

## **OVERVIEW**

Of all the things that Bhutan is known for, it is perhaps the rich religious and cultural tradition of the country that puts it on the tourist map as one of the most exotic and must-visit destinations in the world today.

Bhutan's unique cultural heritage has remained intact and untarnished. Centuries-old traditions are in practice to this day and continue to have tremendous value and significance in the daily life of the people.

Mahayana Buddhism plays a dominant role in enriching and strengthening the socio-cultural fabric of the country.

Hundreds of Lhakhang, or temples, dot the countryside with a huge reservoir of religious and cultural history enclosed within their colorful and mystical interiors. In fact every village in Bhutan has a temple and each temple has a mesmerizing story to tell.

One such temple is Chime Lhakhang.

## **LOCATION**

Chime Lhakhang lies on the periphery of the expansive valley of Lobesa where the borders of borders of Thimphu, Punakha and wangduephodrang districts meet.

Lobesa means either "Place of Return" or "Beautiful Place".

There are various interpretations related to both the meanings- all of them different. Given the scenic and breathtaking beauty of Lobesa though, a visitor would be rather inclined to believe that the latter meaning holds true.

Perched atop a little hillock overlooking the Puna Tshangchu river belt Chime Lhakhang is auspiciously surrounded by nine khas or villages – Sosokha, Yuwakha, Gangmakha, Septokha, Sembjikha, Esakha, Pachakaha, Buewakha and Gangkhar.

Of these, the villages of Sosokha and Yuwakha fall directly along the pathway to the Lhakhang. It takes approximately two hours by car from the capital, Thimphu, to reach the village of Sosokha located right next to the Thimphu-Punakha highway.

A brisk 15-minute walk through the two villages will lead a visitor straight to the Lhakhang.

A sense and feeling of fertility and contentment is indeed immediately palpable as one passes through the rich alluvial paddy fields of the two villages.

All crops grow and thrive well here. Farmers of this region are in fact among the most well-to-do in Bhutan. They attribute this to the blessing of Lam Drukpa Kuenley.

"If Lam Drukpa Kuenley had not set foot in our village we would never have enjoyed such good luck and fortune", says a village elder of Yuwakha as she waters some chili seedlings in her field." We feel his jinlab (power/blessing) in every square inch of the soil here".

## **AN ECCENTRIC SAINT**

Lam Drukpa Kuenley descended from an august lineage of the Drukpa Kagyu spiritual tradition established by Tilopa, Naropa, Marpa and Milarepa. He was recognized as an incarnation of the great Mahasiddha, Saraha.

As a Lam, Drukpa Kuenley is placed among the highest levels of sainthood. But he is remembered more vividly for the outrageous nature of his teachings, which were administered in the most unexpected ways, often with strong sexual overtones and inclinations.

It was because of this style that he is remembered to this day by his devotees in the Himalayas as an eccentric saint.

In Bhutan, he is also a cultural icon around whom countless yarns of facts and fiction, and stories and legends have been spun.

The mention of Drukpa Kuenley will, invariably, draw a mischievous smile on the face of most Bhutanese men and a red tinge in the face of many Bhutanese maidens.

It will also bring to mind the unorthodox antics which the Lam used to clean the society of the many ills brought about by man and the evils, which lurked within society itself.

Most Bhutanese can regale listeners with many bizarre and interesting stories of Lam Drukpa Kuenley.

Dressed in rags, stinking of alcohol, the foulmouthed figure of the Lam roamed the valleys of the Himalayas. His apparent disregard for social norms began in his early years to the frustration of his own mother who did not understand the unusual saintly-hood of her own son.

To all Buddhists, his single-minded purpose of seducing women only conveyed a spirituality of great depth. The spirituality of Lam Drukpa Kuenley was such that, according to namthar (religious history) he could take his dirty rags off his body and hang them on the rays of the sun

It was, however, not his phallic power that elevated the Lam to his spiritual status. It was the power of good over evil that he represented.

Under the guise of uncontrolled lust and apparently thoughtless womanizing, one of Drukpa Kuenley's greatest gifts to countless beneficiaries was: children. Through children, the gift was life itself.

Chime Lhakhang is today one of the most revered and visited temples in Bhutan. People from all corners of the country visit the Lhakhang to seek blessings from Drukpa Kuenley.

## **THE ORIGIN OF 'NO DOG TEMPLE'**

It is believed that around the time when Drukpa Kuenley first visited Bhutan, a demoness called Loro Duem resided on a high pass of present day Dochula. She devoured all those who attempted to cross the

pass and the people of the valley lived in absolute fear of her. Two more demonesses lived on two smaller mountain passes-Helela and Sinchula. The three of them together terrorized the people causing them unspeakable misery and suffering.

When Drukpa Kuenley heard of the three demonesses he decided to embark on the mission to subdue them.

