

SHANGRILA AND THE HIDDEN VALLEYS

One of the best known stories of modern times is that of Shangrila. The book *Lost Horizon* was published only a little over fifty years ago, but its account of a mystical kingdom hidden beyond the Himalaya became so popular that movies were made about it, and the name Shangrila is now widely recognised throughout the world. The appeal of Shangrila continues to this day, and it is easy to understand why. It is difficult, indeed, not to be attracted to the idea of a clement paradise, set amidst snow-capped mountains, where the people are happy and protected from the strife of the outside world.

Few Westerners are aware that the story of Shangrila is based upon a tradition dating back millennia and still held among the people of Tibet and bordering regions. The hidden kingdom of Shambhala almost exactly fits the conception of Shangrila and figures prominently in Tibetan Buddhist beliefs. However, Shambhala is thought to lie far north of Tibet, whereas the similar tradition, that of the *beyuls* (the hidden lands or valleys) are scattered throughout the Himalaya.

The *beyuls* are believed to have been made by Padmasambhava, the Indian Buddhist credited with being the first to establish Buddhism in Tibet. He became deified and is attributed with many miraculous works. To provide refuges for persecuted Buddhists in Tibet, he created these blessed hidden lands, each consisting of forested and fertile valleys surrounded by high mountains, within which crops and herds prosper.

The *beyuls* do not lack for riches: gold, silver and precious stones, sacred texts, books of profound teachings and powerful ritual implements are hidden in them. People living in these *beyuls* are free from illness and hard work and are able to more easily approach true enlightenment. "The hidden land will increase your lifespan, merit and wealth, and all those born in it will be

liberated from the endless cycle of re-births," said Padmasambhava in a text to the *beyul* of Helambu, which is north of Kathmandu.

More than twenty *beyuls* have been referred to in Tibetan Buddhist literature, and many more have been labelled as such by the local inhabitants. Ancient texts called *lamyig* (guidebooks), exist describing at least half a dozen of them. These texts are believed to have been hidden by Padmasambhava in the 8th century, and discovered later, in the 14th and 15th centuries.

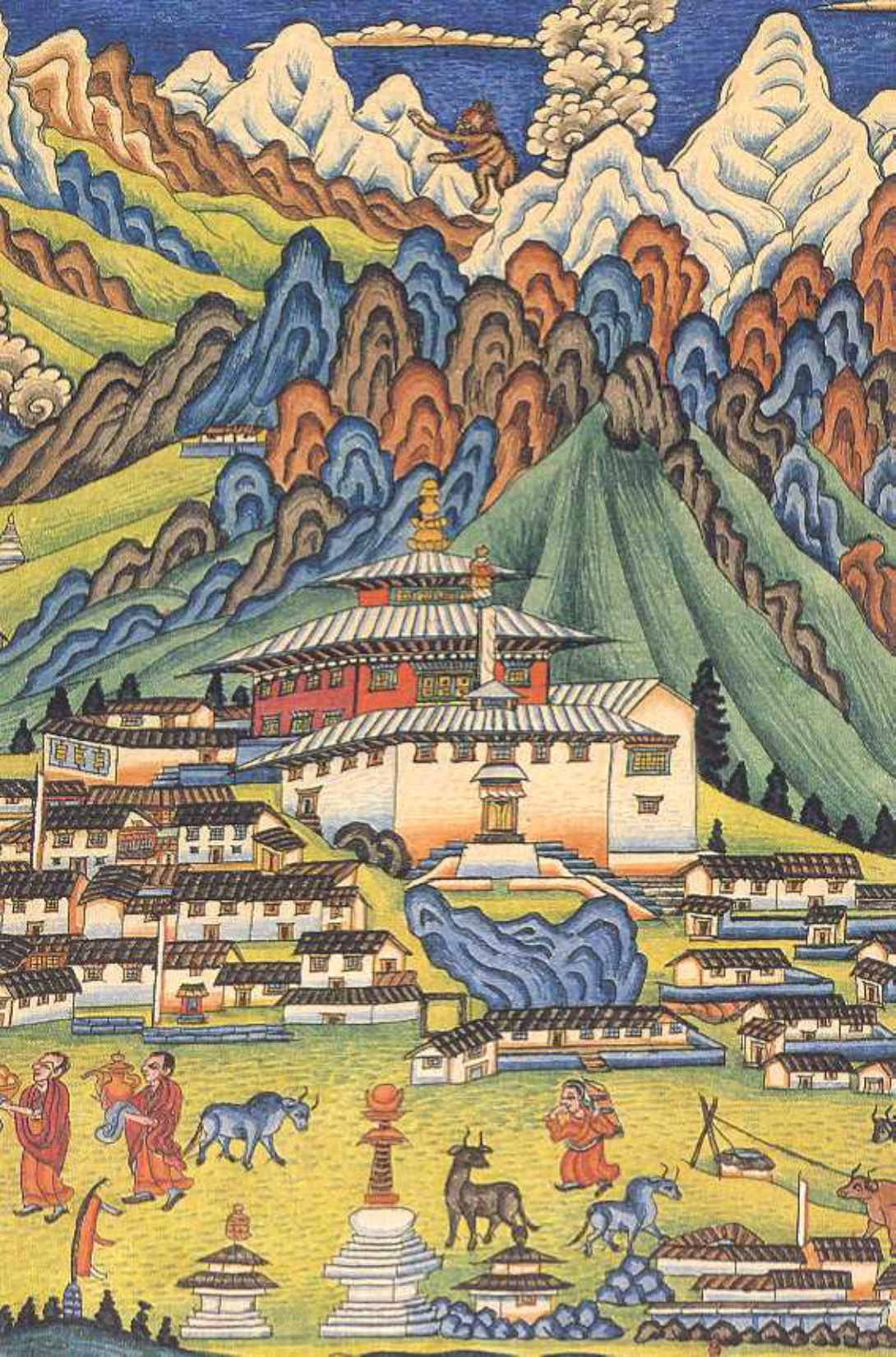
Only certain persons, several of whom were prophesied by Padmasambhava, were destined to find the *beyul* guidebooks. However, these "text discoverers" were often not the ones meant to find the hidden lands. The texts describe the kind of persons capable of reaching the *beyuls*, signs as to the auspicious time to begin the search, the routes to be taken, various rituals to be performed at specific places during the journey, and what will be seen once the travellers have arrived.

