly as if she were holding precious gems. – Shubhra Chakrabarti, teacher*



Ribbon cutting



Making wish lists



Lost in thought



Finding a favorite book



## A Pair of Star-crossed Lovers

by Heather Richardson Hayton

This past July, while on sabbatical from Guilford College where I am the chair of the English Department, I had the good fortune to teach Shakespeare's famous play, Romeo and Juliet to Taktse students. For three weeks, the 7th and 8th graders, their teachers Ms. Yolmo and Ms. Srijana, and I studied the play in its original 17th-century language.

We took several tests to make sure everyone was not just learning how to read aloud Shakespeare's language, but also knew what it all meant. For instance, the students learned what "iambic pentameter" was by writing Shakespearean sonnets on their own. Students also memorized lines and learned parts for a handful of key scenes, including the famous "balcony scene" and the fight-scene where Tybalt and Mercutio are slain. A few days before I was scheduled to leave, we performed our scenes in front of the whole school.

I'll confess I was nervous to be teaching such a foreign and difficult text to 7th and 8th graders. But Taktse students really showcased their abilities and impressed us all! By the end of the unit, they could pick out poetic elements like alliteration, simile, personification, and metaphor; point out rhyme schemes and meter; and translate 17th-century English into modern-day idiom.

I was especially proud of how they were able to make Shakespeare their "own" and were no longer intimidated by "The Bard." For example, when we talked about the play's message with the whole school after our performance, one first grade student in the audience volunteered that the play was about "the sacrifices we make for love" while another very young student stated it was about "the cost of peace."

Doing Shakespeare with Taktse students was transformative for me, too. Watching students grow in confidence and skill, and apply their Taktse work-ethic to such a hard task was inspiring! All of the student performances were great, but two moments especially stand out for me: the first was when Abhishek, as Romeo, put his heart on the line to tell Juliet how much he loved her in the balcony-scene. The second was when Rhana and Sangevin surprised us all with their re-choreographed version of the big fight scene in dress rehearsal. With moves inspired by Jet Li, the scene had us all on the edge of our seats and the audience burst into spontaneous applause when Romeo lamented "Oh, I am fortune's fool!"

Shakespeare is alive and well at Taktse!

*Acting out the role of a woman was a new experience. The clothes were so uncomfortable, yet I overcame it. Everyone was teasing me, but still I did not pay any heed to them.*  
- Amit Agarwal, grade 8

*The play was nice and entertaining. I liked the fighting scene, comedy and almost everything.*  
- Rigzin Ongchen Bhutia, grade 2



## Planting Pumpkin Seeds! New vocabulary words: fertilizer, sprout, germination, pest, and manure





## Making Books with Anna Vojtech

by Sandya Khati Ashrafee, Grade 4

I climbed the wide staircase that leads to the patio on the first floor of our school. My eyes were drawn to Anna Vojtech, the illustrator we were expecting. I walked up to her and introduced myself. She said that it was good to finally meet after all those emails back and forth.



I vividly remember her brown-rimmed glasses, tall stature and broad smile. Here was the world famous illustrator, but she wasn't intimidating at all. I couldn't wait to start working with her.

On the first day, Anna had the fourth graders make self-portraits. They were incredible. Some had noses that looked like cloves, some had eyes that were too close, some had hairlines too far above their foreheads, and some had teeth like grids. Regardless of the flaws, every portrait had its

own unique beauty. Each portrait said a lot about the young artist. I remember Sishek's blue streaked hair, Bhutia's prominent hair band, Rheah's unique flower designs, and Tsedel's lavish use of pink color. Tonnop and Jaswant's self-portraits looked almost like twins, Pema's was remarkably realistic, Sogyal's had broad eyes and Yeshey's reflected her own innocence.



I was just as excited as my students on the day we started making books. Anna introduced us to thumbnail sketches, an entirely new concept for us. Thumbnail sketches helped us plan the illustrations lay out of the text for the books. It took almost a week to finish the thumbnail sketches. Then we started working on the actual books. Everyone was engaged, and strived hard to do their best.

