

NATALIE RIGHTON & TON KOENE

# CHILDREN JUST LIKE YOU

REFUGEE STORIES

LEMNISCAAT



**Natalie Righton    Ton   oene**

# **Children Just Like You**

**Lemniscaat**

# ontents

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## **About the authors**

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# In the tracks of the yak

## Lobsang's flight from Tibet

**Lobsang Lungtok (12 years old)**

**Lobsang is a refugee from Tibet. He was smuggled across the border into neighboring Nepal, where he now lives as a real Buddhist monk in the capital athmandu.**

'I still get scared sometimes when I think about my escape from Tibet to Nepal. I was nine years old when my parents and I crossed the snow-covered mountain tops of the Himalayas. We were fleeing the Chinese, who had occupied our Tibetan homeland. For six days we made our way through the snow. It was a perilous and ice-cold journey. There were many times when I thought we wouldn't make it.

### **revices in the ice**

The mountains were so covered in snow that we couldn't see the trails. If we weren't careful, we could have fallen into one of those crevices in the ice! To avoid this my parents made sure we were led by two yaks. Yaks are long-haired Tibetan buffaloes. Sometimes they are smarter than people. They can smell the mountain trails through the snow. And when they step into the snow, they can feel if there's solid ground or a crevice underneath. We survived the journey by walking in the yak's tracks. That wasn't easy – yaks are much bigger than people – I had to take giant steps.

### **Over the mountains**

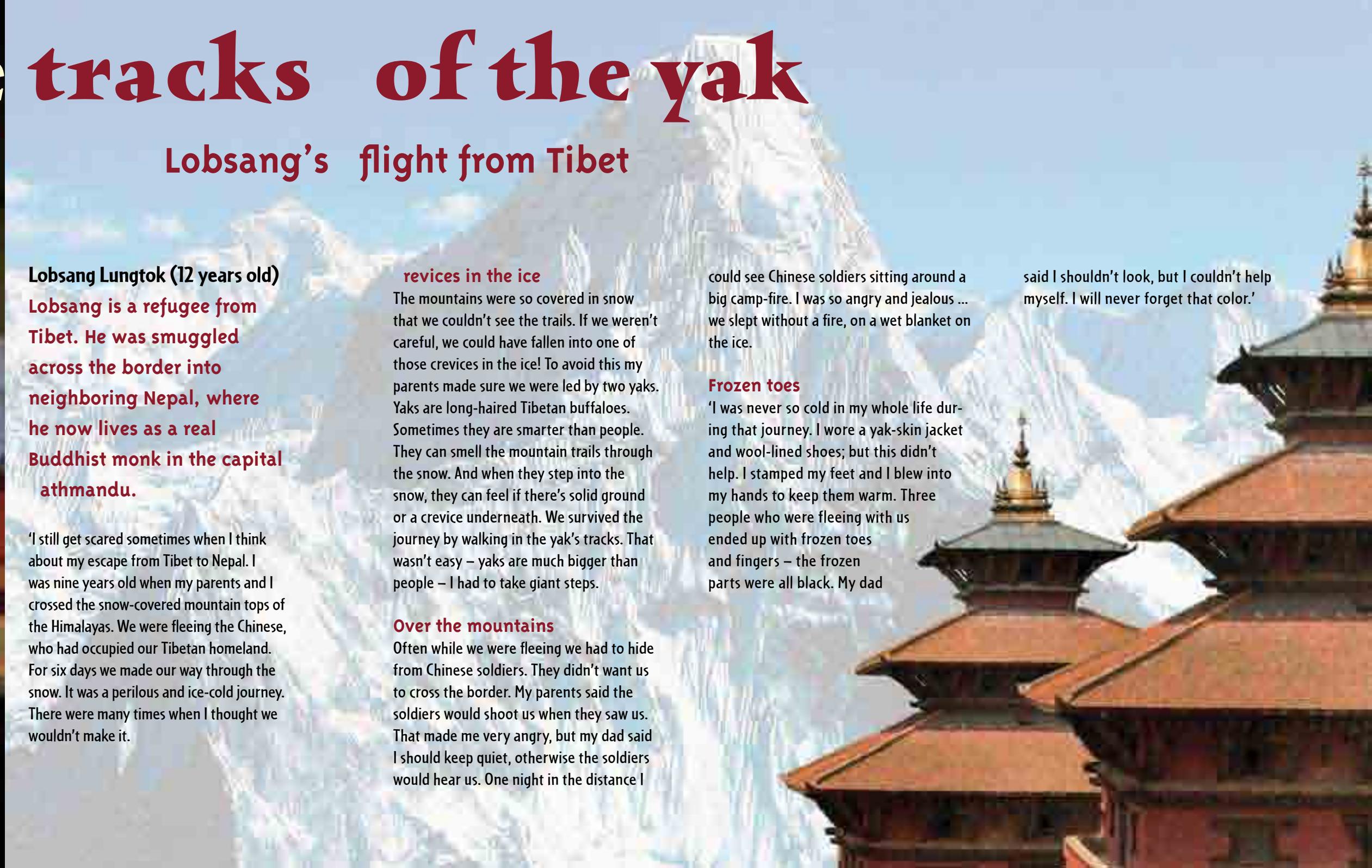
Often while we were fleeing we had to hide from Chinese soldiers. They didn't want us to cross the border. My parents said the soldiers would shoot us when they saw us. That made me very angry, but my dad said I should keep quiet, otherwise the soldiers would hear us. One night in the distance I

