





Tsa-Tsa

miniature *stupas* of Bhutan

As you travel across Bhutan, you will find, besides *dzongs*, *chortens*, *lhakangs*, etc, small stupas - cone-shaped clay castings tucked away in holy and sacred niches, clinging to rocky outcroppings near caves, piled high at the foot of prayer wheels, and even floating down rivers on rafts of sacred wood like cedar and sandalwood. These votive earthen offerings are called *Tsa-Tsa*, pronounced with a silent T. Each *Tsa-Tsa* is placed with loving tenderness and devout belief in its powers. Each one of them is an ancient prayer for the wellbeing of beloved human – living or departed and has its own individual story to tell.

The history of the *Tsa-Tsa* goes back to hundreds, may be thousands of years and their origin is traced in the Himalayan regions of India, Bhutan and Tibet. The moulds and casting process have been handed down through generations from master to student, lama to monk. Also passed down are the meditations and *mantras* that are chanted during the casting process. *Tsa-Tsas* are empowered by inserting a tiny scroll of prayers or *mantras* into a hollow space in





Tsa-Tsa – the miniature stupas of Bhutan



the base while reciting special *mantras* that were written centuries ago by Buddhist masters. Ordinary earth is transformed through this ritual of empowerment into a receptacle of sacred energy that sweetens the air around it and calls to action all the merciful powers of the deities.

On three auspicious occasions, I had the pleasure of accompanying Lama Ugyen Rinpoche, a noted master and *Tsa-Tsa* maker who lives in Dechenchholing on the outskirts of Thimphu. Lam Ugyen was kind enough to prepare *Tsa-Tsas* for three travellers who were on my Photographer's Tour of Bhutan – one had recently lost his mother, another had a gravely ill friend back home, and the third, a high school student wanted to pray for the long life of her grandparents. Lam Ugyen took considerable time to explain to each of them about *Tsa-Tsas* and their powers to heal and gain merit.

“When our friends or relatives are really suffering, may be from cancer or



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Tsa-Tsas made by Lama Ugyen Rimpoche



other serious ailments, we find ourselves helpless,” explained Lama Ugyen. “But there is still something, we can do to actually save them and prolong their life. Through the power of the *Tsa-Tsa* we can gain merit and then dedicate that merit to others. You see, the *Tsa-Tsa* is actually a miniature stupa. We, here in Bhutan also call them *chortens*. Though small as they are, *Tsa-Tsas* evoke the same powers as the largest stupa, but only if the maker and sponsor of them is true believer in their powers. During construction and placement of the *Tsa-Tsa* and for many days after, one should recite aloud the most precious *Sutra of Long Life*, a thousand times over or even more. We should enlist the aid of monks at monasteries to continue to chant the sutra as many times as possible. All of this will focus the healing powers of the *Tsa-Tsa* on those who are true believers as well as their makers and sponsors.”

Lama Ugyen went on to explain the building process of the *Tsa-Tsa*. There are two types and sizes of *Tsa-Tsas* in use in Bhutan, the smaller contains the impressions of eight *stupas* and the larger one a hundred and eight *stupas*. Each is just as powerful as the other depending on the strength of belief of the maker and the sponsor as well as the number of *mantras* chanted.

First, a fine clay is collected from different sites in Bhutan, some from near Paro but most from southern Bhutan. This clay is very sticky and contains a minimum of sand which makes it perfect for pressing into the mould. The *Tsa-Tsa* caster after picking out all

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the small pebbles and stones, pounds the mixture of clay with a wooden mallet. He also mixes in it the clay particles of saffron, holy herbs and spices and kneads it like bread dough until it is pliable and ready for the mould.

The best metal moulds are from foundries in India. They have cast copies of original ancient moulds made by Tibetan masters. Oil is spread inside the mould to keep the clay from sticking. After pressing the clay into the mould, a tubular hole is pressed into the bottom of the *Tsa-Tsa* that will eventually contain, *mantras* from a Sanskrit scripture as well as of Varocana Buddha. The mantras are

copied onto a paper using ink that has partially been extracted from the seeds of holy trees, like cyprus and sandalwood. This tiny paper scroll is then tightly rolled and placed into the bottom of the *Tsa-Tsa* and sealed with a plug of clay. The *Tsa-Tsa* is then dried in the sun until hard and then delivered to the sponsor during a beautiful consecration ceremony of chanting and bell ringing.

So as you venture across Bhutan and witness its glorious landscapes, architecture, history and culture, pay particular attention to the thousands of *Tsa-Tsas* that you will come across on your journey.

Tsa-Tsa Etiquette

Always show respect to the *Tsa-Tsas* wherever you may find them. Never move or touch a *Tsa-Tsa* because much thought has gone into its exact placement. Never step on it as it is considered a sacred religious object. If you want to construct or sponsor your own *Tsa-Tsa*, consult your tour agent or guide and ask for a meeting with a qualified *Tsa-Tsa* master like Lama Ugyen Rinpoche. From Thimphu he can be reached at 761-3517.

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