

2005 Fall — THAILAND



Because the first session of the first AMI course had been postponed, I offered to help keep the morale up, by giving talks in Thailand on the way home from India and Nepal.

I spent 10 days in Thailand visiting schools, talking to teachers, government officials, and school

administrators, every night writing the next day's talks based on what I had seen in schools, or on the questions I had been asked, in order to help people understand the core of Montessori from birth through high school.

Photos:

1 - A child using the traditional coconut balance toy

2 - Thai fruit models in a basket in a Montessori class-in-progress

3 - Some of the Thai teachers and Thai children



Photos:

- 1 - Course students working with materials in my own (1 of 4) *practicals* room
- 2 - Movable alphabet work in a school of one of the students
- 3 - Co-trainer Rita Zener visiting a student's school
- 4 - (Below) A painting "Buddha Swimming" that I did from photos of the Asoka Buddhist community which I visited in 2005, and where we all went during the first session of the course in 2005

The practical life of the Asoka community is very much like a Montessori community might be; close to nature,



reverent, organic, everyone sharing in the daily work and helping each other, research and learning.

For more information see: www.michaelolaf.net/thailandmontessori.html

2006 Spring — THAILAND



The First AMI 3-6 Course Begins

76 students from both private and government or public schools in Thailand, one from Singapore and one from Bhutan, attended the first session.

Photos: The outside of the college where the course is held and the main lecture hall



2006 Fall — NEPAL

The 2006 fall session of the Thailand course had been postponed and I had already cleared time, so I returned to Asia.

I had been put in touch with the Shree Mangal Dvip (SMD) boarding school for poor Himalayan children by Riza Weinstein of the AMI Alumnae Association of Canada. Riza and her husband have worked for several years to help build the school near Kathmandu, close to the Boudha stupa, the largest Tibetan stupa outside of Tibet.

The directors of the school are very interested in using Montessori ideas at all levels.

They want to create a more child-centered educational system for their 400 children, to help them

develop critical thinking skills instead of the traditional "chalk and talk" system now in use.



Nepal is one of the poorest country in Asia and was wracked by war for 10 years, making life even more terrible for the poor than ever.



The children travel to the school from villages that take "1 day by bus and 4-8 days walking" to reach. This school is their only chance for an education, and in many cases medical care and nutrition.

First

I spent a week with the children, sharing their meals and classes, to see how I could help.



They were already very, responsible and independent outside of class as a necessity, much more so than children in Western cultures. They do their own laundry, the older children teaching the younger and making sure their clothing



and their bodies are kept clean, even with one shower for 400 children.

While I was there children from 10-15 years of age were in charge of running the annual dental clinic.



The students had "proven themselves" by working in the school clinic for three years before being able to assist in the dental clinic.





They were in charge of reception, record keeping, sterilizing the tools, and even giving tooth-brushing

lessons to the monks, nuns, and students that came from schools and orphanages all over Kathmandu for dental care.

See: <http://www.himalayandental.com>



This was a strong foundation on which to build. However the academic model was very traditional, the students read from assigned textbooks, teacher talks or writes and the students repeat or copy, all as a group. The adults decide the curriculum.

Together the teachers and I discussed the following elements of Montessori: the three stages of learning, adult modeling behavior, respecting concentration, and ways that students could gradually move toward independent work and research, following interests, and learning to teach each other.

I showed the *Wonderful Two's* video, children in Montessori Infant Communities in Japan and Denver, which makes the potential of children for concentration and the resulting compassion toward others very clear for many people. Because the materials at this age are simple, instead of *Montessori materials*, viewers can focus on the children instead of the environment.

The principal was so inspired by the DVD that he told his son what these children could do. Then the son immediately looked for ways to improve his own independence at home!

One day I took two girls with me to the Tibetan Refugee Center and encouraged them to interview the doctor, the children, and the TV reporters who come to get the most recent news from Tibet.



I cannot post the pictures from this visit on this internet version of the EsF talk because these children may still be at the reception center and it could be very dangerous for them and their relatives in Tibet.

The SMD (Shree Mangal Dvip) students, while visiting the clinic at the reception center, met a woman who had had her toes removed because of frostbite, and saw pictures of the many other Tibetans who arrived from Tibet in terrible condition, needing food and medical help.

