

## Sacred Bhutan: Walking and Meditation in the Land of the Thunder Dragon with Susie Harrington

Feb. 21- March 5, 2015

### Trip Itinerary

*We will begin our trip by gathering in Bangkok. From there we fly to Paro, and our adventure in Bhutan begins. We will integrate our dharma practice into our travel by practicing sitting and/or walking meditation on most days, and by practicing in action with the people and situations we encounter. Keep in mind that we are entering a more relaxed and spontaneous culture, and some elements of this itinerary may change. Part of our practice will be in allowing things to unfold as they do, rather than as they are planned!*

#### **TRAVEL DAY- Friday, February 20**

Travel day. Most flights from the US to Bangkok fly east, crossing the date line and arriving on the following day. You may want to travel a day or two earlier, so that you have time to recover from jet lag in Bangkok. Whatever day you travel, we'll arrange transportation for you from the airport to a guesthouse in a relatively quiet part of the city.

#### **DAY ONE- Saturday, February 21**

We'll gather at a boutique guesthouse in Bangkok, meeting at approximately 3pm. After some time getting to know each other and going over some travel details, we'll have dinner . . . Thai food, of course!

#### **DAY TWO- - Sunday, February 22**

A morning flight from Bangkok takes us along the Himalayas to Paro, a small town at 7,000' that hosts Bhutan's primary airstrip. Paro is located in a beautiful valley, lined with apple orchards and green terraced fields. We'll take a walking tour of the town, highlighting a visit to Rinpung Dzong, one of the finest examples of traditional Bhutanese architecture. A dzong is the regional headquarters for secular and religious authority, and in past times served as fortresses. Rinpung Dzong was built in 1644 on the foundation of a monastery built by Guru Rinpoche, who introduced Buddhism to Bhutan.

We will stay at the Gangtey Palace Hotel, which has a beautiful shrine room on the top floor where we will practice in the evening.



#### **DAY THREE**

This morning we will visit the National Museum, and meet with Director Khenpo Phuntsho Tashi (if in residence), who will introduce us to the natural history and Buddhist art of Bhutan. This will give us understanding of the incredible artwork that we will be seeing throughout our journey. In the afternoon we will meet with Rinpoche Dilgo Yangtse, if he is in residence, and practice in the shrine room at Gangtey Palace. In the evening we will be hosted for a home-cooked dinner at a traditionally crafted local farm house.

## DAY FOUR



Today we will drive to Punakha, with several stops along the way. We will pass through Thimpu, the capital of Bhutan, which is likely the only capital in the world without a traffic light. Here we'll stretch our legs, visiting Changangkha Lhakhang, a temple popular with local pilgrims and featuring beautiful black and gold prayer wheels and stunning views. The main chapel has a beautiful statue of Avalokitesvara, the female deity of compassion.

The high point of the day's journey is Dochula Pass, at 10,000', where weather permitting, we will have magnificent views of the gigantic, snow covered peaks of the Eastern Himalaya. On top of the pass we will raise prayer flags in a ceremony of loving kindness, peace, compassion, and wisdom.

From the pass we drop down to the lowlands of the Punakha Valley at just 4,000', passing forests of rhododendron and magnolia, and the group of 109 Chortens (stupas).

## DAY FIVE

In the morning, we visit the Nalanda Buddhist College, a monastic school perched high on a remote hillside. We'll meet with the 18-year old Rinpoche, if he is in residence, for a discussion about his life, studies, and the experience of being discovered as a reincarnate at the age of four. In the evening we visit the Punakha Dzong, built on a river island at the confluence of the Phocho and Mochu rivers, and possibly the most beautiful Dzong in Bhutan.



After dinner we'll take a short walk to visit the Sangchen Dorji Lhuendrup Lhakhang, a recently built nunnery complex perched on a ridge overlooking three valleys. In addition to practice and teaching of the dharma, the nunnery provides life skills training in embroidery, sculpture, and thangka painting. We will join the young nuns for their evening chants.

## DAY SIX



Today we drive (3 hours) to the little visited Phobjikha Valley, nestled at 9,500' on the western slopes of the Black Mountains. En route we'll stop for a half hour walk across rice paddies and past a local village to Chimi Lhakhang, the temple of the 'Divine Mad Man', where Bhutanese come for fertility blessings.

