

Bhutan: a land of poetry

By Laima Vince

I never imagined I would take a trip to Bhutan. But in 2018 Autumn, I felt called to visit one of the last places on earth where Buddhism is still the bread of daily life. All my life, I have been drawn to places of quiet meditation.

I did my research and learned Bhutan is a tiny country the size of Switzerland nestled high in the Himalayan Mountains. Bhutan is ruled by a benevolent king, but at the same time is a democracy. Until about two decades ago, visitors rarely entered the country. And even now to get to Bhutan is complicated. There are only a few flights a week.

The little I know of Buddhism I acquired through reading the Dalai Lama's books. I have travelled to Tibet, but found the monasteries overrun with tourists, turning Lhasa into a type of Buddhist Disney World. I wondered how the monks could go about their daily routines with express trains bringing in 20,000 tourists from Chinese megacities every day. Even the practice in which young monks debate the teachings in monastery courtyards has turned into a public event where tourists may watch and film them on their phones.

What I discovered is that Bhutan is a land of poetry. A poem expresses depth of

thought and experience that can hardly be accessed otherwise. I experienced Bhutan through poems that kept coming to me during the seven days I was there—poems that I would quickly jot down in my notebook while on the road, or when resting in my hotel room in the evenings. Poetry is something of the spirit. In Bhutan spirituality is not relegated to a single church service on Sunday or a day of Sabbath or a few yearly visits to a temple. Bhutan is a place where deep spiritual belief is enmeshed in all aspects of daily life.

My poems were inspired by Bhutan's landscape, people, stories, teachings, and many more. The poems are like diary entries; raw experiences jotted down as inspiration for further

contemplation. My first poem came to me as I was boarding the Drukair plane.

Entering the Belly of the Dragon

*A monk clad in a scarlet robe
Climbs the metal ladder
And disappears inside the belly
Of the dragon—
The Drukair plane.*

*And now it is my turn.
Doubts overwhelm me:
How will this plane
Twist and turn its way
Through treacherous
Mountain peaks?*

*Today in Singapore
The smog is moderate.
Meanwhile Beijing
Is reaching hazard levels.*

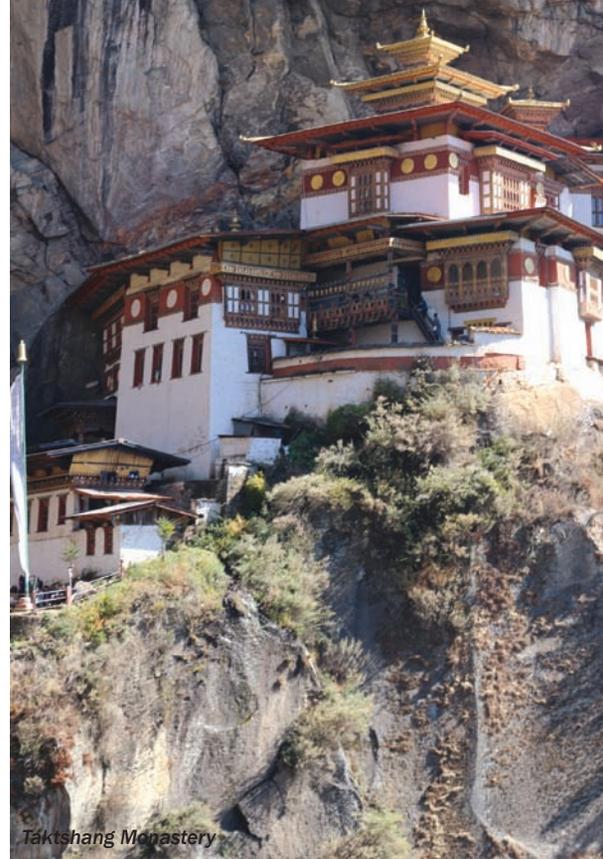
*But in Bhutan
Blue skies await me.*



Elderly people at National Memorial Choeten



Prayer flags and prayer wheels made from recycled plastic. On the climb up to Taktshang



