

**PILGRIM'S PROGRESS**  
**A NEW LOOK AT AN ANCIENT PATH OF PILGRIMAGE**

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## METHODOLOGY

You all said "be lucky", and eventually, I was. It just took some patience and another idea altogether. Life is what happens when you make other plans, I'm learning to live by that. My actual methodology consisted of getting lost a lot, finding my way eventually and laughing about it over a cup of butter tea with whomever I met along the way. I didn't ask for interviews, they sort of fell my way, and stories were as easily plucked out of conversation as the brilliant red blooms are off the Rhododendron trees. If anything, the Sherpas of that region love to talk, even if it's at 60 words a minute in a combination of Sherpa, Nepali, Tibetan and English. They also love to exaggerate, especially at the expense of gullible *injis*. Most of my local information was gathered over meals, at *pujas* (there were three death pujas going on in Tarkye Gyang while I was there - They are the social scene of the region) and over many cups of tea, *chang*, *raksi*, *bolu* and any other forms of alcoholic beverages available.

Textual information was gained from many varied sources. Tashi Tsering from the library of Tibetan texts and Archives in Dharmasala helped me with the articles on sacred sites and pilgrimage while Jerome, Andy and Hubert fed me with all sorts of interesting articles some what related to the topic. I did as much research at the SIT library as was available, which really didn't take me long at all.

For physical information and observation I went off to the woods (rocks, rivers, cliffs, mountains etc. . . .), text in hand and started matching place names with descriptions. I developed an unhealthy attachment to my map, which served me little when I was lost. Though I may not have gained a sense of direction over ISP, I did gain a sense of wonder for geography, sacred or mundane; something I had always considered to be rather flat and uninteresting.

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""Whether it be a holy mountain, a town or a temple, Tibetans go around it, following a path, traced out by thousands of pilgrims who preceded them, and which thenceforth has become ritual." (Anne-Marie Blondeau, Macdonald pp. 3)

Is it human nature to seek the divine in tangible, visible form? Are we inspired by the inherent spirituality found within the aspects of daily existence? Or is inspiration manufactured by a collective subconscious in order to provide the conscious with motivation towards a higher, more meaningful existence? Is the sacred found within?

The Tibetan Buddhist imagination in both Tibet and the Tibetan influenced regions of the Himalayan mountains, has created its own physical geography in accordance with Buddhist and local mythology. Mountains and lakes are imbued with protective powers attributed to the dakas and dakinis (highly realized beings, male and female respectively) that live within, embodying the physical form of the natural environment. In unique forms of nature buddhas and bodhisattvas are found. *Rang-jungs* ( ) are venerated as self arisen images and *chortens* ( ) 'supports of the dharma', are built at any place of significance, such as a crossroads, at the top of a pass, at the entrance to a village or at a precarious point on a trail. *Chortens* serve as both a bestower of blessings upon those who are yet to pass and as a receptacle of thanks for those who have successfully done so. Larger *chortens* may contain relics, either of the Buddha or highly revered saints and lamas.

Where saints walked legends and prayer flags blossom. Their practice caves are places of great veneration. Blessings are bestowed upon the heads of any visitor, and those who practice in them receive one-hundred fold the benefits of meditating elsewhere.

Tibetan Buddhists circle these monuments, not to get a better view, but to pay homage, stemming from a centuries old Indian tradition. The Guru (religious teacher) was always envisioned hovering above the right shoulder, and when greeted in person the chela (student) circled the guru to the right. In Tibetan Buddhist tradition the same applies to any monument of religious significance.

A *ney* ( ) is a sacred place, *ney-cor* ( ) is the Tibetan word for pilgrimage, meaning 'to go around a sacred place'. For Tibetan Buddhists a pilgrimage is essentially a circular journey around a holy place (Macdonald, pp.3). The significance of *ney-cor* is manifold. On one level it is a way of paying homage, on another it becomes a form of walking meditation, a physical, though not mental, break from meditative contemplation. It is a way to get closer to the sacred, a circling ever inward of the mind. For some Tibetan Buddhists it becomes a chance to bathe themselves in the spiritual influence. It can become an inspiration or a reminder to focus in on the teachings rather than out on the material demands of everyday life.

Truly sacred sites and cora routes, such as the one at Boudha, or around the Jokhang in Lhasa, provide the practitioner with the promise of rebirth in a higher realm. *Ri-cor* ( ), mountain cora, or routes that go through difficult and fearful areas; such as cora around Milarepa's tower and cora around Tsurpu monastery in Tibet; offer a better passage through Bardo, provided the pilgrim can navigate them without fear.

When local cora routes become insufficient, devout practitioners gather up their belongings and set out for other areas of more sacred significance, thus partaking of pilgrimage in the more western sense - an actual voyage to a more distant destination.

The introduction by the editors of Anne-Marie Blondeau's survey of Tibetan pilgrimage establish set definitions as to what constitutes an actual place of pilgrimage.

"First, the holiness of the place to which participants go must, to some degree, be generally recognized. Secondly there must be individual and collective movement to that place. Thirdly the objectives sought after by those who participate in the movement must be spiritual or material benefits." (Macdonald, pp. 3)

For Tibetan Buddhists the most important qualifiers of a pilgrimage site concern the circumstances sanctifying the place itself. The events of the past make the site significant for the present. A wealth of legends and mythologies revolve around these sites and are essential for their continued visitation. They are the liaisons between the tangible and the divine.

Mount Kailash in western Tibet is considered to be the *Axis Mundi* of Buddhist mythology. For Tibetan Buddhists circambulation of Kailash mountain has become the quintessential pilgrimage. They consider one circuit of the thirty-two mile path around the mountain to have the effect of gaining enough merit to absolve the practitioner of all past sins. Circambulation in prostration, measuring one's length around the entire circuit, is considered to be absolution of sin for the past few lives.

Every inch of Kailash is immersed in powerful symbolism, entrenched by human adulation spanning the centuries. Whether the sanctity derives from the presence of the gods or the reverence of years is unimportant. Kailash mountain has become a symbol of all that is holy, and all that wish to immerse themselves in this sanctity leave their mark on the mountain. These marks over the years have become veritable shrines, significant in their testaments of respect and awe. For some the circambulation becomes a sort of terrestrial mandala, each circuit representing a single turn in the wheel of life.

Thus is a sacred geography, and any place of spiritual importance tends to develop its own sacred significance with use over the years. Like prayer beads in the hands of a long time practitioner, their significance is amplified by personal history and long term familiarity.

The benefits of pilgrimage are multiple and varied. Psychological and spiritual aspects offer an increase in merits, pardon for religious errors and orientation of future destinies. Though it is doubtful that physical pilgrimage alone can offer a chance of rebirth in a better realm, it can be assumed that the meditation and contemplation that go along with the physical motion bring one further along the path of enlightenment. In such a way the physical act of pilgrimage becomes an aspect of the outer religion accompanying the mind process that is part of the inner religion.

Economically, large popular places of pilgrimage offer a chance for increased trade and business transactions. Pilgrimage sites are often meeting places for large numbers of people from very diverse backgrounds. Pilgrimage can serve as a form of education about unfamiliar places, as well as new peoples. As it is, a moving geography lesson.

Pilgrimage can offer literary aspects as well; pilgrimage texts are an old and often overlooked aspect of popular Tibetan literary tradition. *Ney-yig* ( . ), or pilgrimage guides, are various forms of texts written as guides to sacred areas and pilgrimage circuits. These circuits are usually 'opened' by high lamas or other realized practitioners. Discovery of these circuits may be inspired by dreams, from previously known places with significant markings or even from the revelations of certain hidden texts called *termas* ( ). Like *terma* teachings, the discovery of pilgrimage routes and the opening of hidden lands is reserved for an appropriate time, when the sites or the teachings can be most beneficial. Hidden valleys are Buddhist paradises that offer freedom from suffering. They are usually revealed in times of crises, when a place of refuge is needed.

