

CHIMPHUK: CLIMBING TO THE GURU RINPOCHE CAVES

April 1, 2012

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Samye and Chimphuk

In 1997, at the request of our teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, I traveled to the high mountains of Tibet along with most of my family. We were on a pilgrimage to see His Holiness the 17th Karmapa, who is the enlightened being that the movie "The Golden Child" with Eddie Murphy was patterned after. Since that time the Karmapa has escaped Tibet and is now living in India.

We did meet His Holiness, but along the way we made attempts to reach some of the legendary sacred places in Tibet. One of those places was the high caves where Guru Rinpoche (Padmasambhava) meditated and hid many secret teachings (terma). One of the most sacred cave complexes is that of Chimphuk, high in the mountains above Samye Monastery, to which there are no roads, reachable only by boat or backpack. Pilgrimages in Tibet are traditional, a chance to visit and soak up the vibes where great beings had spent large parts of their lives. Here is my story of climbing to the Guru Rinpoche caves of Chimphuk.

Traveling

After we left Tsurphu Monastery where we spent three days with the 17th Karmapa we returned to Lhasa and headed away from that city toward Tsetang. The road from Lhasa to Tsetang (since it is also the road to the airport) is one of the best in Tibet, fully paved and complete with two whole lanes, and not like the usual roads that are more like driveways.

We drove out of Lhasa knowing that we would not be back again this trip. We had said our goodbyes. On the way we stopped once more at the lovely Tara shrine along that road, the Drolma Lhakang at Netang and then continued on, this time driving right past the Gonghar airport toward Tsetang, following alongside of the great Tsangpo River, which farther downstream becomes the sacred Brahmaputra.

We stopped along that road, right next to one of those great Tibetan barley fields ready for harvesting and had another of those hated hotel box lunches. About all we could eat were the hard-boiled eggs. The bread, which is made with sugar and very bad oils literally brought a gag reflex just looking at it. We had tried it before. After lunch and on down the road (some 30 kilometers or so from Tsetang) we pulled off and drove right down to the edge of the Tsangpo river. At this point, the Tsangpo must be almost a mile wide. Along its bank where we parked were several small barge-like boats, maybe 30 feet long, each with a small diesel outboard engine on the back.

The Boat to Samye Monastery

We were on our way to Samye Chokor, said to be the first monastery built in Tibet, itself unreachable by any highway. The way to Samye was either overland by horse & back-pack or by ferry, which is where we now were. The day was hot and the sun out here in the open was fierce. We had to cross the Tsangpo and ostensibly were waiting for another vehicle coming behind us that brought our cook and a car full of cooking supplies. Where we were going there

were no grocery stores or restaurants. We needed to bring our own cook, food, utensils, and fuel.

Since I had no idea when the cook might arrive from Lhasa, I volunteered to pay the extra boat fee so that we could get started across the river right away. It was clear that few of us could take the sun exposure for the length of the crossing plus an unspecified waiting time beforehand on the open beach. All of our gear was then piled at the end of one of the boats.

Next ensued a lengthy and hot argument between our guide (and driver) and the staff at the boat livery. It was a real standoff and everyone had knives, etc. It seemed that the boat pilot had not yet had his lunch and (somehow) our guide had offended his pride. It was something about the simple meal of tsampa he was to have and the boatman felt perhaps our guide was looking down his nose at him. It was the only argument I witnessed in Tibet, but it was a doozy, with shouting and shoving. We all stood by the boat, waiting to see if we would have a boatman at all. We would.

Crossing the Tsangpo River

The trip across the Tsangpo to the village of Surkar took more than one and a quarter hours, as the boat, not able to just go straight across the river, moved slowly through an intricate maze of sandbars. As we got a certain distance out from the shore we left, we could see our cook arrive and there was discussion about going back to get him. I said we should not - just too much exposure to the sun. On the far side, we could see other barges moored and several large trucks waiting for us.

