

## Pilgrimage to Central Tibet 2010

June 2 - June 20, 2010



### Introduction

Join us in an 18-day pilgrimage tour to sacred sites in Central Tibet. Starting from the cradle of Tibetan civilization of the Yarlung Valley, we will visit all the major historical and holy places such as the tombs of the ancient kings of Tibet, Samye Monastery (the first monastery in Tibet), and Densa Til Monastery (Phakmo Drupa's hermitage) before arriving at the holy capital city of Lhasa (Potala Palace, Jokhang Chapel and the great monasteries of the Geluk lineage), Drigung Valley to the northeast of Lhasa, as well as Namtso ("Sky Lake") – the highest salt-water lake in the world – and Shigatse and Gyantse. In particular, this pilgrimage is scheduled so that we will arrive at Drigung Til Monastery in time for its annual celebration of the anniversary of Kyobpa Jigten Sumgon. Each year, the monks of the monastery engage in a week-long schedule of practice, culminating in the monastic-dances known as *cham*. While in Drigung Valley we will visit all the major sites including the caves at Terdrom (where Guru Rinpoche resided for 7 years – the longest he ever stayed in anywhere in Tibet), and retreat sites of Kyobpa Jigten Sumgon, and the birthplace of Achi Chokyi Drolma.

Khenpo Tsultrim Tenzin and Dr. Hun Lye will lead this pilgrimage. Khenpo Tsultrim is a spiritual director at Tibetan Meditation Center (TMC), Frederick, MD and was once a student at Samye Monastery. It will be a rare and unique opportunity to travel with Khenpo Tsultrim given his extensive training in the scholarly tradition of Tibetan monastic education and his own life-long experience in Buddhist practice as well as his connections to his native land. Khenpo-la will give teachings and lectures throughout the trip as well as lead us in some spiritual practices, whenever possible. Dr. Hun Lye is the current president of TMC and assistant professor of religion at Davidson College, NC, specializing in Buddhism and Chinese and Tibetan religions. He has led several educational-tours and pilgrimages to Tibet and Ladakh in the last few years and has established a reliable and strong connection with people and monasteries in Tibet.

**Note: This is NOT a business venture. Basically, this program is offered because a few of Khenpo Tsultrim's students and some of Hun's friends would like them to lead a pilgrimage to Tibet this summer.**

## **Tentative Itinerary**

### **Day 1 (June 2)**

#### **Arrive Chengdu.**

Our entry point to Tibet will be the southwestern Chinese city of Chengdu in Sichuan province. You should arrange to arrive in Chengdu on June 2. Since most flights from the United States will arrive in Chengdu in the later part of the day, we will only have time for a Sichuan-style dinner and some sleep (on a bed!) in Chengdu. Early the next morning, we will fly to Lhasa.

### **Day 2 (June 3)**

#### **Arrive Lhasa. Tsetang. Hotel in Tsetang (B/L/D)**

We will be greeted at the airport by our guide - Buchung-la (whom I have had as guide the last few trips I have taken to Tibet) who will drive with us to the town of Tsetang in the Yarlung Valley - the origins of the first Tibetan kingdom. Here we will visit Yumbu Lhakhang, the earliest palace of the Tibetan kings and also the ancient tombs of the kings. We will take the rest of the day easy so that so that we can better acclimate to the high elevation.

### **Day 3 (June 4)**

#### **Samye Monastery. Hotel in Tsetang (B/L/D)**

The first monastery built in Tibet (circa. 775), Samye is located close to Tsetang. The monastery combines Indian, Chinese and Tibetan architectural styles and the layout was designed to be a microcosm of the universe described in Buddhist scriptures. Although many parts of the monastery were damaged or completely destroyed during the so-called Cultural Revolution, there are many exquisite murals still preserved at Samye and many of the main chapels and shrines have been restored.

