

## Compte-rendu

*Zangdok Palri – The Lotus Light Palace of Guru Rinpoche – Visions of the Buddhist Paradise in the Sacred Kingdom of Bhutan.* Edited by Supawan Pui Lamsam, Kesang Choden Tashi Wangchuck With contributions by Tulku Thondup, Dungchen Sangay Dorji, Lopen Kunzang Tengye, Pema Wangdi, Chotiwat Punnopatham, Chongmas Rajabhandarak, Tanika Pook Panyarachun. Zangdok Palri Series, Volume 1. Gatshel Publishing, Bangkok. First Edition 2012, Second Edition, 2013. ISBN 978-616-91289-0-8 i-xv, 376pp. Large format, 29cm x 37cm. Preface by Ashi Kesang Choden Tashi Wangchuck.

By Rob Mayer

**T**his massive and magnificent large-format volume is something of a work of art in itself, a beautifully fashioned artefact in which almost every detail of production has been lovingly crafted. Its contents are equally impressive. On the one hand, it contains numerous colour illustrations of considerable art-historical and aesthetic value, generous in scope and size and finely reproduced. On the other hand, it is also a work of excellent scholarship, containing articles by a number of expert authors, all of whom have followed the admirable guiding principle of presenting their best and deepest understanding in a manner accessible to the wider public. Just as the visual presentation is at all times meticulously and beautifully designed, so also the text is at all times learned but clear, never lazy in expression or patronising to the readers, as sometimes happens when experts write for non-specialist audiences. The artwork and text are very thoughtfully co-ordinated, so that written word and illustration mutually benefit one another in a highly effective way. The great size of the volume and its broad scope gives it something of the character of a reference work that can be consulted again and again, rather than absorbed in a single linear reading.

Ashi Kesang Choden Tashi Wangchuck's preface (pp. viii to xiii) gives an insider's account, full of rare and valuable insights, into the longstanding connection of Guru Rinpoche and his lineage with Bhutan. Stretching from the earliest times of Tibetan Buddhism, this connection continues through such figures as Pema Lingpa and Long-

chenpa, up to our own time, with the late Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, and the consecration of the Kurjey Zangdo Palri Lhakhang.

The opening section (pp. 3-91) is a book length essay entitled 'Zangdok Palri, the Pure Land of Guru Rinpoche'. It has been specially written for this volume by Tulku Thondup, one of the most learned and experienced contemporary authors on Nyingmapa, who is also particularly well known in the West for his many influential English language works. He opens his essay by describing Zangdok Palri as the manifestation of Guru Rinpoche's wisdom, which should be understood in terms of the Three Bodies of the Buddha. Guru Rinpoche is explained not only as a fully enlightened Buddha, but as also having manifested historically as one of the greatest sages of the Vajrayāna Buddhist world. In his detailed descriptions of Zangdok Palri and its symbolism, Tulku Thondup clarifies the inner understandings of Zangdok Palri: 'For highly realised adepts, Zangdok Palri is the natural reflection of their own enlightened nature and qualities—the path and the result of their own enlightenment and the unity of the three Buddha Bodies. Seeing the pure nature and qualities of the pure land...is the sight of the absolute presence of Guru Rinpoche as well as the enlightened nature and qualities of oneself'.

Pages 33 to 75 contain Tulku Thondup's translations of accounts of Zangdok Palri as recorded by famous lamas who have had visionary experiences of being transported there. There are eight such narratives, all superbly illustrated from murals and thangkas, which were in several instances specifically painted according to the relevant narratives themselves. These narratives span many centuries, from Ratna Lingpa in the 15th century, up to Dodrupchen Rinpoche in the present. Particularly impressive is the account and accompanying illustration of Chokgyur Dechen Lingpa's visionary journey to Zangdok Palri. These narratives, with their illustrations, are an extremely valuable resource for the devotee and the scholar alike.

In pages 75-81, Tulku Thondup explains how and why focusing on positive images in meditation and prayer can affect the mind: 'Your mind is who you are. Your life is the product of your mind'. Thus devotion to Guru Rinpoche is not about pleasing him to win favours, but solely about training the mind and transforming it: 'what you see and think, that you will become'. Describing how to visualise the Buddha Guru Rinpoche residing within Zangdok Palri, and meditate upon this image with devotion, he explains, 'it is important to realize that Guru Rinpoche is not another person, but the enlightened qualities of your own mind's nature reflecting in front of you as Guru Rinpoche—just like seeing your own face in a mirror.' With carefully chosen words and great clarity, Tulku Thondup then explains four stages of meditating upon Guru Rinpoche.

