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Occasional Newsletter 1/2016 (January to April)

Dear friends and well-wishers of the Ogyen Choling Foundation,

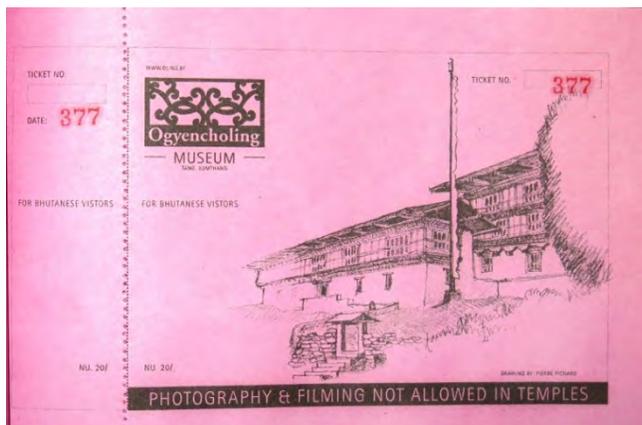
This newsletter is the first one for the year 2016 (but our third since we started sending these occasional newsletters). We hope that this way of informally communicating with our donors, well-wishers and friends of Ogyen Choling will be useful for you to stay informed and be in contact with us. We would appreciate any feedback, queries and suggestions.

Although this newsletter covers four months, the Foundation was active for 3 months only as all our activities were frozen for the month of January, but from the beginning of February things began to move quickly and have kept us busy and on our feet.

ABOUT THE MUSEUM

The visit of the Home and Culture Secretary; We were honored by the visit of the Home Secretary, Dr, Dasho Sonam Tenzin in early April. He spent a night with us and visited the museum and the temples. Dasho was pleased, and enthusiastic and shared many ideas on how to improve the museum. Dasho spontaneously informed us that he would be willing to solicit funds to help improve the museum, especially to build permanent display cases to better protect the artifacts. This proposal will be discussed with the board.

Entrance fees for Bhutanese visitors: Although we were initially against the idea of charging entrance fees for Bhutanese visitors, we eventually decided that all visitors should be charged a fee. The main reason for this change of heart was a growing sense that, most things are more appreciated if they are assigned a value, (unfortunately in this case it is a monetary value). Additionally, it takes the staff the same effort and time to show local visitors around as it does to show international visitors around.



So far, no Bhutanese visitors have complained about the newly enforced Nu, 20/- entrance fee per person. In fact, we have the impression that the visitors accord more value to the experience and they are generally happy to take back the ticket as souvenir of their visit. Students visiting with their schools are still exempted from the entrance free.

From the beginning of the year until the end of April we had more than 500 international visitors. This is an indication that the number of international visitors to the museum is still increasing in spite of the reported reduction of visitors coming to Bumthang.

Our Newest employee: a part-time cleaner for the museum: On the strong recommendation of Kelzang, our development officer, the Foundation agreed to employ a person to sweep the museum twice a week. The visitors, who often come to the museum as part of a trek, often carry in soil and dust on their shoes. Ugye, who is from the village of Ogyen Choling, has been coming regularly to clean the museum and the effect of her work is already quite apparent. The dusting and cleaning of the artifacts will, however, continue to be carried out by Kelzang under the close supervision of the curator.



Ugye and her little helper, two year old daughter Sonam

ABOUT THE TEMPLE AND RITUALS

Repair of the temple stairs: The steep and potentially dangerous stairs leading to the upper floor in the temple has been a matter of concern. The steps were worn out and slippery from more than hundred years of use and required attentive maneuvering even for local visitors. During the visit of the Home Secretary, there was again an incident which could have been serious. This definitely added to the urgency for the need to address the problem. We are happy that we found a solution which allowed us to keep the original stairs by replacing the most worn out parts with wood strips and changing the inclination of the stairs. The repaired stairs feel a little hard on the feet right now but will soften with age and use.

The construction of a separate structure for butter lamps: We have been worried for a long time that the use of butter lamps is a potential fire hazards as well as a cause for damage to the temple paintings and decorations. The volume of butter lamp offerings has steadily increased over the years with an increase in the economic wellbeing of the pilgrims and patrons and so the need to address this issue has become ever more urgent. After the board, the temple care taker and some village elders agreed on a structure located near the sangthap (fumigation stove), we could start construction in late March.

