

FMS-Altach

Insights into a Buddhist school!

By **Guntram Ferstl**

For the past four years, the Austrian private school Freie Montessori Schule - Altach (FMS-Altach) with Buddhist confessional recognition by the Austrian Buddhist Religious Society (ÖBR) has been undergoing a transformation to integrate Buddhist practice and wisdom – a report.

Please, take a little fantasy journey with me. Imagine that your Buddha eye is open and you see what is happening in a morning lesson in the Lynx class in Altach, Austria. The students, aged 6 to 9, are painting and doing handicrafts - everything is happening calmly and with a good humor. But then the door opens and a nice young woman comes in and strikes the singing bowl - Gong Gong Gong. Three girls raise their heads and go together to the teacher and ask: May we? The teacher nods and the girls leave the classroom with a smile and go to a room at the end of the corridor. There is a door opened just a small gap. In complete silence, they go inside. In the room are a teacher and several other students sitting on a meditation cushions. Most of the students have their eyes closed

and seem to be enjoying the energy. peace, silence ... Few minutes later, two boys leave the meditation room and walk out, but the door remains open a small gap. ... (because closing the door makes noise during meditation).

For me, as a mentor on Buddhist issues, I wanted to show how the open meditation lesson works. Experiencing this as a teacher is amazing and wonderful - the meditation lesson tops the charts. Each week, students have the opportunity to visit the meditation room for one lesson as long as they want.

But back to the origin of Buddhist history at FMS-Altach. In Austria we have an interesting situation for Buddhist students, because

Buddhism has been a state-recognized religion in Austria since 1983. On the one hand, this means that Buddhist students can be taught by Buddhist teachers at school. This is very rare in Europe. On the other hand, there is a special law for private schools in Austria that creates financial advantages if the school has state religious recognition. In May 2019, FMS-Altach became the first private school to receive Buddhist denominational recognition from the Austrian Buddhist Religious Society (ÖBR). About 9 or 10 months before, the board of FMS-Altach was very eager to contact ÖBR. At first the ÖBR showed not a big interest in a Buddhist school. But the board did not let up and tried again and presented ÖBR with an elaborated concept. The persistence of the FMS-Altach and

the concept signaled seriousness. Several conferences followed to clarify the legal provisions and Buddhist guidelines. But what does state recognition mean in the example of FMS-Altach? When we started in the school year 2019/20, there was no person with a Buddhist confession at the school, but many parents who are positive about Buddhist practice and wisdom. The board of FMS-Altach wanted to have a Buddhist teacher as a mentor at the school. Here I came on the scene because I am the only teacher in the State of Vorarlberg. The idea was that the mentor would lead a process that would bring the students, parents

and teachers into contact with Buddhist practice and teachings. At the same time, when I started as mentor, Alexandra Matt became English teacher in FMS-Altach. She is very important, because she is also a Buddhist and gave from the beginning a lot of support in the whole process. The principal and I took a very gentle approach the first year, because we didn't want to mission or indoctrinate. We wanted to make offers, for example workshops called "Happy like a Buddha". Some students attended these workshops and were enthusiastic about the meditation and the stories about Buddha and the Buddhist

Dharma. For the parents, I gave three lectures as an introduction to Buddhism, but a few months later Covid 19 rocked the world. A time when people learned a lot about digital communications, through YouTube I gave several meditation instructions. In the second year we have set up classes on Buddhism and philosophy in the afternoons for two groups. One group for the little ones and a second for the older students. This was extraordinary because of the time spent on classes during free time.

In the 3rd year, we set up BREP (buddhism religion ethics philosophy) in the morning classes for the students with no religious





engraving mani stones



opening ceremony with choir



open meditation lesson

affiliation. We had three classes, for the youngest students (6-9 years old), the intermediate students (10-12 years old) and the oldest students (13-14 years old). Each class lesson starts with singing the refuge song and a few minutes of meditation. They learned about the life of Buddha and the Dharma. The oldest students were very interested in reincarnation. The youngest ones like the rituals at the altar, the lighting of the candle, the offering of incense and love the chanting of the Refuge.