The route descriptions mix known place names with vague geographical features, causing serious problems with identification. For example, one mountain on the way to Helambu is described as looking like a "mother holding a baby on her lap." And there are stringent requirements, with unpleasant consequences if not carried out. In the text to a *beyul* located behind Manaslu, at one place, "If you do not make an offering to the stone that looks like a lying dog, you will vomit and have diarrhoea."

Such difficulties make it no easy task to ensure that all the text's instructions have been fulfilled and the *beyuls* correctly located. Furthermore, there are three levels of a *beyul* which can be seen, depending on the level of awareness attained by the searchers. The inner and secret valleys are said to be visible and accessible only to advanced practitioners of the Buddhist doctrine, and only they will receive the full benefits of the *beyul*.

Nonetheless, approximate locations of some of the hidden valleys can be worked out and local traditions help to

Left, this distinctive Sherpa painting shows Thyangboche Monastery and a yeti climbing the high mountains.



pinpoint them more precisely. Thus we know that one of the most famous *beyuls*, Pema-ko, is located near the mountain Namche Barwa where the Brahmaputra River bends to the south before entering Assam from Tibet. Another famous *beyul* is in Sikkim, believed to be near Kangchenjunga.

Texts and traditions place several *beyuls* in Nepal. One of the best known of these is Khembalung, located east of Mount Chamlang south of Makalu. Indeed, the Sherpa name for Makalu is Sura-rakya, a major protector deity of Khembalung. The most important of the pre-Buddhist deities were mountain gods, and they are believed to have been defeated by Padmasambhava and converted into protectors of Buddhism. Situated at the base, or in the laps as it were, of these ancient and powerful deities, the *beyuls* are not only protected by their natural surroundings but by the mountain gods as well.

At Khembalung Sherpas living in the area will show power places, one of the most prominent being a cave, where the

results of magical feats performed by Padmasambhava are supposedly visible. Such sacred sites often become the goals of pilgrimages, and in Khembalung huts have been built for those wishing to take advantage of the heightened effectiveness of meditation in the *beyul*. "If Tantric practitioners stay there, they will obtain all realizations and great power," said Padmasambhava about Khembalung. The pilgrimage itself is thought to gain one considerable merit - the water has great purifying power and the white clay at the mouth of the cave is considered a potent medicine.

Thus for ordinary people the *beyuls* are not just unattainable mystical lands. Although realising they will not experience all that is promised in the texts, many persons nonetheless consider they benefit greatly from pilgrimages to these sacred valleys. Several cases are recorded of entire villages abandoning their goods and setting out in search of a *beyul*. Often they find nothing but hardship, with those surviving the jour-

A thangka portraying Padmasambhava, the creator of the *beyuls* or hidden valleys of Shangrila.



neys having to turn back. According to some Sherpas, their fathers originally came to the Khumbu and settled there because it was a *beyul*.

The hidden lands, whether "real" or not, thus served as true refuges for those escaping political and economic pressures. The historical context in which the *beyul* texts were "discovered" should also not be ignored. They were found at a time of considerable political instability, exacerbated by rivalries between different schools of Tibetan Buddhism. The isolated, forested valleys of the Nepal Himalaya provided real havens, the "natural fortresses" of the texts, for those in need of peace - and land.

Both *lamas* and texts warn that misfortune will befall those looking for *beyuls* before the right time has come. Opinions vary amongst *lamas* as to the interpretation of the signs described in the texts and one recent controversy concerns the Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1959. "During the decline of Buddhism, the soldiers of Hor (the land

bordering Tibet to the north) will come to the centre of the country and destroy the Tibetans. This is the time the *beyul* can be found." Is this the time to be looking for *beyuls*? Some believe so, although only the most learned will get beyond the outer levels of the *beyul*, whilst others feel the signs were missed and the *beyuls* already closed. The difficulties involve the interpretation of the signs, fulfilling the demanding religious requirements and following the confusing route descriptions. The physical obstacles may well be the easiest problems to overcome.

We may never know if we have entered a "real" *beyul* or not, but in Nepal we can find some of the most spectacular mountain scenery and plenty of picturesque and fertile valleys. We also find a fascinating culture of great antiquity - and the complex roots of the legend of Shangri-la. Perhaps the sacred texts are correct: We will see and experience the hidden valleys only in direct proportion to the degree of awareness we bring to them.

The
Thyangboche
Rinpoche
officiates at a
cremation,
using the
dorje and
bell.

