



BHUTAN HEARTLAND

TRAVELS IN THE LAND OF THE THUNDER DRAGON

ROBERT VAN KOESVELD & LIBBY LLOYD

FREMANTLE 
fine independent publishing PRESS



BHUTAN



Previous page: The swirling Black Hat dancers purify the dancing area at the beginning of the annual Paro tshechu.

CONTENTS

	Introduction	6
Chapter One	Around Paro: first impressions	14
Chapter Two	Taktshang gompa: the tiger's lair	34
Chapter Three	Thimphu and the new democracy	50
Chapter Four	Over the high passes	70
Chapter Five	Monks and nuns, lamas and gomchen	92
Chapter Six	Down in the valleys	114
Chapter Seven	Feudal life at Ogyen Choling	144
Chapter Eight	Maintaining culture: festivals and family	160
Chapter Nine	Moving east: with silk weavers and yak herders	180
	Acknowledgements	204
	Glossary	205
	Further Reading	206
	Index	207



INTRODUCTION



WHEN THE PILOT SUGGESTS WE LOOK OUT THE LEFT-HAND WINDOWS OF the plane there is a collective gasp, even for those of us who have done this flight before. The peak of Mount Everest is silhouetted against the clear blue sky and seems to rest calmly on a vast bed of clouds. We are reminded with a thrilling certainty that we are going somewhere very special.

These massive ranges are still in the process of creation, squeezed by the Indo-Australian landmass that has been pushing against Asia for the last forty million years. The perpetually snow-covered mountains provide Bhutan's northern and western borders and beyond them lies the Tibetan plateau in China. To the south and east is a semicircle of Indian states — Sikkim, West Bengal, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. The Himalayan snows and glaciers become the fast flowing rivers that swell with monsoons to feed the subtropical jungles and plains of Bhutan and India that begin a mere 120 kilometres south.

Bhutan has been very careful about welcoming foreigners (*chilips*). Over the centuries its geography has played a part in protecting its traditional culture, at the same time giving rise to an unusually diverse and almost hermetically sealed ecosystem. From the air, central Bhutan seems filled with the green convolutions of endlessly forested mountains, steep ravines and rushing rivers, with isolated valleys cradling townships and a patchwork of terraced agriculture. The country may be the size of Switzerland, but has only about a tenth of the population. Most of its 700,000 citizens live in the high valleys to avoid the excesses of climate or terrain in the north and the south.

For the romantically inclined, Bhutan is sometimes known as Druk Yul — the Land of the Thunder Dragon. A monastery was being consecrated in central Tibet in the twelfth century when thunder — or the voice of dragons (*druks*) — was heard, so they named the monastery Druk and the particular strand of Buddhism Drukpa. When Drukpa became the dominant form of Buddhism in Bhutan in the seventeenth century, it gave its name to the newly unified country. The original names of some districts — Blooming Valley of Luxuriant Fruits, Rainbow District of Desires and Land of the Longing and Silver Pines — would challenge even the writers of Shangri-La drenched tourist brochures.

Previous page: Prayer flags like these, in groups of 108, cleanse the sins of a deceased person by invoking the prayers of Chenresig, the Bodhisattva of Compassion. Prayer flags adorn almost every hillside and house, mountain pass and meadow in Bhutan, anywhere the prayers can spread their blessings by catching the wind, for the benefit of all sentient beings.

Right: Spinning 108 prayer wheels, like these at Thimphu's Trashichhoe Dzong, gains much merit as it is the equivalent of repeatedly reciting the prayer held within each one.

What brings us to this very special small country, apart from its renowned beauty, is our curiosity about how the Bhutanese manage the complexities of maintaining a rich cultural heritage and mostly pristine countryside while gradually integrating the benefits and costs of modern society: democratic government with systems for healthcare, education and communication, and the mixed blessing of material goods. The transition from an isolated semi-feudal society with an absolute monarchy in the 1950s to a planned democracy with a constitutional monarchy in 2008 is unprecedented since it was conducted primarily under the leadership of the king and virtually without bloodshed. The turmoil surrounding political change in neighbouring Tibet, Nepal, Sikkim and Assam has highly motivated the Bhutanese to manage their own transitions with great care.