When the other side was reached, we piled our stuff in the back of a truck and climbed up ourselves, hanging on to the overhead frame that stretched over the truck bed. The trip by truck from Surkar to Samye was some eight kilometers. And hang on we did (for dear life!) while the truck lurched down the road, hurtling across sand dunes, and going as fast as the young driver could push it. The older kids loved it and the driver knew it. The rest of us got numb knuckles just trying to keep from flying off the side.

Along this road are the Rignga Chortens, five small stupas that have been carved out of solid rock from the mountainside. Painted white, they are even visible from the Gonghar road on the South side of the Tsangpo.

Samye Monastery Grounds

After the ride through the dunes, and while passing through groves of trees, we got our first glimpse of the golden roofs of Samye. The monastery is laid out like a vast mandala with the large Utse temple in the center. The entire perimeter consists of a great elliptical wall more than a kilometer in circumference on which are set 1008 small stupas. There are four gates to the city, located at 45-degree angles from the North-south/East-west axis. Destroyed by the Chinese, Samye is far along with reconstruction. Inside the perimeter wall are four very large stupas, all of which have recently been undergoing reconstruction.

The Utse temple, at the center of Samye, is impressive. Inside the outer walls of the temple is a large square circumambulatory area filled with prayer wheels that surrounds the actual gompa (shrine room). The walls along this prayer-wheel route are filled with exquisite murals featuring 35 Buddha images, some of which have been defaced by the Chinese. Above this is a second floor containing the monks quarters, all of which face inward toward the central gompa.

The main shrine hall area is very dark and filled with incredible statues. I was able to practice there early one morning before the monks began their daily puja. I had monks all around, as usual, just watching me. One sat immediately in front of me, no more than a foot from my face. They had perhaps never seen a westerner practice, or few indeed. Although nerve-wracking, everyone was very friendly. I must say that my concentration was not very good in that situation.

There were not many amenities at Samye. The best we could do was one large barracks-like room that had maybe 10 or more beds in it lined up side by side. Everyone was in the same room, including people we didn't know. There is no way that I would sleep on those beds without a sleeping bag and a ground cloth.

There was no running water and the open-air bathroom was not quite far enough away to breathe free. And there was no fresh air or, if we opened the two small windows, we had a continual stream of smoke and bathroom smells pouring in. And the bathroom... It was one of those lovely Tibetan 2nd-story open-to-the-sky bathrooms, with some kind of wall-like shielding only up to your thighs. The idea is that you have to squat down if you want no one to see you. No stand up peeing like we are used to. Also, it was right on the very edge of the building, in plain sight of anyone below. I am not complaining, just explaining. It was a little bit different from the bathrooms at my local mall.

Our cook arrived with about a ton of gear, including huge sacks of flour, cans of cooking oil – way more than we could ever need. He set up shop in a room downstairs and he, his helper, and our guide moved in there. They soon filled it with smoke, cooking, and tobacco. We found out right away that the food would be pretty bad, even though the cook tried to please.

My opinion of Samye is that it is a spiritually heavy place. I don't know if it was heavy just for me or whether it is the kind of place that puts everyone through a lot of changes. I have no way of knowing, but I can say that some tough stuff went down there that I have no intention of even going into here. Perhaps it is because Samye is said to be Tibet's oldest monastery. We spent two, quite difficult, days at Samye Monastery. My son became sick and my wife at one point had to take him out of there, back across the Tsangpo River and all the way to city of Tsetang to a hotel, where he could recover. You get the idea.

Main Gompa at Samye

I can remember one morning at Samye, rising before dawn, and going down to the main gompa hoping to find a place to do my daily practice. It was cold and drizzling rain. When I got to the shrine, the front door to the hall was still locked. A padlock and large chain was in place. The outer cement floor near the door was a sort of an alcove, protected from the rain, and it was filled with dozens of dogs who had sought shelter there for the night. In Tibet, people always leave their unwanted dogs at a nearby monastery because they know the monks would not hurt the animals.