Finally (pages 83-87) Tulku Thondup explains the benefits of building Zangdok Palri monuments, and gives an analysis of the meanings of the Vajra Guru mantra.

After Tulku Thondup's essay comes the presentation of many of the finest Zangdok Palri murals and thangkas found in Bhutan. This is the largest single section of the book, filling 164 pages in all (pp. 92-255). It is organised according to location and collection, listing twelve different monasteries and temples, but there are also two further sections with images found in the private collections of Her Majesty the Royal Grandmother of Bhutan. The lavish illustrations in this section are beautifully and thoughtfully presented, alongside plentiful highly learned and informative explanatory text contributed by Dungchen Sangay Dorji, Lopen Kunzang Tengye, Kesang Choden Tashi Wangchuk, and Pema Wangdi. The presentations are detailed, in most cases with over ten of this huge book's very large format pages dedicated to each mural. Each mural can show distinctive individual details, representing as they do individual visions of Zangdok Palri. However, the underlying similarities are much greater than any differences, which can best be understood as variations on the same themes, such as the different Rakshasa realms, the Mu-le ocean, Zangdok Palri itself and the bridges that connect to it, the Lotus Light Palace, the enlightened beings inhabiting it, and so on. These 164 pages are surely the best and most comprehensive presentation of Zangdok Palri so far made in any publication, and form an invaluable resource to Tibetologists and other students of the rNying ma tradition.

The historian and art historian can also learn a great deal from them. What is striking in this regard is the continuous ongoing cycle of devotionally-motivated renewal that is integral to Bhutanese religious construction. Fires, earthquakes, and the destructive passage of time, invoke repeated renovations and re-buildings of temples, monasteries and sacred sites, motivated by devotion. A further consequence of such continual renewal is that comparatively few of the extant murals of Zangdok Palri are more than 100 or 200 years old, even in the most ancient sacred sites that have been associated with Padmasambhava for over 1,000 years.

(pp. 95-110) The first Zangdok Palri mural described is one from Old Kyichu Guru Lhakhang, in Kyichu, Paro. It is believed that this was one of the 108 'Taming Temples' built by Emperor Songtsen Gampo of Tibet, and it is also believed that Padmasambhava himself and his consort Yeshe Tsogyal visited this temple in the eighth and ninth centuries, and buried many Terma treasures there. This temple has therefore played a prominent role in Bhutanese religious life over many centuries. Although earlier constructions deteriorated over

time, various beautiful renovations and additions have been made to it over the centuries, most notably, and at the behest of the late H. H. Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, by Her majesty Ashi Kesang Choeden Wangchuck. What is now called the Old Guru Lhakhang was built in the first half of the 20th century. It is thought that its magnificently detailed mural of Zangdok Palri might follow the vision of the Treasure revealer Dudul Dorje (1627-1684), since it represents the form of the Dharma protector Ralchigma in a manner characteristic of his Treasures. The complete mural, and many of its individual details, are beautifully presented photographically, alongside several pages of learned explanatory text.

(pp. 111-122) The next Zangdok Palri mural to be presented is the one found in Dumtsek Lhakang in Paro. Construction of the Lhakhang is believed to have started in 1433, during the first of three visits to Bhutan by Thangtong Gyalpo, and was initially undertaken to avert harm from the Naga spirit inhabiting the Taktsang ridge. The Zangdok Palri mural is in a part of the temple constructed in 1821, by the 25th Je Khenpo. Since Thangtong Gyalpo himself visited Zangdok Palri in his meditations, his vision is represented in this mural, which is also guided by Kunkhyen Pema Karpo's Zangdok Palri prayer. As with all the other examples in this book, images of the complete mural, and many of its individual details, are beautifully presented, augmented by pages of learned textual explanations.

(pp. 123-136) Next is the mural of Zangdok Palri in the Central Tower of Paro Rinpung Dzong. While originating in the 15th century and previously held by a family lineage, in 1644 it was handed over to the Zhabdrung Rinpoche, who reconstructed it, and used it as a major administrative centre for the western part of Bhutan. Fire damage in 1906 required reconstruction, and the extant Zangdok Palri mural originates from after that date. As in the previous examples, the mural is beautifully presented in expertly co-ordinated illustration and text.

