Lama Tshering Gyamtsho from Punakha Dratshang\(^1\) who lived during the 18\(^{th}\) century was a close disciple of the 9\(^{th}\) Je Khenpo\(^2\) Shacha Rinchhen. He was destined to explore the sacred places of Guru Rinpochhe\(^3\). In his quest, he reached a place called Pemaling located towards the north of Trashi Yangtse in eastern Bhutan. There he found a cave with clear body prints of Rigsum Goenpo (Jampalyang, Chhana Dorji and Chenrezig)\(^4\). A powerful local deity called Genyen Phanbu was the guardian of this sacred cave. The Lama befriended the local deity through his spiritual powers and built a small lhakhang for his meditation.

After the death of Lama Tshering Gyamtsho, his nephew and spiritual heir Lama Jangchhub Gyeltshen took over the entire responsibility of the cave and the lhakhang. He renovated and extended the present-day lower lhakhang with unique mural paintings of the life history of Lord Buddha (Paksam Thrishing) which can still be seen. The lhakhang was named as Rigsum Goenpa Lhakhang. Lama Jangchhub Gyeltshen was instrumental in spreading Buddhism in the region until his soul transcended into the Nirvana. He had already found his spiritual heir in the person of Lama Ngawang Loday, his beloved nephew.
While Lama Ngawang Loday was reinforcing religious activities introduced by his uncle, His Holiness Yonten Thaye, the 13th Je Khenpo (1771-1775), who was on his way to Tsari Rongkor (Mountain Pilgrimage) in Arunachal Pradesh, India visited the region and ordained him as the 3rd abbot of Rigsum Goenpa Lhakhang. He was a famous lama who left behind a great spiritual legacy. He constructed the bigger lhakhang and installed valuable ku sung thukten (sacred artifacts representing the body, mind and speech of the Buddha) including the statue of Jowo Shakya Muni, hundred volumes of Kanjur and the eight enlightening stupas of Lord Buddha (Desheg Choeten Gyed) for the well being of the people of Bhutan. The statue of Jowo was brought all the way from Punakha Dzong. It was made by the famous craftsmen and iconographer Pentsa Dev from Nepal during the reign of 4th Desi Gyalsay Tenzin Rabgay. So sacred is the statue that the fifth abbot of the lhakhang, Lama Shacha Gyalpo is believed to have witnessed it speak. Hence, the name Jowo Soong Joem - the Jowo that spoke.

Major reconstruction works at Rigsum Goenpa Lhakhang are under progress. The works which were initiated by the dzongkhag administration and the people and sponsored by the Royal Government of Bhutan are expected to be over by the end of 2002.

Lama Ngawang Loday wished to construct a replica of the Bodhnath stupa of Nepal in Kholong chhu valley in memory of his late Uncle Lama Jangchhub Gyeltshen and to subdue a demon dwelling at the site where the choeten was to be constructed. Guru Rinpochhe and his brothers had constructed the Bodnath stupa popularly known as Jarung Khashor in their previous lives.

Lama Ngawang Loday and his friend Lama Zangpo from Tawang, Arunachal Pradesh set on a journey to Bodnath. Both returned home with a model of the choeten which was quickly made out of radish. They were determined to construct similar choeten in Trashi Yangtse and Tawang.
Consequently, Lama Zangpo constructed one at Pangchanang valley in Tawang, which is known as Gorzam Choeten today. Lama Ngawang Loday constructed another in Trashi Yangtse valley and was called Duerong Choeten. It later came to be known more popularly as Choeten Kora. By the time they arrived home, the radish model had shrunk distorting the shape. As a result, the choeten particularly the one at Trashi Yangtse underwent some changes in design especially in the level of galleries.

The construction of Choeten Kora took 12 long years. It was supported by disciples of Lama Ngawang Loday and devotees from Trashi Yangtse, Trashigang and Kurtoe valley, and also by people from the neighboring tribal communities of Tawang. His Holiness Je Yonten Thaye made his second visit to the valley, consecrated the choeten by making offering of the mandala of Dechhog Paochigpa, and blessed the people in the valley. After the construction, the demon that harmed the people was subdued and banished. Thereafter, it is said that the people in the valley continued to live in peace and harmony.

The pinnacle of Choeten Kora was originally carved out of a huge stone. Later, Lama Shacha Gyalpo, who was originally from Seola Goenpa, Phunakha, known as the most learned and wealthy of Rigsum Lama replaced it with a gilded cupola. It is said that the people who were involved in the work could not think of a way to bring down the stone pinnacle. So, Lama Shacha Gyalpo performed prayers during the day and it is believed that the stone miraculously descended itself at night. It is still found beside the choeten. Pilgrims and devotees who circumumbulate the choeten also go round the pinnacle.

Another legend says that while the construction of the choeten reached its dome, a girl of eight years old believed to be an angel, who came from Tawang and volunteered to enter the dome and be buried there. On account of this incident, the 15th day of the first month of the lunar calendar is called
Dakpe Kora or circumumbulation by the Dakpa from Tawang and the 30th day is called the Drukpe Kora, circumumbulation by the Bhutanese. The festivals are held every year and hundreds of devotees from far and near congregate at the choeten. They believe that making prostrations and praying with pure mind at the festivals would enable them to realize their aspirations in life.

The sertog or the golden cupola was gilded again through the initiation of the Dzongkhag Tschechu Tshogpo in 1999. The initiative was strongly supported by the Royal Government. Stone-slab roofing of enclosure of the choeten and prayer wheels were restored in 2000-2001 by the dzongkhag administration.

NOTES

1 A monastic college. The Punakha Dratshang, first organized by Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal in the 17th century became the core of state monastic body.
2 Supreme abbot of the monastic community. The present Je Khenpo Trulku Jigme Choedra is the 70th in line and elected to office in 1996.
3 The Indian Buddhist saint from Swat valley in present day Pakistan. He first came to Bhutan in 746 A.D at the invitation of an ailing king Sindhu Raja in Bumthang, central Bhutan.
4 Manjushri, Vajrapani and Avalokiteswara.
5 Canonical texts consisting of the teachings and precepts of the Buddha.
6 A civil ruler. Under the theocratic state established in the 17th century, the country was governed by a civil ruler known as deb or desi while spiritual affairs were administered by the Je Khenpo. There were a total of 57 desi.
7 The river that drains the Trashi Yangtse valley.
8 Guru Rinpoche, King Thrisong Deutsan (of Tibet) and Vairocana were the three brothers in their previous lives.
9 Committee for organizing festivals in the district.