They interviewed a young woman who had had a good life in Tibet but wanted to go to school in the West and so has left.

They also sat in on a discussion between 4 of the international media reporters who regularly come to the reception center to interview arriving refugees, because this is the only source of true and up-to-date information about what is going on in China.

On the way home the two SMD students begged me to be able to stop at an internet cafe to do more research. They were so excited to be encouraged to follow their curiosity that they asked the head of the school the next day if they could give a presentation to the whole school about their "Montessori Day."

This was a first for the school and the principal was pleased, knowing that it was the result of the ideas we had been talking about.

As a model for students teaching each other, I

asked for a lesson on a Himalayan musical instrument, then gave a lesson on the guitar, and then asked my student to teach two others.



For more information on this school, and how to help them, go to the *children's projects* section of www.michaelolaf.net

2006 Fall — THAILAND

On this same Asia trip I returned to Thailand to continue research on the practical life of Thailand that a fellow course assistant and I had begun—with the idea of helping the 3-6 training course by understanding more fully the culture of the children.

Gunilla Kolmodin earned an AMI 3-6 diploma from Sweden, and has been living in Thailand for 10 years, her husband working as an engineer there. She is a fellow course assistant with me on the AMI course in Thailand. Together we visited the school of one of our students from the AMI course, and we gathered materials for the next session of the AMI course in April 2007.

Gunilla shared with me the work she has done creating Montessori environments for neighbor children over the years, both in their home, and in the poor country schools.



Photos:

Children working in Gunilla's home in the countryside, using Montessori materials that Gunilla and her husband have made or brought from Sweden: folding, language, sorting, dressing frames, pink tower, etc.



Photo: Metal insets being made by Gunilla's husband Håkan for one of the poor country schools where Gunilla also volunteers.



Just as in the first *Casa dei Bambini* in Italy, Gunilla first taught the children how to keep themselves, their clothing, and their environment, clean.



And she taught other practical life such as locking and unlocking with keys.

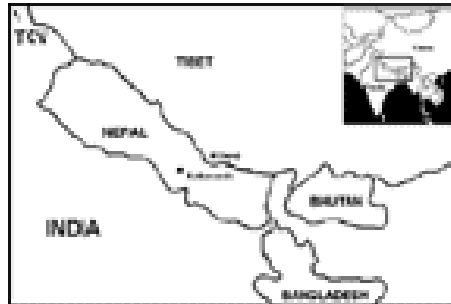


Photos: Boys weaving, showing off their woven pillows, and learning to write beautifully by means of metal insets, at a poor country school in Thailand.

2006 Fall — BHUTAN Preparing for Montessori Education

During this same trip I visited one of the Thailand course students, as a guest of the government.

Dendy (most Bhutanese have only one name) and her husband have a school for children from ages 3-12 in Paro, and they want it to be a Montessori school.



This is a picture of Dendy, wearing the traditional Bhutanese *kira*, standing in front of her home and school in Paro, Bhutan.

Bhutan is a Himalayan kingdom connected in many ways, just as is Nepal, to the Tibetan culture. I am always interested in how these peaceful cultures, based on Buddhism and daily meditation and prayer of children and adults, will incorporate Montessori.

There is such a similarity between the concentration that leads to normalization in the Montessori class, and the normalization of adults who practice daily meditation. Science is finally exploring this in such books as *Train Your Mind, Change Your Brain* (2007), by Sharon Begley.



In preparation for Montessori training courses in the future, it is valuable to collect information on the daily *practical life* of the culture: the

ways of shopping, cooking, eating, dressing, etc.

Dendy's family were very willing to share these things with me. Here you see her son Kinley teaching me how to eat with my hands.



And below, how to dress in the *gho*, the national costume of men and boys.





All over the world children easily observe and learn the way of life from their families.

Here a very young child, held on the back of an old man, perhaps a grandfather, watches as a large Tibetan butter lamp is being polished for a coming ceremony.

Below is the hot rock bath so famous in Bhutan. A sunken wooden tub is filled

with water, and then heated by means of submerged rocks that have been heated in a fire. This bath is at Dendy's family home.