could see Chinese soldiers sitting around a big camp-fire. I was so angry and jealous ... we slept without a fire, on a wet blanket on the ice.

### **Frozen toes**

'I was never so cold in my whole life during that journey. I wore a yak-skin jacket and wool-lined shoes; but this didn't help. I stamped my feet and I blew into my hands to keep them warm. Three people who were fleeing with us ended up with frozen toes and fingers – the frozen parts were all black. My dad

said I shouldn't look, but I couldn't help myself. I will never forget that color.'



# In all my life I was never as cold as when I was in the Himalayas



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'This is where I used to live in Tibet. If I went to school or visited neighbors it would take me a half hour because houses are far apart from each other. We used to live by a lake, where I often went fishing with my dad. To the left you could see the Himalayas. When we fled to Nepal I spent six days walking over those snow-covered mountains.'

'One last kiss and then off went my folks'

## Bamboo bridge

'I remember well a wobbly bamboo bridge across a river. It didn't look very strong, so my dad sent a yak out onto it to see if the bridge could hold its load. But the bridge was so wobbly that the yak fell off it – I saw the yak drown, right in front of my own eyes. After that I didn't dare cross the bridge. But my dad had a long talk with me and afterward I got the courage to cross the bridge with him: step-by-step.'

## Hidden in the bus

'After trudging through the snow for six days we arrived at the border between Tibet and Nepal. There were few Chinese soldiers about (because of the cold) so we were able to secretly sneak across the border. On the Nepalese side my mother hid me under a seat on the bus headed for Kathmandu. She told me to be quiet until I heard the voice of my aunt calling my name. My aunt would meet up with me at Kathmandu and take me to a Tibetan monastery. Then both of my parents gave me a kiss and took off. They went back to Tibet, because they would never find work in Nepal. That was the last time I saw them. I knew this would happen, but I still got a lump in my throat.'