To be able to enter and open a hidden land the revealer needs to be of profound faith and she or he needs the help of a guidebook. These guidebooks are usually attributed to the dakini Yeshe Tsogyel, after oral transmission from her consort, Guru Rimpoche. [A Descriptive Guide To The Sacred Places Of Helembu](#) is one such text. Other pilgrimage guides, however, are written in journal form by common (or uncommon) pilgrims and later published. Guides written by famous and highly regarded lamas and rinpoches such as the sixth Shamarpa are usually the most popular.

The sixth Shamar Tulku Gorwang Choskyi Wangchuk, a red crown lama under the Kiaga Karmapa was one such lama. In the early 1600's he had planned a pilgrimage from Tibet to the great sacred sites of India. Political complications arose, however, and before even leaving Nepal he was requested to return to Tibet. While still in Nepal he did a short tour of the sacred places in the Kathmandu Valley, and while traveling via the Kathmandu - Lhasa trade route wrote a small pilgrimage guide to the areas he visited. Shortly after his return to Tibet in 1630 he died, leaving the newly written text virtually unknown.

Franz Karl Ehrhard recently discovered the text, and even more recently, and upon special request, the section on Yolmo was translated by Hubert Decler.

Yolmo is also known by its Sherpa name of Helembu meaning 'radishes and potatoes', which are the principle crops of the region. It does not lie directly on the Kathmandu - Lhasa trade route, but access can be gained into Tibet via the Ganja-la pass that towers above the valley in an unbroken fence of snow capped mountains. Beyond the pass is the Langtang valley and Tibet. Helembu begins at the confluence of the Melemchi Khola and the Indrawati rivers, about six hours by bus northeast of Kathmandu. The hidden valley of the lotus grove, Padmai tshal ( ) forms the sacred center of Yolmo and begins with the upper reaches of the Melemchi Khola and Yangri Khola.

The original inhabitants of the region were Sherpas who fled from Tibet during the upheavals of the Tibet - China wars. Their language is a dialect of Tibetan and their manner of dress and tradition is very similar to those of Tibet. Recent refugees from Chinese occupied Tibet have come to the region and successfully integrated themselves into the community. Many have married and now call themselves Sherpas.

The inhabitants of the lower valley are mostly Tamang and Nepali. Many were mercenaries of a successful Gurkha campaign and as payment and reward they were given the fertile land near the banks of the Melemchi river. With increasing numbers they have moved further up from the banks, pushing the Sherpa people up onto the less fertile ridges.

The Helembu valley is steep, carved by the rushing torrents of a glacial stream. Terraces cut the sides of the mountains, starting from the ridges and river banks, but never meeting. Small villages cling precariously to the hillsides while large ones crowd the lower passes and broad river banks. There are no roads into the region and the villagers practice mostly subsistence farming, occasionally augmenting their income with the sale of apples that the region is known for. Over the last twenty years Helembu has become a popular trekking route and for some villagers tourism has become their only source of income. It is a beautiful land; encircled by soft hills and towering peaks capped in ancient glaciers. Rhododendron forests shock the springtime in blazing splendor and gentle rains bathe the hillsides in green luminosity. Yetis roam the high rocky passes in the memories of the old and monkey and deer forage fearless, secure in the knowledge that Sherpa tradition keeps them from harm.

## Boudha

*"By stages we traveled the road and set up camp at the great Stupa of Boudha where we performed prostrations and circambulations..." (34A)*

The sixth Shamarpa started in Boudha, at the great Stupa of Jarong Kashor ( ), 'permission given for proper action'. The *chorten* or *stupa* in Sanskrit, is in the middle of the Kathmandu valley, forming the central part of a natural mandala. The eyes of the stupa that once gazed upon lush green fields and snowy mountains now look with quiet contemplation upon the thriving community of Tibetan refugees that have all but obliterated the final traces of an agricultural Tamang village. Trash litters the cora path, buildings block all views and air pollution turns any glimpse of the far away mountains into a thick grey opacity that serves as Kathmandu's substitution for a sky. Monasteries of the different schools around Boudha vie for the once green land with the prospering carpet factories that spring up like so many oddly shaped mushrooms after the monsoon of foreign demand. Yet the Stupa seems to rise up out of its surroundings, transcending the stains of modern existence. Perhaps it is simply the immense size of the Stupa that brings all traces of dirt to insignificance.

Buddhist pilgrims have made the journey to the Great Stupa throughout the centuries to seek the conference of its blessing powers and to circambulate its circumference in the hopes of rebirth in a better realm. It is said that the relics of the previous era's Buddha Kasyapa lie interred at the base. Like any other stupa, its shape is the symbol of the buddha mind, and thus an inspiration to all who lay eyes upon it, perhaps the true significance of its blessing powers.

The stupa was built in the seventh century by a poor poultry woman and her three sons. After begging permission from the king she gathered together her meager savings and commenced work on the stupa. Her sons continued construction after her death. Upon completion, the sky over the stupa exploded into many auspicious signs, and flowers rained down from above. (Dowman) The compassion that went into construction was so strong that at the moment building stopped the stupa attained the powers of wish fulfillment. The three sons wished to reunite in later lives in order to bring Buddhism to the remote land of Tibet, locked in ignorance by protective mountains and impassable snow fields. The servant of the three sons, upon hearing this, also wished to return in Tibet in order to assist in the spread of the Dharma.

A lifetime later, the three sons gathered together in Tibet as King Trison Detson, abbot Santaraksita, and Padmasambhava, the great Indian saint who had come on the request of the king in order to bring Buddhism to Tibet. There Padmasambhava recounted the story of the Great Stupa and the three sons' subsequent role in Tibet to a group of 25 initiates at Samye Chokor Monastery. Upon hearing the story, Yeshe Tsogyel, Padmasambhava's disciple, queried about the eventual fate of the Stupa.

Padmasambhava, by the great power of his prophesies, prophesied that the Stupa would soon fall into ruin, but that an enlightened yogi tulku with certain spiritual qualifications would rediscover the Stupa and rebuild it to even beyond its past glory.

A few centuries later, while doing renovation work on Samye Chokor Monastery, Ngag Chang Sakya Sangpo, an incarnation of the original servant of the three sons, discovered the terma of the Legend of the Great Stupa (Translated by Keith Dowman) which had been hidden by Yeshe Tsogyel until the appropriate time. He was instructed to go to Nepal in order to excavate and rebuild the Stupa.

Sakya Sangpo traveled to Nepal where he rebuilt the Great Stupa of Boudha in much the same way that it exists today. He is also credited with the renovation of the Stupa of Swayambunath, though he is most fondly remembered in the minds of Tibetans as the restorer of Boudha. (Ehrhard) Upon completion of the two stupas, Sakya Sangpo went to Yolmo to open the hidden valley of Padmai Ling ( ) 'Lotus Grove', where he established a monastery and the abbot seat of the Yolmo Tulku lineage.

From the 16th to the 19th centuries the Yolmo Tulkus remained in almost constant contact with the Boudha Stupa, founding a long line of caretakers that was only interrupted in the mid 19th century when the Tibet affiliated Yolmo Tulkus fell out of favor with the Nepali monarchy during the Tibet - Nepal war. In 1859 Taipo Shing, a Szechuan Buddhist lama, was given the abbot seat of Boudha, as well as stewardship of the town of Melemchi Goan (Gyang), across the valley from Tarkye Gyang.

Taipo Shing, or the 'Chini Lama' as he is referred to, has left behind a long and colorful history that has since reached legendary status among those who know Boudha well.

After leaving Boudha, the 6th Shamarpa and his entourage traveled for a few days where they had a small adventure with a hunter. After converting the hunter to the wisdom of the Dharma they continued on to reach the sacred valley of Yolmo.