I had anticipated that Miss Anna would have had very structured formatting guidelines

for the pictures. It was very different; she let the kids draw according to their fancies. She would move around and softly compliment each student. Occasionally she would turn to me and whisper, "They're precious!"

Miss Anna's modesty, approachable nature and passion towards her work left an indelible impression on me. She brought out the hidden artist in my students and me. I hope she comes back again.





## Once upon a time...

by Anna Vojtech



Two years ago, Ms. Maria Denjongpa asked me to illustrate her children's books. I get such requests from time to time, but I have to turn down most of them. However, Maria's stories were interesting and well-written, so I agreed to meet her at my Gloucester studio. We had much in common. Beyond the fact that our sons graduated from Waring School, we shared a love of art, literature, good education, and much more.

When Maria told me about Taktse School and Sikkim, the seed was planted. It grew in January when I attended a wonderful presentation about Taktse by Pintso Lauenstein at the Waring School, and ripened with the contagious enthusiasm of Waring's Jim Watras and Diane Jirka, who had visited Taktse with a group of Waring students. In May, I found myself on a plane to Sikkim.

Arriving at Taktse after my long journey, I was awed by the breathtaking surroundings and the beautiful building, but above all I was moved by the warm welcome I received from the Taktse community.



My plan was to help the children create their own books as professionals do it. When I met Ms. Sandya and Ms. Bhavna's third and fourth graders, they already knew a lot about me from my website, and were surprisingly well-informed about books and publishing. I showed the children some of my sketches and originals, and I explained the process of creating a book, which takes time and patience.

The following day we started with self-portraits. The students also wrote about themselves. When they were done, we read their stories together. Then the children became each other's editors, shortening and improving their stories. I was impressed with how well the stories were written, and how closely and thoroughly the teachers worked with each student.

The first step of illustrating a book is to make a storyboard with thumbnail sketches. The children got to work with enthusiasm. It took a week to complete the storyboards.

For the next two weeks, the students diligently followed their thumbnail sketches.

Then, each student folded and stitched together eight sheets of paper. I worked with them and kept them moving in order to finish on time. When the illustrations and texts were done, the young author-illustrators made the dedication and title pages. They were proud of their beautiful books, and I was proud of them!

Later, Miss Suman invited me to talk to the 10th graders about my life in Czechoslovakia. I was impressed and touched by their insightful, open-minded, and sensitive questions. It is a reflection of how the students are taught at Taktse and I felt privileged to contribute.

The last day at Taktse wasn't easy, as I had grown very fond of all the children, their amazing teachers and the wonderful staff.

Now I'm back in my studio in Gloucester, with many wonderful memories and images of Sikkim. I'm thinking of all the budding authors, illustrators, editors and readers at Taktse School. I am truly grateful to everybody who made my trip to Taktse possible.

*Anna Vojtech is a well-known illustrator of children's books. Check out her web page at: [www.avojtech.com](http://www.avojtech.com)*





Taktse's 9th and 10th graders read Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman as part of their curriculum. The 9th graders also staged a production of the play under the direction of Brendan Pelsue and Ms. Dawa Yolmo.

**Death of a Salesman**  
by Brendan Pelsue

Nobody knocks on doors in Sikkim selling vacuum cleaners, so I was worried that the students would not be able to relate to Death of a Salesman by Arthur Miller, the play I directed when I was visiting Taktse. I also feared that they would struggle with concepts like ambition and capitalism.

So it was gratifying to see the students connect to the universal themes in the play, despite certain phrases that I had to explain to them. Much of the tension in the play revolves around parental anxiety over their adult children's financial success, while the children want to make their own life choices. The Taktse students easily related to the gap between parental expectations and their own ambitions.