Buddhism has been central to Bhutan's values, life-style and cultural expression since the seventh century when kings and lamas first introduced Buddhist beliefs and practices. We have had a personal interest in Tibetan Buddhism for over thirty years, and our visits to Bhutan are rare opportunities to experience similar beliefs practiced



openly in the daily life of a country. As westerners we want to believe it is possible to succeed in peacefully creating what it is easy to idealise — the best of the old with the best of the new. We hope to begin to understand what it is to live in a society that aspires to Gross National Happiness rather than Gross National Product.

We have another goal too — to simply meet the Bhutanese people. So we take every opportunity to talk with them about their society and creativity as we experience their marvellous landscape, architecture, religion, crafts and culture. Winding through the valleys and mountains of the heartlands it is easy to fall in love with Bhutan's great beauty and friendly people. Inevitably we want to learn more, so we observe and read, and most of all listen. How do they feel about the great transitions of recent decades? What do stories of flying tigers or encounters with yetis (*migoi*) say about their beliefs and cultural history? What do the mysterious masked dances mean? How can buildings as massive and ornate as a *dzong* be constructed without plans or nails? What happens when a yak herder's daughter is educated? How does a young monk spend his day?

Below: Happiness comes easily to these playful girls at the annual religious festival at the Dzongdrakha Gomba south of Paro.

Overleaf: Exquisite carvings at the newly renovated 450 year old Gangte Gomba in the Phobjikha Valley, repainted by Pema Dorji and other graduates of the National Institute for Zorig Chusum.



Although English is the language of schooling in Bhutan, and Dzongkha is the official language, there are more than nineteen languages and dialects in daily use. We rely on our multilingual guides when we meet older Bhutanese who have not had access to schooling or are not confident about speaking English. Spellings of place names and even personal names can be variable, so we have adopted the most commonly used spellings in this book, alerting the reader to significant variations they may encounter.

Since driveable roads are few, most of the 20,000 annual visitors to Bhutan are driven (at around 40 kph) in a 4WD car or minibus along what locals call the Lateral Road that winds over 600 kilometres between Paro in the west and Trashigang in the east — 210 kilometres if you are a raven. The road was begun in the 1960s; previously one walked or used horses, mules or yaks along narrow tracks. Some fitter visitors pursue a variety of outdoor activities including guided treks into the mountains and remote villages.

As part of the policy to protect the culture and environment, Bhutan manages tourism by setting a minimum daily tariff that includes all guides, accommodation, food, transport and drivers. Some of that tariff is used to build tourism infrastructure, including the extensive training and registration system for guides, drivers and trek cooks. All arrangements must be made through one of the Bhutanese tour companies. On our first trip we travelled in a photographic tour group of sixteen in eight 4WD vehicles in which we changed vehicles daily to experience a different guide and driver. Since then we have travelled on our own itinerary with one guide and one driver, so it is even easier to stop when we see a great opportunity for photography or inquiry. Getting around is easy, especially in springtime when the summer monsoons or winter snows don't cause landslides or block the only road!

This book describes the springtime journeys we have taken through the heartland of Bhutan along the Lateral Road and the visual delights and charming encounters we experienced along the way. The symbolism of moving from the west to the east and then choosing either to return west (flying out through Paro) or continue east (and fly out through India) is not lost on us or indeed on the Bhutanese we meet, for they face a cultural version of this choice each day.



WHAT IS GROSS NATIONAL HAPPINESS?

We asked ourselves the basic question of how to maintain the balance between materialism and spiritualism in the course of getting the immense benefits of science and technology.¹