### **Day 4 (June 5)**

#### **Densa Til. Depart for Lhasa. Mindrol-ling. Hotel KyiChu (B/L/D)**

In the morning we will visit Densa Til, a monastery that grew out of the simple retreat-hut of Phakmo Drupa (1110-1170), teacher of Jigten Sumgon (founder of Drigung Kagyu) and source of the so-called eight "junior lineages" of the Kagyu order. Members of the Drigung Kagyu lineage have recently restored parts of Densa Til and consequently we have a close connection with them. We will have a picnic-lunch at Densa Til.

In the afternoon we will depart the Tsetang area for Lhasa. Enroute we will drop by Mindrol-ling Monastery. Mindrol-ling is one of the six "mother" monasteries of the Nyingma lineage and was founded in 1676 by Tertön Terdak Lingpa who enjoyed a close association with the 5<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama. Although like many monasteries, it suffered extensive damage under the hands of Chinese Communists, Mindrol-ling has been rebuilt and many of its chapels have been restored. Currently it is also home to some exquisite statuary that originally belonged to Sakya Monastery. Mindrol-ling is also famous throughout Tibet for its superb quality incense and we will arrange to see their incense production facility.

After Mindrol-ling we will continue on to Lhasa, arriving there just before dinner. Lhasa (elev. 3650m) is the ancient capital of Tibet and the traditional seat of the government led by the Dalai Lamas from the 17<sup>th</sup> century until the current Dalai Lama went into exile in India in 1959. Lhasa will serve as our "base" for the rest of the pilgrimage (except when we visit Drigung Valley where we will stay for a few days).

Kyichu Hotel is located around the corner from the Jokhang Chapel and the Barkhor and it is a friendly, cozy and comfortable hotel. It is also a favorite among scholars and researchers who frequent Lhasa and tend to stay for weeks or even months.

### **Day 5 (June 6)**

#### **Jokhang, Barkhor & Ramoche. Hotel KyiChu (B/L/-)**

The Jokhang Chapel is the heart of Lhasa city, if not all of Tibet. It houses the “Jowo Rinpoche” – the holiest Buddha statue for Tibetans and was first constructed in year 639. From that time till the present, all Tibetans aspire to come to Lhasa to pay homage to Jowo Rinpoche and receive its blessings.

The Barkhor is part of old-city Lhasa and is bustling with local Tibetans, pilgrims from different parts of Tibet, temples and chapels, big and small. It has an active market filled with vendors who cater to both local Lhasa residents as well as pilgrims and tourists.

We will enjoy a scrumptious vegetarian lunch at Holy Land Vegetarian Restaurant, a restaurant owned by Angon Rinpoche’s family. Angon Rinpoche is one of our senior Drigung Kagyu rinpoches and in recent years have taken the responsibility of the restoration of many Drigung Kagyu monasteries and the publication of Drigung Kagyu texts long thought to have disappeared. After lunch we will go to the Ramoche Chapel which houses the second most holy image of the Buddha in Tibet and was also built in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. Whereas the Jokhang was built in the “Nepali” style, the Ramoche was built in the “Chinese” style.

### **Day 6 (June 7)**

#### **Potala Palace & Sera Monastery. Hotel KyiChu (B/L/-)**

The Potala Palace was once the main residence of the Dalai Lamas that also housed many chapels, shrines, mausoleums where religious rites were performed as well as the ministries, departments and offices of the Tibetan government. The construction of the Potala started in 1645 and was only completed in 1694. We will spend the morning at the Potala.

After lunch we will visit Sera Monastery, located a few kilometers north of Lhasa, was founded in 1414 and was the second largest monastery in Tibet and at its height was home to 10,000 monks. This monastic campus occupies an area of about 1/3 sq. km. Aside from being a bastion of Tibetan religious intellectuals and scholars, its size, religious-affiliation (with the tradition of the Dalai Lamas) and proximity to Lhasa made it an important political force in Tibet prior to 1959.