## Palchok

*"The next morning we climbed a high pass and finally reached the inner parts of the sacred area of Yolmo - Gangra, 'Helambu's fence of snowy peaks', by name of Peltshog; this is also what in its Descriptive Guide is referred to as:*

*-Down south, where a marsh borders a forest, [there is] a temple of Jowo Avalokiteshvara and the spot of an inhabited village.*

*And this sacred spot, thus spoken about by Guru Rimpoche (Padmasambhava) is located on a hilltop close to the village by name of Pel-tshog." 34B*

Pel-tshog ( ), though once a Sherpa village, is now almost exclusively Hindu, all traces of anything Buddhist have since been appropriated by the Nepali religion. Above Palchok (the modern English spelling), on the ridge is Kakhani, a principally Sherpa village. The temple of Jowo Avalokiteshvara (Chen Rezig) may have existed somewhere between these two villages, but at present day no traces can be found. Along the trail from Kakhani to Shermatang is a long row of mostly ruined *Chortens* and Mani walls, but their origins are unknown.

## Go Tsang Ling

*"The next day we had been going in a leisurely mood, when we reached Go Tsang-Ling, the [Dharma] center of Go Tsang's [former] residence of Go Tsang Re-chen, disciple of Majestic lord Tsang Nyon. (the mad saint from Tsang)." 35 A,B*

Go Tsang Ling ( ), or *Gortshangling* as it is called locally, is a tiny village located an hour's walk from Gangjwal on the trail to Tarkye Gyang. More of a small *Lha-kang* ( ) 'shrine' with two houses, the village floats five minutes off the trail in a sea of rolling green barley. Mild mannered cows roam freely through the courtyard of the *Lha-kang*, contemplating the flowers in the planter boxes while they chew their cud in meditative silence.

To one side of the courtyard is a small reliquary *chorten*, probably in memorial of one of the Sermo Lama familial lineage holders that have been the caretakers of the area for the past few generations. Two sisters live in an adjacent house while the third lives with the present caretaker at the *Lha-kang*. The building itself is old, but well kept up. A sign at the entrance welcomes visitors in English and requests donations for upkeep, evidencing another way the locals of the region can attain benefits from the onslaught of trekker tourists. Inside the entryway are several beautifully executed frescoes that look to be almost one hundred years old, judging from other frescoes in the region; though no one knows for sure.

The main altar of the *Lha-kang* is cluttered with images, the five main statues surrounded by several smaller, cruder sculptures that appear to have been made locally. The altar shows signs of regular use, though not by many. The offering bowls are simple and well kept and the floor is swept and polished. The lama and his wife sleep on the second floor in a room adjacent to a smaller, sparser shrine room and library. The library is one of the few in the region and evidently very new. All of the wood upstairs is new and highly polished, the glass windows are clean and unscratched.

There is little or no sign of Go Tsang Pa's former existence there, though he probably spent very little time at the *Lha-kang*, electing to spend more time in retreat at his meditation cave. Go Tsang Repa Na-trag Rangdrol was the main disciple and biographer of Tsang Nyon Hereuka, who in turn is Milarepa's biographer and the editor of the 100,000 Songs of Milarepa, one of the single most loved and read works of Tibetan literature. As a descendant of the Karmapa and Kagyud lineage, Go Tsang Pa is attributed with starting the tradition of retreat in southern Tibet and Nepal.

## Ri Yang Rill

*" The next day, in order to be able to visit the Guru Rimpoche practice place known as Yang-dag-chog Gi Drub-phug, ' the practice cave of the supreme Yang-dag [Hereuka]', we set out early in the morning, and having climbed an extremely high forested pass, then a marsh like pass, at the top [we found] what in the Descriptive Guide is explained to as the very center [navel]of the sacred area, by name of Ri Yang Rill, with its three temple buildings and enjoyable surrounding [buildings?]'*

A 'navel center' refers to the 32 *chakras* of the body, which also exist in direct correlation with a sacred physical geography. It was Guru Rimpoche, who, with right mind and meditation, identified the 32 sites in Yolmo, of which he wrote about in the Descriptive Guide.

Ri Yang Rill ( ), 'Yang Rill Mountain', is known fondly to the local villagers as Ama Yangri, meaning mother Yangri. Ama Yangri is considered to be a dakini, who, by power of her compassion, has become a goddess protector of the entire region. Locals born under her shadow grow up depending on her blessings. Looking upon her mountain form offers the viewer blessings for long life and freedom from accidents. When parting she is the final face villagers look upon, hoping to impress her form in their minds so that they can draw upon her memory in times of need. Upon return they prostrate before her in thanks for a safe journey and for comfort in the enfolding arms of her forests.

Yearly, on the full moon of Chaita (March or April) a big festival is held in her honor, to pay homage to her presence, in thanks of her protection and in hopes of success for the following year. Sherpa peoples from all over the region climb to the summit before the break of day in order to greet the rising sun. Local lamas lead a morning long puja and from the afternoon into the evening the local ama-las lead the community in dance. Following local Sherpa tradition, raksi (corn wine) and chang (barley beer) flow freely. At moon set Ama Yangri is left alone again, with only the echoes of laughter and singing interlaced with the spiraling smoke of incense as her offerings.

The path to Ama Yangri from Tarkye Gyang ascends through an ancient forest of twisted and moss bearded Rhododendron trees, an army of old men that have been creeping to the summit for centuries. One grey muzzled yak quietly (for such a large creature) snuffles through layers of old leaves in search of fodder. He is a leftover, a relic from last year's yak herder migrations in late August, after the summer monsoons. Alone he guards the mountain, casting a quizzical eye upon all who pass by.

The way of the pilgrims, through the large marsh-like pass (provided that environmental geography has changed little in the past 400 years) is the way of the old outer circambulation route, which few people still use. It circles the base of the mountain in an ever upward spiral where it eventually meets up with the modern path just below the summit. At this point the trail again turns left, ensuring another full circambulation before reaching the top. Crowning the summit is a large white *chorten*, circambulation of this completes the outer inner and sacred levels of the full cora route, important to all truly significant places of pilgrimage.

From the summit the whole ridge of the Yangri Danda is visible in both directions. To the south the Kathmandu Valley unfolds like a scroll. On clear days and in the early morning the Great Stupa of Boudha is visible, its great dome seemingly suspended above its surroundings, due to the effect of its blindingly white base. To the north is Dawa Chati, consort mountain to Ama Yangri and hiding place for many *termas*. Beyond Dawa Chati is the whole expanse of the Himalayas, with enough imagination one could almost see Everest far to the east. Steep valleys fall from both flanks, their depths not visible, but the sounds of their rivers still audible in the morning air.

Directly below the summit on the western side, the 'marsh-like pass can be seen through a fringe of forest. Though dry in early spring when mountain snows have yet to respond to summer's warmth, the marshland soon becomes a lake after the monsoons.. This lake is the abode of Ama Yangri's mythological beast, a fierce serpent dragon. On the walls of the Tarkye Gyang *gompa* she is portrayed in woman form riding this dragon.

The summit is long and narrow, following the ridge it descends a few meters into a shallow basin, then rises again to a smaller, lower summit topped by a prayer flag and a few large flat rocks. On the southern end of the summit rests a large *chorten* surrounded by prayer flags. The whitewashed sides are cracked and damaged. Mortar has fallen out from between the stones, and the crown point, carved of yellow wood, is now housed in the small shrine inset on the southern face of the *chorten*. Dried rhododendron flowers are stuck haphazardly in the cracks as offerings of physical apology for damage unattended. The *chorten* has been hit several times by lightning, yet still stands, a silent sentinel to the passage of change.

Below the *chorten* in the shallow basin between the two summits is the remains of a small meditation hut. One side is dug into the earth with piled rocks for added shelter. The other side is open to the endless expanse of mountain and sky. Locals hold it as a very powerful place to meditate.