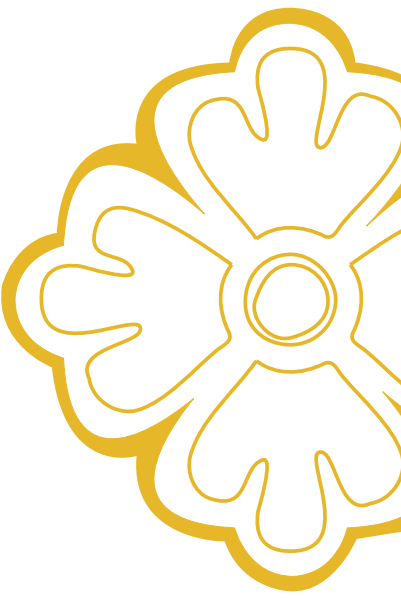
With this deceptively simple statement Jigme Y. Thinley (Bhutan's Prime Minister) summarised the complex task his country had taken on. Until the late 1950s Bhutan took advantage of its geographical and political isolation to control this balance. It helped that the country had never been colonised, and was environmentally intact and largely politically stable (apart from unresolved conflict since the 1980s concerning the integration of southern Bhutaneese of Nepali origin and recent 'economic migrants' from Nepal).

Research around the world has often suggested that, beyond providing for basic needs, the level of material consumption does not equate with the level of happiness. Gross National Product is therefore an insufficient measure of Bhutan's success since the paramount goal of its monarch and government since the 1960s has been the wellbeing and contentment of the people — only the country's national security competes with this in importance. The United Nation's Human Development Index of life expectancy, literacy and standard of living is commonly used to measure development success, but it does not quite reflect the values of wellbeing and contentment. When in 1987 King Jigme Singye Wangchuk declared Bhutan's complementary goal was 'Gross National Happiness' this commitment to creating a suitable context for the private pursuit of contentment was made public.

The Bhutanese government considers that in order to benefit from science and technology without compromising spirituality and wellbeing, it is necessary to establish economic self-reliance, environmental preservation, cultural promotion and good governance. Several measures illustrate these foundational principles in practice. Bhutan became a democracy with a constitutional monarch in 2008 and now basic education and healthcare are free and accessible to all. Media and online debates are rigorous, especially on the topic of good governance.

Forests are protected so that that at least 60 per cent of Bhutan remains pristine, while hydro-electricity (the main export) is generated underground beside rivers. Cigarette sales, plastic bags and billboards are all banned, tourist services are carefully controlled, and TV, the internet and mobile phones only appeared in the country in 1999. Art and craft schools ensure the continuity of traditions, national dress is mandated at schools, government offices and on formal occasions, and Buddhism is integrated into most aspects of society.

¹ From *Gross National Happiness* by Sonam Kingu et al (eds), Centre for Bhutan Studies, Thimphu, Bhutan, 1999, p. 15.



chapter one

AROUND PARO

first impressions



FLYING INTO PARO ADDS A THRILLING DIMENSION TO THE TRIP AS OUR PILOT — one of only eight certified to use this very challenging airport in a deep valley at 2200 metres above sea level — takes the smallish plane down the valley, sweeping alongside steep wooded mountains and descending over green fields beside the Paro Chhu (river) to land in front of the most beautifully ornamented airport terminal in the world. Almost every square inch of this modern facility seems to be carved and painted. Only two commercial planes are allowed to use Bhutan's only international airport; both belong to Drukair (Royal Bhutan Airlines). The only other entry points are by road at Phuntsholing near the West Bengal border and at Samdrup Jongkhar via Assam.

The Tibetan traders and invaders of previous centuries have been replaced with increasing numbers of tourists since the airport opened in 1983. Now, in the midst of the valley with its traditional farms, a main street with shops and restaurants has sprung up to complement the small hotels newly built for visitors. We stay in a hotel that was built in the nineteenth century as the residence of the Paro *penlop* (governor). The three-storey wooden buildings are intricately carved and painted and their courtyard tea makes a perfect welcome but we are keen to immerse ourselves in Bhutan's other charms and so hurry to the morning market and the nearby archery field. Then we feel we have arrived.

The outdoor market runs behind the buildings of the main street. It is primarily a farmers market, with each stallholder setting out their produce in baskets or on a

Previous Page: The splendid opening rituals at the annual Paro tshechu.
Below: The famous Dance of the Black Hats transforms these monks into powerful tantric yogis so they can purify the dance space, ridding it of evil spirits in preparation for the first day of the tshechu in Paro's Rinpung Dzong. The dance also recalls the assassination of the anti-Buddhist Tibetan king Langdarma in 842 — the voluminous sleeves hid the fatal bow and arrow.