As we worked on the play, I could see that the students comprehended it on an intellectual level, but I was often unsure if they were connecting to it on an emotional level. I wanted them to grasp the tragedy of the play. But there was this great moment on one of the last days, when we were reading through the final scene of the play in our literature class. I overheard one student lean over to another student and say, "This is so sad. This play is so sad." It wasn't something they were saying for me to hear, but I could tell that they were feeling the anguish of the characters.

A good literature class should be a dialog. At Taktse, that dialog was enhanced, because it wasn't just dialog between the reader and the text, but between me, as an American and these Sikkimese students too. The level of conversation that happened was layered, varied, and stimulating. It was a wonderful experience.



*"We have three days to finish the play!" exclaimed Mr. Brendan. I was excited, but a bit nervous too. Excited, because I knew we would have loads of fun enacting different scenes and improving our teamwork skills. Nervous, because we had many lines to memorize, and we had to present the play to the whole school.*

*When I was given the role of Biff, Willy Loman's elder son, I wasn't quite sure if I could be in character on stage because of the switch in gender. As a girl, I was unsure I would feel the emotions he would feel. But eventually, with the support of Mr. Brendan and my friends, I could act out the dramatic scenes without cracking up.*

*I enjoyed the experience thoroughly. When we messed up our lines or forget the stage directions, Mr. Brendan would patiently say, without scolding or getting angry, "Come on guys! Once again!" with a warm encouraging smile. And then I overcame my fears and gave my best.*

– Gawa Topden, grade 9

*The kids were really good and acted well. They could really communicate the message through their acting.*

– Mr. Deependra

*The 9th graders had more potential than I'd expected. I was thrilled to see my friends perform.*

– Pooja Tamang, grade 10

*To be honest, the play was tedious in the beginning, but once we understood the story, it became more exciting. Everyone wanted to participate, and to find out which character they would play. I was nervous performing on stage, but I guess everyone feels that way. In the end, it turned out to be a successful play.*

– Lekpai Dhendhup, grade 9



In June, Taktse supporter Zetta Herrick of the Brooksby Village Women's Forum organized a presentation about Taktse for residents of Brooksby Village in Peabody, MA. Paul Lauenstein presented a virtual tour of Taktse School, which can be accessed on Taktse's web site, [www.taktse.org](http://www.taktse.org).

Sonam and Aka Denjongpa talked about the progress of the new building, and the difference it will make as the phases are completed. Debbie Hilbert, Andy Knapp and Diane Jirka enthused about their visits to Taktse last year. Brendan Pelsue described his recent experiences producing Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* with Taktse 9<sup>th</sup> graders.

Please email Lonnie Friedman at [lonnie.friedman@comcast.net](mailto:lonnie.friedman@comcast.net) for assistance in arranging a Taktse presentation.



## Sharing Ideas: Mallya Aditi School

by Maria Lauenstein

Three years ago, Taktse Vice Principal Suman Pradhan and I visited the Mallya Aditi School in Bangalore as part of a survey of six leading Indian schools. We felt a special kindred spirit with Mallya Aditi, which, like Taktse, fuses progressive and traditional learning. For example, they offer instruction in English as well as Kannada, the native language of their state of Karnataka. Mallya Aditi maintains exceptionally high educational standards. Their students typically score very high on the rigorous University of Cambridge International Examinations. One even scored highest in the world!

Last year two Mallya Aditi teachers, Sneha Titus and Kalpana Surya, visited Taktse. They said Taktse reminded them of their school in its early days (Mallya Aditi is 26 years old). That gave us confidence that we were on the right track. They helped us understand the differences between the Cambridge and the Indian examination systems, and how these two systems prepare students for Indian universities, so we could better advise Taktse parents as to which system is more appropriate for their child.



Mallya Aditi founder Anne Warrior with Taktse's Sonam Wangdi

This year, Taktse board members Sonam Wangdi and Pema Namgyal, Taktse Principal Pintso Lauenstein, and I revisited Mallya Aditi. We took the bus to school each morning, and met with the founder, Ms. Anne Warrior and the principal, Mr. Jayarajan, as well as

teachers, teacher-trainers, and recent Mallya Aditi graduates. We also sat in on classes, and visited Azim Premji Foundation and Intel, which has an educational initiative...all in three days! Taktse instructors Mr. Riddhi Rai, Ms. Suman Pradhan and Ms. Dawa Yolmo also visited Mallya Aditi a week later.

