

RESEARCH NOTE

A BRIEF HISTORY OF RIGSUM GOENPO LHAKHANG AND CHOETEN KORA AT TRASHI YANGTSE*

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Lama Tshering Gyamtsho from Punakha Dratshang¹ who lived during the 18th century was a close disciple of the 9th *Je Khenpo*² Shacha Rinchhen. He was destined to explore the sacred places of Guru Rinpoche³. In his quest, he reached a place called Pemaling located towards the north of Trashi Yangtse in eastern Bhutan. There he found a cave with clear body prints of Rigsum Goenpo (Jampalyang, Chhana Dorji and Chenrezig)⁴. A powerful local deity called Genyen Phanbu was the guardian of this sacred cave. The Lama befriended the local deity through his spiritual powers and built a small *lhakhang* for his meditation.

After the death of Lama Tshering Gyamtsho, his nephew and spiritual heir Lama Jangchhub Gyeltshen took over the entire responsibility of the cave and the *lhakhang*. He renovated and extended the present-day lower *lhakhang* with unique mural paintings of the life history of Lord Buddha (*Paksam Thrishing*) which can still be seen. The *lhakhang* was named as Rigsum Goenpa Lhakhang. Lama Jangchhub Gyeltshen was instrumental in spreading Buddhism in the region until his soul transcended into the Nirvana. He had already found his spiritual heir in the person of Lama Ngawang Loday, his beloved nephew.

* This article is based on discussions held with Lopen Namgyal in 1994 and Lam Dorji in 1999-2002. Lopen Namgyal was a *kangjo* of the old Trashi Yangtse Dzong for 37 years. Lam Dorji is serving his 27th year as the Lam of Rigsum Goenpo Lhakhang. I would like to acknowledge with gratitude their valuable contribution.

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While Lama Ngawang Loday was reinforcing religious activities introduced by his uncle, His Holiness Yonten Thaye, the 13th *Je Khenpo* (1771-1775), who was on his way to Tsari Rongkor (Mountain Pilgrimage) in Arunachal Pradesh, India visited the region and ordained him as the 3rd abbot of Rigsum Goenpa Lhakhang. He was a famous lama who left behind a great spiritual legacy. He constructed the bigger *lhakhang* and installed valuable *ku sung thukten* (sacred artifacts representing the body, mind and speech of the Buddha) including the statue of Jowo Shakya Muni, hundred volumes of *Kanjur*⁵ and the eight enlightening stupas of Lord Buddha (*Desheg Choeten Gyed*) for the well being of the people of Bhutan. The statue of Jowo was brought all the way from Punakha Dzong. It was made by the famous craftsmen and iconographer Pentsa Dev from Nepal during the reign of 4th *Desi*⁶ Gyalsay Tenzin Rabgay. So sacred is the statue that the fifth abbot of the *lhakhang*, Lama Shacha Gyalpo is believed to have witnessed it speak. Hence, the name Jowo Soong Joem - the Jowo that spoke.

Major reconstruction works at Rigsum Goenpa Lhakhang are under progress. The works which were initiated by the *dzongkhag* administration and the people and sponsored by the Royal Government of Bhutan are expected to be over by the end of 2002.

Lama Ngawang Loday wished to construct a replica of the Bodhnath stupa of Nepal in Kholong chhu⁷ valley in memory of his late Uncle Lama Jangchhub Gyeltshen and to subdue a demon dwelling at the site where the *choeten* was to be constructed. Guru Rinpoche and his brothers⁸ had constructed the Bodnath stupa popularly known as Jarung Khashor in their previous lives.

Lama Ngawang Loday and his friend Lama Zangpo from Tawang, Arunachal Pradesh set on a journey to Bodnath. Both returned home with a model of the *choeten* which was quickly made out of radish. They were determined to construct similar *choeten* in Trashigang and Tawang.

Consequently, Lama Zangpo constructed one at Pangchanang valley in Tawang, which is known as Gorzam Choeten today. Lama Ngawang Loday constructed another in Trashigang valley and was called Duerong Choeten. It later came to be known more popularly as Choeten Kora. By the time they arrived home, the radish model had shrunk distorting the shape. As a result, the *choeten* particularly the one at Trashigang valley underwent some changes in design especially in the level of galleries.

The construction of Choeten Kora took 12 long years. It was supported by disciples of Lama Ngawang Loday and devotees from Trashigang, Trashigang and Kurtoe valley, and also by people from the neighboring tribal communities of Tawang. His Holiness Je Yonten Thaye made his second visit to the valley, consecrated the *choeten* by making offering of the mandala of Dechhog Paochigpa, and blessed the people in the valley. After the construction, the demon that harmed the people was subdued and banished. Thereafter, it is said that the people in the valley continued to live in peace and harmony.

The pinnacle of Choeten Kora was originally carved out of a huge stone. Later, Lama Shacha Gyalpo, who was originally from Seola Goenpa, Phunakha, known as the most learned and wealthy of Rigsum Lama replaced it with a gilded cupola. It is said that the people who were involved in the work could not think of a way to bring down the stone pinnacle. So, Lama Shacha Gyalpo performed prayers during the day and it is believed that the stone miraculously descended itself at night. It is still found beside the *choeten*. Pilgrims and devotees who circumambulate the *choeten* also go round the pinnacle.

Another legend says that while the construction of the *choeten* reached its dome, a girl of eight years old believed to be an angel, who came from Tawang and volunteered to enter the dome and be buried there. On account of this incident, the 15th day of the first month of the lunar calendar is called

Dakpe Kora or circumambulation by the *Dakpa* from Tawang and the 30th day is called the *Drukpe Kora*, circumambulation by the Bhutanese. The festivals are held every year and hundreds of devotees from far and near congregate at the *choeten*. They believe that making prostrations and praying with pure mind at the festivals would enable them to realize their aspirations in life.

The *sertog* or the golden cupola was gilded again through the initiation of the *Dzongkhag Tshechu Tshogpa*⁹ in 1999. The initiative was strongly supported by the Royal Government. Stone-slab roofing of enclosure of the *choeten* and prayer wheels were restored in 2000-2001 by the *dzongkhag* administration.

NOTES

¹A monastic college. The Punakha Dratshang, first organized by Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal in the 17th century became the core of state monastic body.

² Supreme abbot of the monastic community. The present *Je Khenpo* Trulku Jigme Choedra is the 70th in line and elected to office in 1996.

³ The Indian Buddhist saint from Swat valley in present day Pakistan. He first came to Bhutan in 746 A.D at the invitation of an ailing king Sindhu Raja in Bumthang, central Bhutan.

⁴ Manjushri, Vajrapani and Avalokiteswara.

⁵ Canonical texts consisting of the teachings and precepts of the Buddha

⁶ A civil ruler. Under the theocratic state established in the 17th century, the country was governed by a civil ruler known as *deb* or *desi* while spiritual affairs were administered by the *Je Khenpo*. There were a total of 57 *desi*.

⁷ The river that drains the Trashigang valley.

⁸ Guru Rinpoche, King Thrisong Deutsan (of Tibet) and Vairocana were the three brothers in their previous lives.

⁹ Committee for organizing festivals in the district.