



# 49 DAYS,

## A BUDDHIST FUNERAL IN BHUTAN

*A story about ritual and healing, in commemoration of the second death anniversary of the beloved Dasho Shingkar Lam*

*By Jessica Vernon*

**T**HEY started mowing the lawn at 10 pm. The Dasho has passed away.

Funeral preparations began immediately. His Majesty the King sent a truckload of army personnel to help construct the altar and set up white funeral tents. Family members worked alongside the camouflaged men until 3 am, the next day. Aunts and cousins rushed back and forth trying to organise breakfast for the troops. Monks wandered around in crimson cloaks; hanging yellow and orange ribbons from the roof of the new altar, mounting rainbow checked flags and banners. Once the grounds were duly prepared and the altar finished, the body was brought in. We woke to a small

tented village in the centre of our tranquil compound.

Curled into a lotus position, the body lies enclosed within the altar which is adorned with flowers and vases of water, small bowls of food, candies and drinks. Perfumed incense travels on the wind. Butter lamps burn from day to the night. The lighting of these lamps is an important and very symbolic practice in Buddhism. Burning the physical (clarified yak butter) transforms matter into energy; providing a light in the dark. It is both a literal and metaphorical symbol of illumination; the eradication of ignorance, the dispelling of darkness. Lamps are lit in prayer and dedication; to serve as a guide; to be a beacon for all



▲ Prayer wheels at Kyichu Lkakhang in Paro (left). Monks coming for morning tea, a break from daily prayers (above)

sentient beings to rise from the shadows of their suffering.

Dasho Shingkar Lam Kunzang Wangchuk passed away on October 16, 2014, at the age of 86 with his guru and family at his side. Born into a hereditary lamaist family in the ancestral home of the great *nyingmapa* master, Kuenkhen Longchenpa, Shingkar Lam was destined to live the long spiritual life of a reincarnated lama. But as a young teenager, he was conscripted as a retainer at Wangdecholing Palace to serve in place of his uncle who had abandoned his duties as court attendant. Over time,

the young retainer rose to the position of private secretary to the Third King and was later elected as the Fifth Speaker of the National Assembly. In 1968, Shingkar Lam was awarded the red scarf, earning the esteemed title of *Dasho*.

Having served under the Second, Third and Fourth Kings during a period of great political and economic change in Bhutan, Dasho Shingkar Lam inadvertently became one of the most influential figures of his time. As the Himalayan Kingdom made its first steps into the world of international politics, Dasho Shingkar Lam played an integral role in helping the country form itself as a nation. He aided in

the revision of the taxation system, drafted some of the first civil and criminal law records, helped write the National Anthem and designed the national flag of Bhutan as well as the official insignia for the Royal Bhutan Army and Royal Bhutan Police. He is said to have had a keen artistic eye and a natural grace in the traditional dances.

Upon retirement in 1985, Dasho returned his focus to the religious life he was forced to leave behind as a boy. In 1995, Karma Ura (now head of the Centre for Bhutan Studies and GNH Research) published a book about Dasho Shingkar Lam's life titled, *The Hero With a Thousand Eyes*. After suffering





▲ High Lamas presides over the prayer ceremony

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a stroke in 2004, which left half of his body paralyzed, the Dasho dedicated his life wholeheartedly to spiritual practice and the study of the *Bardo Thodol* (known in the Western world as the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*).

#### Foreshadowing of Clouds

On a cold October morning, long before sunrise, the body is placed in a new altar in the back of a truck bound for Paro. The Dasho has been granted the honour of being cremated at the Kyichu Lhakhang, Bhutan's oldest and most auspicious monastery.

A long, winding tail of headlights slowly makes its way

along the snaking mountain road. The envoy arrives at the monastery just after 7am. White ceremonial tents are already set up and quickly, *suja* (butter tea) and rice are served; first to the monks, then to the guests. Clouds hang low overhead. The sun, we assumed, would soon come out—as it always does—to burn away the morning clouds and heat the earth with its intense rays. But not today. Today is not a day for sunshine. A cold mist suspends in the air, snow on the surrounding peaks bearing silent witness to the rumbling chants and horns of the monks. This weather is an auspicious sign.

Dasho's wife, Aum Tshering

Doma, affectionately called *Ama* (mother) by almost everyone, seems stoic but her soft eyes betray her composure. There is much prayer and ceremony conducted by the high lamas. After an elaborate lunch of regional Bumthang dishes, the fire is lit.

Sticks of incense make their way around to all the guests. Much of the family sits inside the tent while the body burns, somehow able to endure the suffocating smoke. Entering the tent my eyes immediately burn and it is hard to breathe. On a raised alter in the centre of the tent sits a small figure, hunched under many cloaks and robes, crowned with a ceremonial

hat. The fire under him gains strength as each stick of incense is added to the logs. We walk around the body clockwise before exiting through the opposite door.

The scene is captivating. Indeed the weather is perfect for such a day. Clouds, moving ever so slowly in the background, seem to foretell of the billowing smoke that now fills the horizon. A streak of rainbow over Samtengang temple, one of eight centres established by Kuenkhen Longchenpa in Paro, marks the auspiciousness and connection to his birth place, Shingkar Dechenling. The fire burns all day and all night. In the morning the family gathers the ashes to scatter into the *Paro Chhu* River. Remaining bones are ground into powder and mixed with mud to form small cones (mini *stupas*), called *tshatsha*, that will be blessed and taken to sacred places low in the Ganga River. One hundred and eight prayer flags printed with the Chenrezig mantra, *ommanipadme hum* are hoisted in honour of the deceased as a blessing for all sentient beings.