Taktshang Monastery

*So here I am, about to visit
The Happiest Country in the World.
What could I possibly fear?*

*The flight takes off.
In the flight magazine I read:
"A teenage princess dwells inside
Beautiful stairways that could never
Lead her out. It is a tale of human
honour,
Of sacrifice, and of faith
That resonates with few in this,
Our degenerate time of excess,
Useless pride, and profanity."*

*I glance around
At my fellow passengers.
We are that few
Who the princess's story
Still resonates with.*

*I read about a pig
Who ran in mindless circles
Around a stupa
To escape a dog
And was reborn
As a human.*

*We are all given a chance
Whether we know it or not.*

Perhaps this is my chance?

*As the plane soars over Bhutan
I feel the energy of that land.
Bhutan, what will you show me?
How will you change me?*

Bhutan, I am listening.

At Paro Airport, I was greeted by my guide, a young man with a scholarly look dressed in a *gho*, a length of plaid fabric fashioned into a robe that ends just above the knee and is held tight with a woven sash. First, we travelled to see a chain bridge that extends across a rushing river. Prayer flags are strung across the bridge and surrounding mountain ledges. As I gazed at the prayer flags fluttering in the

wind, a poem began to form in my head.

Prayer Flags

*The Bhutanese string prayer flags
Across rivers, mountains, peaks.*

*The purpose of the prayer flag
Is to billow in the wind,*

*Carry prayers out
Into the environment,*

*So that birds, plants, waters, animals
May be blessed and feel the benefit.*

*I gaze around me and I see peaceful
dogs
Reclining in the dust; cattle, horses,
grazing.*

*Everywhere there is peace.
To me the writing on the prayer flags*

*Looks like squiggles. But those
squiggles
Contain prayers and those prayers*

*Flutter on the wind, catch onto
branches,
Slide down stems of grass into the
earth,*

*And reemerge as new shoots —
As renewed life.*

After lunch, we headed to Tashichhodzong in Thimphu. This fortress of the glorious religion was constructed in 1641, and was then restored in the 1960s by the Third King of Bhutan, King Jigme Dorji Wangchuck. The fortress houses ministries, His Majesty's Secretariat, and the central monk body. A portion of the dzong is open to visitors, who admire the murals and the temple study hall with 1,000 Buddha statues presided over by a glorious Buddha. I was surprised to see in the mural

paintings that Buddha has blue eyes.

The Blue-Eyed Buddha
*In the monasteries of Bhutan
The Buddhas have blue eyes -
So that they may be somehow
Different, otherworldly.*

*And so now we,
The blue-eyed,
Have journeyed to Bhutan,
Carrying our curiosity
With us on our backs
And our dark minds.*

*We hope to take some wisdom
From the land of the dragon
Back to our overcrowded cities,
Buzzing with humanity,
Displays of light,
That never cease to blink
Despite our talk
Of global warming
And the need
To cut back*

Our excesses.

*And so I stand
Before the blue-eyed Buddha
My own blue-green eyes common
where I come from.*

*Oh Bhutan,
Dream of the last Shangri-La,
Kingdom of mountain peaks,
Where wisdom
Has not dissipated
Like the clouds
That entangle themselves
Around your craggy cliffs.*

*Where a benevolent King
Loves his people still.
And welcomes us
The blue-eyed
To his home.*

From Tashichhodzong, we headed to the National Memorial Choeten. Here, elderly people circumambulate





The Golden Buddha on the mountain top over Thimphu Valley

the stupa. As I watched the flow of people, my guide explained that in Bhutan the elderly spend their days at the *choetens* and stupas, praying, circumambulating, preparing for their eternal journey. They are not prevailed upon to stay home and watch the children and cook and clean, as they would be in China. Nor do they use their retirement to travel, to snatch what enjoyment they still can from life, as they would in Europe or North America. Instead, they focus on their souls and prepare themselves for death. It is a daily practice. I was amazed. Again, a poem came to mind.

