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

November 23 – December 6, 2019

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, November 22
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, there will be hotel transport available from the airport.

DAY ONE - Saturday, November 23
We'll gather at a small hotel in Bangkok, meeting at approximately 4pm. After some time getting to know each other, then we'll have dinner... Thai food, of course!

DAY TWO - Sunday, November 24
A morning flight from Bangkok takes us along the Himalayas to Paro, a small town at 7,000’ that hosts Bhutan’s primary airstrip and is where our guides will meet us. Paro is located in a beautiful valley, lined with apple orchards and green terraced fields. We will take a leisurely walk to Dzongdrakha. We will have our first opportunity to visit, and quietly sit, in a traditional Bhutanese temple. From there we will wind our way down the hill where a picnic lunch will await us. After lunch, we will continue our downhill stroll through fields and apple orchards arriving in Bondey village.

This day will include orienting us to our journey, getting to know our guides and each other. 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-Monday, November 25
We will drive to the beautiful Chele La, a high pass with spectacular views of the high Himalayan Peaks and walk among the abundant prayer flags. Our group will then enjoy a picnic lunch before visiting the Kila Nunnery, a remote hillside nunnery, that seldom sees visitors. Trip funds will contribute to a gift for the nuns and their monastery. We will have the opportunity to offer the gift as part of our time at the monastery.

DAY FOUR-Tuesday, November 26
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 and view the Buddha Dordenma, made of bronze and gilded gold. This magnificent statue is the largest Buddha statue in the world and is located amidst the ruins of Kuensel Phodrang. We will stop either at a weaving center or a thanka painting studio to get an introduction to the traditional arts.

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 Himalayas. From the pass we drop down to the lowlands of the Punakha Valley at just 4,000’, passing forests of rhododendron and magnolia. For those interested and weather allowing, we will have the opportunity for a walk from the pass.

DAY FIVE-Wednesday, November 27
In the morning we will 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. Then the Punakha Dzong - built at the confluence of the Phochu and Mochu rivers, and possibly the most beautiful Dzong in Bhutan. In the afternoon we will also have the opportunity to walk through local fields to visit the Khamsum Yuli Namgyel Temple, a fabulous three story temple built on the top of a hill by the Queen Mother as an act of protection for her son the King.

DAY SIX-Thursday, November 28
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 and the associated museum. The Dzong is considered the most impressive masterpiece of Bhutanese architecture. We will settle in for two 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 SEVEN-Friday, November 29
For the morning, we will settle into deep practice in the beautiful small temple on the grounds of the Chumey Nature Resort. In the afternoon, we will visit 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′. This location was a primary retreat place for Longchenpa, Dzogchen master of the 14th century and author of many significant Dzogchen texts. After visiting the monastery, we will have the option to hike to KiKiLa Pass, a remote high pass that is the home to a glass-encased golden statue of Longchenpa. We will again spend the night in Chumey.

DAY EIGHT-Saturday, November 30
This morning we take a short drive to Pema Choling Nunnery, where over 100 nuns, mostly teenagers and young women, study and practice. Our guide’s sister has lived at Pema Choling monastery, and Susie has dharma friends here we will visit. 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. Khempo Tsenzin Thinley, the leading monastic, will visit with us if he is in residence. Collectively we will contribute to a gift for the nuns or their monastery, which we will present to them as part of the morning. We will drive to the Tang Valley, deeper into Bumthang, and stay at the Ogyen Choling palace.

DAY NINE-Sunday, December 1
Ogyen Choling was the home of a noble family until recent times. The palace includes fabulous temple rooms separately dedicated to Tara, the Buddha, and other deities. The central tower of the complex is now an extensive and well curated museum (with English explanations). In addition to what is on site, there will be the option of visiting the Thowadrank Goempa (2-3 hour hike uphill). This remote cliff temple is also a long-term retreat place under the direction of the delightful Pema Sherab Dorji Rinpoche with whom we will ask for an audience. For those desiring a mellower walk, there are three private lankhangs to be seen via a beautiful walk through the neighboring village, along the river and through the Tang Valley. In addition, above the palace is a favorite sitting spot of Longchenpa that is a welcome place to go and take in the wide spaces. We will again stay at Ogyen Choling for the night.

DAY TEN-Monday, December 2
We will begin this day with the return drive to the central Bumthang valley of Chokhar. We will visit Kenchhosum Llakhang— a freshly restored and grand temple. We will have lunch in farmhouse with a local family. In the afternoon, we will visit Tamshing Goemba, a deeply sacred temple built in the 1500’s. There will be some time to wonder the village of Chokar for those interested in seeing the local town.
DAY ELEVEN—Tuesday, December 3
We will begin our day visiting Bumthang’s most treasured temples—Kurjey Lhakhang and Jambey Lhakhang. The latter was built here in 7th Century by the Tibetan King Songtsen Goempo, even before the arrival of Guru Rinpoche. We will walk along the river to Kurjey, which is 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. And then a visit to Jambay Lhakhang, one of the oldest temples in Bhutan. We will then catch a mid-afternoon flight to Paro. If time allows, after arriving in Paro, we will visit Kichu Lankhang (the temple that was Dilgo Kyentse Rinpoche’s home).

DAY TWELVE—Wednesday, December 4
Leaving Paro, we will give our gear to the horses and start our overnight trek to Bumdra monastery. A five-hour hike (2500’ elevation gain and 5 miles with many rests and a picnic lunch along the way), takes us to our camp at 13,500’, near the monastery, with beautiful views of the Himalayas. We will spend time at the camp to relax and enjoy the expansive mountain views or visit a cave used by meditation practitioners for centuries, or the Bumdra monastery. For the curious and still energetic, above the camp, there are sacred sky burial sites worthy of the effort. Our ‘luxury camp’ will include standup tents with cots, a dining tent with space heaters, and delicious meals prepared by our crew.

For those who choose not to do the trek, there will be the option of visiting DraKarpo, a cliff temple and sacred rock-mound that is the other place Guru Rinpoche is understood to have visited when he came to Tiger’s Nest. The devoted do 108 circumambulations of the large hillside cliff (which takes 3 or 4 days), and the place is rich with stories.

DAY THIRTEEN—Thursday, December 5
We hike approximately three hours, all downhill, visiting several remote monasteries on the way. The highlight of the day is one of Bhutan’s most sacred places—Taktsang (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 before continuing for another two hours’ walk down to the road and back to Paro, where we will stay again at the Gangtey Palace Hotel. For those who choose not to do the trek, an early morning departure will allow you to hike uphill to rejoin the group for the visit to Taktsang.

DAY FOURTEEN—Friday, December 6
We will conclude our time in Bhutan with sitting, reflection, and goodbyes to our local guides, 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 Saturday, March 1, you will most likely arrive home on the same day, of Saturday, March 1.