



The story within the Lama's Temple

By Karen Greenspan



Chakhar Complex

BUMTHANG Valley is thought to be the site of many of Bhutan's sacred myths and miracles as well as known historical events and the seat of many of the country's most revered lamas. Most importantly, Bumthang is believed to be the first locale in Bhutan to be visited in 746 C.E. by Guru Rinpoche (also

known as Padmasambhava). He was the all-powerful Tantric mystic credited with bringing Buddhism to Tibet and Bhutan from India, and who is worshipped across the country as the Second Buddha.

The story goes:

An Indian king from Assam, named Sindhu Raja, established himself as the King

of Bumthang. He got into a scrape with a rival king and subsequently offended the chief Bumthang deity, Shelging Karpo. The deity took revenge by turning the skies black and stealing King Sindu Raja's life force. One of the king's men implored the tantric master Guru Rinpoche, the renowned mystic, to come to Bumthang





to save Sindhu Raja. The Guru came (in 746 C.E.) and transformed into his eight manifestations (the various wrathful and peaceful identities he manifested to heroically “save the day”). Together, all eight manifestations danced a powerful tantric *cham* (sacred dance). All the local deities were drawn to watch the spectacle, except for the stubborn Shelging Karpo. Guru Rinpoche then transformed the king’s daughter, Princess Tashi Kheudren, into five princesses, each carrying a golden ewer. The intense light of the sunshine reflecting off the five ewers was irresistible and Shelging Karpo ventured out, but in the form of a snow lion. The Guru immediately transformed into a garuda (mythical bird creature), alighted, and seized the snow



Chakhar Lama Dorje sits outside in front of his home

lion extracting his vow to behave and become a loyal protector of Buddhism. Thus, having saved Sindhu Raja’s life, Guru Rinpoche went on to make peace between the two kings and converted them both to Buddhism as well.

A notable feature of Guru Rinpoche’s legacy is the treasure teachings. According to the tradition, the Guru and his disciples prepared and hid many of his teachings as treasures (*terma*) for discovery in the future by chosen persons called *terton*, or treasure revealers, during times of spiritual need. These treasures came in many forms — texts, relics, visionary experiences, and even dances. The treasure dances (*tercham*) were often received as revelation during dream or meditative states by these treasure revealers, some of whom practiced and taught in the Bumthang Valley. The treasure tradition was institutionalized and richly developed by the Nyingma School (oldest school of Tibetan Buddhism).



The Chakhar Lhakhang (Temple)



Bumthang elders gather for discussion in the courtyard of Jampa Lhakhang



Newly created thangka of Guru Rinpoche's visit to the Bumthang Valley to cure the dying King Sindhu Raja

A great Nyingmapa *terton* who was quite active in Bumthang was Dorje Lingpa. Born in central Tibet and given the name Orgyen Zangpo, he lived from 1346 to 1405. He traveled about Tibet and Bhutan disclosing hidden manuscripts and visions that offered an approach to Buddhist practice that was quite radical at the time. He revealed treasures from both Buddhism and Bon (the pre-Buddhist, indigenous religious tradition of the region). By the age of 17, he became known as Dorje Lingpa. The name "Lingpa" is often given to treasure revealers. Dorje Lingpa is credited with disclosing 108 rites for empowerment, consecration, taking vows, repentance, burnt offerings, and subjugation as well as a rich legacy of treasure

dances.

I made the trip to the Chakhar (Iron) Valley of Bumthang in central Bhutan during the cold, short days of mid-December after the excitement had subsided from the dance and ritual festivities of the annual festival at Jampa Lhakhang. I had come to visit Chakhar Lama, Dorje, the 90-year-old lineage holder—keeper and guardian of the dance and ritual traditions of Terton Dorje Lingpa. The Chakhar Lama's house and temple next door are said to be built on the site of Sindhu Raja's nine-story iron palace. Chakhar Lama, Dorje, explained that the palace was destroyed by the famous anti-Buddhist Tibetan King Langdarma (803-842), and Dorje Lingpa restored the temple and its relics. According

to Tibetan and Bon scholar, Dr. Samten Karmay, Dorje Lingpa spent just under three years in Bumthang (1374-1376) and is supposed to have lived in the residence occupied by Chakhar Lama today.

Upon entering the compound, I found the lama and his 84-year-old wife outside sitting cross-legged on woven mats in the mid-day sun. The lama was busily repairing a prayer wheel, one of his favorite pastimes. These hand-held cylindrical wheels on a spindle contain a scroll of printed mantras. People spin the wheel to release the prayers into the universe. The inner contents of the sacred implement were scattered beside him. Meanwhile, his wife, sitting close by, was counting her rosary beads, chanting mantra,



and continuously spinning her prayer wheel. We enjoyed tea and conversation; then I asked to visit the Chakhar Temple.

We climbed the stairs up to the padlocked temple door, which the lama unlocked. After removing our shoes, we mounted a steep, wooden, ladder-like stairway and walked through a curtain-draped doorway into the temple proper. The altar was set with typical offerings, brass and silver bowls of water, platters of fruit, multi-colored *torma* (symbolic sculptures made of butter dough dyed in many colors), and two brass ewers of holy water topped off with a peacock feather on each. At

each end of the altar was a column on which hung the buffalo masks of the wrathful Lord of Death and his Consort that are worn for one of the sacred dances.