On the other side of the hut is a low spiky bush with *katas* interwoven through its branches. Aside from grass it is the only vegetation on the otherwise barren mountainside. At the base of the bush is a pile of rocks vaguely shaped in the form of a frog.

Inside and protected is a bare trickle of a spring. It offers only enough water to feed the sheltering bush and to keep the small stone in the center wet. It is said that if the stone ever dries out the gentle rains upon which the entire region depends will cease. This small stone, called by some the weather frog, possesses powerful qualities in local legend. If touched by human hand bad weather will immediately descend upon the mountain top, be it rain, snow, hail, wind or a combination of all four. There are several stories in the villages about those who tested the 'frog', all with bad results. Legend holds that the spring was once upon a time much bigger, but that it has slowly decreased over the years.

In 1723 a land grant, recorded on copper plate, was rewarded to Nyima Seng-ge, an unaffiliated yogin from the area, for services to the Malla king (Clarke). According to descriptions of holy sites and lists of localities established by Guru Rimpoche, he determined the summit of Ama Yangri to be the most auspicious place for a monastery. Upon this land he built a large monastery and temple complex, which was later destroyed by natural causes (Ehrhard).

Local history tells the story of Nyima Seng-ge who came to the area with his wife and son, Tele Dudjoms (who was the final recognized incarnation of the Yolmo Tulku lineage). Upon completion of the temple grounds it was revealed that the blessings of the area were so powerful that anyone looking upon the monuments would be immediately saved from rebirth in the lower realms. Soon after the consecration of the temple grounds lightning struck the area six times. No harm was done until it was hit a seventh time, whereupon the entire complex burned to the ground, leaving Nyima Seng-ge still meditating safely inside the ruins. The explanation for the distraction is that looking upon the temple was too easy an escape from rebirth in the hell realms. It was felt that attainment of a better rebirth should be based on merit rather than upon the mere perception of a great temple. At present all that remains of the once great monastery is the lonely white *chorten*, also cracked by lightning, and now desecrated, as two years ago one of the cracks was widened and the sacred relics and treasures within were stolen.

It is unclear as to what buildings were upon the summit of Ama Yangri in 1629, as well as what happened to them. The text makes reference to Siddha Gyaltshe-bum, a disciple of Rigdzin Godem Thru-chen, a great terton from the region, but no explanations or histories of his role at Ama Yangri are available.

Another mention is made to the 'pure monk' Tsulthrin, who used to bathe a sacred bronze mirror; "...and now, as people visit these sacred representations, they all drink some of this bathing water, as a result of which they are saved from rebirth in the lower realms - thus it has been prophesied by Master Padma [Sambhava]. At this navel center of 'Helambu's fence of snowy peaks', The Siddha Gyaltshe-bum made a start with the building of temples and the rest, but due to obstacles that arose he could not complete the task" 35b, 36a

Many pieces of the story are missing, but local histories and inherited memories only extend as far back as the early 1700's when villages first became established in the area.

## Dorje Ling

*"Next we went downhill, and where a forested pass barred [our access], and we determined this was the very spot about which the Descriptive Guide To Sacred Spots quotes the prophesy;*

North of Yang- Rill can be seen a forest where there is also a pleasant marsh valley.

There [you'll] attain a group of great mediators (gonchen) [as your deciples]

*The place being known as Dorje-Ling , 'Vajra Isle'. we reached a spring located there and stayed there." 36A*

Dorje-Ling ( ) is a small hill on the mountain ridge connecting Dawa Chati to Ama Yangri. 'Ling', meaning isle or place, can also indicate center, and if Dawa Chati and Ama Yangri, both sacred protectors of the region, can be seen as opposite ends of a vajra, it seems that Dorje-Ling is not simply a place but the center of a naturally formed mountain vajra. Further on in the text the mountain of Dawa Chati is likened to a 'five pronged vajra'. Nomadic yak herders use the area as a camp site when moving their herds through the mountains in late summer. In early spring the only evidence of their passage are a few tent circles and fire pits.

Just below Dorje-Ling, about an hour's descent along a great waterfall, is the small retreat center of Neyding. Surrounded by pine trees and lofty mountain peaks, it is protected from behind by the mass of the mountain side, yet has an extensive view of the upper Helembu valley before it. For the past twenty years Neyding has served as a meditation center for Chatral Rimpoche's (of Pharping) monks and male deciples. Usually it is a quiet community of twelve monks on retreat any where from three to twelve years, however the population swells to over 500 people for a few weeks every April when visitors come from all over the region to participate in a week long puja and initiation.

**Duk-phu** "The next day we continued our trip, and already by early morning we reached Master Padma [Sambhava's] practice place, the Yang-dag-chog Gi Dru-phug, 'practice cave of the supreme Yang-dag [Hereuka] where we performed all kinds of virtuous activities" 36A

Following the knobby backbone of the Yangri Danda over and beyond Dorje-Ling, the large black mass of Dawa Chati's rough granite face looms menacing in the foreground. No path runs through the tumbled boulders precariously balanced upon smaller stones and the rubble of other crushed rocks. The rock face is almost constantly moving, the slightest breeze can trigger small landslides that escalate into roars of falling rock, sand and mountainside, plunging thousands of feet to the river below. A few minutes after the dust settles silence resumes and the mountain returns to its usual state of quiet composure.

Wisely, the trail skirts the southern face of the mountainside, choosing to go around the mountain anti-cora rather than ascending the steep face in a more direct approach to the valley behind. After many smaller, more difficult passes the trail reaches the final chorten crowned pass and a whole new world opens up. The fantastic beauty of the Duk-phu basin unfurls like a richly textured carpet in infinite directions. The Himalayas stack upon each other in an ever unceasing row of jagged dragon's teeth. The valley is devoid of any vegetation, springtime snow hides any hint of green. The landscape is unworldly, like a segment of the moon portrayed in black and white. A brilliantly plumaged pheasant flies up in sudden splendor. the mad crack of its wings startles the silence, leaving it unprepared for the eerie echo of the bird's lonely call.

The Duk-phu basin is closed on three sides, the fourth descends to the east in a gentle succession of peaks down to the valley of Lha-kang Gyang. Dawa Chati and Tong-la mountain form the northern and southern cusps of the basin. The ridge connecting them forms the western edge. 'Duk-phu' is the local name indicating the region, the basin and the *ney*, though *Yang-dag Chog-gi Drug-phug* ( . . . ) is the full name of the cave, meaning 'Practice Cave of the Supreme Yang-dag'.

Guru Rimpoche's cave can hardly be distinguished from the large pile of boulders scattered throughout the basin. Mani walls and snow covered *chortens* blend in with black rocks and white prayer flags, their poles, bent by strong wind and years of heavy snow' bow to touch their heads to the roof of the cave. Their silhouettes against the bright sky are the only distinct markers in an otherwise indistinguishable landscape.

The compound of the cave is quite elaborate, Mani walls protect the entrance with powerful mantras and shelter from the icy mountain wind. Two stone houses adjacent to the cave provide shelter for visiting pilgrims as well as a preparation place for the occasional pujas. The entrance of the cave is low and sealed by an unlocked wooden door. A rock overhead provides shelter from rain and snow for those preparing to come in. Near the entrance is another lower doorway, leading to a dry storage area for food and firewood. The 'cave' is more of a hut built into the mountainside, under the shelter of a large overhanging boulder. Stone walls have been built up on three sides to provide insulation and protection from cold winters. The cave is low, but not too low to stand and there is enough room for a full prostration board and pallet, a fire pit and food storage. The ceiling is black from years of wood fire smoke, though a small gap between stone wall and rock ceiling provides for good

light and ventilation. The image of a sun and moon in eclipse are naturally formed into the ceiling of the cave, and further in the corner, almost obliterated by the passage of time, is an ( ) *rang-jeun*, a 'self arisen' mark that is the root syllable of Chen Rezig's Mani mantra, Om Ma Ni Pad Me Hum ( ).