### **Day 7 (June 8)**

#### **Norbulingka Summer Palace, Mentsikhang & Muslim Quarters. Hotel KyiChu (B/L/-)**

In the morning we will visit Norbulingka – the summer palace of the Dalai Lamas from 1870s until 1959. Norbulingka consists of gardens, a zoo (originally to keep animals given to the Dalai Lama), residences of the Dalai Lamas and other officials, formal audience and meeting rooms and religious chapels.

After lunch, we will go to the Mentsikhang which is the main medical facility in Tibet that continues to provide traditional Tibetan medical treatments. We will attend a lecture on the principles and practice of Tibetan medicine by an accomplished and erudite Tibetan doctor who speaks fluent and impeccable English. Anyone interested can also arrange for personal medical consultation with Tibetan doctors at the Mentsikhang.

There is a thriving Muslim community consisting of two groups – Tibetan Muslims and Chinese Muslims – in Lhasa. There are two mosques in the old city, a few blocks down away from the Jokhang Chapel. Tradition has it that the 5<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama gifted land to Muslims in the 17<sup>th</sup> century to establish their mosques and burial grounds. Close to the Muslim quarters is Drophenling, a not-for-profit organization that promotes “fair trade” in Tibetan arts and crafts. We will visit their workshop and learn about their projects. They have a shop that will also give us an opportunity to support their efforts.

### **Day 8 (June 9)**

#### **Depart Lhasa for Drigung Valley: Katsel Monastery & Drigung Til Monastery. Drigung Campsite (B/L/D)**

The Drigung area is a lush alpine valley that lies about 100 km northeast of Lhasa and is home to an important branch of the Kagyu lineage of Tibetan Buddhism. The main monastery in this area – Drigung Til (founded in 1179) – is at an elevation of 4150 meters and perched on the brow of a long ridge. Members of this tradition value the tradition of extended solitary retreats and is evidenced by the numerous hermitages built around the main monastic complex. Drigung Til is also home to the most famous “sky-burial” grounds in Tibet. Our affiliation with this particular monastery will make our visit different from that of many other visitors. We will be arriving during the monastery’s annual ritual monastic-dances festival (Tib. *cham*).

On the way to Drigung Til, we will visit Katsel Monastery – home monastery of Lama Sonam. Katsel is one of the oldest monasteries in Tibet as its founding dates back to the Tibet of King Songtsen Gampo in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. Katsel later became a Drigung Kagyu monastery and currently Nyidak Rinpoche is the senior-most Drigung Kagyu lama in the Drigung Valley and we will have an audience with rinpoche.

### **Day 9 (June 10)**

#### **Drigung Til Monastery & Surroundings. Drigung Campsite (B/L/D)**

This is the final day of the monastic-dances. Tibetans explain that since the deities are invisible to ordinary eyes, during these monastic-dances the deities are temporarily made visible by having the monks embody the deities. Thus the monks not only dress as the deities but also perform visualizations to actualize the deities and channel their blessings. Tibetan laity come in large numbers to these monastic-dances from far and near. Because of our connection with the monastery, we will probably have access to the “back-stage” area of the dances and see the behind-the-scenes and speak to one of the young rinpoches who is quite known for his abilities in the monastic-dances.

We are also planning to visit with the relatives of Khenpo Choephel and will be able to experience local culture and meet locals at Drigung in a way that no ordinary tourists will be able to do.

### **Day 10 (June 11)**

#### **Terdrom Nunnery & Drigung Area. Drigung Campsite (B/L/D)**

We will begin the day with a special practice of Lama Chopa and Tsok at the Golden Chapel at Drigung Til Monastery. Following that we will visit Terdrom, which has been described as the “pearl in the Drigung oyster”, and definitely a “power-place” in the Tibetan spiritual landscape. Terdrom is reputed to be the place where Guru Rinpoche spent seven years – the longest he ever stayed anywhere in Tibet. Its spectacular limestone mountain ranges, medicinal hot-springs,

hermitages and meditation caves have been home to generations of Tibetan yogis. Terdrom is also home to a thriving nunnery and if we are lucky we might be able to gain an audience with the current Drigung Khandro – a revered senior female teacher of the area.

