

GOMPHU KORA - A Guide to the Great Circumambulation at Gomphu.

Prelude

The early history of Bhutan abounds with narratives of the great deeds of Buddhist masters. These stories often defy logic and modern interpretation but such was their sway over our pool of beliefs and customs that they became the very bedrock of Bhutanese culture and tradition. As we now try, increasingly, to retrieve whatever little knowledge about our past as we could from the dying tradition of oral story telling, we find that there is so much we can learn about ourselves and also proudly narrate to the outside world.

One such story is about Gomphu Kora-a silver of land and rock outcrop, on the bank of Dangmechu, in the far east of Bhutan where each year, beginning on the 8th day of the second month of the lunar calendar, every farmer leaves his spade and oxen behind to revel in the festivity of a mighty spiritual tradition.

Merits

The coming of Guru Padmasambhava or Guru Rimpoche was prophesized by the Buddha. In the 8th century, the Guru (“teacher” or the “revered one”) strode the Himalayas like a Colossus, subduing evils and spreading the Dharma. It is said that there is not an inch of soil in Bhutan where the Guru has not stepped on. His legacy lives on through highly venerated sites, strewn all over the kingdom, and the re-enactment of his divine deeds during the Tshechu (religious festival held in the Guru’s honor). Gomphu Kora is one of these sites. In sheer sanctity, it is in the league of the Taktsang in Paro, Singye Dzong in Lhuntshi and Kurjey Lhakhang in Bumthang. In terms of historical antecedents, it is perhaps unequalled.

Buddhist scholars say that the site has been blessed with indefinite virtues and prayers: a mere visit cleanses one of sins, fulfils desires and guides the path to Nirvana (liberation from the cycle of existence). They also point out that the single circumambulation at Gomphu Kora brings more spiritual merits to the devotees than reciting the divine mantra”Om Mani Padme Hung” or “Om Ah Hum Vajra Guru Padma Siddhi Hum” 100,00-0 times elsewhere.

Location

Gomphu Kora lies in the heart of the agrarian belt of eastern Bhutan. It is 23 kilometers from Tashigang Dzong, the headquarters of Bhutan’s most populous district, and two kilometers from Duksum, a quaint hamlet consisting of a few shops that serves the nearby farming community. The drive from Trashigang winds downhill for about 11 Kms, till the bridge at Chazam, and then swerves left and follows the course of the Dangmechu for another 12 Kms to Gomphu Kora. The headquarters of Trashiyangtse Dzongkhag is located a further 33 Kms away.

The ambience is purely medieval. Large monolithic rocks rise intermittently from tracts of paddy fields amid the strident roar of the Dangmechu that washes the site’s southern peripheries. The roar builds to a crescendo and falls, only to rise again, as the sound lashes on and off against the wall of cliff on the other bank. Except for the three-day festival once a year when people assemble, the human settlements are located higher up on the laps of the surrounding mountains. In Choekey (a classical script), Gomphu means” Meditation Cave” and Kora means “Circumambulation”. The name is derived from a cave formed out of a rock-face next to a temple that has been built as a tribute to this sacred site.

The story of Gomphu Kora goes back to the 8th century AD. Legend has it that an evil spirit called Myongkhapa escaped from Samye in Tibet when Guru Padmasambhava, the progenitor of Nyingma

strand of Buddhism, was spreading the Dharma in the Himalayas. Myongkhapa followed the course of the present-day Kholongchhu stream and concealed himself inside a rock where Gomphu Kora stands today. The Guru followed the evil, meditated for three days inside the rock cave and finally vanquished it.

The subjugation of the malignant spirit took wit and sheer cunning. To escape from the wrathful Guru, the spirit blasted the rock from the inside, carving a passage of escape. In another incident, the spirit transformed itself into a terrifying snake and appeared before the Guru as if to strike at him. The Guru then manifested as a Garuda, a legendary bird, and captured the snake. Finally subduing Myongkhapa, he was instructed to be the guardian deity of Gomphu Kora and was entrusted with the responsibility of guarding the doctrine.

Legacy

The legacy of these encounters is still visible today. The escape passage from the rock is frequented by Buddhist devotees, who believe that the experience cleanses them of their worldly sins. The episode of the tussle between the Garuda and the snake is preserved through body imprints on the rock. Also visible inside the rock is the Guru's thumbprint that signifies the undertaking by the spirit to submit to the Dharma.

The rock is also a repository of many other spiritual attributes containing, among others, the Ters (treasures) associated with Avalokiteshwara (The God of Compassion), Manjushri (The God of Wisdom), and Vajrapani (Vajra Dharma Buddha) as well as the Tshebum, the longevity vase of Lhacham Pema Sol.

The story of the longevity vase throws an interesting account of the early Buddhist history in the Himalayas. On the verge of dying, the Tibetan king, Trisong Duetsen, pleaded with the Guru to grant him the boon of immortality. To pacify the adamant king, the Guru sent his disciple Atsara Salai 'O' to the cave of Mara Tika in Nepal-where the Guru had attained immortality-to obtain the immortality vase. Unfortunately, as fate would have it, the king died when the vase reached Gomphu Kora. On the Guru's instruction, the vase was concealed the rock to benefit future generations. It is said that, even today, 'the water of long life' can be seen trickling out of the rock during the auspicious days.

Relics

The surroundings of Gomphu Kora are laden with relics that capture the activities of the Guru. The area stretches along the riverbank from Tsergom in Jamkhar gewog to Ombha and Gongza under Toetsho geog in Trashiyangtse district.

The Guru also meditated in a cave called Kapaliphu, about 15 minutes uphill walk from Gomphu Kora. It is said that the three-month meditation and retreat ended miraculously when two streams-a male and a female-gushed out from beneath a rock. One of the streams is used as a water source for the Gomphu Kora temple.