#### Return to the Village

At home in Thimphu, the *pujas* continued until the 21<sup>st</sup> day, when the tents were taken down and only a few monks remained to continue their



▲ One of the four altars on each side of the cremation tent

prayers in the altar room of the main house.

On the 49<sup>th</sup> day, in the tiny village of Shingkar in Bumthang, the Dasho finally returned home. The entire village was present for the final ceremony when the soul is believed to have completed its cycle of rebirth. In the small temple where the little lama grew up a statue of *Chana Dorji* was dedicated in his honour.

Long after the last rituals

are performed, the mourning process endures. Buddhists view this time of grieving as an opportunity for loved ones to examine his or her own life and find solace in the present moment. Grief teaches compassion and provides motivation for a more dedicated spiritual practice.

#### Journey to Samsara

Upon death the monks immediately begin reading





light. A person, who has lived as a spiritual seeker, dutifully studying the *Bardo Thodol* and practising deep meditation, may be able to recognise this light, embracing rather than fearing its intensity. This soul will enter into the realm of enlightened beings; the eternal *Nirovana*—a state of no death, no birth.

A soul that flees from this light, failing to access the first spiritual realm will pass into the *second bardo* described as a marshland of terrifying demons and emotional turmoil. Recognizing that they are no longer part of the physical world, the soul must confront

the many projections of the mind that are shaped by the emotional patterns formed in their previous life. Here the accumulated *karma* is weighed; the merits of a life lived in devotion or of a life lived in ignorance will determine the conditions of the next rebirth.

Most spirits are believed to spend around 45 days in the *second bardo*. This final realm of *bardo* is the stage of reincarnation where the soul is pulled into its next body, reborn into one of six alternate realms. Those who accumulate bad karma may be reborn into an animal or hell realm which is considered inferior to obtaining

a body in the material plane as the lower realms provide little chance for creativity or generating good karma. Being reincarnated as a human in the physical world is the most desirable option because it offers the most opportunities for spiritual learning and growth and is the only realm from which one can escape the cycle of *samsara*.

The consciousness of the deceased is believed to be highly clairvoyant, especially during the first 21 days following the death of the body. This is a powerful time to perform spiritual ceremonies as the bonds

“Those who accumulate bad karma may be reborn into an animal or hell realm which is considered inferior to obtaining a body in the material plane as the lower realms provide little chance for creativity or generating good karma.”

from the *Bardo Thodol*. The book serves as a guide for the dead, helping him first to recognise that he is no longer connected to a physical body, then providing instructions on how to navigate the various stages of afterlife on the path to rebirth.

It is believed that during the first four days the deceased is not yet aware that he is dead. He is still with us, in a state of trance, watching in confusion as his house overflows with activity. During these initial days, while the soul (consciousness) is in the first stage of *bardo*, it is important that the family maintain a sense of normalcy; meals are served three times a day, emotions

are subdued. The family's role is to help their deceased recognise his new state and detach from his former life. Negative emotions can confuse the deceased; the family must try not to cry as that will make it harder for the dead to disengage from this world and leave their loved ones behind.

The Buddhist funeral lasts for 49 days. The first seven days are of great importance as the consciousness passes through the *Clear Light bardo* where the dead is faced with a brilliant

► High lamas leading the prayer (above). A boy spins the prayer wheels at Kyichu Lhakhang (centre). Cremation smoke mingles with the clouds (right)







▲ Clouds mirroring the smoke offering during a morning prayers

between the dead and living remain strong. Transferring of merit to the dead becomes the sole occupation of the family, providing an opportunity to assist their loved one into liberation or a favourable rebirth while also providing space for living grief to transform into positive action.

Every seven days the soul undergoes judgment until the 49<sup>th</sup> day when the final verdict is given and the realm one will be reborn into is decided by the wind of its *karma*. There is a great ceremony held on this day and again on the 100<sup>th</sup> day, one year and three year anniversaries.

### Impermanence

There is nothing more real in this life than death. In the West


we are often taught not to talk or think about death, as if this will help us to avoid it someday. Buddhism is essentially a lifelong preparation for death; like the yogic *savasana*, where we come to “practice dying.” The acknowledgement of impermanence lies at the core of Buddhist teachings. In Khyentse Rinpoche’s book, *What Makes You Not a Buddhist* he explains, “If one knows that everything is impermanent, one does not grasp (hope), and if one does not grasp, one will not think in terms of having or lacking and therefore one lives fully.”

This perspective allows for much insight into what we hold as ours; the things and people that we label as belonging to us or to this world. When viewed as fleeting, every aspect of life;

every emotion, every tragedy, every joy becomes simpler. Of course we will never be immune to grief and pain when someone we love leaves us, but viewing the world through this macro lens provides an understanding that this life— and the next— is transient.

“Nothing is ever lost. Nothing is ever gained.”

*Note from the Author: The intricacies involved in the Buddhist death rites are overwhelming and extremely confusing, especially for an outsider. A lifetime of dedicated study is required to understand the meanings of funeral prayers and rituals. It was an honour to witness these sacred proceedings but I have not even begun to comprehend the vast world of Buddhist samsara. Here I attempt only to relate some of the information as it was explained to me during the many meals, pujas and evening bonfires of those weeks. I am forever grateful to the Rabten family for their astounding grace and hospitality during this time of grief. Historical accounts of the Dasho’s life are documented in Karma Ura’s novel, The Hero with a Thousand Eyes.*



Jessica is an intentional wanderer of the world with an insatiable appetite for adventure and a strong affection for words. Her words paint the faces of people she meets, the mountains she climbs and the experiences that have marked her personal evolution. She is currently based in Thimphu, Bhutan, reveling in the beautiful conundrums of the capital city. To read more of her work, visit: [www.jessicajvernon.com](http://www.jessicajvernon.com)