We will spend the day with exploring the area – climbing the mountains in the area, drink tea and eat with the nuns and soak in the hot-springs. In the past, these hot-springs were only open for the use of the heads of the Drigung Kagyu lineage.

### **Day 11 (June 12)**

#### **Drigung Valley. Drigung Campsite (B/L/D)**

We will continue to explore the Drigung Valley. Arrangements will be made to access normally unvisited and hard-to-reach sites that Kyobpa Jigten Sumgon practiced at. You can also go hiking in the area, go back to the hot-springs at Terdrom, visit with the monks and nuns in the area or even rafting (need pre-arrange). The Drigung Valley is most lush and green at this time of the year, with many different types of miniature flowering plants covering the valleys and mountain ridges.

### **Day 12 (June 13)**

#### **Depart Drigung Valley for Lhasa. Drepung Monastery & Nechung (B/L/-)**

We will leave Drigung in the morning and return to Lhasa. After lunch we will visit Drepung and Nechung. Drepung is the largest of all Tibetan monasteries and is located on the Gambo Utse mountain, 5 kilometers from the western suburb of Lhasa. Over ten thousand monks were in residence at the height of its influence. Founded in 1416 by one of Tsongkhapa's disciples, Drepung was also the residence of the early Dalai Lamas, until the 5<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama built the Potala in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Although like make other monasteries and religious centers Drepung also suffered extensive damage during the early days of the Chinese occupation, most of the main sections of this sprawling mini-city have been restored although today only several hundred monks are in residence.

Nechung is the seat of the State Oracle of Tibet and sits at the bottom of the mountain where Drepung is built. It was the seat of State Oracle until 1959 when he fled with the Dalai Lama to India who now lives in exile in Dharamsala, India. The Dalai Lamas traditionally always consulted him before making an important decision. It was the residence of the Protector Pehar a deity of the Horpas who lived to the east of Lake Kokonor (far northeast Tibet). According to tradition, Padmasambhava originally brought Pehar to Samye Monastery in the 9<sup>th</sup> century who bound him to protect the Dharma in Tibet. The 5<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama then moved this protector deity to Nechung in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The elements in this monastery are unique among all others as it is dedicated to wrathful protector deities.

### **Day 13 (June 14)**

#### **Drak Yerpa. Hotel KyiChu (B/L/-)**

Built on a hillside with more than 80 meditation caves, Drak Yerpa is described as the "life tree" or spiritual axis of Lhasa and is about an hour's drive from Lhasa. The site had a powerful spiritual heritage, having served as retreat sites for King Songsten Gampo, Padmasambhava, Yeshe Tsoygel, Padampa Sanggye, and Atisha. Before the Cultural Revolution it was home to several hundred hermits, monks, and nuns. Today, a smaller but dedicated community of

practitioners is continuing their practice here. There is a good amount of steps to ascend here but we'll have lots of time to do it!

#### **Day 14 (June 15)**

##### **Depart for Shigatse. Hotel in Shigatse (B/L/D)**

Tashi Lhunpo Monastery is seat to the Panchen Lama, the second most important spiritual leader of Tibet and is in Shigatse, Tibet's second largest city. The First Dalai Lama, Gyalwa Gendun Drup, founded Tashi Lhunpo in 1447. On the eve of the Chinese invasion there were 5000 monks at Tashi Lhunpo. Although the monks' quarters at Tashi Lhunpo were destroyed in the wake of the Chinese invasion, the monastery itself was not as extensively damaged as most other monasteries in Tibet, for it was the seat of the Panchen Lama who remained in Chinese-controlled territory. There is therefore much to see here at Tashi Lhunpo. We will stay in Shigatse for the night.