The dogs slept tightly packed and filled the space, all curled up in little balls, side by side. I had no place to practice, so I gently shooed some of the dogs to this side and that side and made a little place there on the cement floor. With a small flashlight, I did my practice, surrounded by yawning and scratching dogs. We shared the space.

Climbing to the Caves

By Horseback to Chimphuk

One other memorable story is our climb to Chimphuk, the Guru Rinpoche caves high above Samye. My wife had taken my son, who was sick, back to Tsetang, accompanied by our 15-year old daughter May. This left me, my 21-year old daughter Anne, and our two sangha friends at Samye. One of the goals of my trip was to visit some major Guru Rinpoche caves and Chimphuk is near the top of anyone's list. My guide suggested that it might be too difficult, but when I did not acquiesce to his way of thinking, he set about finding us some horses to get us through the plains and lower mountain slopes. This meant that he had to travel to a village one hour away in search of mounts.

Sure enough, early in the morning there were three horses parked outside the building where we stayed. Tibetan horses are much smaller than what we think of as riding horses here in the states, but don't be fooled by their size. They are tough and nimble animals and used to carrying heavy loads. We mounted up and headed slowly out through the back alleys of Samye. The alleys gave way to some farmland and soon we were crossing a small river and heading out across a long plain toward the distant mountain slopes. The horses moved at a slow pace and distance was measured with time passed and by looking back. Each time, the glittering gold roofs of Samye were harder to see and then they were gone altogether.

The Lower Slopes

The plains gave way to hills and a path that wound back and forth along canyon rims and on up the steep slope. The horses were patient and sure-footed, if slow. Soon we were into more mountainous vegetation, with thick carpets of bright green short grass, rushing streams, and much more humidity. Blossoms and plants thrived here. In particular, there were the most varied and beautiful kind of plants with thorns that I have ever seen. Long sharp, brightly-colored thorns with rich green leaves. It was a natural botanical garden, almost like an acid trip or a vision out of a Carlos Castaneda novel, with the slow treading of the horses and the vivid landscapes. This was the end of the rainy season and everything was in bloom.

The Climb Begins

Higher and higher we went, with my horse, who was being a little difficult, often lagging behind the other two. The trail turned into a steep path until the horses were actually climbing up the side of the mountain and I had to just hang on to keep from falling off. These trails were really meant for climbers or trekkers. After a very long climb, we arrived at the Chimphuk Utse nunnery or ani gumpa that marks the point where we had to leave the horses and begin the climb on foot.

The horses tied up, we had a small lunch in what must have been part of the nunnery kitchen. The only uncomfortable event was the fact that a Chinese guard carrying a machine gun was posted to the nunnery. He kept hanging around where we were. Apparently there had been some trouble a few days before and the Chinese decided to come in to protect, I am not sure whom.

Farther on, when we began to climb again, now on foot, a group of monks passed us going down. We were told that there was an important Rinpoche in the group and that perhaps the guard was watching him or watching out for him. I know that with the appearance of the

Rinpoche, the guard stopped trailing us.

Now we began to climb in earnest, with both the guide and my daughter not having real trouble. I lagged behind and just did the best that I could. It was an endless zigzag trail that always went higher and steeper. Sometimes I just had to sit down and rest, embarrassing as it was for me to have my daughter peering down on me from a ledge high above to see if dad was alright. The guide finally took my day pack, giving me more breathing room and a lighter load.

After what seemed like too long a climb for me, we arrived at some buildings, where an old man and woman were. It was so steep that I literally crawled almost straight up and collapsed on a ledge where they were sitting. I could not tell if they were lay people or monks because they seemed to have pieces of clothes of different types. My daughter and Pemba (our guide) were already settled in as I reached the ledge outside the tiny room or house. They brought us some butter-tea and it tasted good. It turns out that they too were Karma Kagyu and were thrilled when I showed them the picture of His Holiness, the Karmapa, that I had taken less than a week before. I gave them each a copy of the photo which really moved them. It is fun to find someone who cares about the same things you do.