Paro Taktsang is one of Asia's most famous Buddhist pilgrimage sites, and one of Bhutan's most ancient and important. It has been closely associated with Padmasambhava and his student Lang Palgyi Senge for centuries, and is the site from which many Terma treasures have been recovered.

(pp. 137-148) The Guru Tsen-gye Lhakang at Taktsang Pelphug that had been there since the 17th century was devastated by fire in 1998, so that its current Zangdok Palri mural dates from the recent reconstruction. However, it was painted by one of Bhutan's greatest contemporary artists, Lhari Lopen Ugyen Lhundrub, and is very fine.

(pp. 149-158) The Zangdok Palri mural in the Old Zangdok Palri Lhakhang at Paro Taktsang was first completed in 1843, but de-

stroyed in the fire that gutted the temple in the mid twentieth century. The present murals therefore date from its restoration.

(pp. 159-171) Gangteng Sangnag Choling monastery in Wangdiphodrang has a splendid Zangdok Palri mural, which, as one might expect of this famous centre for the Pema Lingpa tradition, depicts Pema Lingpa's own vision of Guru Rinpoche's Pure Land. Here, Padmasambhava, the central deity, takes the rare form of Guru Raksha Thotrengtsal, the Wrathful King of the Rakshasas. Having suffered severe earthquake damage in 1714 and again in 1897, the monastery was most recently renovated on a magnificent scale between 2000 and 2008. The mural of Zangdok Palri was worked on by many master painters, including Tulku Thinley Wangchuk from Lhalung and Tulku Tenzin Sherab from Gangteng, following the directives of the Second Reincarnation Tenzin Lekpe Dondrup. It was further rendered in natural mineral paints by Lhari Lopen Kumbu of Gangteng.

(pp. 172-181) Tharpaling in the Chumey Valley, Bumthang, is one of Bhutan's most remarkable holy places. It has been a site sacred to Guru Rinpoche since ancient times, and his footprints are still visible in its rocks. Later, the great Kagyu masters Tsangpa Gyare and Onrey Dharma Singe (dbon ras dar ma seng nge) meditated there for prolonged periods. Most famously however, the great Longchen Rabjam lived at the Tharpaling Monastery for many years, and even wrote his famous Seven Treasures (mdzod bdun) while residing there. However, with the passing of many centuries, Tharpaling Monastery gradually deteriorated, until its restoration in 1914 by the first King of Bhutan, Gongsa Ugyan Wangchuk. The Zangdok Palri mural dates from this restoration in the early 20th century, and is said to have been executed by Lopen Ugyan from Lhalung.

(pp. 183-193) Also in Bumthang is the Guru Sampa Lhundrup Lhakhang, at Kurjey, another holy place of Guru Rinpoche, where his body imprint is believed to be preserved. It is said that Nyangral Nyima Ozer, Guru Chowang, Melong Dorje, Longchen Rabjam, and Dorje Lingpa, all spent time at this holy place. In more recent times, Gongsa Ugyan Wangchuk built a huge statue of Guru Rinpoche there, together with a two-story lhakhang to house it. The murals of Zangdok Palri and are said to have been transported there from Sinphu Gonpa in this period, the early 20th century, with some additions made by Lama Rinchen Dorje.

(pp. 194-pp 203) Thangbi Lhundrup Choling in Bumthang is also believed to be a site once visited by Guru Rinpoche, and was established as a holy site for Guru Rinpoche in the 15th century, by the 4th Shamar Tulku (1453-1524). In later centuries the 5th (1526-1583) and 8th Shamar Tulkus (1695-1732) added to and rebuilt the Lhakhang.

The present murals are believed to date from the first part of the 20th century, and to have been painted by Lopon Ugyen from Lhalung.

(pp. 204-215) Yungdrung Choling at Trongsa was the abode of Pema Lingpa himself (1450-1521), Bhutan's most famous saint and Treasure Revealer, and was originally built to house his bodily remains (sku gdung). The Zangdok Palri murals visible there date from a restoration conducted by Gongsa Ugyan Wangchuk following the great earthquake of 1897, and were painted by Lopen Monlam Rabzang.

