

## A Memorial to the Shrine of Three Jewels

A few Bhutanese seem to realize the great loss of Konchosum Lhakhang, which was destroyed by fire in the afternoon of 24 February, 2010 and even fewer may have lingering pictures of this small temple. In spite of its significance, it was not an icon like Taktshang or Kurje temples. Yet, it was a small, beautiful, well designed and above all a very old and historically important temple in Bhutan. I always loved it for its aesthetics, antiquity and lack of opulence.



Also known as Tselung and Chokhor Lhakhang in literary writings, the temple is supposed to have been built by Thrisong Deutsen after receiving instructions from Guru Rinpoche to do so. The king sent one Bami Trisher from Yarlung to supervise the construction and Guru Rinpoche himself is said to have designed and consecrated the Chokhor Lhakhang with its adjacent monuments. A very interesting relic preserved in the temple which supports its origin in the 8<sup>th</sup> century is a large broken bell (*choedril*), one of the very few bells from the Yarlung dynastic period surviving today. Locals believe that when the bell was rung, the sound was heard as far as Tibet. The jealous Tibetans came to take away the bell but unable to carry across the mountains, they broke it.



The temple contains as its central figure a statue of Buddha Vairocana, which was in vogue during Yarlung dynastic period, flanked by exquisite Avalokiteshvara and Guru Rinpoche statues, which are perhaps later additions. An ancient megalith stands at the entrance of the temple and some other interesting objects have been found during a recent excavation. Sometime in the early part of the first millennium, Bonpo Dragtsal, whom some consider to be the first Bhutanese *terton* or treasure discoverer, is said to have extracted a *dzogchen* text from this temple. Much later in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the temple became an important venue for the works of Pema Lingpa, Bhutan's foremost religious figure and cultural hero.



Following a prophecy to repair the temple, Pema Lingpa undertakes the renovation of Chokhor Lhakhang in 1479. He mobilized the people of Chokhor valley to work on the project

and invited an artist called Kunga from Lhodrak, who restored the paintings. To fund the project, Pema Lingpa was told in a prophecy to extract gold from behind the Vairocana statue. This he did in public only to reveal a thumb size wax figure of a donkey, causing him much distress. However, the next day he found two tiny pieces of gold hidden in the wax donkey which miraculously turned out to be sufficient for gilding all statues and murals. The restoration took two years. In a dramatic turn of events, Pema Lingpa, who was already a reputed religious figure, was once again called to the temple in 1490, this time by the people of Chokhor who alleged that he unduly took out a turquoise from the back of the Vairocana statue. Pema Lingpa had to take a solemn oath before the statue that he did not. The temple also saw a great number of Buddhist visitors, one of them being the great Sogdogpa, who correctly noted that the locals call this temple Konchogsum Lhakhang for the three main statues it houses.

Today, the temple remains gutted by a fire caused by a habitual butter lamp. The caretaker was away attending a ceremony in the neighbouring Tamshing monastery. It is a tragic lesson of impermanence and of cultural loss. "The murals which have been restored in recent decades using turpentine paints have easily succumbed to the flames", says a lama of Tamshing. Luckily, the main statues were not severely damaged and other relics have been saved before any harm was done. Like other people of Bumthang, I will sorely miss the Shrine of Three Jewels.

*Karma Phuntsho*  
Cambridge