## Ravine

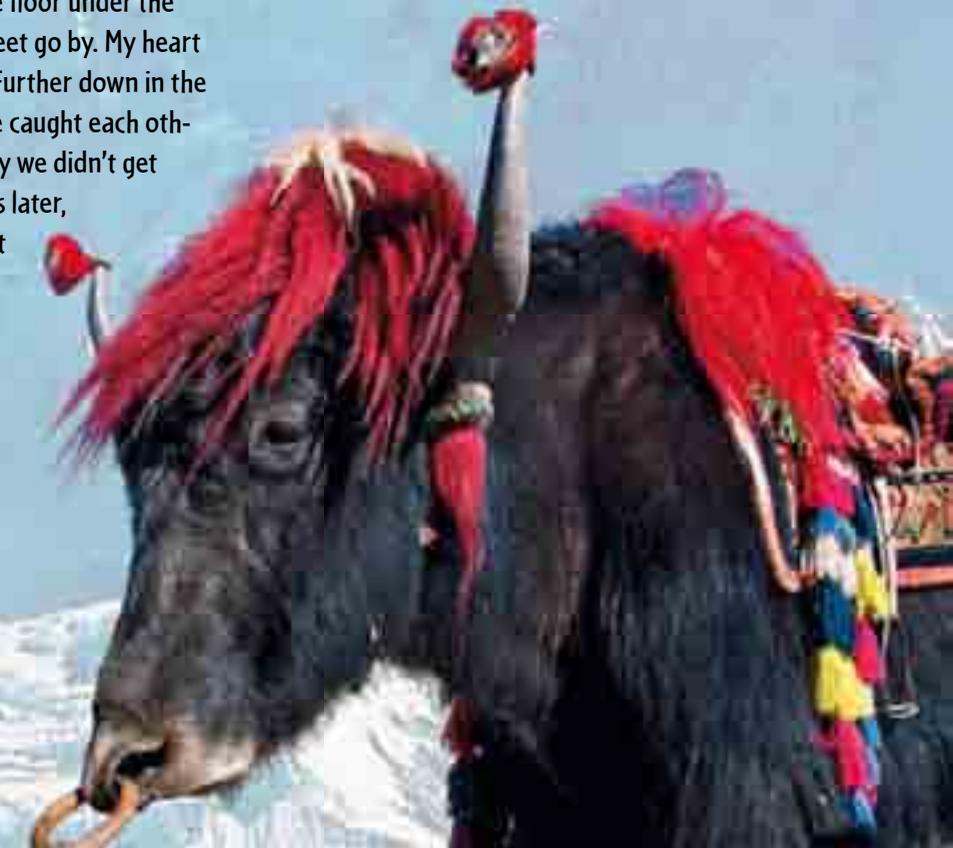
'The bus ride was maybe even scarier than the escape over the mountains. We drove along a narrow crooked road, right up against a ravine. Back in my village, I had heard that a bus like this had driven down into the ravine a week earlier. I was sweating like crazy.'

## Road block

'Once the bus was stopped by the police to check if there were any refugees inside. While I was hiding on the floor under the seat, I saw the officer's feet go by. My heart jumped into my mouth. Further down in the bus, a girl was hiding. We caught each other's glance. We were lucky we didn't get caught. A couple of hours later, as promised, my aunt got me from the bus. I was finally free!'

## Happy

'I've been living at the monastery for three years now and in all that time I haven't seen my parents. I really miss them a lot. The same for my old village and my best friend Kalsang (who I always used to play soccer with). But I'm still happy to be living in Nepal and not in Tibet any longer. Now I can go to school every day and I have seen my dream come true: to become a real Tibetan monk. I am really so happy.'



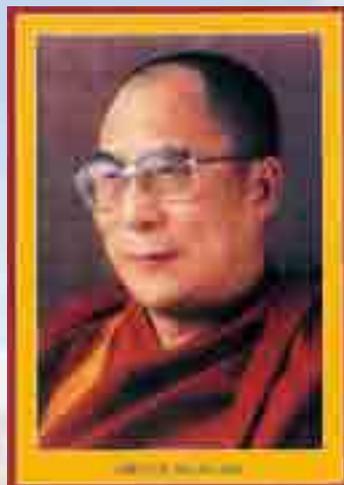
# At last safe in Nepal

## Why flee from Tibet

Tibet has been occupied by China for almost fifty years now. The Chinese consider Tibet to be a province of their country. To show who's in control there are a lot of Chinese soldiers in Tibetan villages. Tibetan refugees say they have been arrested and tortured without any reason. Possessing a picture of Tibet's spiritual leader – the Dalai Lama – is enough to land you in jail for months. China denies all accusations. However, most Tibetans don't flee their country because it's un