#### **Day 15 (June 16)**

##### **Depart for Lhasa. Gyantse Kumbum. Hotel KyiChu (B/L/-)**

We will depart Shigatse right after an early breakfast. On the back to Lhasa we will visit the town of Gyantse which is notable for its magnificent tiered Kumbum Chörten (literally, '100,000 images') of the Palcho Monastery, the largest chörten (stupa) in Tibet. The Kumbum Chörten was commissioned by a Gyantse prince in 1427 and was an important centre of the Sakya lineage of Tibetan Buddhism. This religious structure contains 77 chapels in its six floors, and is illustrated with over 10,000 murals, many showing a strong Nepali influence which have survived pretty well intact. They are the last of this type in Tibet.

#### **Day 16 (June 17)**

##### **Depart for Namtso. Namtso Campsite (B/L/D)**

Namtso ("Sky Lake"), at an elevation of 4718 meters, is the highest salt-water lake in the world and an important pilgrimage site for Tibetans. Many of great masters of Tibet including Padmasambhava, Jigten Sumgon, Shabkar and several of Karmapas performed retreats here for extended periods of time. This will probably be the highest elevation we will reach during this trip. Apart from its religious-spiritual significance and spectacular views, Namtso is a refuge for the fauna of the region, as aptly described on a website: Wild yaks, hares and other wild animals leisurely look for food along the expansive lake shores; countless migratory birds fly here to lay eggs and feed their young; sometimes lovely fishes in the lake jump out of the lake water, enjoying the warmth of the sunshine; sheep and cows herds are like flowing white blanks on the green grassland which can stretch as far as your eyes can see...." At Namtso we will have a spectacular view of the mountain range Nyenchen Thanglha which has more than thirty peaks over 6,000 metres high, and four are more than 7,000 metres high.

#### **Day 17 (June 18)**

##### **Depart for Lhasa. Hotel KyiChu (B/L/-)**

We will depart Namtso National Park in the early morning via the hot-springs of Yangpachen (for another dip!) and return to Lhasa for some last-minute shopping. We will celebrate the end

of the trip with a special dinner with Tibetan crew who has been taking great care of us at the restaurant at Kyichu Hotel.

### **Day 18 (June 19)**

#### **Depart for Chengdu. Hotel in Chengdu (B/L/D)**

A little time in the morning to make a last visit to the Barkhor (until your next trip to Tibet). Depart Lhasa (2 PM flight). We will have a farewell dinner in Chengdu, savoring the famous Sichuan cuisine of Chengdu.

### **Day 19 (June 20)**

#### **Depart Chengdu for home. (B/-/-)**

### **Price Estimate**

The land-cost portion for this pilgrimage will vary greatly depending on the size of the group. The optimal number of participants is 16 (start recruiting friends, family and neighbors!). The land-cost includes all accommodations (two to a room/tent, single supplement available), camping-gear, most meals, entrance tickets and fees for applying and obtaining special permits required for travelling in restricted areas in the Tibetan Autonomous Region.

Tips for guide, driver, cook and crew not included and you should set aside at least \$150 for this. When camping, we will have a support staff of upwards six people (including a cook and his assistants) who will attend to our needs – from “wake-up” call in the form of hot-tea delivered to each individual tent, to ensuring we have clean, bottled, water for drinking to the best meals you will ever have “camping!”

The tour agency that we will be using maintains the highest level of service, being the main company used by several major university and educational institutions in the United States. This agency is owned and operated by Tibetans. Although Chinese tour agencies often can give us cheaper prices, as a matter of principle I do not ever use their services since these businesses are often the beneficiaries of discriminatory government policies working against the interests of indigenous Tibetans.

### **Landcost**

9 people – approximately \$3100

10-14 people – approximately \$2500

15 upwards – approximately \$2200

### **Other expenses**

Airfare Chengdu-Lhasa r/t – \$450

International airfare (US city-Chengdu r/t) – \$1500-\$1800

Chinese visa fees & application – \$150

Personal expenses & offerings to monasteries – variable

***A non-refundable deposit will be necessary by beginning of March to reserve a spot.***

For further information, contact:

Dr. Hun Lye at [hun.lye@gmail.com](mailto:hun.lye@gmail.com)