

Mann, Peter (2017). The Building of Sangye Migyur Ling . In Dasho Karma Ura, Dorji Penjore & Chhimi Dem (Eds), *Mandala of 21st Century Perspectives: Proceedings of the International Conference on Tradition and Innovation in Vajrayana Buddhism* (pp. 265-9272). Thimphu: Centre for Bhutan Studies.

The Building of Sangye Migyur Ling (Druk Mila Sekhar Guthog)

Peter Mann

In 2007, Venerable Lama Kelzang, who has lived in Hong Kong for 28 years, made a pilgrimage to the Milarepa Tower in Qinghai, and in a moment of inspiration, decided to build a similar tower and monastery in his home country, Bhutan. Following a positive response from the Royal Government, 9.8 acres of land were acquired at Rigzinling, about 10km from (and 900m above) the border town of Phuentsholing in south Bhutan. The new monastery is called 'Sangye Migyur Ling' (SML).

Most people know the story of the famous Tibetan saint who learned black magic in his early life to take revenge on enemies but later became a disciple of the great translator Marpa, who had brought many sacred texts back from India. Knowing that his new student had accumulated bad karma, Marpa treated him harshly and made him build a nine-storey tower (Sekhar Guthok) with his bare hands. When it was nearly finished, he told him to move it to another location. This happened a few times until Milarepa had removed his bad karma. Later, he went off to meditate in mountain caves and became enlightened in one lifetime. Milarepa is a shining example of the virtues of renunciation, diligent practice and devotion to his guru.

Venerable Lama Kelzang's plan is that the monastery and tower should become a holy site to attract pilgrims from Bhutan, where Kagyupa Buddhism is the official religion, and from Northeast India (e.g. Darjeeling, Kalimpong and Sikkim). Already, the Milarepa Tower and Shrine Hall have become prominent landmarks above the town of Phuentsholing and are clearly visible

from the Indian plain beyond. He hopes that in future, 500 monks will be in residence at SML, and that he can also build a Retreat Centre.



Sangye Migyur Ling Monastery takes shape on the south Bhutan skyline.

As the project budget was estimated at around US\$3.8m, charitable foundations were established in Hong Kong and Bhutan in 2010 and His Holiness the Je Khenpo wrote letters of support. A project committee was set up in Hong Kong to oversee and coordinate the project and to raise funds, which come from donations and fundraising activities such as charity dinners, concerts and sponsored walks.

On 17 November 2011, His Holiness the Je Khenpo presided over the ground-breaking ceremony and blessing of the site with many government representatives and thousands of spectators. That day there was a halo around the sun and when the cooks were asked how many they were cooking for, they replied 'We are cooking for all sentient beings!'

In his speech, His Holiness the Je Khenpo reminded us that "Even hearing the name of Milarepa prevents rebirth in the hell realms for seven lifetimes'. He also requested that the image of Milarepa should not be made in emaciated form like a hungry ghost but rather in a perfect form like all ancient statues. The Speaker of the National Assembly and the Minister of Labour and Human Resources also attended the ceremony.

From 2012 to 2014, extensive site formation took place, including the building of an access road and major drainage work. Then the foundation work started on the Milarepa Tower and Shrine Hall. As south Bhutan is considered an

The Building of Sangye Migjur Ling in Bhutan

earthquake prone zone, the foundations need to be exceptionally strong. By November 2015, the tower was finished and the Home Minister was invited to officiate at the ceremony to install the *sertok* or golden pinnacle at the top of the tower. The ceremony also commemorated the 60th birth anniversary of His Majesty the Fourth King.



Many treasures and precious relics were placed under the *sertok*. The construction of the Milarepa Tower and Shrine Hall now nears completion and most of the work involves decoration, plaster work and painting and making of statues.



Here a lama proceeds with highly specialized painting on the 9th level of the Tower.



Complicated carving work on the 9th level of the Tower.

Venerable Lama Kelzang's vision for the interior of the Tower is that the ground floor will contain a life-sized marble statue of Milarepa in a cave, surrounded by four protectors. There will also be 78 carvings of stories from Milarepa's *namthar*. The second floor will feature a statue of Shakyamuni Buddha together with his disciples, Ananda and Sariputra. There will also be paintings of the Sixteen Arhats. The third floor is devoted to the Buddha of the

East, Akshobhya, and paintings of the Five Buddha Families and Eight Goddesses.



The fourth floor will contain a mandala and 13 paintings of the main *yidam* of the Kagyu lineage, Cakrasamvara, while the fifth floor will feature the eight forms of Padmasambhava (Guru Rinpoche). The sixth floor will be devoted to the Kagyupa lineage with statues of Marpa, Milarepa, Gampopa and paintings of the four major and eight minor lineages. The seventh floor contains all the Drukpa Kagyu lineage, while the eighth floor has all the Karma Kagyu lineage. Finally, the ninth floor has statues of the Five Buddha Families.

On the top floor (inaccessible to visitors) are placed the Buddha Amitabha, Hayagriya and Kurukulle. These three, facing south, are powerful protectors of the Milarepa Tower and the country itself.



Buddha Amitabha, Hayagriya and Kurukulle, facing south, protect the tower and the country.

The Shrine Hall is situated to the south of the Milarepa Tower and following the advice of His Holiness the Je Khenpo, it will contain images of Amitabha (centre), Shakyamuni (left) and Maitreya (right). Underneath are monks' quarters, classrooms, visitor facilities and a practice hall. Plaster work and painting is underway and the marble floor will be laid later this year. There are already 20-50 novice lamas living at the site and a number of teachers who conduct daily lessons in English, Maths and dharma studies.

From 1-6 January 2016, the third annual Mahakala Puja was held at the tower, a ceremony dedicated to world peace, prosperity and the liberation of all sentient beings. The Ritual used was the long scripture rearranged by H.H. 15th Karmapa, Kachyab Dorje. The upcoming Mahakala Puja and Vajra Dances will be held from 21-19 December 2016.



Lama Kelzang presides over the Mahakala Puja in January 2016.



The Building of Sangye Migjur Ling in Bhutan



Novice monks saying grace before lunch.



Shrine Hall with view of Indian plain below



TK Ngan (project manager) in middle and Lama Yeshe (management) on right.

There are at present three main dharma projects nearing completion in Bhutan: The Big Buddha Statue in Thimphu, the Guru Rinpoche Statue at Takila, East Bhutan, and Sangye Migyur Ling in South Bhutan.

When all internal decoration and landscaping are finished, the Grand Opening of Sangye Migyur Ling is planned for 2019 (Year of the Earth Pig).