

Bhutan: A Short Historical Background by Blue Poppy Tours

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Buddhism was brought to Bhutan by a Tibetan king, Songtsen Gampo, who constructed the first two Buddhist temples (in Paro and Bumthang) in the seventh century. Then, in the eighth century, a Tantric Buddhist, Padmasambhava arrived from an area of Pakistan to introduce his particular esoteric form of Buddhism to Tibet and Bhutan. He is generally known as the Guru Rinpoche or 'Precious Master' and every temple in the country pays homage to him. All the places he visited and wherever he meditated are now places of pilgrimage for the Bhutanese.

Many different Buddhist schools subsequently developed and there still exist a number of different forms of Buddhism being practised in Bhutan today. But the next most significant religious figure to be aware of is Ngawang Namgyel. His honorary title by which he is usually known is the Shabdrung, at whose feet one submits. He arrived in Bhutan in 1616 and proceeded over a number of years to unify the country as one in place of the various separate states existing previously. It was he who constructed the first dzong (at Simtokha) and left a legacy at his death of a well-organised system of administration and law.

He established a state clergy under a religious leader (the Chief Abbot) known as Je Khenpo and a political system administered by monks led by a chief known as the Desi. The system lasted until the monarchy took over in 1907. The country was divided into provinces headed by governors or penlops who governed from their respective dzongs. The penlop of Trongsa eventually emerged during the nineteenth century as the most powerful and his son was subsequently elected as the first King of a unified Bhutan. A hereditary monarchy was born, with the fifth King now having taken the throne, albeit with much of his power having been ceded by his father, the fourth King, to a new Parliament following historic elections held in 2008. Parliamentary democracy is taking its place in the life of Bhutanese Citizens who voted in the Druk Phuensum Tshogpa party, and its leader Jigmi Y Thinley, with an overwhelming majority (45 seats out of 47).

Elections were also held for the National Council which is the upper house. It meets twice a year for 3 weeks and the sessions are public. Laws are discussed and voted on and matters of national interest debated.

The King holds ultimate judicial power; all citizens can appeal to him as a last resort. But a High Court has been set up with six judges: four appointed by the King, and two by the Assembly to represent the people. All districts have a local court presided over by a magistrate appointed by the Chief Justice, but local cases are also tried by village headmen. The system of law follows closely that established by the Shabdrung. There are no private lawyers and each litigant pleads his own case. Crime rates remain low and the cases generally involve matters relating to family disputes and property rights. That said, the Code of Law has recently been reviewed and students are being sent to India to train as lawyers, so there will be gradual change in this area in due course.

As far as local administration is concerned, the three initial districts set up by the Shabdrung are now 20, known as dzongkhags, each with its own dzong as the centre of administration, governed by a head known as a Dzongda who is responsible to the central government in the form of the Home Ministry. Each district is divided into blocks known as geogs which are administrative units grouping several villages together. Committees formed from representatives of the local people as well as civil servants have been

established for each geog to decide on development plans for the area. The head of the geog is known as the Gup and he holds a lot of power locally – all the more so now that more decision making powers have been devolved from central government as a result of the decentralisation and devolution policy adopted in recent years.

There is not space here to describe the Buddhist religion in great detail, and this is obviously a complex subject. The Lonely Planet guide to Bhutan has a very helpful and succinct summary of the basic tenets of Buddhism and an explanation of the particular way that Buddhism developed in Bhutan and is practised today. But it is useful to be aware of the extent to which the religion influences and forms an integral part of daily life for most Bhutanese.

Most Bhutanese worship the Buddha, Guru Rinpoche and a number of other deities and indigenous gods as well as local religious masters (or lamas) and monks.

Rituals are performed on all occasions – birth, marriage, death, illness, departing for a trip, building a new house and so on. The tsip (astrologer) will be consulted before any important act is undertaken – when travelling it is vital to know which is an auspicious day and time to depart; when buying a car to know which is an appropriate colour, and so on.

Each house has its own altar (called a choeshum) containing at least three statues – the Guru Rinpoche, the Buddha and the Shabdrung. Daily prayers are offered here together with the offering of butter lamps on auspicious occasions. And every available opportunity will be taken to visit temples or monasteries, particularly on auspicious dates, to offer butter lamps, circumambulate and turn the prayer wheels.

Where possible, money is donated to monks and monasteries and good causes sponsored. It is the duty of every person to offer support to those who are dedicated to religious life, and to perform pious acts, to ensure their own good fortune in a future life. The religion is followed unquestioningly as a matter of custom and most families will try to send one of their sons to train as a monk from an early age