He first set out to Dochula to look for Loro Duem and, sure enough, found her along with the two demonesses getting ready to feast on a carcass. As soon as the three demonesses saw Lam Drukpa Kuenley, they took to their heels-his reputation for subduing demons having preceded him by this time. The Lam chases them down the valley and the two lesser demonesses dissolved into the body of Loro Duem. As she reached the plains of Lobesa, Loro Duem transformed herself into a dog to escape detection.

But Lam Drukpa Kuenley recognized the demoness dog, killed it and buried it under the mound of a hill which he is fondly said to have described as “looking like the breast of a woman”. He then said ‘chi-med’ (“No dog!”) and built a black chorten(stupa) on top of this mound. He also said that a temple would one day be built near it.

In fact even before killing the demoness dog and burying her Lam Drukpa Kuenley had imposed conditions on her and had bound her to the service of the Buddha Dharma. He transformed her into a guardian and protector of the Buddha and gave her a new name-Chhoekim or “ the one converted to religion”.

Today Chhoekim is the Guardian Deity of Chhime Lhakhang.

As prophesied by Lam Drukpa Kuenley, a Lhakhang was indeed built on a mound some time in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century and came to be known as Chime Lhakhang or “no dog temple”. Although many people believe that Lam Drukpa Kuenley himself built the Lhakhang, it was actually built by his cousin, Lam Ngawang Choegyal, in honor of his illustrious relative. Drukpa Kuenley himself never believed in such forms and structures and deliberately chose not to establish any religious seats or centers.

Not much information remains thereafter about the original Lhakhang built by Lam Ngawang Chhogyal. Oral sources which have percolated down generations to this day suggest that the Lhakhang fell into ruins at some stage.

Years later Zhabdrung Jigme Choegyal is said to have built a Drupkhang (a retreat house) on the same spot: This Drupkhang is expanded and converted into a small Lhakhang by the people of Lobesa who then onwards became the custodians of the Lhakhang.

However, being preoccupied with the struggles of daily existence, the people were not able to look after the Lhakhang. The Government, considering the deep historical and religious significance of the Lhakhang, decided to look after it.

Over the years, the Lhakhang has undergone substantial renovations primarily supported by contributions from devotees. Major renovation works were carried out between 1994 and 1997. The Fourth King, His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck, granted the gold for the construction of the sertog (golden pinnacle).

Chhime Lhakhang now comprises the main temple housing the statue of Drukpa Kuenley and his sacred relics, the statues of Lam Ngawang Chhoeqyal and Choekim, and other prominent Buddhist saints and masters. In recent years classrooms and living quarters for monks have also been built.

## **THE FERTILITY TRADITION**

It is widely known today that most of the thousands of people who visit the Lhakhang do so to pray for children-either to ask for children by those who are childless or to seek protection for children by those who already have them. There are many people in Bhutan, and indeed in other parts of the world, who will vouch that their prayers will be answered.

Nobody knows exactly how and when the tradition of seeking fertility blessing started in Chimi Lhakhang. There are no written records and even oral sources provide scant information on this.

The Chief Monk of Chimi Lhakhang puts forth a plausible theory. According to him, “Drukpa Kuenley has always been associated with giving life and liberation to people. He is the potent source and symbol of all-fulfilling power and a saint and Bodhisattva of the highest order” says the Lam. “Actually he is like a paksam joenshing (a mythical wish-fulfilling tree). He will not deny anyone who comes to seek his kindness and munificence. And there is also the physical side of his character too. A childless couple could have sought his blessing in any point in time and the tradition could have carried on. If it’s not Chimi Lhakhang, it could have been somewhere else. But this is the only temple in Bhutan dedicated to him, where he actually set foot and prophesied that the temple would one day be built. All this is pre-ordained with his power and divinity”.

Couples who visit the Lhakhang are blessed by a replication of the iron bow and arrows of Drukpa Kuenley, his scriptures and the phallus, which is the symbolic representation of fertility. It is said that during his life, the saint often used his phallus as a tool to impart his teachings.

As part of the blessing a monk on duty will also select a name for the unborn child randomly from the list of names maintained at the temple. If it is a female name, couples can expect a girl: and if the name drawn is that of a male, then a boy.

Some childless couples stay overnight at the monastery. “Their faith and devotion is of absolute significance,” the Chief Monk says. “They also have to be very sensitive to any dream they may see overnight and remember it properly. This will be an important indication of things to come.”

## **A CENTER OF MONASTIC EDUCATION**

While Chime Lhakhang is renowned for its fertility blessings, it also fulfils the other religious and spiritual needs of the people.

Monks from Chime Lhakhang perform rituals and ceremonies in times of sickness and death. They regularly organize prayer ceremonies for the welfare of the local community, the nation, and indeed all humanity. More significantly, the Lhakhang serves as a center of monastic education and learning. Young monks, mainly from rural households, live and study at the Lhakhang.

The novice monks stay at the Lhakhang for eight years during which they receive basic all-round monastic education in preparation for further studies in Sheydras (Buddhist monastic colleges) around the country.