Soon an older nun came along the path and we all chatted. She offered to guide us up the trail a ways and point out some of the sacred places, footprints of Guru Rinpoche, special rocks, etc. This was a real help and we got to see many small spots and grottoes that otherwise we might have just passed by. After a time she turned off and we climbed on toward the main cave. By this time, I was in a full sweat and feeling pretty good from the general substance elimination that sweating brings.

At last we reached the top and the Drakmar Keutsang cave, which is said to be the Buddha-enlightened-speech place of Guru Rinpoche, the spot where he first gave his special teaching on the eight meditational deities called the Drubpa Kabgye. A two-story building had been erected around the front of the actual cave, which is toward the back of the structure. Aside from many statues, we were shown the rock containing the impression of the body of the princess that Guru Rinpoche brought back from the dead in order to give her a special teaching. And the attending monk took the special lingam-shaped rock that is housed there (said to have come from the Shitavana charnel ground in India) and rubbed it across our backs, a healing tradition. We meditated and did some dharma practice in the cave where Guru Rinpoche once lived.

Later, on the outside terrace we had butter-tea with the monk who oversees the place. He had been there already two years, summer and winter, practicing. I could only admire his courage and perseverance. It is not like he could run down to the corner and get a sandwich. We shared a chocolate bar and drank our tea (both forbidden items in my diet) in the bright sun on that high courtyard. It was great. Far, far below us was the plain from which we climbed, shimmering in the distance. We could not even see Samye from where we sat.

Prayer Wheels at Samye Gompa

Our return trip back down to the nunnery was a lot easier than going up. We distributed the rest of our food and provisions with the nuns and prepared to return to the plains. The shrine room at the ani gompa was very beautiful and I lingered there awhile meditating. I then tried to switch horses for the trip back because my first horse was too willful, but the new horse tried to buck me while on the edge of a steep trail. That was something! I went slinking back to my original horse and together we went on down the mountain. The horses really took over on the way back, carefully selecting each foothold. Any prompting of the horse on my part was mostly

ignored, as the horse actually climbed down the trail. About all I could do was brace myself to keep from falling off, sit back (or hang on), and enjoy the ride -- too scary for much enjoyment, except as a memory. As we reached the plain, my horse insisted on going off on a side trail, which was actually the way back to his own village, refusing all guidance and kicks from me. This ended up with me on the other side of a small canyon from the other two riders but, after much urging on my part and a few kicks, we rejoined the others just before we crossed the wide shallow river.

And the trip down was in full Tibetan sun, which meant I ended up extending my shirt cuffs over the backs of my hands, just to keep them from being scorched. It was hot! We re-crossed the small river with difficulty (my horse refusing for a time) and wound our way back through the back village streets. The sun was going down when we arrived. We ate some food and pretty much went right to bed. There was no electricity. I just lay down on the bed with my clothes still on and fell asleep. I was too tired to do anything else. With the rest of my family gone to Tsetang, it was kind of strange being there in Samye. And my butt was sore for weeks afterward!



The famous Tara shrine located along the road between Gongkhar Airport and Lhasa, a very moving sacred place, and filled with many, many statues of Tara.



The barley field near where we at a roadside lunch. Tibetan barley is beautiful beyond words.



In Tibet, after we saw His Holiness, there were rainbows after rainbows after rainbows.



The boats to cross the Tsangpo.



Crossing the Tsangpo in an open boat in full Tibetan sun, crossing to Samye Monastery.