Behind the altar, in glass-enclosed cabinets, were the usual icons – statues of Guru Rinpoche and his primary consorts, the Buddha, Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal (founding father of Bhutan), deities, and bodhisattvas – and also a collection of local treasures. These included a golden statue of Tashi Kheudren, famed daughter of the Bumthang King Sindhu Raja, who became the Bhutanese consort of Guru

Rinpoche (partnering with him to perform many of his amazing miracles). She was dressed in a striped silk *kira* (long, wraparound skirt worn by Bhutanese women) and draped in gold necklaces and earrings. There was also a footprint believed to be hers. Another cabinet contained a golden statue of Dorje Lingpa holding a *damaru* (small two-sided ritual drum with a throbbing bead) in his right hand. He was flanked on the left by a figure of the first Chakhar Lama and on the right by a figure of Dorje Lingpa's spiritual son. These singular items were quite antique.

In the right corner, shelves were stacked with cloth-



The Chakhar Lama sits in the courtyard of Jampa Lhakhang amongst elders of the community repairing prayer wheels





wrapped tablets of Dorje Lingpa *termas* discovered in scriptural form. The Chakhar Lama brought my attention to a large, brightly colored *thangka* (religious painting on silk) of Dorje Lingpa covering the left wall. The great treasure revealer sits in flowing orange robes holding a *damaru* in his right hand and a ritual bell in his left, clearly engaged in Buddhist ritual practice. He sits before a low altar table with various ritual objects and is encircled by an aura of rainbow light surrounded by pink lotuses and peonies with interwoven greenery. Above the central figure sits a row of tantric deities in meditative postures. Scholarly lamas of the lineage surround the *terton* along the sides and across the bottom.

After we had time to admire the beautiful work of art, the Chakhar Lama drew closed the yellow silk curtains that protect the painting's brilliant colors from the sun light streaming in through the adjacent window and we departed the temple saying our good-byes.

We headed next door to a building that had recently been converted to a heritage museum by one of the Chakhar Lama's daughters, Pema Tshokey. The plaque at the entrance explains that Dorje Lingpa built the lhakhang (temple) in the 14th century at this very strategic location where Guru Rinpoche first came to the region and performed the miracle of saving Sindhu Raja's life. But, it also explains that another momentous event occurred in

this geographic location. Here, Guru Rinpoche imparted the inner-most tantric teaching, the Prajna Paramita (great perfection of wisdom), for the first time in Bhutan (to Sindhu Raja after he recovered). This is the supreme teaching on emptiness (*shunyata*), in which we learn that our sense of fixed identity is an illusion. The idea that all existence is merged in a fluid, interdependent state was first espoused in Bhutan in this place.

The next morning, I returned and entered the open door of the Chakhar Temple expecting to find the Chakhar Lama performing his morning offering rituals. The black door to the *goenkhang* (inner sanctum), painted with wrathful figures, was ajar.



From within, I could hear the rhythmic beating of the drum and recitations. The scent of incense hung in the air. Finally, Tenzin (the Chakhar Lama's eldest son) emerged from the *goenkhang* with a smile on his face. He was only too pleased to unveil a new *thangka* hanging on one of the walls. This densely-packed, narrative painting brings together the major historical figures that make this little piece of geography so ripe with historical significance.

The *thangka* tells the story of Guru Rinpoche's visit to the Iron Castle. He sits upon a lotus throne inside the iron palace with Sindhu Raja at his feet on one side and a scribe on the other. Below, Tashi Kheudren pours an offering of *ara* (grain alcohol) at a table. At the center

Signage for the Chakhar Lhakhang Complex that now includes a Homestay and Heritage Museum



of the top of the *thangka* is the image of *Kuntuzangpo* — the naked, blue primordial Buddha — seated in union with his white consort. They are flanked on the left by Terton Dorje Lingpa and on the right by Terton Pema Lingpa, both of whom

were active in the Bumthang valley. Along the upper left side is an image of Guru Rinpoche meditating in the nearby cave at Kurje (around which is built the large Kurje Temple Complex). On the right side, Tashi Kheudren appears as the Guru's dakini consort holding the golden ewer and a white ceremonial scarf. Moving down the left side is the dramatic scene of Guru Rinpoche manifesting as a garuda. He grasps Shelging Karpo in the form of a snow lion in a mid-air tussle. Tenzin related this action to a particular dance movement typical in many of the *cham*. On the right side, Shelging Karpo, the offended local deity who is causing Sindhu Raja problems, is represented as a blue naga (serpent) cowering in his cave longing to come out and view



Homestay interior



HISTORY



the magnificent dance spectacle performed by Guru Rinpoche.

At the bottom, pictured within a dark cloud, Shelging Karpo wears an evil expression as he rides off on horseback brandishing a sword and staff. The episodes rendered in the painting are suspended within a network of clouds filled with curlicues, exquisitely detailed trees and leaves decked with golden jewels, and colorful potted flowers.

When I asked how the *thangka* came to be made and acquired, Tenzin explained that the nearby Kharchu Monastery has a similar mural with a depiction of the Iron Palace. Seeing it, Tenzin was inspired

to commission a *thangka* representation of the subject for the temple. Two years ago a painter from Kharchu executed the project.

After my impromptu encounter with this hidden gem, I left the dark interior of the Chakhar Lhakhang, headed out into the crisp Bumthang day, and continued my search for the Chakhar Lama. I found him down the road at the Jampa Lhakhang. He was ensconced within a group of community elders sitting in a circle on the flagstone courtyard in front of the temple having an animated discussion about how to best honor Guru Rinpoche at the upcoming holy day. The Lama

was listening to everyone's opinion with sincere interest, all the while, assuring blessings for all as he busily repaired their prayer wheels!



KAREN GREENSPAN, a New York City-based dance writer, researches and observes contemporary and traditional dance forms in the United States and abroad. Wherever she travels, Greenspan engages with the local performing artists to gain a deeper understanding of the world's dance traditions. A former professional dancer, Greenspan is a frequent contributor to Tashi Delek Magazine.