safe, but because China doesn't allow them to live as Buddhists. Over half of all Tibetan children want to become a Buddhist monk or nun. Many children also flee because they want to go to school. There are no schools in many Tibetan villages. A total of 150,000 Tibetans have fled. Each year 3,000 are added to this. Most refugees are children without parents living in monasteries or boarding schools in India or Nepal.

**Over half of all Tibetan children want to become a monk or a nun, but since they aren't allowed to in their own country they flee their country**



The Dalai Lama



This is Nepal's best known temple. Lobsang sometimes visits there to pray and to feed the pigeons. Tibetan monks consider pigeons to be holy animals.



# Being a Tibetan monk

## A shell for an alarm clock

'After fleeing Tibet my dream came true: I became a real Buddhist monk in a Nepalese monastery. I live here with 47 other monks. Many of them are boys my own age. Monastery life starts early – every morning at 4:30 I am woken up by a monk blowing on a huge shell in the courtyard. That shell is my alarm clock. It took weeks before I got used to waking up this early; but now I kind of like it.'

## Seven hours of prayer

'At five o'clock sharp I begin two-hour prayers in the temple. All the monks take their seats according to age: the youngest (6 years old) back-left and the eldest (85 years old) front-right. During prayers the elder monks swing side-to-side while chanting a low melodious tune. I still find it difficult to concentrate. My best friend Choklang often pulls silly faces that always makes me laugh! Luckily nobody minds. If I lose track as to where we are in the prayer book, an older monk helps me find my place.'

## Prayer book memorizing contest

'I spend about seven hours a day praying and studying the holy scriptures of Buddha. I'm pretty good at it. During this year's "Prayer book memorizing contest" I came in fifth. I beat 43 other monks! I know sixty pages by heart.'

## Precious possession

'While I was escaping Tibet I couldn't take anything but food with me. My most precious possession these days is a book containing sacred Buddhist texts given to me by the monastery in Nepal where I now live. I study it every day.'

## Praying seven hours each day

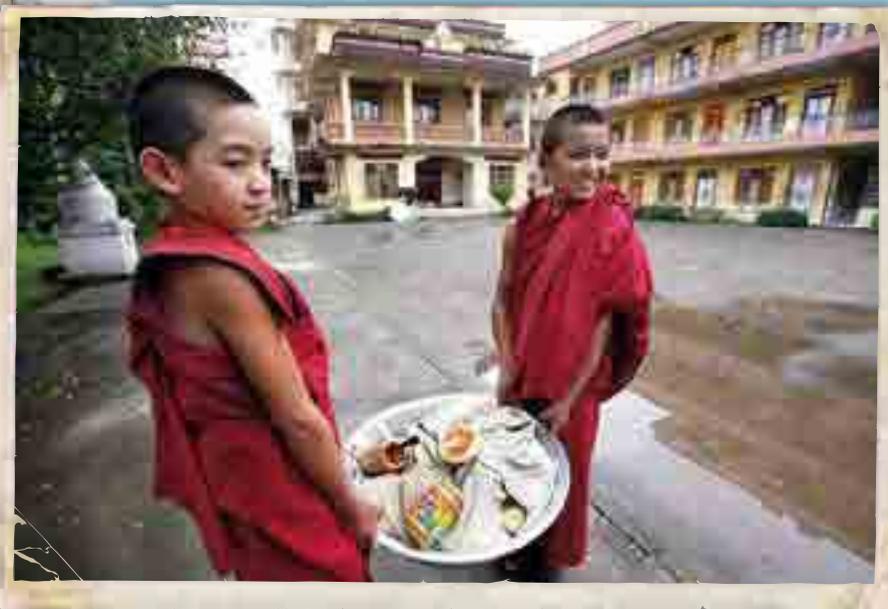


I study every afternoon in my room at the monastery where I have a bookcase with prayer books and posters of Buddha on the walls.