Of the many evil spirits that the Guru quelled in the area, there was one at Tsergom, three Kms before the Gomphu Kora temple from Trashigang, which brought miseries and sufferings to the people in the locality. The Guru subdued the spirit, extracted its heart, and drilled numerous holes into it with a dagger using a rock as a slab. The remnant of this encounter is a stone riddled with holes and a black rock that symbolizes the spirit's heart itself. The spirit eventually became the protecting guardian (Nedak) of Gomphu Kora.

A statue of Gyenen Myongkhapa is preserved in the temple alongside a mermaid (Tshomem Gyalmo) who is said to have appeared from a river-lake nearby to supplicate and make offerings to the great Guru.

While at Gomphu Kora, the Guru is believed to have resorted to several tactics to subjugate the evils. Rock imprints show bodies of evils being burnt, and skins being flayed and dried on boulders. Once, in an instance of trickery, the Guru pretended to be dead and caught the evils off-guard. A stone pillar standing nearby the temple is said to be the petrified form of an evil spirit rising to see if the Guru is dead.

Pilgrims in the Past.

Several prominent religious personalities have undertaken pilgrimage to Gomphu Kora in the past millennium. One of the earliest was Gongkhar Gyal, a twin grandson of Lhasay Tsangma, who built a small shrine at Gomphu Kora around the 10th Century AD. Gongkhar Gyal had by then established his noble lineage at Trashiyangtse.

A mendicant, Choying Gyatsho, is believed to have engraved mantras onto a stone at Gomphu Kora. This historical figure has later been identified as the son of the renowned treasure revealer Tertön Dorji Lingpa. Tertön Pema Lingpa, one of the five king Tertöns, visited Gomphu Kora in the 14th Century AD. He enlarged the existing shrine and revealed several treasures including the statue of the Buddha, Guru Padmasambhava amulet, the footprints of the Guru and his consort, and the footprints of the Guru's riding horse. After this discovery, Ani Choten Zangmo, Pema Lingpa's grand daughter who founded the Dramitse monastery, undertook a pilgrimage to Gomphu Kora.

The Gomphu Kora temple was renovated and enlarged in the 15th Century by Yongzin Ngagi Wangchuk, the grand father of Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal who founded Bhutan as a Nation state. He also inscribed murals on the walls of the temple. Gyalsey Tenzin Rabgay, the 4th temporal ruler of Bhutan, followed his footsteps about a hundred years later and renovated the temple.

Circumambulation

“Go around Gomphu Kora today for tomorrow may be too late” so goes a local song that entices devotees to visit Gomphu Kora.

The place comes alive, once every year, when people all over Eastern Bhutan descend upon a narrow valley, dressed in fineries, to partake in the festivity, to worship and to reunite themselves with their illustrious past.

The sanctity of the three-day religious festival equally draws the Dakpa tribe in neighboring Arunachal Pradesh (India) who endure days of travel on foot amid rugged environs with entire families in tow. Some say the Dakpas have done this for more than a millennia, beginning shortly after Guru Padmasambhava sanctified the place in the 8th century AD.

So, in just the blink of an eye, the otherwise desolate rock-scarred landscape mushrooms into a town of tents and huts filled with all shades and colors. Towards dusk, the occupants of these makeshift dwellings join a river of crowd for a clockwise circumambulation of the temple and the rock chanting the omnipotent mantra of Guru Rimpoche. This often lasts till dawn. The Guru is attributed to have said that devotees will flock to Gomphu Kora for eons on to celebrate the triumph of good over evil. There couldn't be a more accurate prophecy.

Social occasion

The festival also provides a much-needed respite for work-worn farmers. Especially in recent years, the strictly religious event has become a great social outlet, as young boys and girls from various regions meet and mingle, their casual relationship often sparking into courtship and eventually marriages. The rendezvous may sometimes be brief but the memory lives on: after all, with all its spiritual aura amid a medieval-like setting, what better place than Gomphu Kora for an unforgettable romantic interlude.

The spirit of romance, in fact, might have been perpetrated by the great Guru himself. One of these indications comes in the form of a boulder, weighing up to 200 kilogrammes, that has to be lifted and carried around the black rock. The reward: fertility for barren women, and test of courage and strength among the men-folk before an audience of admiring women. No less arduous and romantic is the 'sin cleansing' rigor, entering and exiting a dark and dank rock tunnel said to have been created during the duel between Guru and the evil spirit.

Apart from these, as in any religious gathering in Bhutan, there are the mask and folk dances, the unfurling of the sacred scroll (Thongdroel) for public viewing and an assortment of modern entertainments such as music, films, jesting and other pleasantries. Trading too is brisk while the festival lasts with wares for sale ranging from simple farm implements to western imports like Coke and Pepsi.

Other Attractions

Guru Rimpoche visited and blessed many places in TrashiYangtse including Rigsum Goenpa, Dechenphodrang, Pelri Tse, Kharchen Dra (Bumdeling), Omba Ney, Gongza Ney and Pemaling. Other attractions in the district are the old TrashiYangtse fortress (Dongdi Dzong), the ruins of the Tshenkarla Dzong built in the 8th Century AD by Tibetan prince Lhasey Tshangma, the winter habitat of the endangered black-necked crane at Bumdelng, and the Chorten Kora.

The Chorten Kora, a large Buddhist stupa, was built by Lama Ngawang Loday in 1740 by bringing the replica of the Boudanath stupa in Nepal carved on a radish.

Just before Gomphu Kora is Trashigang, Bhutan's largest district. The district is known for its imposing 17th Century fortress, exquisite hand-woven textiles, and the nomadic tribe called the Brokpa.

Tashi Delek!