Many children have traditionally entered monasteries or nunneries at an early age, sometimes because they want to become monks or nuns, and sometimes because it is the choice of the family, for either spiritual or economic reasons.



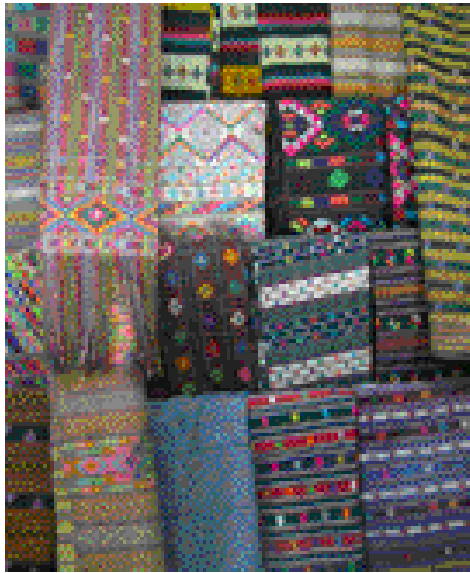
Dendy and I observed one young monk repeatedly being hit because he would not study. This is not uncommon throughout Asia. It is considered the logical way of disciplining. Dendy later talked with the head monk about other ways of teaching.

As in all countries, one of the main things I try to find out is "What do people mean by the word *Montessori*." I found, at least in India, Thailand, Nepal and Bhutan, it often means one of these two things:

(1) a preschool where children learn to read

(2) a school where children are not hit.

Weaving is an ancient tradition in Bhutan, and one sees evidence everywhere.



We visited two schools in the capital, Thimphu, and Dendy's school in Paro.

Sally Connellan from Australia has given several workshops to the teachers of both schools to help them implement Montessori and she will continue to help them.

It is very difficult when there are no Montessori books in *Dzongka*, the language of Bhutan, and no AMI Montessori schools to observe.

Weaving is done by both adults and children at one of the schools.



In one school, the children were taught traditionally but had the freedom to use Montessori materials when finished with their other work.

However in all three schools, although there were some Montessori materials being used, they were not being presented by fully-trained teachers.

The two trained



Montessori teachers, and Dendy who is in now in the midst of taking her 3-6 training, are also the heads of school so can't be in the classroom. This makes it easy for children to misuse the materials, weakening the establishment of a sound Montessori system.



In another class, a very well-intentioned teacher was giving a lovely lesson on the first presentation, and language.

of the *geometric solids* to the whole class.

But because the classroom was being run in the traditional way, the 24 children were sitting in their chairs at two tables watching as the teacher handled the materials. Then they each took turns touching the "cone" for a few seconds, and then learning the name.

This is an example of Montessori materials used to teach a concept, but not an example of a Montessori class.



The most authentic *Montessori* class I saw did not have many Montessori materials. The teacher was off in a corner and not the first thing one saw when entering the class. The atmosphere was quiet and busy. The materials were available on low shelves on all four walls. The children had learned to get out a floor mat, carefully remove the materials from the shelves and place them on the floor mat, to work for relatively long time periods, not to interrupt each other (perhaps because they were all happily busy on their own work) and then to put the materials back. These were toys, not didactic materials, but it was still the closest to an authentic Montessori class I had seen.

I believe that having mixed-age groups, respecting the 3-hour work-cycle, individual choice of non-Montessori toys, 1:1 lessons by the teacher, respecting concentration, and care of the environment through individual activities, should be stressed first.

Then it will be easy, once the teacher is fully-trained and has earned a Montessori diploma, to introduce the Montessori materials. Classes with this groundwork laid will be successful.



I gave two talks at Dendy's school. We discussed the child from the age of 6-12 because this is the age of most of the children at this school. There are many Montessori ideas that can be used at this level. I told them about my experience in Peru, teaching with no



Montessori materials, and showed *The Wonderful Two's* video so they could see the potential of the child.

The most exciting event happened before the first meeting: The son of one of the teachers took it upon himself to stack the children's chairs to make room for the teachers tables and chairs.

I asked those few adults who were present to not interfere or interrupt, to let him work. He arranged



the chairs in two stacks, then three, then one short and two tall, then three of equal size, then sorted the chairs by color, and then repeated the patterns. He worked for a long time, doing real work that was helpful, that engaged both his mind and his body, deep in concentration. He knew when he was finished.