(pp. 216-225) The next representation of Zangdok Palri is not a mural, but a remarkable and unique thangka that shows every stylistic and other sign of being extremely old, and might well date back to Pema Lingpa himself (1450-1521). It is found at Tamzhing Lhundrup Choling monastery, the premier pilgrimage site in Bhutan, a place initially associated with Padmasambhava and later also the place where Pema Lingpa lived, taught, and passed away. The monastery itself was constructed in 1501, when Pema Lingpa was 50 years old, and to this day it is where many of Pema Lingpa's terma objects and even his body relics are preserved. Details of the thangka correspond to visions of Zangdok Palri that Pema Lingpa had at the age of 32, in the Iron Ox year (1482), and might well have been painted by or for Pema Lingpa in his own lifetime.

(pp. 226-233) Another site associated with Padmasambhava is Tshelung Nay, and in its Lhakhang is a valuable mural of Zangdok Palri painted according to the particular vision of Sogdogpa Lodro Gyaltsen (1552-1624). The Lhakhang was built by the 32nd Je Khenpo, Tshultrim Gyaltsen (1802-1860), and when the Lhakhang was restored and renovated in the 1990's by Her Majesty the Queen Mother Ashi Kesang Choeden Wangchuck, the mural of Zangdok Palri was carefully preserved in its original state, but as a separate item, like a thangka, since it could no longer fit on the new wall.

There is a set of two particularly fine, highly detailed, and well-preserved thangkas of Zangdok Palri in the private collection of Her Majesty the Royal Grandmother of Bhutan. Both were passed on to her from her own mother, the Mayum Rani Choying Wangmo Dorji (1897-1994), who was the youngest daughter of Thutob Namgyal, the ninth Chogyal of Sikkim. It is believed that the thangkas originated in Tibet, but nothing more is known about their provenance. The first (pp. 234-243) is distinctive in the manner in which it presents the Dakinis of the Four Lineages. The second (pp. 244-255) is distinctive in the way it presents various Buddhas, deities, and their pure lands, above the Palace of Lotus Light.

The next section of the book (pp. 256-273) is Kunzang Tengye's account of Padmasambhava's visits to Bhutan and his activities there,

according to traditional sources. Among the most important of the traditional sources are historical texts and Treasure discoveries on the life of King Sindhu Raja, which describe his inviting of Padmasambhava to Bumthang in the 8th century, even before Padmasambhava first went to Tibet. An influential version of the life story of King Sindhu Raja is here attributed to the Treasure discoveries of the famous Ugyan Lingpa (1323-1360). From Bumthang, it is said Padmasambhava went on to visit many further locations in Bhutan. In all, it is said, Padmasambhava visited Bhutan three times, burying treasures, giving teachings and empowerments, making prophecies, and leaving his imprints and blessings in the rocks and soil.

As a consequence of Guru Rinpoche's visits and activities in Bhutan, there are now numerous sacred sites connected to him in various parts of the country, and the next two sections of the book are dedicated to these. First comes 40 pages (pp. 274-315) of remarkable photographs of Bhutan's major Padmasambhava sites, of various imprints of Guru Rinpoche's feet, hands and body upon rocks, of the Treasure doors behind which he buried his treasures, and so on. The next section is entirely text, describing fourteen of the Guru Rinpoche sites in detail, with their special characteristics and qualities (pp. 316-323).

The final section of the main body of this magnificent book (pp. 324-335) contains a prayer to be reborn in Zangdok Palri from Jigme Lingpa's Longchen Nyingthig Treasure. The Tibetan text is presented alongside Roman phonetics and an English translation, and the pages are beautifully ornamented.

The end-matter first presents a substantial glossary (pp. 336-363), which helps the book to be more accessible to readers less familiar with Tibetan Buddhism or Bhutan, followed by references and bibliography. The Editor's Note describes the circumstances of the writing of this book, explaining that only the section by Tulku Thondup was first written in English, and that the other sections were translated into English from Choekyi (chos skad, Religious Language). Brief bio-data of the contributors is given, along with their photographs, and acknowledgements.

This is a magnificent book, produced with endless loving care by a large team of eminent and talented people. While it is primarily intended for devotees of Guru Rinpoche, it also has a great deal to offer to scholars of various academic disciplines.