# A day in the life of Lobsang

## MY DAILY SCHEDULE

- 4:30 AM - 5:00 AM: get up: brush my teeth, get dressed
- 5:00 AM - 7:00 AM: prayers at temple
- 7:00 AM - 7:30 AM: breakfast
- 7:30 AM - 11:30 AM: studying sacred Buddhist texts in my room
- 11:30 AM - 12:00 PM: lunch
- 12:00 PM - 3:00 PM: school: writing and drawing
- 3:00 PM - 3:30 PM: tea break
- 3:30 PM - 4:30 PM: prayers at temple
- 4:30 PM. - 5:30 PM: dinner
- 5:30 PM - 8:30 PM: school: English, Tibetan or debating
- 8:30 PM: bed time



7:00 AM: Time to have breakfast in the temple. Two monks hand out white rolls with peanut butter. Lobsang thinks this is typical Tibetan food.

### Hidden monastery

'The monastery where I'm living is located in the heart of Kathmandu, the capital of Nepal. It's not easy to find our monastery, because there are countless temples in the city. They're all painted yellow or red. Some

are decorated with turrets on the roof. Inside are golden Buddhas, in front of which people kneel. The monastery not only has a temple, but also a dormitory, a school and a refectory.'

### The same clothes every day

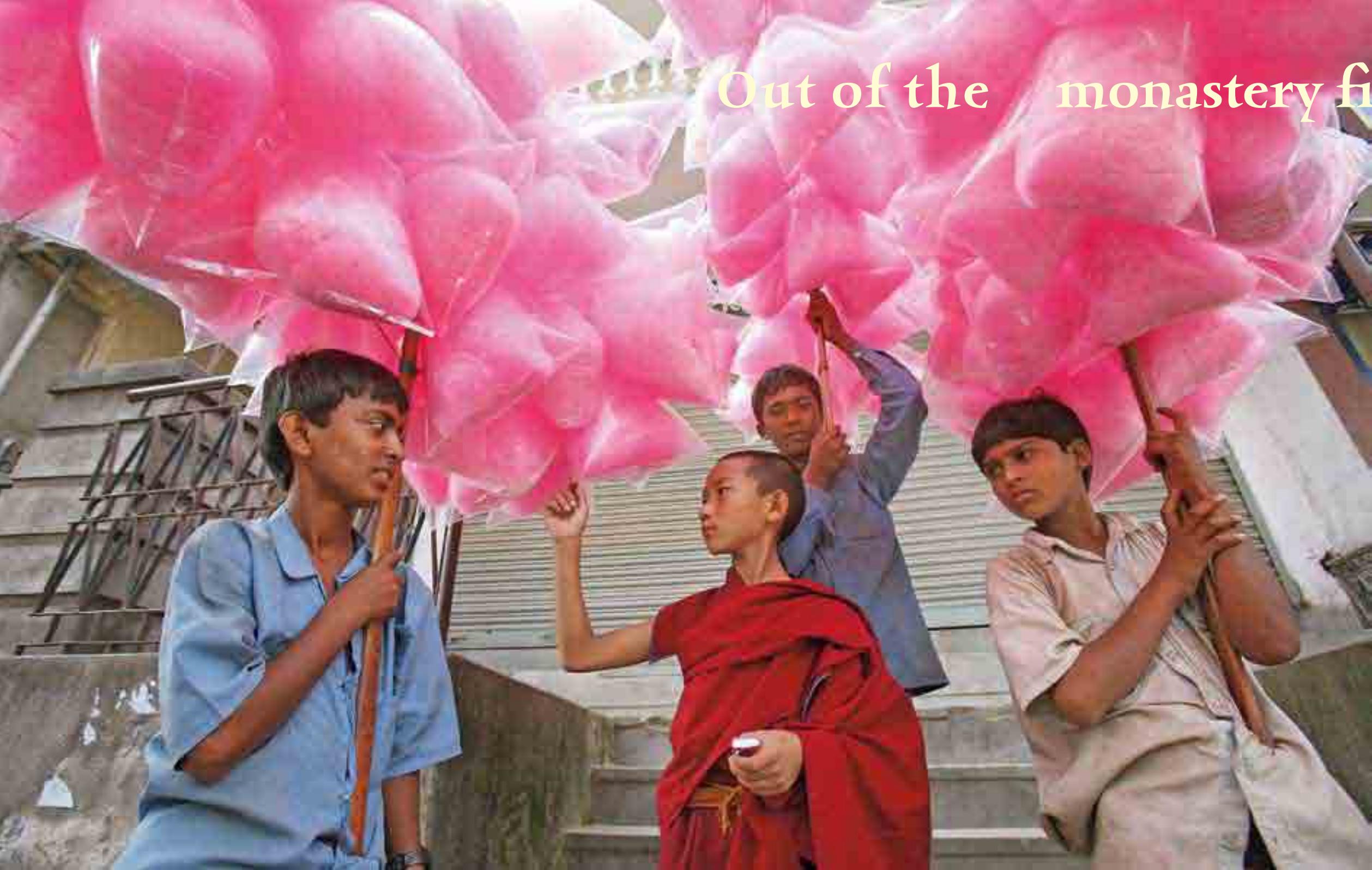
'Usually it's still dark when I wake up and go to the monastery bathroom to wash. There are tea-lights everywhere, so I can find my way. I never have to worry about what I'm going to wear, because every day I wear the

