

The Crucial Point

Newsletter of the Mangala Shri Bhuti Sangha



Bir and the Bir Monastery

*A short history and
an update on construction*

It's a precipitous climb from the town of Bajnath up through the Himalayan foothills. To the right, the drop plummets to the valley below, and the view back across the gorges and hills of Northern India's Himachal Pradesh is spectacular. Eagles nest in trees near the top of the road and many float on wind currents blowing up from the valley.

Cresting the ridge one views a majestic panorama of larger foot-hills, which mark the true beginning of the Himalayan range. Hamlets with tiered rice fields, tea plants, and white plastered waddle farmhouses stretch along the slope at the foot of the mountains. Palm trees dot the landscape, distinguishing this mountainous area as a subtropical region; they are a surprising sight to anyone familiar with the Western Rockies. In the center of your view stands a tall unpainted gray Tibetan style building. Its gray color contrasts with the traditional reds, yellows, blacks and whites of surrounding buildings. It is the new building at the Pema Ewam Choegar Monastery and it marks the location of the town of Bir, Venerable Dzigar Kongtrül Rinpoche's home town.

Kongtrül Rinpoche was raised in Bir along with his three brothers and sister. Currently his two eldest

brothers — Orgyen Tobgyal Rinpoche and Jamyang Gyaltzen — live there with their families. Rinpoche's mother, Mayum Tsewang Paldün, passed away in



The new building seen facing onto the central courtyard, with the old main building in the foreground. Above, the old building seen from the roof of the new.

Bir two years ago, and now a seven-story stupa commemorating her life of practice and her parinirvana is under construction.

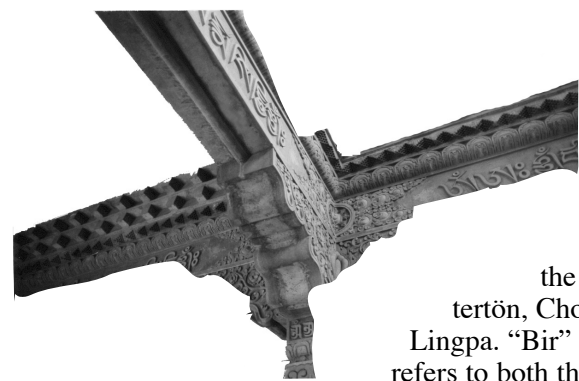
Bir was founded by Rinpoche's father, His Eminence Neten Chokling Pema Gyurme Dechen Dorje Jipé Rinpoche, who was the third incarnation

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Tibetan of the great monastery, the tertön, Chogyur Lingpa. “Bir” here refers to both the settlement and the which, as in Tibet, have an intertwined spiritual and secular relationship. Bir is also home to the reincarnation of Rinpoche’s father, the 4th Neten Chokling Rinpoche, who lives at the monastery with his wife and new son and carries on the work of his predecessor.

To me, Bir has a home-town feeling, a family feeling. It holds a lot of history about Rinpoche’s family, and also about Tibetans in the later half of the 20th century. There is a strong living tradition at the monastery, which you observe in daily performances of rituals and in mundane chores. And there is also a strong feeling of a practice tradition in Bir. You see it in the eyes of some of the people there, and in how they spend their time very simply. Wangchen Dorje, Rinpoche’s father’s attendant, is an example of this. Rinpoche’s mother completely embodied this when she was alive.

After being in Bir for some time, you discover this choice to spend your time simply or not as well. Since there are not many familiar kinds of entertainment, you are more or less left with your mind — perhaps like in retreat, except you are not in retreat. Being in Bir, without necessarily doing any formal meditation, can point you in the direction of a kind of practice — a practice of being self-contained or self-sufficient with one’s own experience and not needing much else. While I was in Bir I felt I had a chance to taste and witness this inner spirit and attitude toward life that Rinpoche and many members of his family embody.

The history of the monastery and the settlement is a story of dedication, compassion and, as with any story of Tibetans around the middle of the last century, survival. Rinpoche’s father fled Tibet in 1959 with his wife, Tsewang Paldün, and his two eldest sons, Orgyen Tobgyal Rinpoche and Jamyang Gyaltzen, after a series of premonitions and coincidences regarding the approaching Chinese invasion.

In the early period of exile from Tibet, many

refugees collected around Rinpoche as they traveled from Nepal to India. It seems that His Eminence Chokling Rinpoche may not have had immediate plans to create a fixed place of residence. However, seeing the plight of the many exiles gathered around him, he was filled with compassion and decided to find a place for everyone to settle and re-establish a community.

He searched for a location and funding in India and soon made a connection with an American aid organization, and in particular with a retired army Captain named Captain Davidson, which in turn led him to the land around Bir. This land had been the site of struggles during the Partition of India and afterward had become a tea plantation, which remained sparsely populated. Coincidentally, it resembled a site that Chokling Rinpoche had seen in a vision before leaving Tibet, so he chose it as the location for the Bir settlement. Chokling Rinpoche, who spent the remainder of his life working hard for the people of Bir, died suddenly in a car accident in the early 1970’s.

The first developmental phase in Bir focused on building housing. Drüpchens and pujas took place in a small tent set up on the site of the present monastery. Almost all of the monastery’s activities took place in this tent: pujas, cooking, eating, teachings. Many great masters, such as His Holiness Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche and His Holiness the Dalai Lama, visited and taught there.

After some years, when the settlement was well established, construction of more permanent struc-



The new building from behind. Above: a detail from the shrine room.

tures began at the monastery with the assistance of Khamtrul Rinpoche. Since that time the monastery has undergone a series of building phases. The main building was completed in the late 80’s along with expanded monks’ quarters.

The newest construction phase began about two years ago. Kongtrül Rinpoche and his brothers, Khyentse Yeshe Rinpoche and Orgyen Tobgyal Rinpoche, each took responsibility for raising a portion of the cost. Mangala Shri Bhuti’s “Cup” fundraiser in February, 2000, raised twenty-five thousand dollars alone. Construction was able to start right away and the building is nearing completion.

The shared courtyard between the new and old monastery buildings inspires awe. The “homey” feeling pervading the old monastery boundaries is



His Eminence the 3rd Neten Chokling Rinpoche

the top. At the far end is a three-story niche in which will sit the main statue and main shrine. Protector shrine rooms and some retreat rooms sit on the top floor. The roof has views that span across Bir, the mountains and onto the valley below. The new building is a majestic addition to the architecture of the monastery. And it represents another stage in the establishment of the Longchen Nyingtik tradition in India.

In addition to allowing the numbers of monks at Bir monastery to increase in the coming years, the new building is designed to be large enough for ceremonial events involving both the monastic community and the local lay population. In this way, the new building fulfills His Eminence Chokling Rinpoche’s original intention of creating a community where both the secular



The main shrine room seen from the entrance way.

enhanced by the impressive mass and height of the new building. Stepping across a wood plank, which will be the doorstep into the first floor of the new building, the scale of its two-stories is striking, as is the smell of concrete and plaster that enters your nose.

This area will serve as a dining room and place of congregation. On this floor, and below, are offices and other function rooms. On the second floor, also two stories in height, is the main shrine hall. This room has windows on either side and is large enough to accommodate 300 monks. There is a raised ceiling in the center portion of the room which is an additional story high. It is ringed with many windows which allow light to flood in to the shrine room from

and spiritual aspects of Tibetan life could be preserved and continue in harmony.◊

Sasha Meyerowitz