A low altar in the back of the cave stands surrounded by articles of modern retreat; a flashlight, a kerosene lamp, a water bottle and good bedding. All that is left of the three images that had once graced the cave with their encouraging auras of quiet contemplation and attainment are three empty lotus thrones. Sharing the fate of several other sacred areas in the region, they too have been stolen, even from such a remote place as Duk-phu.

Where once stood antique images of Guru Rimpoche, Yeshe Tsogyel and Mandharava are now uniquely formed stones, little consolation for the disappearance of their predecessors. Mandharava's throne, to the left of Guru Rimpoche, holds a crescent moon shaped stone; Replacing Guru Rimpoche is a spiral carved stone, and to the right, in place of Yeshe Tsogyel, is a Mani stone.

Lama Renzin, a local from Tarkye Gyang, is the unofficial caretaker of the cave. He spends much of his time on the upkeep of the cave, and for a few months every year he goes into retreat. The cave is popular among locals for short time retreat, the paucity of water and wood in the area makes a long term retreat near impossible. Almost all supplies need to be brought in from Tarkye Gyang, the closest village.

Five minute's hike up from Guru Rimpoche's cave is another smaller, unassuming and unmarked cave. The entrance is low, and standing inside is difficult. The cave is attributed to Yeshe Tsogyel, dakini and deciple consort to Guru Rimpoche. Above the entrance is a self arisen vulva, often times taken as her signature seal for use in the discovery of *termas*..

Inside the cave there is no window and no fireplace. A small fire pit, filled with ashes of incense lies at the entrance, under the shelter of an overhanging rock. Inside there is no prostration board or pallet, only enough room for a small person to sleep. In the back is an old altar of stone, but three of the four images upon it are new. A slate image of the Sakyamuni Buddha, painted by unknown hands, stands to one side of a relief statue of Vajra Yogini. To the other side is a low relief of a stupa, perhaps Swayambhu, carved into white stone.

On the far right is a strangely formed piece of white rock, upon which one can make out the vague image of a woman's body with a crudely shaped head. Legend holds that this is the naturally formed image of Vaharahi , the white boar dakini, that is mentioned in a later part of the pilgrimage text. Why the image is found in Yeshe Tsogyel's cave is unknown, perhaps it was placed there for safer keeping, perhaps that is where it rightfully belonged.

The origin of all the images is unknown, Few people even know about the cave, and it is rarely visited. Though the sixth Shamarpa and his train of pilgrims must have passed directly above the cave on their ascent to Dawa Chati, there is no mention of the cave's existence. Whether the cave was unknown at the time or if it was simply considered insignificant is unclear from available sources.

*"The next day, throughout the morning, it was climbing uphill, very steep; There we visited what in the Guide to Sacred Places is described as the rocky mountain similar to a five pronged vajra . . . Where there is also a naturally formed [statue] of the white boar lady Vaharahi . . . Also there is the rocky hill where has been 'receiving' a mass of recovered treasures (termas), beyond imagination; and on its summit is the so-called Do-kha Chorten, or the 'Crossroads Stupa', a blessing to the [people passing by?] 37B*

Continuing up from Yeshe Tsogyel's cave about two hours, a faint trail finally reaches the ridge connecting Dawa Chati to Tong-la. On the other side of the ridge is the hidden valley of Pemthang, newly 'opened' by Chatral Rimpoche, about fifteen years ago. In Pemthang is a sacred lake known locally as the Dakini Lake. In local stories the dakini that lives in the lake is said to be quite ferocious, if one gets too close to the shores of the lake they run the risk of getting sucked in by her. Nearby is another sacred cave, attributed to Rig'dzen Godchen Phru-chu, a well known and revered *terton* or treasure finder.

Instead of descending down into the valley of Pemthang, the pilgrims ascended the north face of Dawa Chati in an arduous climb to the top. There is a *chorten* at the top of the mountain, however it is seldom visited and no one from the area knows its history. It is possible that the local name of Dawa Chati, 'moon god' is an actual corruption of 'Do-kha Chorten' ( ), the name 'Dawa Chati' being more familiar and one that fits in better with local mythology.

In earlier history Yolmo was known as one of the trade routes into Tibet, though it was not as well circulated as the Kathmandu - Lhasa route. The 'Crossroads Stupa', then, would apply to all those following that route. The only people that now pass by are yak herders and the occasional pilgrim. The 'rocky hillside', treacherous for even the most agile of climbers, is considered sacred by local visitors, due to the number of treasures revealed there by Rig-dzen Godlem Phru-chu.

## Dzo Drill

*"Upon our return we again spent one day at Dorje Ling, the Vajra isle. The next morning we were quite early on route again, and with the [local] lama of Go Tsang Ling acting as the sponsor, we again stayed there for one day . . . [we then] departed stage by stage.*

*"In order to decide upon a suitable place for [building] a monastery, the mantra expert Ngag-chang Sakya Sangpo , all the way from Ri-wo-pel Bar 'hill ablaze with splendor' in Man-yul (southern Tibet) Threw one triangular stone torma, either a 'torma-weapon' that would establish the truth [about the most auspicious place for the future monastery] or earth rolled into [the size of] a petal,-- hence the name of the monastery, Dzo-Drill Gom[pa], 'petal rolled'. It has been the abbot seat for Yolmo Tulkus one after the other, starting from this Ngag-chang [Sakya Sangpo] himself, and (after him) Tulku Namkha Gyajin, all the way up to the present Tulku Tenzin Norbu (1598-1644)"*

Dzo Drill Gompa ( ), or *Churi Gyang* as it's known locally, is located just below the present day village of Tarkye Gyang, on a site that bears the distinction of being the oldest gompa site in Helembu. Burned to the ground in the mid 17th century, it has since been rebuilt and renovated many times. The architecture is old, combining both the caretaker's residence and the shrine rooms under one roof. Behind the building is an immense pine tree, rare in a region where wood planks are a much desired building material. In front is a wide grassy lawn, in the center of which is a large old reliquary *chorten*, housing the remains of one of the Yolmo Tulkus, possibly Sakya Sangpo.

To the south of the *gompa* , near a small vegetable garden, is an elaborately carved and decorated fountain-spring. It is called the 'spring of the mouse' and local legend tells the story of a mouse that burrowed all the way from the bottom of the Dakini Lake in Pemthang, only to resurface at Dzo Drill, half drowned from the force of water behind her.

The *gompa* is old and not very well kept up. Beautiful frescos adorn cracking walls and a large broken prayer wheel leans drunkenly in one corner. The *gompa* estate is quite rich; several acres of rented farmlands bring in a steady income, but since the caretaker lama died eight years ago, little has been done for its upkeep. His widow roams around like a pale ghost in a velvet chuba, still mourning her beloved husband. In the far right corner of the altar are his footprints in concrete.

The altar is cluttered and highly decorated, but most significant are the two images flanking the altar and facing each other at right angles to the back wall. The images are of Sakya Sangpo and Tenzin Norbu, two important personages in the Yolmo Tulku lineage.

Ngag-chang Sakya Sang-po, after completing the renovation upon the great Stupa of Boudha, was told to "Build a gompa in a land where the sky looks like the wheel of worldly existence, and the land like the eight petaled lotus. After receiving this prophecy, he comes by way of Ribo Pomba to Kathmandu, where he repairs two stupas, and then he opens the 'outer, inner and secret' doors of Yolmo Gangra." (Clarke)

Various legends surround the establishment of the site of the first gompa in Yolmo. According to the sixth Shamarpa and his pilgrimage guide, Sakya Sangpo threw a torma or a

dirt ball from Southern Tibet. Yet local legend holds that he threw a curved antelope horn from the top of Ana Yangri, whereupon it landed in a tree, establishing the new site. Locals seem to go by the latter legend, insisting on calling the gompa 'Churi Gyang', meaning 'curved antelope horn', rather than by its other name, 'Dzo Drill.'