The same year, the board set up a working group for Buddhist events. Three parents and I had the task to

think about events and workshops for the adults. We decided to organize a big event for the Vesakh festival. A festival for children and adults was our aim where the people feel the spirit of Asia with peace and happiness. We called the festival Buddha Day and had an amazing program. Students performed a play about „Buddha and the wild elephant Nalagiri“. Bhante Sujatha, a monk from Sri Lanka gave us a Dharma talk and meditations. The people were inspired. Children painted chinees calligraphy, made Mala necklaces and engraved Mani-stones. Yoga lessons and a lecture about aryu veda were other programs

for adults. Vegetarian food, delicious cakes and non alcohol drinks rounded the program and took care of the physical needs. Altogether, the Buddha Day sent blessed dharma-vibes in to school. Especially because Bhante Sujatha spent time with all the students and teachers at the school for Dharma talks and meditations in the run-up to Buddha Day. It was a great Dharma fortune for us that Alexandra Matt hosted Bhante Sujatha and we were able to invite him as a special guest with his qualities of loving kindness. Now in the 4th year, parents can participate in meditation

scene Siddhartha and the swan



Guntram at Buddha Day 2023



students of BREP with mentor

workshops, such as metta meditation, vipassana meditation, or Tibetan meditation practices. We also set up an open meditation session for the students every week, led by several teachers in some weeks – as I told in the introduction.

The biggest event was the second Buddha Day with many interesting program items: Dharma talk by Bhante Sujatha, a talk on mindfulness education for parents, a mantra concert and a yoga class. The play "Prince Siddhartha and the Swan" performed by the middle-aged students was fantastic. They had wonderful costumes and acted

very professionally and with a lot of enthusiasm. The children were very happy as they made mala necklaces, sand mandalas and engraved mani stones. A choir accompanied the event especially at the beginning and at the closing ritual. In perfect weather, parents offered homemade delicious vegan food and sweet cakes. So many helpful and inspired people made this event possible - a great blessing to all. The entire event was free, only DANA boxes invited generosity. The proceeds will help needy mothers in Sri Lanka, who are supported by Bhante Sujatha.

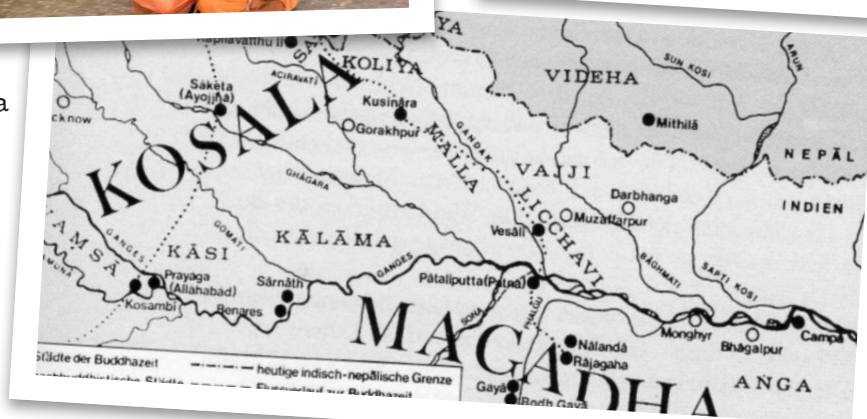
For next year, the principal has opened access to BREP classes to Catholic students as well. This means that a total of about 50 students will attend BREP.

It has been shown in the last four years that we have very good conditions for Dharma because the cooperation with the board and the principal Heidi Haas is excellent and many parents are very motivated to support the spiritual development at the school. All in all, a lot of good things have happened at FMS-Altach in the last four years and we hope that the Dharma will take more and more roots. 🙏

closing ceremony



Siddhartha and Devadatta



map Buddhas hiking trails scgumann

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