Siddarth Prabhakar, a Mallya Aditi graduate, came to Taktse for a month to teach. He did an outstanding job. Other Mallya Aditi graduates may also come teach at Taktse. We hope the Mallya Aditi principal and several teachers will visit Taktse, and we hope to set up a student exchange program between the two schools.

We're thrilled to have this connection with such an outstanding school in our region.



### Pema Namgyal, Chairman Taktse Board of Directors

*"Part of the uniqueness of Taktse is that we visit many other schools in India and around the world, observing classrooms, talking to principals and teachers, and learning about 'best practices.' Doing so has given us important insights into our own strengths and weaknesses, enabling us to continually improve our school."*



*Jan Baker organized a book drive for Taktse, and hosted four Taktse teachers during their professional development visit to Gould Academy in Bethel, Maine coordinated by her husband Lorenzo in February 2010.*

## **Faculty Meeting, Taktse-style**

*by Jan Baker*

My husband and I have been in private education for thirty years. A quick calculation of weekly faculty meetings, most lasting a minimum of ninety minutes, could leave one glazed over. By contrast, the faculty meeting we attended at the Taktse School left us energized and smiling.

Our visit to Taktse was our first trip to India, an adventure into terra incognita. We'd read up on Sikkim, studied the Taktse website, and packed for the adventure. But one always takes gifts—what to take? We knew about the school's ambitious “books in the luggage” campaign, but heavy books were not an option since we were traveling first to other countries. However, we couldn't arrive empty handed, so what could we take that would be useful?



Games! Lightweight board games to reinforce English reading and speaking skills. It was a gamble, but we took along games like Cranium, Apples to Apples, and Bananagrams.

A day or two after we arrived, Taktse Principal Pintso Lauenstein invited us to a faculty meeting. It was held after school in the library. The teachers arrived, removed their shoes and sat on the floor, chatting until Mr. Lauenstein began the meeting. He showed the games to the teachers. Then they broke into three groups and played the games so that they would be familiar with them for use in their classrooms. Laughter erupted all over the room

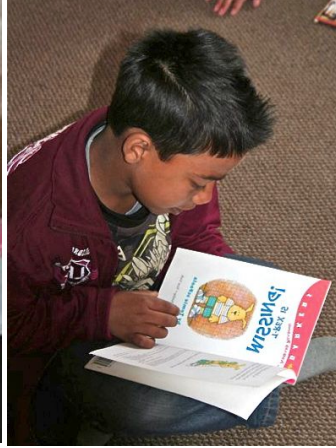
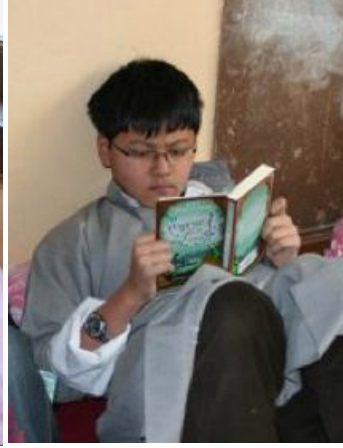
as teachers learned the games. Snacks arrived—trays of hot tea and fried chickpeas—delicious!

The teachers then moved to another part of the library where the librarian had laid out the latest arrival of books on the floor. The teachers looked them over, and then each selected a book. Then they took turns sharing why they made their selections, and how they planned to use the books in their classrooms.

The excitement, new ideas and energy at the meeting was palpable. It was both fun and productive, and showed us the valuable commitment the Taktse faculty makes toward shaping this wonderful, wonderful school.







Edited by Paul Lauenstein and Lonnie Friedman.  
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