Losar with the Canadians: On the 9th February it was a group of Canadians, led by Ms. Nancy Strickland, the Executive Director of Canada Bhutan Foundation, who helped us to enter the Fire Male Monkey year (Lunar calendar). The recently introduced custom of celebrating the Losar with a shudrel ceremony in the morning in the Drolma Lhakhang and a lunch in the sun for all those who are “over sixty” from the village was enjoyed by all. Nancy who is also turned 60 in 2016, contributed to the cost of the celebration.



After lunch many enjoyed singing and dancing

THE GUEST HOUSE

Buildings vacated: The family of Ugyen Rinzin moved into their new house at the beginning of 2016. This made it possible to start remodeling work in the south wing of the shagor.

The Ogyen Choling Heritage House officially started operations on 1st February: On the 2nd of February, Mr Philopse Abraham from Kerala, who had been a teacher in Jakar school in 1979-1980 and his friend Mr. Mathew Thommen from Singapore came and stayed with us. They were the first guests of the year to the museum and the first ever guest to stay in the Ogyen Choling Heritage House.

French guest in the completed rooms in the shagkor : Mr. Nawang Jampe, assisted in part by development officer, Kelzang Namgyel and Suzanne Moser (a visitor from Switzerland) worked hard to complete the painting of two of the shagor rooms so that they were ready for a large group of French visitors. The harmonious blend of the traditional architecture with modern amenities is most obvious in the bathrooms. We managed to retain the original, traditional window façade and at the same time

install modern, European standard sanitary amenities (shower, toilet, washbasin). Our first guests to enjoy the room expressed their satisfaction.



Picture of a new bathroom with the traditional window façade seen in the mirror

Sanitary Installations continued: Mr Nico Lauper, who has just completed his professional training as a plumber in Switzerland, worked with the Ogyen Choling Foundation for six weeks. He continued the installation of bathrooms, and other sanitary facilities. Despite his age, his professional skills and his ability to lead, teach and motivate young Bhutanese assistants resulted in excellent work progress. He leaves back a Bhutanese assistant whom he trained to a level where he can continue simple installation and maintenance work.



Nico and his assistant Chador welding pipes

OTHER NEWS AND EVENTS

Launch of the book “Guru Rinpoche is Coming”: As the Monkey year is also the birth year of Guru Rinpoche we considered the Losar as the perfect day to launch Kunzang Choden’s fifth illustrated children’s book, “Guru Rinpoche is Coming “. The children from the village were all invited to the launch. It was a moving experience to see how the children recognized and identified with the characters who were all modeled real people from the village. Ms. Nancy Strickland launched the book and read it to the children.



Nancy reading to the children



Little Yeshey, the main character in the book explaining the story to her grandmother

Civil Society Organizations (CSO) retreat: In March the Executive Trustee attended the first day of the two days of the first CSO Retreat in Paro. It was a good opportunity to meet representatives from 35 CSOs out of the 45 registered CSOs in the country. Almost all CSOs are based in and around Thimphu, so most CSO related activities happen in and around Thimphu. It has, therefore, not been convenient for Ogyen Choling Foundation to participate in the past. This particular retreat was a significant meeting that looked at the future of CSOs in Bhutan among other shared issues.

Board Meeting: We took advantage of Dr. Karma’s presence and conducted the Foundation’s 7th board meeting. While the meeting was mainly to report on the progress of the Foundation activities, it was also an excellent time to discuss some important issues.

Documentation by Shejun: In April Dr. Karma Phuntsho, the Director of Shejun Agency for Bhutan's Cultural Documentation and his team of 11 researchers came to Ogyen Choling and stayed with us for two nights . During their stay they carried out various research activities which included the visual documentation of the museum artifacts as well as the temples. The researchers also filmed interviews with different people from the village covering a range of subjects such as rituals, history and festivals. . We hope this exercises will be the basis for a more holistic documentation of the Ogyen Choling Foundation and the community.



The Shejun team interviewing an informant



Little Rinchen from the reading group sends greetings to all with the bubbles she blows

We thank you warmly for your interest and we look forward to your continuing encouragement and support.

With best wishes

Kunzang Choden
(Executive Trustee)