same monk's habit. It consists of dark red pants and a jacket. Over that I wear a piece of cloth that I throw over my shoulder. It is really comfortable, almost like a track-suit.'

## I get up every morning at 4:30.



4:30 AM: I get up and wash my face at the pump



# Out of the monastery five times a year

## Doing everything that's not allowed

'I leave the monastery only on special holidays. That happens five times a year. Together with my friends I can do everything that's not allowed the rest of the year ... for example, playing soccer or eating candy. Also on holidays we get a little pocket money from the eldest ... about fifty cents. What I like to buy best is cotton candy. Fifty cents buys me two sticks.'

## Missing mom

'When I'm allowed out of the monastery I can never go see my parents. The journey to Tibet is too long and too dangerous. When I want to talk to my mother I call the only telephone call-box in my village and talk to whoever picks up the phone. I tell them what time I will call back to talk to my mother. She then waits for that time. It always works.'

## 47 brothers

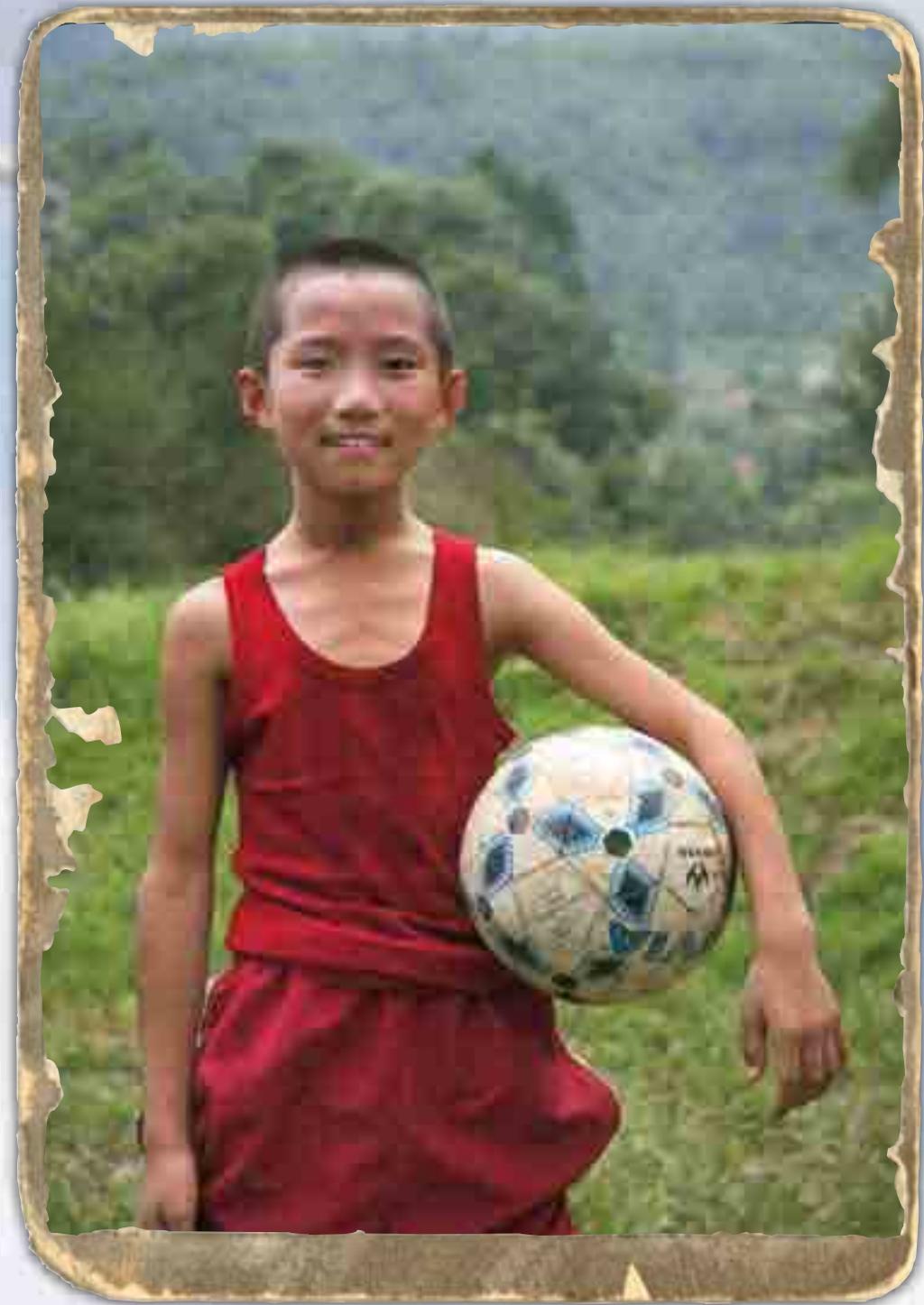
'The other monks don't feel sad for me just because I see or hear so little of my family – we are all in the same boat. They have also fled Tibet without their parents and only speak to them once a year at the most.'

We see each other as family. You could say I have 47 brothers in the monastery. In reality I have one brother and two sisters. They also fled Tibet and are now living at a boarding school in India.'

## Sad Dutch kids

'I'm very happy in the monastery with my new brothers. I think it's strange to hear that many Dutch kids would find it hard to live in a monastery, to pray every day and not see their family a lot. I think kids who aren't living in a monastery are sad – because outside the monastery walls everyone is poor, it's dirty and there's little food. I saw it myself when I walked outside the monastery walls. I can't imagine anybody would want to live outside.'

**I think kids who don't live in a monastery are sad.**



### Little time to play

Lobsang prays seven hours a day and goes to school for another six hours. There's little time left to play. But in the little spare time he does have, he likes playing soccer or shooting marbles with the other monks.

### Never having to work for money

As long as Lobsang is a monk he won't have to work for money. The monastery receives gifts from faithful Buddhists. There's always enough money for food and clothing. Some monks have a job just because they like to have one. You can recognize these monks by

## Leisure time in the monastery

their monk's habit. Lobsang wants to become a pilot so that he can see more of the world. But of course he only wants to fly wearing his monk's habit.