## Tarkye Gyang

Just above Dzo Drill is the prosperous village of Tarkye Gyang, largest on the region of Helembu, although most of its population is presently in India, working to gain money. The village is uniquely structured, with houses huddled together under Ama Yangri's benevolent shadow. Doorways are connected by long narrow cobbled paths, creating a labyrinth that only the slow-moving cows seem to understand. Both the entrance and exit of the town upon the Helembu trekking path are hallmarked by large newly-built hotel lodges, standing apart from the village proper in jarring disaccord. A gompa stands near the front of the village, surrounded by a grassy field

Nyima Senge-ge, after successfully halting an epidemic in Kathmandu, was rewarded by a grant of land in Yolmo, the transaction of which is recorded on copper plates. (Clarke) The first land deed from King Jaya Jagajjaya Malla recorded during the year 1723 corresponds with the building of the temple on top of Ama Yangri. The second plate, dated 1727, corresponds with the construction of Nyima Senge-ge's second gompa, Padma'i-chos gling ( ).

Elaborating on recorded evidence, local legend recounts the story of a famous Yogin who lived in the area. In desperation for the welfare of his people, the Malla king, Jaya Jagajjaya invited the yogin to Kathmandu in order to halt the epidemic that was ravaging his country. As a reward for successfully putting an end to the terror, the Yogin Nyima Senge-ge was given 100 horses as a gift. Not knowing what to do with the horses, the Yogin decided to take them to Tibet. During the passage through the mountains, one of the horses stumbled and fell, breaking its leg on the rocky trail. An old man on the side of the trail scoffed at Nyima Senge-ge, saying that he should have asked for something more practical, such as land.

Marking the spot, the yogin returned to Kathmandu with the horses, asking instead for land in Yolmo. He returned with a copper land deed and, near the area where the horse was lost, he built a great gompa, which became known as Tarkye Gyang, or 'Temple of 100 Horses'.

The land of the gompa was eventually divided up into seven parts, six of which went to different families of his descendants, while the seventh remained the estate of the gompa. Stewardship of the gompa and its accompanying lands cycles through the six families, each taking a yearly turn as Lama and profiting from rents on the gompa lands.

Just above Tarkye Gyang is the retreat center of Tropodoung. Many of the local families spend the monsoon season there in retreat, accompanied by a few nuns in long term retreat. A small *chorten* there memorializes Gayrken Renchin Rimpoche, a refugee from Tibet and revered teacher for the region.

## "Tha Phug Senge Dzong

*'The next day, having prepared breakfast, stage by stage we set out and eventually reached the practice place foretold by the powerful Lord Marpa to the great majestic Lord Milarepa, the Tha Phug Senge Dzong,, 'Tiger Cave Lion Fortress', as it is known. Previously, this used to be an actual tiger's den, hence it is still being called like this. In the immediate surroundings, in a spot where a tiger used to circambulate Milla, there are Milla's footprints and also the tiger's. . . The day after, stage by stage, we moved on and visited the two areas where there are, as one comes up, right on top, Lord Milla's footprints, the tracks of the tiger and so forth. "* 39a

The path to Tha Phug Senge Dzong rambles through forest and field down the steep western flank of Ama Yangri. At times the mountainside seems to fall directly into the turbulent glacial waters of the Melemechi River. The path has no apparent direction, threading its way through terraced fields from house to house, as if to visit one old friend after another. Though strangers at the beginning, visitors soon become familiar with the territory and its ways, navigating with ease the terraces that turn the lower reaches of Yolmo into a living contour map.

The fields turn into forest as the land grows steeper in preparation for the final plunge to the depths of the valley floor. Even the long term residents, experienced in carving life out of a mountainside, hesitate to tame this unruly section of the Sengala Forest. Though tigers no longer roam its twisted depths, tumbled boulders and ancient trees, watered by monsoon cascades, defy even the slightest notion of a sure path. Breaking free of the strangling switch backs, the path opens onto a ridge overlooking a sun filled clearing. Perched almost at the edge of a cliff with the forest at its back is a small gompa cradled in the granite arms of the mountainside. The trail picks its way down a few stone steps and passes to the right of a low stone and mud house. The caretaker, an old Sherpa goat herder who had to be summoned from the next village, explained that the building was the preparation area for use during wongs, pujas, and the twice yearly festivals celebrating the birth and para- nirvana (death) of Milarepa. The gompa itself was built just three years ago by Chempo Tsultrin Rimpoche of Boudha, who also has a small *Sam-kang* (retreat house) behind the gompa.

The path rounds a large boulder and stops at the entrance area of the *lha-kang*. Looking back, on the other side of the boulder is a large mural depicting a scene from Milarepa's life, in which he encounters an angry hunter. Upon hearing Milarepa speak, the hunter, desirous of freedom from Samsara, immediately offered up his bow and arrow and became a disciple of the Dharma. In one corner of the mural is the tiger, presumably the previous resident of the cave which became Milarepa's refuge and shelter, free from the distractions of the mundane world.

The Great Marpa, Milarepa's teacher and master, instructed his student to "Take refuge in the solitude of the barren mountains, the snows of the forests." ( The Life of Milarepa, p. 94) Unlike Marpa, Milarepa did not seek the life of a wise and venerated teacher. Instead, distraught by the unceasing cycle of life, death, and suffering he witnessed all around him, Milarepa sought freedom from Samsara and took refuge in meditation, where he concentrated upon freeing other sentient beings from the endless cycle of existence through the power of his meditation.

Upon the departure of his favorite pupil and spiritual son, Marpa left Milarepa with specific suggestions. "Well if that is so, son, you may now leave. Since I have identified all things with illusion, practice accordingly. There is the Riwo Pelbar of Mangual land and the Yolmo Gangra in Nepal, which are the holy places prophesied in the Mahayana Sutras. Go there to meditate." (The life of Milarepa pp. 94) Milarepa traveled throughout Tibet and meditated, practicing many great deeds. "From there he went to mount Yolmo Gangra and lived in Tha Pug Senge Dzong in the forest of Singla, doing work beneficial to many human and non-human beings." (pp. 148)

The cave itself was originally said to have been a tiger's den, and the tigress, upon seeing Milarepa, circambulated him three times and offered to him her cave for the continuation of his meditation. Local mythology recounts that Ama Yangri, dakini goddess of the mountain, approached him there and offered to him her services and protection. In the "Song of a Yogi's Joy" it is said that "The master of yoga, the Jetsun Milarepa, in obedience to his master's orders, went [to] Yolmo Snow Range where he dwelt at the tiger cave of Senge Dzong in the woods of Singalin. The local goddess of Yolmo appeared in gracious form, obeying the Jetsun's orders and rendering her best services to him. Milarepa remained there for some time in a deeply inspired mood." (100,000 Songs of Milarepa)

Often times Gurus will suggest to their disciples that they choose a place not only of solitude, but of fear, whereupon they can conquer their fear in the realization that this fear is only an indication of clinging to ego. While meditating in his cave one day, Milarepa was approached by five nuns who commented upon the area, "It is said that this place is full of terror and an ideal place in which to attain great improvement in meditation. Can this be true, have you found it so?" to which the Hermit replied, "The greater the fear, the greater the happiness I feel", (100'000 songs pp. 74) understanding that ultimately fear and happiness are the same.

In the environs of the cave is a silence unique to sacred areas. The Melemchi river, a few hundred feet below the cave, roars with the fury of melting glaciers, resentful of the gentle heat of the springtime sun. Breezes whisper and whine through the trees and playfully kick up piles of old leaves who complain in dry crackles at being moved from their chosen abode. The auspicious call of the cuckoo is often heard echoing off the rocks and the walls of the newly built *lha-kang*. The air itself hums with warmth. Yet the silence remains, its quality augmented by the lack of anything foreign. There is sound, but no noise.