This is what we look for in a real Montessori class and it was wonderful, for as Dr. Montessori said:

Follow the child.

QUESTION FOR SUSAN

The first question I get when sharing these experiences is "How can you afford the time and money to do this?"

Each trip is different. In order to afford going to the Australia conference, for example, I gave a 2-day workshop in Dunedin, New Zealand. In most places I am given room and board. From India and Nepal I have sent home Tibetan rugs, shawls and other items that supporters have bought in order to help cover the cost of plane fare. The Michael Olaf Montessori Company helps a lot. Also I do oil paintings, and sometimes have fine art prints made from them—the sales of which contribute to these humanitarian projects.

Most of all I have to thank my husband, a hospice volunteer and manager of The Michael Olaf Company, for whom service is the greatest joy of life. He supports everything I do, and agrees that it is more important for the Michael Olaf Company to be of service than of profit. We both feel that our work is helping the future of the world as much as anything else we could be doing.

As a result of these trips, other people have been inspired to go to these places, to involve their students, and in some cases their own children, in the lives of others, even becoming sponsors and supplying the room and board and education of many children.

Childpeace Montessori School in Portland, Oregon has become the sister school for Dendy's school in Bhutan, and our granddaughter Zahra, who attends Childpeace is the penpal of Dendy's daughter Omo. This is just the beginning.

THE NEXT GENERATION

Every time I return from one of these experiences I am overwhelmed with gratitude for the resources we Montessorians have, knowledge, based on experience, of the potential of humans, and tools to protect this potential from birth on.

Montessori has enriched our family life immeasurably. Our oldest daughter, Narda, has earned all three Montessori diplomas, considering them valuable for being a parent and for her work in the Peace Corps and the medical field, and now volunteer work in Guatemala. The second daughter, Ursula, who has the 0-3 diploma, considers her Montessori schooling the inspiration for a life of excitement about learning, teaching, and helping to improve the environment. And our youngest, Michael Olaf, who educated himself by means of "Montessori homeschooling," credits his ability to think, to create in the music field, to enjoy law school and helping others, and to maintain a physical, mental, and spiritual balance, to his Montessori education. The following is an excerpt from an email home from him, writing from Chennai, India, March, 2004:

This morning two friends and I went to the Mother Teresa Orphanage. All of the kids there are the ones that no parents will adopt because they have some kind of physical or mental defect. A lot of them had polio and couldn't walk, and one little girl was only about one foot tall and had a very deformed face. She had no arms either, only hands growing out of her sides. We spent a lot of time with her.

There was another boy who had very weak legs so we spent awhile moving his legs for him and trying to get him to exercise them. Eventually he began to straighten and bend at the knee and then he got very happy and started laughing when I touched his feet and moved his toes.

This has opened up for me what is important in life and what is not so important, and I know the feeling might not be with me for very long, but hopefully each time it sinks in a little deeper and stays with me longer.



THANK YOU!

With gratitude to my trainers and lecturers:

0-3, Judi Orion, Silvana Montanaro

3-6, Hilla Patell, Muriel Dwyer

6-12, Margaret Stephenson, Mario Montessori Jr.,

Abs Joosten, and many others

With gratitude to my husband, my children, and my parents and siblings, who support everything I choose to do. With gratitude to all of the Montessori teachers and administrators around the world who create the model classrooms that are the core of this work, and to all off the teachers and parents who constantly provide feedback concerning the use of the Montessori philosophy we share through the Michael Olaf publications.

And to the customers who support the Michael Olaf Montessori Company and the patrons who buy my art, all of whom contribute to this work.

We are all working together, each role essential in improving the lives of children around the world, and searching to discover and protect the human potential for peace on earth.



Susan Mayclin Stephenson
PO Box 890
Trinidad, California 95570
USA
susanonly@earthlink.net
www.michaelolaf.net/susan.html

The Michael Olaf Montessori Company
65 Ericson Court
Arcata, California 95521
707-826-1557
michaelola@aol.com
www.michaelolaf.net

Photo: Susan and Jim, Thailand 2007