### WANT TO LEARN SOME TIBETAN?

Hello - fashi delek

I'm Tibetan - nga bhoepa yin

I'm from the USA - nga USA ne yin

Yes - yin

No - m n

Tea - ja

School - lobda

Thank you - fhukjeche

See ya (bye) - shukdhen ja



Playing a ball game



Shooting marbles



Playing soccer in the monastery courtyard



Fixing a kite

# Attending school at the monastery



'I attend school at the monastery. Along with ten other boys I spend six hours a day learning English, Tibetan and debating. I find writing Tibetan the most difficult. Tibetan letters are just like spaghetti; they're squiggly and all over the place! I like debating the most. We discuss important issues in life such

as: "Why am I a Buddhist?" I don't take Math and Geography at school because with all the prayers, I don't have time for them. I think that's a pity, because, for example, I don't know where the Netherlands is on a map. And I find it difficult to count change when I buy candy.'

**I don't take Math because with all the prayers, I have no time.**



My teacher



Tibetan letters are just like spaghetti; they're squiggly and all over the place!

# Tibetan

# food and drink

## Would you like a cup of tea with salt?

### Vegetarians

Lobsang, like all Buddhist monks is a vegetarian. Buddhists don't want to eat dead animals, because they believe that humans are reborn after they die. This is called

reincarnation – being reborn sometimes as another human being, but also sometimes as an animal. So when you're eating a nice piece of chicken you might be eating your dead grandma reborn as a hen. Luckily there are

many vegetarian dishes. Lobsang's favorite dish is called 'chow mein' (Chinese noodles with vegetables).

### Getting used to vegetables

When he first arrived at the monastery, Lobsang had a hard time getting used to vegetables. In Tibet he never ate vegetables, because very few grow there. What he ate was mostly rice and yak meat. And since he wasn't a monk back then, it was OK to eat meat.

### Welcoming tea

When you visit Tibetans you're always offered a cup of tea. It is their way of welcoming you. It is considered impolite to refuse. In the morning Tibetans drink tea with milk, butter and a pinch of salt. Tibetans only drink tea with sugar in the afternoon. So if you don't want to drink salty tea, it's good to know when to visit a Tibetan.



Once a week the elder monk goes to the market. On holidays, I'm allowed to go with him.



Many times I have to make tea for the other monks, and I do that using a solar kettle. The silver screen is heated by the sun and reflects the heat onto the bottom of the kettle. It takes an hour and a half for the water to boil.



# Religion and traditions

## **Buddhism**

Buddhism is both a religion and a way of life. Buddhists believe they are here to do good for every living thing – not only for human beings but also for animals and plants. They hope this makes everybody happier and that there is no more suffering in the world. Buddhists believe they are born several times, as a human being or as an animal. They call this

## **Birthdays**

Tibetans don't celebrate their birthdays. They believe their date of birth is not worth remembering. Lobsang has no idea on what day he was born. He's not even sure about the exact year. Tibetans have a different calendar than the one used in the Netherlands. Instead of using numbers they name each year after an animal. Lobsang's mother told

## **Born in the Year of the Pig**

reincarnation. If you are good, you might come back as a rich princess in the next life. But if behave badly, you might come back as an insect. That's why a Buddhist would never deliberately hurt anyone.

him he was born in the Year of the Pig. That means that now he is about 12 years old.

## **A new name**

When Tibetan boys and girls join a monastery, they get a new name. Lobsang Lungtok translates as 'he who learns the scriptures of Buddha'. When Lobsang is older and knows the Buddhist scriptures, he will get a new more suitable name. Some Tibetan monks get as many as four names in their lifetimes.

## **Burning incense**

Incense is burned everywhere in Nepal. Incense are little sticks that give off a pleasant aroma. Many people believe that incense is a way of connecting with God. They say that God can smell the incense. In a country like Nepal incense also has a very practical use. There's a lot of garbage laying in the streets and when it's warm this garbage starts to smell. Burning incense helps to get rid of nasty smells.