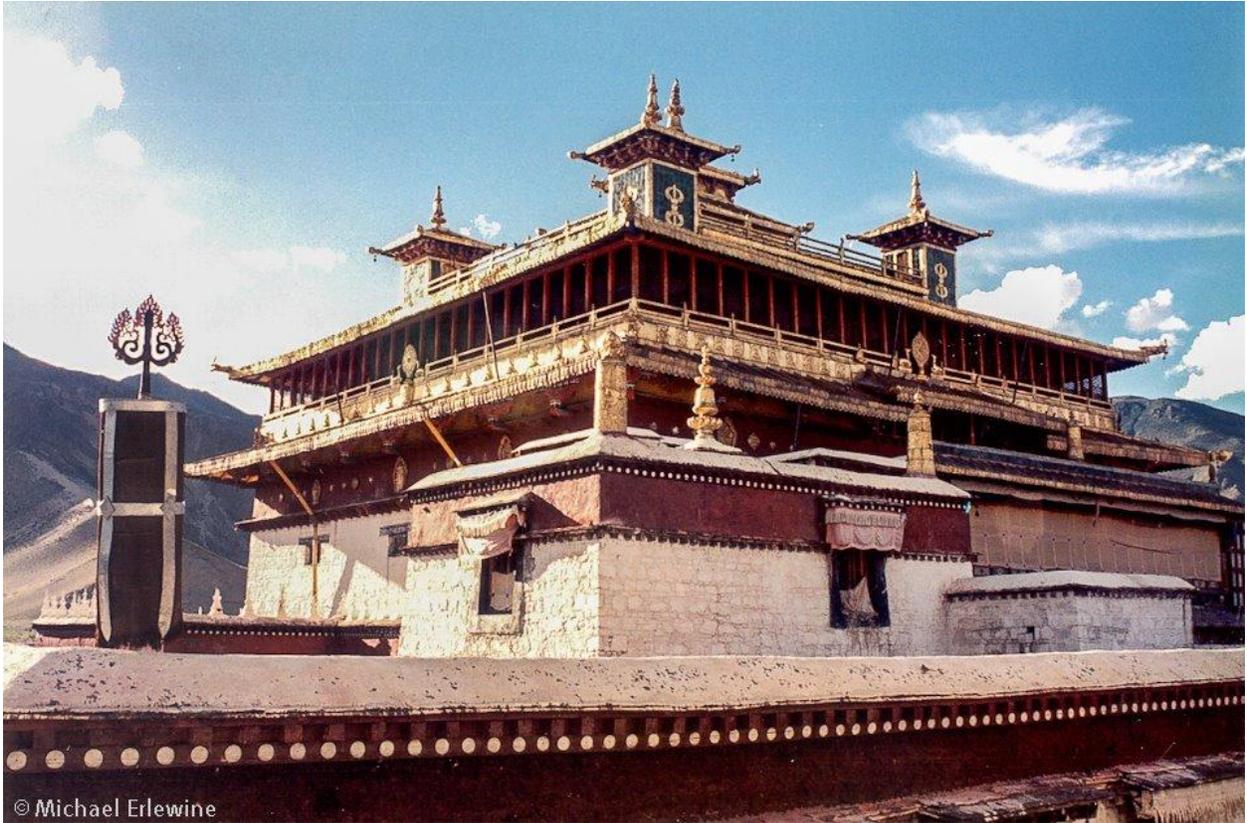
The view of the Tsangpo in midstream.



Riding the open truck from the Tsangpo to Samye Monastery, about 8 kilometers. This is my daughter Anne.



A view of Samye from outside the walls. It is laid out like a vast mandala, with four gates, etc.



The main gompa of Samye Monastery.



One of the many dogs that hang around monasteries.



Here I am with my close friend Ngodup Tsering Burkhar. My pockets and vest are stuffed with everything important I own.



Yep, that is me on my horse.... but no boat. Heading toward the Chimpuk caves.