At the weekly farmers market in Paro, stall sellers like the cheeky Kunzang Dem offer their wares, including chillies, dried cheeses (*chugo*), dried jellied cow skin (*khoo*), bitter melon and fiddle-fern.

cloth on the ground. Some, requiring more shelter for their dry goods, share one of the small roofed platforms dotted about. Since this is classed as an informal situation, sellers and buyers are free to choose traditional or western dress. Most of the farming women wear the traditional *kira* — a length of fabric (usually handwoven) wrapped around and pinned at each shoulder with a brooch and belted so it hangs at floor length — with a silk shirt beneath and a jacket on top. A necklace of turquoise, coral and silver completes the outfit. Market day is also a social occasion for everyone to catch up with friends and hear the gossip from nearby valleys.

For us though, the fascination of markets lies in discovering unusual foods and enjoying brief encounters. There is a lot of good-natured fun as we enquire and smell and taste and look and photograph. We bring copies of photos taken on previous visits and hand them over with the exchange of broad smiles. Often their smiles are vivid red with the juice of the *doma* they are chewing. Doma is a mix of areca nuts, betel leaves and lime, and this teeth-attacking pastime is imported from the southern foothills. The mixture is for sale alongside more familiar locally grown produce such as melons, apples, beans and potatoes. There are piles of dried jellied cow skin (*khoo*), strings of hard cubes of yak cheese (*chugo*), and endless mounds of red or green chillies. Most dishes contain plenty of chillies, but the national dish, *ema datse*, is simply whole cooked chillies in a cheese sauce! For the less adventurous springtime visitor, other local specialties include



red rice, Matsutaki mushrooms, fiddle fern fronds that are similar to asparagus, and plenty of real asparagus too.

In a grassed park nearby, the afternoon archery match is well under way, with a line-up of charming old fellows watching the young lads and perhaps remembering their own victory dances in more agile times. Archery is the great passion and official sport of the Bhutanese, going far back to their heritage as hunters and warriors. Every village and town with sufficient level land has an archery ground, and even the royal family competes in national tournaments. Competing is far more than about winning: an archery match confirms and maintains their sense of community and history, so national dress is always worn. Astrologers may be consulted before major tournaments. Good-natured insults and ribald comments distract opponents while cheer squads of young women dance sing and provocatively to add to the diversions. At the other end of the archery ground team-mates stand right next to the small rectangular target, shouting encouragement or taunts (depending on whose arrow is coming their way) and stepping nimbly aside just in time as the arrow completes its 140 m flight. Team-mates offer celebratory dances and belt ribbons, even for a near-miss. Cautious about the possibility of a stray arrow, we watch carefully from behind trees.

The game is over when the first team attains 25 points. The two teams each have between 5 and 11 archers who take turns to shoot two arrows each. After confirming scores for the round (3 for a bullseye, 2 for hitting target and 1 for a near miss), they all walk to the other end of the field and shoot back the other way. This progression back and forth can take plenty of time, so they are all really ready for the awards and festivities afterwards.

Archery, like many aspects of traditional life, is changing with the exposure to modern influences. Some wealthier archers, for example, now use imported metal alloy bows

Above: These archers in Paro prefer the traditional bamboo bow and reed arrows rather than the modern metal alloy versions.

Right: A new hero has replaced the image of royalty or a religious figure on this lad's badge.



and arrows rather than the original reed arrows, bamboo bows and bowstrings made of giant nettle or jute. This means separate matches are held for those with traditional equipment at major tournaments. Bhutan had its first Olympic archery team in 1984, three men and three women; they were not placed, perhaps missing the inspiration of team-mates and supporters dancing beside the target. In the meantime, community leaders express concern that archery may be losing out to the excitement of soccer and basketball. Who can forget the little monks' passionate negotiations for a satellite dish to watch World Cup soccer in Lama Khyentse Norbu's popular movie *The Cup*.

Across the Paro Chhu from the archery field is the magnificent Rinpung Dzong. There are *dzong* all over Bhutan, combining the functions of fortress (now a historic role: the last invasion was in 1730), monastery and administrative centre. These massive stone, earth and wooden structures, wonderfully painted and carved, are emblematic of Bhutan's traditional architecture and dominate most major valley towns. We find them awesomely imposing, yet strangely reassuring and peaceful — though our



Watching the afternoon archery match in Paro gives these men an opportunity to catch up and perhaps reminisce about their own sporting triumphs.

