

The Uninvited Guest of This Universe by Andrew Hinton

Tashi & the Monk won the 2016 Emmy Award for Most Outstanding Short Documentary. As a tribute to the compassion at the heart of this story, the filmmakers are offering the film in its entirety for viewing here.

Lobsang Phuntsok is a former Tibetan monk who trained with His Holiness the Dalai Lama and spent years teaching Buddhism and meditation in the West. In 2006, he disrobed and moved back to his native India, establishing a community in the Himalayan foothills for orphans and impoverished children.

Jhamtse Gatsal Children's Community—"jhamtse gatsal" means "the garden of love and compassion" in Tibetan—is the scene where the 2014 film *Tashi and the Monk* is set.

The community originally started with 34 children, and over the last decade has grown to house 85 children who are cared for by four housemothers and 13 teachers. Jhamtse Gatsal hopes to keep expanding so that 200 children can eventually live there.

In the following interview Andrew Hinton, the film's codirector, speaks with Lobsang Phuntsok about his turbulent childhood and what motivates him to give underprivileged children a better life.

Could you start by telling us who you are and how you came into the world?

My name is Lobsang Phuntsok. I was born in the state of Arunachal Pradesh in the remote Indian Himalayas.

When my mother got pregnant she was unmarried and still young, so it was a disgrace in the village. She gave birth in secret in our family toilet, where she left me covered in the dried leaves used to cover human waste. My aunt and grandparents heard something crying and thought a goat had got into their fields and was eating their crops. My aunt went out to check, saw something moving under the dried leaves, found a baby, and it was me. I had turned a kind of greenish-purple—I nearly died.

Normally, when you have a new baby, the family, friends, and neighbors celebrate. But my birth wasn't something to celebrate. I brought a lot of pain and embarrassment to my family. That's why when I was younger I was always called "the uninvited guest of this universe."

How was your childhood?

People really didn't like me. I created problems breaking people's windows and destroying their prayer flags. I particularly remember someone telling me, "You are not going to change. You are not going to get better." I don't know why that really stuck in my mind. Today still I can see the place and feel it. A couple of times I remember thinking it was

better to end my life. Luckily, I had my grandparents who loved me even when I was not lovable. I feel it is because of their kindness that I am alive.

Somehow they saw something inside me, but after a while they decided there was only one way I would change, and that was by going to the monastery.

My grandfather was a tough guy but soft-hearted. He wasn't expressive, but when there is love, you can feel it. My grandparents didn't have much but the day before I left for [the monastery in] South India, my grandfather stitched a sack out of a pair of his trousers and put a lot of money he had saved in it with my name on it. "Keep this always," he said. "Never use it unless you really need it."

It was only later that I was able to understand how much he loved and trusted me.

So at the age of 7 you left home for the monastery. What happened there?
The monastery had a very rigid schedule and very strict discipline. It was difficult for me as a child, but as a young monk my mind was engaged and I didn't have time to think. I had to follow the schedules, policies, discipline, activities, and things that we were doing in the monastery.

It took me a while to get better. I had a bad attitude about everything, but at some point I started thinking positively, growing in confidence, and believing that I could become a better human being.

One of the teachings I received from my teacher was: You are a tiny, tiny part of the larger family in this universe. You are only one person amid billions of human beings and other sentient beings—creatures, animals, bugs, and birds. This helped me connect to other sentient beings through my own challenges and difficulties. And when I do that, naturally, the focus changes. Instead of complaining, you ask yourself, "How can I contribute to my family, my larger family, to relieve them from their challenges?"

Today I really try to share my own challenges with the young kids, because most of them are going through very similar challenges that I had. I encourage them to believe it doesn't have to be negative. I see now it was a blessing to have had the childhood I did.

And when did you feel you wanted to turn your experience into something positive?
I think the seed of creating this children's community was in me from a really young age.

As I was growing up in the monastery one of the messages my teacher would always teach was to do something meaningful in your life. He would encourage us to pray and then evoke a motivation to do something useful for yourself and others.

Whenever I came back to my village, I would see all the kids facing similar problems—it was a clear message for me to do something. I'm not experienced in this line of work, I'm not educated enough to do what I'm doing today. But I speak from my own experience of growing up in a difficult situation.

What I have today is because of others' kindness. And now my biggest responsibility is to repay that kindness. I remind myself that no matter how difficult a child may be, I will never lose faith or confidence in them.

What is the significance of the name of the children's community?
Jhamtse Gatsal means "the garden of love and compassion." It truly reflects what we are

doing here. These children need a family, love, and a sense of belonging.

That's why I decided to call it a children's community—it is their family, their community, and their life. They are not orphans at Jhamtse Gatsal. They have parents here, they have many mothers, they have many fathers, and they have many siblings who care about them. And they are getting all the care, love, and support that they deserve.

And why did you start the community here?

This region [the Tawang District of Arunachal Pradesh] is still one of the most disadvantaged areas educationally, medically, socially, and economically. When we started this community in 2006, it was so remote that we often said it was like the way to Jurassic Park. Driving here was only six or seven kilometers from a small town but through a thick jungle, where even in the daytime you would be afraid to walk by yourself.

So in a way I feel that the community itself started out a little bit like an orphan. It wasn't really a desirable place or somewhere that people felt would do good work.

Who are the kids and where do they come from?

Many of our children are actually the first generation to get an education. When we visit the villages we are not looking for the smartest kid in the family—instead we ask: Who are the difficult kids? Who are the kids that nobody wants?

Our job is to accept the children nobody else can take care of and nobody else wants, and help this child transform into the most amazing human being.

And you do that using only love and compassion?

Almost every kid in the community had a very difficult childhood back in their village. People would say "My goodness, you will need doctors, you will need psychologists, psychiatrists there to help these kids." But in our eight years in history we have not given any medication to our kids.

First, I think it is the simple life at Jhamtse Gatsal. We accept the child—we embrace without making a judgement, the good, the bad, anything. Next we really try to create a space for them and be supportive of them.

Then there is the power of love, the power of care or the power of compassion that we are giving to each and every child. And that becomes the main healing for every kid here. And I strongly believe that that works. Yes, it takes time, but eventually the kids transform.

In the community our kids are equally responsible for everything they do, which teaches the kids responsibility and how to be an active participant.

I think it is really obvious that our kids are not passive beneficiaries—our kids are active agents of the change and transformation we are making in the community. They are supporting each other, helping each other, making things happen—from cooking to construction, to cleaning, helping younger siblings, washing, bathing, doing laundry—every activity that we have in the community the kids are actively involved in. In that way the sense of community and supporting each other when it is needed is definitely unique about Jhamtse Gatsal.

Is the community still growing?

One of my most difficult jobs is when and how to accept new kids. Right now we have 85 children in the community, with more than 1,000 requests for other children.

Every day people come to me asking to take more children. It is very difficult. If I say yes to one family I am saying no to 10 others. At present we don't have enough accommodation or resources to take any new kids.

Finally, what is your practice?

My main practice is always based on my training to generate more compassion, stabilize myself, remain focused, and practice on patience and perseverance.

Human beings—rich or poor, East or West, educated or uneducated, man or woman—all have one thing in common: we all want joy and happiness in our life.

I feel lucky that I found something in my life where there's so much happiness and joy doing something useful and meaningful. That is what I feel. I am so lucky. I pray I may take many rebirths to come back and continue this type of work. There is so much joy and happiness in doing it.