In the afternoon we'll explore the Phobjikha Valley on foot- following the Khewa Chu stream through open meadows to a small, seldom visited monastery built in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, and recently brought back to life as an active monastery for about 30 young monks. We will stay to listen to evening chants, and visit with Tulku Tshultim Dorji Rinpoche, the reincarnate of the 13<sup>th</sup> century founder of the monastery. Tonight we stay at the remote Dewachen Inn, a luxurious wood-heated hotel.

## DAY SEVEN

Today we head to Bumthang province, known as the spiritual heart of Bhutan. A dramatic drive takes us through the town of Trongsa, where we will stop to visit the Trongsa Dzong, considered the most impressive masterpiece of Bhutanese architecture. We will settle in for three nights in the Chumey Valley at the Chumey Nature Resort. The Chumey Valley is the home of Bhutan's famous yathra weaving- a geometrically complex weaving of hand-spun wool.

## DAY EIGHT



Today we settle into deep practice in the beautiful small temple on the grounds of the Chumey Nature Resort. A day of quiet contemplation and integration, with time for an afternoon walk in the peaceful wooded valley.



## DAY NINE

On the second day of our practice intensive, we will spend the day at Tharpaling Monastery, perched high above the Chumey Valley. This goemba houses over 100 monks and several temples, including the high hermitage of Choedrak Goemba, above Tharpaling at 12,400'.

Choedrak Goemba has a chapel that is said to hold the footprint of Guru Rinpoche. We will spend the morning practicing in the main temple on the wooden planked floors worn smooth from centuries of monks' feet. In the afternoon we will practice walking meditation on a hike to KiKiLa Pass, a remote high pass that is the home to a glass-encased golden Buddha. Here we will raise prayer flags in a ceremony of peace and loving kindness.

## DAY TEN



This morning we take a short drive to Jakar, the small town at the center of the district of Bumthang, considered the spiritual heart of Bhutan. Our focus for the day is a visit to Pema Choling Nunnery, where over 100 nuns, mostly teenagers and young women, study and practice. Our guide's sister lives at Pema Choling monastery, and will introduce us to her dharma sisters. We will spend the morning with them, sitting as they practice their daily chants and talking with them in the stone courtyard in the center of their dormitories and classrooms. Trip funds will contribute to a gift for the nuns or their monastery, which we will present to them as part of the morning.

In the afternoon we will stop to visit some of Bumthang's most treasured temples- Kurje Lhakhang, Jambey Lhakhang, and Tamshing Goemba. Jambey Lhakhang, the first Buddhist temple dedicated to the future Buddha, was built here in 7th Century by the Tibetan King Songtsen Goempo, even before the arrival of Guru

Rinpoche. A little walk to the north is Kurjey Lhakhang, built around the cave where Guru Rinpoche meditated and left the imprint of his body on a rock. Kurjey is considered one of the holiest places in Bhutan.

#### **DAY ELEVEN**

A morning flight takes us back to Paro, where we give our gear to the horses and start our overnight trek to Bumdra monastery. A five-hour hike takes us to our camp at 13,500', near the monastery, with beautiful views of the Himalayas. We will practice in the afternoon in either a cave used by meditation practitioners for centuries, or in the monastery itself. Our 'luxury camp' will include standup tents with cots, a dining tent with space heaters, and delicious meals prepared by our crew.



#### **DAY TWELVE**



We hike approximately five hours, all downhill, visiting several remote monasteries on the way. The highlight of the day is one of Bhutan's most sacred places- Taksang (also known as Tiger's Nest) Monastery. This monastery, perched on the side of a sheer cliff, was built atop the cave where Guru Rinpoche, the father of Mahayana Buddhism, meditated for three months after arriving in the Paro Valley on the back of a legendary flying tigress. We will practice in one of several shrine rooms of this incredible monastery before continuing for another hours' walk back to Paro, where we will stay again at

the Gangtey Palace Hotel.

#### **DAY THIRTEEN- Thursday, March 5**

We'll have some final closure in the morning, and then say goodbye to our local guides and support crew, and catch an afternoon flight back to Bangkok.

*Our trip will end in Bangkok, upon our arrival in the airport in the afternoon. If you need to wait until the next morning for a flight back to the U.S., we can arrange lodging for you if needed. Note that because of the dateline, if you leave on the morning of Friday, March 6, you will most likely arrive home on the same day, Friday, March 6.*