Overleaf: The magnificent Rinpung Dzong with its watchtower above and cantilevered bridge below, restored many times since the seventeenth century.





response might have been very different had we been seeking shelter centuries ago from invading Tibetan soldiers. Even today's busy novice monk or stressed bureaucrat may overlook the grandeur of their workplace.

Bhutanese people show great respect for the manifold purposes of a dzong. They may only wear full national dress there, right up to the ceremonial shoulder scarf (the men's *kabney* and the women's *rachung*), and women must leave by sunset.

The Rinpung Dzong ('fortress on a heap of treasure') was built around 1646 on the site of a much older, smaller dzong, at the bidding of the Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, the lama who united Bhutan. Despite major damage in a fire in 1907, the reconstructed dzong continues to have an active life as the centre of district administration, the residence of some two hundred monks, and the location of Paro's spectacular annual *tshechu* — the sacred dance festival in honour of Guru Padmasambhava, who established Buddhism in Bhutan in the eighth century.

Above: The conch-shaped Rinpung Dzong watchtower (*Ta Dzong*) is now home to the cultural treasures of the National Museum.

Right: Paro's flat fertile valley makes farming here much easier than on hillside terraces. The traditional wooden shingles of farmhouse roofs are gradually being replaced by corrugated iron so as to preserve trees.



Standing above the Rinpung Dzong is its watchtower (*Ta Dzong*), newly renovated as the National Museum, which provides us with a useful overview of the cultural items we will encounter on our travels along the Lateral Road. Buddhism requires people to move in a clockwise direction around sacred objects and images, and the museum, shaped like a conch shell, is set out to facilitate this. Legend and history, magic and science are linked in displays of religious paintings, sculptures and ritual objects. We are captivated by the 4000 year old stone weapons of snake spirits and the unusual uses put to skins of once living creatures — a rhino shield, a frog saddle, a fish scale hat. And just as intriguing, modern postage stamps of steel and silk — and one you can listen to on a record player!

Most dzong were built in the seventeenth century when Tibetan invasions were frequent, but the oldest go back to the twelfth century and they were still being built into the twentieth century. Typically they have been rebuilt several times because of fires (often caused by butter lamps), earthquakes and floods. Their construction is a wonder. The architect holds the plans in his head and the carpenters use no nails — the huge beams lock together, secured if necessary by wooden dowels. We have visited dzong and *lhakhang* (temples) across Bhutan and everywhere observe the ongoing challenge of structural restoration and the skilled maintenance of wall paintings and carvings. Further up the Paro valley we wander through the remains of the 1951 fire at Drukgyel Dzong, built of rammed earth in 1649 to commemorate a victory over invading armies from Tibet and Mongolia. The ruins are dense with atmosphere and we rather hope they remain unrestored.

But some buildings it seems vital to maintain because of their amazing history. For instance, when a gigantic female demon was thwarting the introduction of Buddhism in Tibet, King Songtsen Gampo subdued her by pinning her to the earth with the force of 108 temples built on one day in 659! Not far from Paro is one of these temples, the intimate Kyichu Lhakhang, one of the oldest temples in Bhutan and reputedly constructed over the left foot of this demon. Another is Jampey Lhakhang in Bumthang (140 kilometres to the east), covering the demon's left knee.

Just one more! Latecomers find a way to squeeze through a side wall into the crowded courtyard of the annual Paro tshechu.





Left: Wheelbarrow fun under the flowering trees at the Kyichu Lhakhang is safe — the giant female demon was subdued there in the seventh century.

Lay singers and dancers are an important part of religious festivals.

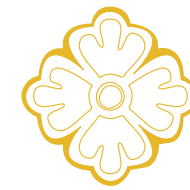
These women wear their most beautiful clothes as they sing religious songs at Paro (right) and Dzongdrakha (below) tshechus.

Overleaf: Paro Valley with the green roofs of the main street. The airport runway (Bhutan's longest straight 'road') is only 500 metres to the right of this street.

