



BHUTAN

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INTRODUCTION

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The early history of Bhutan, or Druk Yul—the Land of the Thunder Dragon—as it is known to the Bhutanese, is shrouded in mystery, and like the best histories, the story of Bhutan begins with a legend. In the eighth century, it is said, Guru Padmasambhava, the famous Indian Buddhist teacher, flew into Bhutan from Tibet astride a tiger's back. Hailed as an incarnation of Amitabha, the Buddha of endless life, he brought with him the Vajrayana,¹ a new stream of Mahayana Buddhism that would forever change the people of this remote land.

After a few days in the midst of towering mountains, majestic fortress-cum-monasteries and a people deeply immersed in their religious beliefs, it is not difficult to suspend rationality and to believe, as many Bhutanese do, that Guru Padmasambhava performed many miracles to tame the evil spirits and wrathful local deities and turn the wheel of Vajrayana Buddhism in this land, as he had earlier done in Tibet. These narratives lend further enchantment to the site of one of the wonders of the world, the Takstang Monastery, perched perilously high upon the edges of a cliff where he is said to have first landed and meditated.

More than seventy per cent of the Bhutanese people are Buddhists. As they look back on the centuries following the miracles of Guru Padmasambhava, or, as he is more often called in Bhutan, Guru Rimpoche, the 'Precious Master', they see the main historic milestones in terms of the contribution of other great religious saints. In the thirteenth century Phajo Drukgom Shipo established the Drukpa subsect of the Kargyupa² school, one of the four major schools of Tibetan Buddhism. A couple centuries later the religious scene was enlivened by Drukpa Kunley (1455–1529), known as the Divine Madman, who remains one of the best-loved saints in Bhutan. Besides using sacred devotional songs, he is



The national emblem is composed of a double *vajra* or diamond-thunderbolt placed above a lotus, surmounted by a jewel and framed by two dragons. The *vajras* represent the harmony between secular and religious power; the lotus symbolizes purity and the jewel expresses sovereign power. The two dragons, male and female, stand for the name of the country, Druk Yul, Land of the Thunder Dragons.

Facing page

Owing to improvements in the public health system, life expectancy in Bhutan has been rising steadily.

Also see page 100