

Monks share message of peace

By KATHLEEN DUFFY

The Medford Sun

Tsawa monks enter the Gaden Jangtse Monastery in Southern India as children, some as young as 6 years old.

The monastery feeds, clothes and educates them.

“They come to monasteries because it’s one of the places where they can be raised,” explained Jeff Beach, driver and ombudsman of a group of Tibetan monks traveling from the monastery to North America to spread cultural awareness.

While not required to remain monks through their lives, there is a Tibetan tradition for one son to become a monk, and, if one is conceived, a daughter to become a nun.

With the current diaspora occurring, Tibetans are escaping harsh conditions.

Tibet is located below China and above India, Bhutan and Nepal.

Seven monks visited the Medford Friends Meeting House on Wednesday, June 27, reciting prayers, creating a sand mandala and telling their story.

There are more than 2,000 monks in their monastery, said group leader Geshe Dorji Wangchuk, many of whom came to receive an education.

Therefore, the monks undertook the tour for three reasons: to share their culture, to discuss and practice together and for educational support, said Wangchuk.

“We have a sponsor program sponsoring monks for \$20 a month,” Beach said. “They are real poverty level conditions which is common around India. India is no rich country.”

While they have medicine and clean drinking water, the contrast between the wealthy and the middle class is evident everywhere, said Beach, who has traveled to India to teach English Conversation and Meditation and has been a Tibetan Buddhist practitioner for 18 years.

“The Buddhist philosophy is based on the Four Noble Truths,” he explained.

The nature of this world is based on clinging to attachments, which causes suffering.

To escape suffering, Buddha developed the Eightfold Path, which is the way to liberation.

“All Buddhism comes from those two things,” he said.

At the meeting house, where the organizers had donated the space, the monks began their program with a Puja Prayer, which incorporated throat singing, reed instruments from China, long horns, drums and cymbals.

“The instruments represent thunder and lightning,” said Beach, and the prayer was an offering to the gods.

After the half-hour long prayer, the monks set to work creating a sand mandala, a process known to take four to six hours, according to Beach.

Five elements were represented by the colors: earth, water, air, fire and wood.

“These are the essential elements of life,” he said.

In addition, they could also represent the five Buddha’s or the five directions.

“There’s lots of different meanings,” said Beach.

At the end of the day, the monks were to deconstruct the mandala and disperse the sacred sand to onlookers.

“I didn’t even know what a mandala was,” said Cindy Battista, who had driven down from Connecticut to watch the monks. “It’s so pure.”

Her relative, Stephen Lapp, also drove from Connecticut, but lives in Las Vegas.

“I had to come down,” she said. “I couldn’t resist.”

Lapp called the experience “once in a lifetime.”

“It’s just beautiful,” she said. “I think it’s fantastic. I’ve always wanted to go to India.”

Venue coordinator Michele Halliwell first saw the monks at Georgian Court University in Lakewood and was able to secure a date at the meetinghouse.

“I was in the right place at the right time,” said Halliwell. “How often do you get to see Tibetan monks?”

Different sects of the monks come each year, she explained. The Tsawa monks would not be back for three more years, but another group will begin their tour in the fall.

“Their purpose is to share their culture with us; their message of peace,” she said.

Beach has now been on the road with the monks for nine months and has found interactions with them to be “harmonious.”

“You would expect that there would be dissention and there isn’t,” he said, pointing out that the monks are human beings, not celestial creatures.

He plans to write a book to be titled *Across America with Seven Buddhist Monks: I’m Peddling As Fast As I Can*.

He called his experience to be “absolutely extraordinary.”

“Being with them is fine,” he said. “I don’t have an issue. I’m not a stranger to what they’re about.”

As they crouch in front of their mandala creation, acting by memory, Beach said that the monks get tired, but their bodies are used to the position.

“It’s pretty amazing,” said Beach.

For more information on the group of monks, visit www.tsawamonksusa.com, email monks@tsawamonksusa.com or call (626) 823-0451.