Pages 32–33: Interior of Paro Dzong where the annual festival is held.







BRINGING IT HOME

Bhutanese with potential and passion are often rewarded with sponsorship for postgraduate training outside their country. While this is not an unusual opportunity in developing countries, it is impressive that these bright young Bhutanese are invariably keen to return and contribute their skills and knowledge to their homeland.

Nima Tshering works at the Ministry of Education in Paro developing an art curriculum for Bhutanese schools. This is a new initiative, to give all school children access to a range of traditional and modern art forms, and the basic skills, so they may explore further for pleasure or employment if they choose. It's about a balanced education.

Nima speaks eloquently about ensuring balance between family, work and creativity in his own life as well as in the lives of future generations. This philosophy was strengthened by three years study in Japan, including six months learning the language. For this period he was separated from his young family. Their home in Paro reflects some of the quiet elegance of Japanese design.

For his creativity Nima practises the Japanese art of papermaking. He explains the exact attention required to make the fine bamboo frames, prepare and dye the pulp and then evenly spread it on the frames and finally dry the delicate sheets. He shows us his precious 'book of errors' — tiny blemishes on his beautiful handmade paper — ideal for learning perfection.





chapter two

TAKTSHANG GOMPA

the tiger's lair



MOST BHUTANESE CAN TELL YOU WHERE THEY WERE WHEN THEY HEARD the news of the great fire at Taktshang Gomba in 1998. This mystical monastery up high in the clouds is an iconic image of Bhutan. It is a most sacred place, venerated by Buddhist pilgrims from across the region, because it is built upon an eighth century meditation site of the second Buddha, Guru Padmasambhava, a Tantric sage known affectionately in Bhutan as Guru Rinpoche (Precious Master). The fire took the life of the caretaker and destroyed much of the complex of ancient temples and its collections of relics and beautiful images.

Looking up through the forest from the end of the newly constructed road we see, rising more than 800 metres above us, tantalising glimpses of white, ochre and gold, buildings clinging improbably to the granite cliff, all draped with morning clouds. How did they restore it? How did they build it in the first place with seventeenth century technology?

To find the answers to these questions we need to take the path walked by pilgrims for more than twelve centuries. Since we are unused to such effort at elevations around 3000 metres above sea level, we treat ourselves to a ride on the back of stoic pack ponies. Not all the way up, and not for the return down the mountain. After more than an hour of steep zigzagging on stony paths through forests of mossy blue pines, the walkers and riders get to the halfway teahouse about the same time. This is where we leave the ponies, and after our tea we walk steadily for half an hour, climbing all

Previous page: Walking towards Taktshang Gomba we pass the shrine over the cave where Bhutan's previous chief abbot was born in 1926.

Below: These water prayer wheels ting constantly at the start of the trail up to Taktshang Gomba to remind pilgrims that the prayers inside the wheels have blessed the water now flowing towards rivers, lakes and oceans to benefit all beings.



Above left: Inside the birth cave of the previous Je Khenpo, the late Geshey Guenden Rinchen.



Above right: Spanish moss festoons the trees along the path.

the while and passing red rhododendrons and ancient oaks festooned with Spanish moss until we are level with the awesome Taktshang. It seems to tease us across a deep chasm as the clouds drift in and out of the cluster of elegant gold-tipped temples. Not having the benefit of the flying tigress that brought Guru Rinpoche here, we have to follow the steep stone steps down into the chasm, past the sacred waterfall with its constant ting of the prayer wheel and across the wooden bridge. Then up, up, beside little mossy caves, mounting steps tight against the cliff face with the glorious buildings beckoning us, all aflutter with thousands of prayer flags. We feel quietly proud that we have made it, as we surrender our cameras to the security desk and enter the peaceful beauty of Taktshang itself.

Monks, pilgrims and tourists move quietly through the perfectly restored timber and stone buildings. Narrow passages lead to small chapels, highly decorated with images, statues and offerings. Some are built around meditation caves that were in use more than a thousand years ago and which contain relics of the disciples of Guru Rinpoche. Moving carefully beside the cliff-top railings we catch glimpses of panoramic views through the clouds and into the Paro valley far below.