Perhaps it is the stillness of the Yogi's mind that permeates the area. Perhaps it is the stillness sought after by all that visit. Generations of pilgrims have gone there to meditate, and, inspired by Milarepa's practice and achievement, have imbued the area with their own piece of mind. Though with the company of others, the solitude is still remarkable.

The tradition of retreat and solitude in Buddhism is an important one. Long periods of solitude offer the retreatant not only the opportunity to meditate upon one's self and the engendering of enlightenment, but also upon compassion for all sentient beings and their eventual enlightenment.

The five nuns, having understood that Milarepa had already attained the highest form of enlightenment through meditation, invited him to come to the village and spread the teachings of Dharma there, for the benefit of the whole community. To which Milarepa replied, "Practicing meditation in solitude is, in itself, a service to the people. Although my mind no longer changes, it is still a good tradition for a great yogi to remain in solitude. . .

In the wood on Singa (Lion) mountain,  
I, Milarepa, meditate on voidness,  
Not because I fear to loose my understanding-  
Constant meditation is the yogi's way." (100,000 songs pp. 81)

Prayer flags, visible from across the river as well as from above, hallmark the area as they do any spot of sacred significance in the Yolmo valley. A row of them stand sentinel at the cliffs edge. The breezes coming up from the river keep them in constant motion, sending prayers of compassion across the valley.

To get to the cave itself, it is necessary to pass behind the *lha-kang* and through a small empty chamber. Upon the walls are various images of Bodhisattvas and saints. The cave entrance is locked with both wooden shutters and a metal gate. Above the entrance is a newly painted fresco of Chen Rezig. The 'cave', though now completely enclosed with stone walls and a cement ceiling, was originally a simple stone overhang with a crevice recessed deep into raw rock. With none of the later additions it would have offered nothing more than a great view. Even shelter from the rain would have been a bit dubious, had a strong wind been blowing. Yet here Milarepa sat, in quiet contemplation for many seasons, with nothing more than a few rags and a pot in which to boil his soup of nettles. The nettles grow in profusion around the perimeter of the area, untended and unfettered, perhaps as a subtle reminder of the duality of their stinging nature and their (dubious) nourishment.

The cave, protected by layers of concrete and walls of stone, carries with it the silence of a tomb. So isolated, it is difficult to imagine the splendors of the outside world which evoked the beautiful and compassionate imagery found in Milarepa's hymn to the area, "Song of a Yogi's Joy."

"Here at Yolmo Tagpu Senge Tson,  
The tigress howling with a pathetic, trembling cry,  
Reminds me that her helpless cubs are innocently playing.  
I cannot help but feel a great compassion for them,  
I cannot help but practice more diligently,  
I cannot help but augment thus my Bodhi-mind."

The floor is concrete, colder and harder than the soft moss upon which the Yogi meditated. The ceiling is painted deep blue, with a crescent moon and star painted in one corner just above the entrance, perhaps as a reminder that Milarepa sat alone, keeping company with the sun, moon and stars; their temporal light the only witness to his achievements.

In the back of the cave, nestled between rough rock and earth, is an altar and a long, elaborately carved, wooden cabinet of glass doors, one of which is cracked. Encased in the cabinets are five sculptured images. Dorje Sindsa is in the center, flanked on both sides by carved wood images of Milarepa. On the far left is Karmapa, on the left is an unidentified Yolmo lama. Offerings of food and money engulf the images and *katas* and white rhododendron blossoms adorn the cabinet. On the altar are several unlit butter lamps. Below

the altar, on the floor, is a forest of burned out candle stumps. One large butter lamp burns steadily, as a continuous offering of light.

The old caretaker points to the Milarepa statue on the right and mutters a few words. This is the statue that was stolen a few years ago and finally returned after months of police research. It is said to have been stolen by a Sherpa boy from Thimbu and two Nepali men. The three, working under the cover of darkness, carried it down to Melemchi Pul Bazaar and on to Boudha in Kathmandu. It took the three of them to carry the statue, perhaps its weight augmented by Milarepa's reluctance to leave his shrine and home.

The altar is well used, signs of care and age glow in the wood, polished by generations of hands that have caressed its surface in veneration and awe. Across from the altar is a low pallet. A local ani sleeps there at night, with one eye open, the locals say, in order to discourage a repeated attempt on the images. Throughout the region, sacred sites and temples, once open to public use, now stay locked and unvisited due to the danger of increasing theft.

The *lha-kang*, built as additional protection for the sacred, ancient images, houses an exquisite statue of Milarepa. His thin, ascetic body is pale green, attributed to his almost exclusive diet of nettles. Nettles are still eaten today in the region, boiled to a thin paste. Behind the *lha-kang*, the same overhanging rock that forms the cave extends to the cliff's edge, as if to peer over into the heart of the gorge. The boulder is painted with murals, four of which are the faces of Ama Yangri; north, south, east and west, but also angry, sad, blissful and meditative. It is the Dakini Ama Yangri that greeted Milarepa on his arrival, and local legend holds that she became his disciple upon recognition of his great powers of meditation.

Milarepa is one of the greatest and most loved saints of the Buddhist pantheon. His story of a young foolish man, who, appalled by the result of his evil deeds renounced selfish life and attained enlightenment, is an inspiration and an example to all. Milarepa gained inspiration from his surroundings, and all who visit his caves and sacred sites gain inspiration from his life story and from the veneration of generations before them. It is said that hearing the life story of Milarepa once is enough to set one on the path to enlightenment. Visitation to his sites confers the full power of his blessings. As he told his disciples and followers as they set out in the world, some to his own caves;

"If you meditate in these caves, you will have solitude and favorable conditions. Go there and meditate and you will have the blessings of my lineage." ( The Life of Milarepa p. 147)

## **Thimbu**

*"Then, the next day, we gradually descended into areas under cultivation. Later we stayed for two days at a place called Tumbu 'the Petal', a pleasant plain where there are only pine trees and where is also located a 'stone drop', stated to be [the size of] food taken [each day] by Master Padma [Sambhava]". 39a*

Timbu ( ) is a small village located almost directly below Gangyul resting on the banks of the Melemchi River. Once it was a thriving Sherpa trading center at the intersection of two trails, one continuing up river and other starting the ascent to Gangyul and the towns above. Now it is inhabited by mostly Tamang and Nepali farmers and lodge keepers that provide for the trekkers coming through. The last vestiges of the once thriving Buddhist tradition can be seen only in the three long ruined chortens standing sentinel over the swirling rapids of the river.

The locals are relative newcomers, they moved in and pushed the previous Sherpa residents further uphill and onto the less fertile ridges. Their roots are as deep as the past few generations of crops, and they have no notion of local history beyond the time of their arrival. Their histories are those of their forefathers, mercenaries of the Gurkas, and their claim to the land rests on rewards from successful campaigns. If the 'stone drop', referred to by the sixth Shamarpa is still in existence, none of the local villagers know of its whereabouts.

The Pilgrims continued their path down river and over a pass. From there they followed the Kathmandu - Lhasa trade route back into Tibet. Later that year the sixth Shamar Tulku Choskyi Wang-chuk died, having never made it to pilgrimage in India. (Douglas and White)

## Melemchi Gyang

Had the pilgrims crossed the river at Thimbu and gone up the other side, they would have eventually reached the village of Melemchi Goan, or Gyang, as some locals call it. 'Melemchi' means 'good prize', in reference to the four *neys* in the area. The Tibetan name is Tsung Ma, but the meaning is unknown.

All of the *neys* center around the presence of Guru Rimpoche, however it is unclear as to when and why he traveled through the region, unless it was on the way to Duk-phu. As of yet no documentation has been found. In the minds of the villagers, however, whether or not Guru Rimpoche passed through the area according to some academic document is irrelevant. He exists, real or imagined, in the collective memory of the villagers, and they know more about his local legends than they do of their own *lha-kang*.