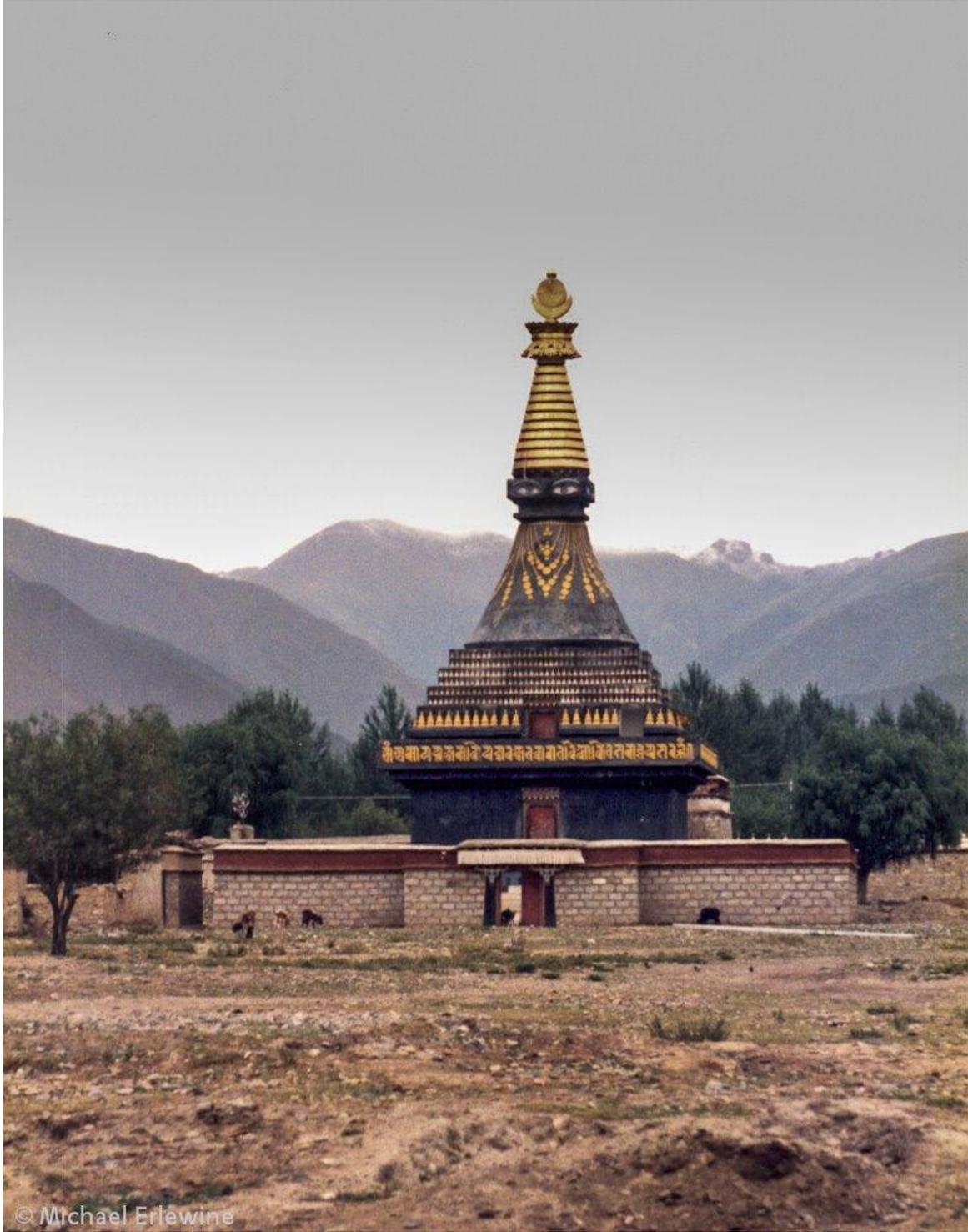


One of the three Tibetan horses we used to traverse the plains and low altitudes.



© Michael Erlewine

One of the stupas in Samye.



One of the many stupas in Samye.