*Preparing for the next life
Circumambulating the stupa in
Thimphu,
Elderly Bhutanese women,*

Earnestly walking clockwise,

*Twirling their prayer wheels,
chanting,
Preparing themselves for life's
eternal journey.*

*All wear purple-
purple jackets, sweaters, blouses,
shawls,
Even long purple kiras.*

*All my life I've loved the colour
purple -
I've worn purple coats, purple
sweaters, purple dresses.
I've even painted entire rooms in my
house purple.*

*I fit right in
That moving crowd of purple
And prayer.*

*Excused from housekeeping,
Tending grandchildren,
They spend their final days here,
In the shadow of the stupa.*

*When they are called
They will be ready.*

Naturally, I sometimes struggle to be fully present in the moment, to resist the urge to pull out my camera or phone and snap photos or film video. This inner struggle inspired yet another poem.



Chain bridge, between Paro and Thimphu



National Memorial Choeten, Thimphu



Two guides have a discussion beside a sea of prayer flags in the mountains outside of Thimphu

Circumambulating the Stupa

*Circumambulating the stupa
I am tempted to take a photo,
Shoot a video,
Be the tourist.*

*But why would I throw
Such a precious opportunity away?
The chance to cleanse my soul?
What is it I cannot let go of?
My good training as a consumer?
The wish to possess everything
I can lay my hands on?
Take it away with me
As an image locked
Inside my phone -
Stored securely on the cloud.*

*The camera seeks to capture the
present
But by the time the shutter releases
The present is gone -*

*It is a fool's game.
Embrace the present
With each footstep*

*That takes you
Around the stupa -*

*That is your challenge -
Even if it means
Going around in circles
For eternity
Until you get it right.*

The high point of my week was climbing up to Taktshang Palphug Monastery, or the Tiger's Nest, located in Paro. The monastery was built into the side of an imposing mountain in 1692 by Gyalse Tenzin Rabgye. It is the site where, in the 8th century, Guru Padmasambhava, otherwise known as Guru Rinpoche, meditated for three years, three months, and three days, after having reached this isolated outpost by flying from Tibet on the back of his

loyal consort, Yeshe Tshogyal who transformed herself into a tigress. I had the privilege to spend a few moments in meditation inside the cave where Guru Rinpoche meditated. The name Milarepa came to mind. As a student, I'd read *The Life of Milarepa*. Throughout my life, I've often remembered this holy man who meditated for the good of humanity. Later, after I'd climbed down the mountain, I learned that indeed, the very same Milarepa had also meditated in this cave. I never could have imagined that I would one day find myself inside that very cave! The world is indeed full of miracles.



View of the Himalayas on the road from Paro to Haa

Meditating in Guru

Padmasambhava's Cave

*I climbed high up the mountain
to reach Taktshang, the Tiger's
Nest,
Where Guru Padmasambhava
Was set down by Yeshe Tshogyal,
The flying tigress,
One of his two loyal consorts.*

*It took me a good two hours,
And a lot of determination.
My guide climbed with ease.
It was his 100th time up the
mountain.
You are a holy man, I teased.*

*Having ascended
Once again we descended
Deep inside the mountain
Into its tight stone womb.*

*This is where Guru Rinpoche
Meditated for three years,
Three months and three days.*

We paused here

*And we both meditated.
And the mountain breathed
And I breathed with it.*

*What I have taken away with me,
Oh Bhutan, from your mountain
core,
Is something beyond words,
Beyond thought, beyond time.
It is a treasure
I have carried
Out of that cave.*

The next day, I left Bhutan. Returning to the “modern world” felt like falling back down to earth from heaven. I hope to hold onto the inner peace I have taken away from Guru Rinpoche’s cave for as long as I can. Bhutan has shown me that it is possible to live in a way that is different than the way we live in today’s cities. At the same time, Bhutan is not anachronistic. The people of

Bhutan simply choose wisely to preserve their own cultural heritage while not shying away from technological advances where necessary. There is always another path. It is our choice to follow it or not.



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