The train of pilgrims may have bypassed the area due to lack of time or out of ignorance. The town of Melemchi Gyang was not established until 1859 when Tai Po Shing, first holder of the Chini Lama lineage, was given stewardship of the Boudha Stupa, and with it lands from Yolmo, on the Melemchi side. The last Chini lama's house in Melemchi still stands empty, though his son, Mani Lama occasionally visits. At the time of the sixth Shamarpa, few people, if any, knew about the *neys*, which could explain why they were not visited.

Dru Phug Nida Rang-jeun ( ) 'practice cave of the self arisen sun and moon' overlooks the terraces and walled in fields of Melemchi Gyang. Across the valley the village of Tarkye Gyang can be seen, protected by the enfolding arms of Ama Yangri's forested hills. The cave is sheltered by a large and ancient forest, Dru Phug Banne, which has been saved from food and fuel encroachment due to its status as a protected area. Villagers take nothing out of the forest out of fear of risking the wrath of the forest spirit guardians, as well as losing the 500 rupee fine imposed by the local government. Above the forest and the cave towers Jo Chati, father mountain and protector of their land.

The cave is large, an overhanging rock with walled in sides. A stone wall surrounds the compound, creating a quiet, shady enclosure. The gate is usually kept locked, a near by resident is caretaker and key keeper. Attached to the cave on one side is a small room that once upon a time served as kitchen and store room for a lama in retreat. Just above the entrance of the cave is a self-arisen sun and moon, hence the name of the cave. The altar is old, and evidently once elaborate, but an aura of age and disuse has settled over the images like a blanket of time. Shafts of light coming in from the door illuminate specs of dust swirling through the air and reveal several tumbled butter lamps and the stumps of old candles. The wooden base board is cracked and chewed by mice and the frescos on the wall have faded to an almost indistinguishable shade of grey.

The images, however, look freshly dusted and several new *katas* are tossed haphazardly around the central figure of Guru Rimpoche; evidence that modern day pilgrims from the recent initiation at Neyding have passed this way. In addition to the four images flanking Guru Rimpoche is an unusual image of the Sakyamuni Buddha set into the right side wall at a 45 degree angle to the final image of Channa Dorje. Several *tsa-tsas*, small *chorten* - like offerings of clay litter the floor and the spaces around the images.

Despite the air of disuse and neglect that permeates the cave there still lingers a calm presence that pulls scattered thoughts and ideas into focus, creating an ambiance of single minded contemplation. The sheltering walls and cool walls provoke a need for silence and stillness, a whisper invoking awe for those, real and imaginary, who have practiced there.

At the base of the village, at the edge of a cliff overlooking a waterfall is a solitary prayer flag. The flag marks *Cha-thrap*, meaning 'tea stove'. Guru Rimpoche, on the way to his cave one day became thirsty. He sat down near three flat rocks and built a fire between them, creating a natural stove. He boiled water in his pot and made tea.

Almost directly across the water fall is another prayer flag, this one marking *Jouk-tea*, a large flat rock standing perpendicular to the ground and vaguely shaped like a seated human form. Rays like the sun are painted around where the head would be. Guru Rimpoche once stopped and rested there, leaning his head against the smooth stone.

A ten minute walk north of the village along a steep ridge is a low cave that opens onto the face of a cliff. A small trickle of water has carved a spout out of the cave entrance. The cave is only about a meter high in most places and shows evidence of being water carved. *Tsang Pug Ara Dutsi*, 'full cave of blessed wine nectar', is special for the women of the village. In local mythology it is said to have been the menstruation cave of Mandharava, Indian princess and consort disciple of Guru Rimpoche. She came to visit while he was practicing at *Drug Phug Nida Rang-jeun*, and following local custom of the time, she retreated to a cave in order not to taint him while she was menstruating.

The waters of the spring, passing through layers of iron laden rock, collect in a shallow pool in the center of the cave. Red mud collects at the bottom and it is said to be the blood of Mandharava, and is considered to be a potent blessing of fertility. In the back of the cave is a low flat ridge that serves as a rough altar for the 'Buddhas' that are naturally formed by the steady dripping of mineral laden water over the centuries.

Visitors to the cave, in order to receive its blessings, partake in an elaborate ritual. They first wash their hands and face in the water then bring some to their lips in order to drink, in much the same way as taking blessed wine at a *puja*. They run their hands through their hair then touch each of the 'buddhas', collecting the red mud on their fingers. Their foreheads are marked with the mud, leaving a streak that will last for days.

Regardless of factual documentation (or lack there of), the *neys* of Melemchi Gyang have been turned into a veritable sacred geography imbued with a rich local history. The reverence and homage paid these areas reciprocates in multiple amounts, sanctifying them with an intense spiritual significance, which, with the continued devotion of those that visit them, only perpetuates their sacred value in a never-ending cycle.

## Conclusion

Pilgrimage as tradition has been an integral part of almost all religions. Chaucer's journey fellows wound their way through England in order to reach the great Canterbury Cathedral, in his book The Cantabury Tales, the well loved version of a western pilgrimage guide. The Crusades were as much a chance to see the Holy Lands as they were to free them. Muslims travel to Mecca, and if they can't travel, they face it. Hindus look towards Varanassi and the sacred Ganges.

The spiritual value of pilgrimage is as much the actual journey as the ultimate destination. Attainment of the goal may bring merit, but it is the journey that brings wisdom. Every voyage is an education, be it a further understanding of one's self or of another people.

Reaching the destiny of a pilgrimage is inspiration. These sites of veneration have become important through their histories and their meanings. Sanctified by generations of devoted believers, the beneficial powers of these places are limited only by the human mind. The benefits are real as long as someone believes in them. Touching a relic or standing where once a great practitioner has stood is a way of partaking of the sacred, a direct inspiration of the ultimate goal, whatever it may be.

Pilgrimage in Tibetan Buddhism is an essential part of the outer practice. Be it cora around a local shrine or a long journey to a sacred mountain such as Kailaish, spiritual benefits accumulate in the form of merit. This 'merit', however, bears no significance if it is not undertaken with proper mind, meditation, and practice. The moment it becomes mechanical or self-serving, all spiritual value is lost. "Real pilgrimage isn't something you undertake just for yourself; you do it on behalf of all beings, your friends and even your enemies. Unless you do it in this spirit, it is just an ordinary journey without any spiritual significance." (quoted by Ian Baker, Kailaish article, Shangri-La)

The Sixth Shamarpa's pilgrimage may have originated from a political basis, but the ultimate goal was still spiritual attainment. Inspiration gained from visitation to practice caves is invaluable when acted upon. For those who believe that the conference of blessings comes from outside oneself, the caves are still places of potent power. In partaking of these blessings, the sixth Shamarpa not only gained blessings for himself, but could in turn bestow them upon others who could not travel so far. The power of his Dharma teachings became even more valid in the eyes of his followers, and in turn, he could further spread the Dharma.

The true validity of a blessing cannot be established. There is no physical specimen to be analyzed, and its efficacy is limited only by the mind that receives it. The power of a blessing or the sanctity of a sacred spot exists in the mind that perceives it. Physical evidence of reverence for a site, such as offerings, katas and signs of use only augment the sacred in the visitors mind; where as destruction and desecration of a site does not lessen the value of its history, it only diminishes the human value of reverence in the eyes of the beholder.

The role of local legends and sacred mythologies serve to make the associated personages and saints more real. Sites connected to their histories prove them to be tangible beings from which inspiration can be drawn. Gods may inspire by terrifying power, but it is the humble humans with great achievement that provide pilgrims with visible goals. It is human nature to

mythify places and people, raising them from the mundane but not isolating them from their worldly origins. Pilgrimage to these sites and mythification through reverence perpetuates a living tradition that is constant, yet consistently changing. New mythologies rise and fall like waves and layers of physical reverence change their forms.

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"You won't get out this shit alone" -Jerome Edou

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Poof!