We have tea with head monk Lam Renzin who tells us he has lived in a hut near the entrance with his dog and cat for the past five years while re-establishing the monastery. After the fire, government funds for the costly five-year reconstruction and restoration were augmented by donations in cash and kind from all over the country, as well as from Buddhists beyond Bhutan. In a sizeable advantage over the original builders, they were able to erect an 800 metre cable crane against the cliff-face to take heavy materials up. Remnants of precious objects saved from the fire were gathered so that craftsmen and builders could restore everything just as it was; fortunately, Guru Rinpoche's cave remained intact in the fire. When work was completed in 2005, they began allowing pilgrims and visitors into some areas.

It is a private monastery, without government subsidy, and Lam Renzin also gathers funds for the 45 monks who live there. The novices sleep, eat and study in the same large hall with their three lamas, rising at 4 am to begin their day of religious practice and study. There are small retreat houses for longer meditations, some jammed into rock crevices higher up the cliff.



Lam Renzin explains that there is no formal link between the religious communities of Bhutan and Tibet, although most of the Bhutanese practices and beliefs have Tibetan origins, modified by the indigenous animist Bon traditions. Guru Rinpoche himself was from the Swat valley in present day Pakistan and travelled to Tibet to assist with managing the demons obstructing the building of the first Buddhist monastery there, at Samye. It was on a visit to eastern Bhutan to assist an ailing king that, it is said, he flew west on a tigress and through the Paro valley to land high on this cliff. The tigress was a form of one of his female devotees, Khando Yeshey Tshogyal. Guru Rinpoche himself had taken his eighth form, the wrathful Guru Dorji Drolo, in order to subdue demons there. Together they meditated for several months in a cave beside the waterfall, now called Shelkar Zar after the crystal prayer beads he gave her.

Over the centuries many devotees and masters visited Taktshang, including Langchen Pelgi Sengye, Dorji Lingpa and Milarepa. Relics and sacred objects began accumulating, and in 1692 the civil ruler of Bhutan, Desi Tenzin Rabgye, made a pilgrimage to Taktshang and initiated work on the monastery we now know as the Tiger's Lair (or Tiger's Nest). Initially, demons destroyed the walls each night until the Desi cut off his hair to mix it with the mud of the foundations. All went well then and the first lama, Sakya Tenzin, was installed in 1694.

Three centuries later, in the small village of Kanglung in eastern Bhutan, an unusually mature two year old boy seemed to know an amazing amount about Desi Tenzin Rabgye. By 1998, this boy was a four year old novice monk, and Ashi Dorji Wangmo Wangchuk in her book, *The Treasures of the Thunder Dragon, a Portrait of Bhutan*, describes meeting him. She observed how remarkably composed he was

The Snow Lion Cave (Singye Phu Lkakhang) is a meditation retreat dramatically jammed into a crevice next to the sacred waterfall facing Taktshang Gompa.



at a public gathering in Kanglung where he told her and the king that he had built Taktshang Gumpa and wanted to return to Tango Gumpa near Thimphu where he had left his things 300 years before! The Je Khenpo (Chief Abbot of Bhutan) arranged for a full examination of the child's claims. The boy was able to identify relationships, objects, obscure protocol and buildings significant to the seventeenth century ruler. He was officially recognised as the reincarnation of Desi Tenzin Rabgye and since 1999 lives with about two hundred other monks in Tango Gumpa, Bhutan's main Buddhist institute. He reconsecrated the restored Taktshang Gumpa in 2005 under an auspicious rainbow, some three centuries after being central in its creation.



Left: The bridge below the sacred waterfall leads to the final steep steps up to the glorious Taktshang.

Right: The last close-up photo possible at Taktshang before surrendering your camera.

Below: This impressive wall painting in Trongsa Dzong shows Guru Rinpoche sitting between his two consorts and above the eight manifestations he adopted to achieve various purposes in his life, including subduing demons near what is now Taktshang Gumpa. Bhutanese regard him as the second Buddha.







Lightened by the experience of Taktshang, the walk back home seems easier and this time we notice the rhododendron petals and tsa tsa (tiny memorial chorten) beside the path.