

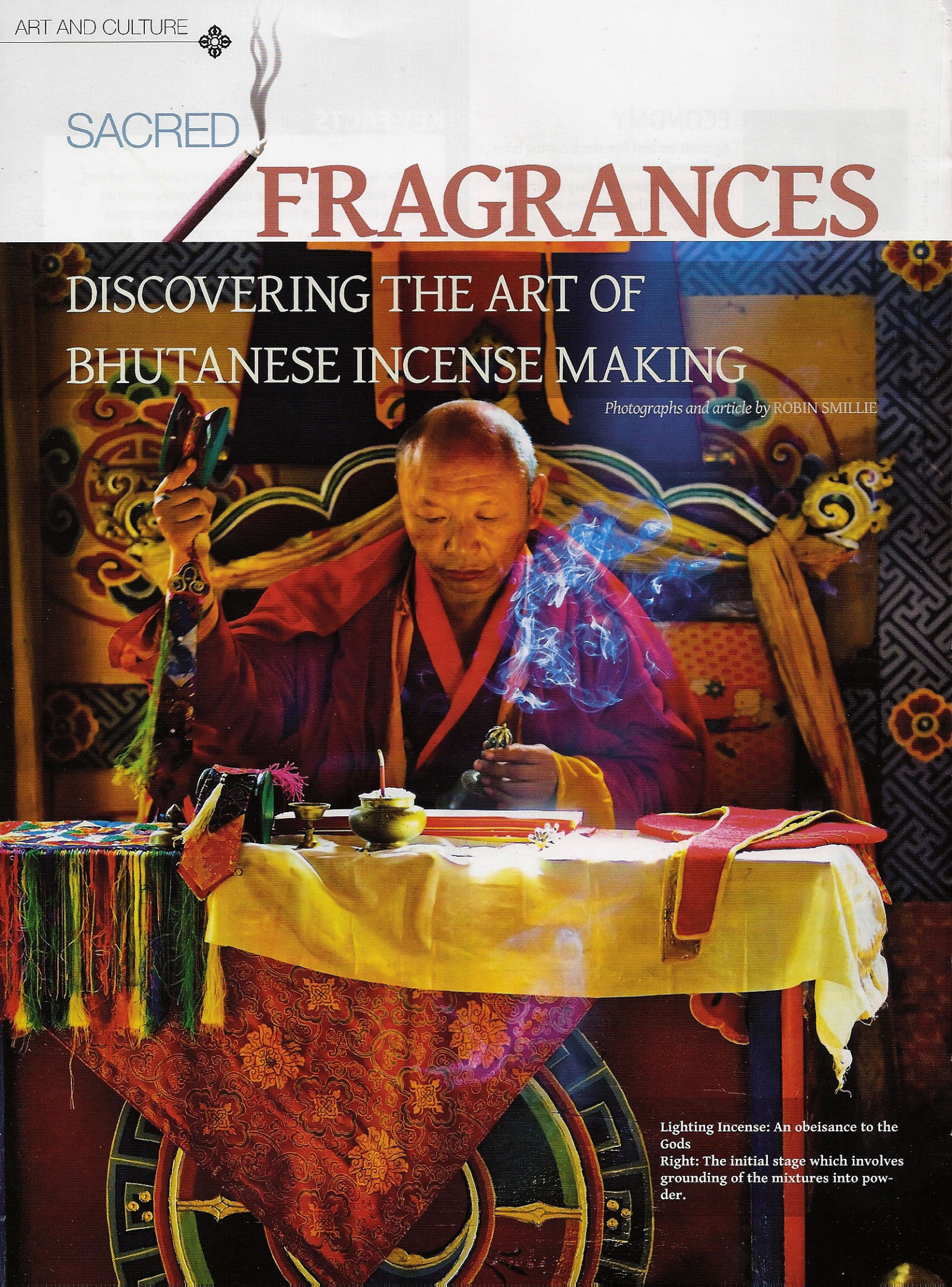


SACRED

# FRAGRANCES

## DISCOVERING THE ART OF BHUTANESE INCENSE MAKING

Photographs and article by ROBIN SMILLIE



Lighting Incense: An obeisance to the Gods

Right: The initial stage which involves grounding of the mixtures into powder.



**F**or most Bhutanese, the act of lighting incense is an inseparable part of daily life.

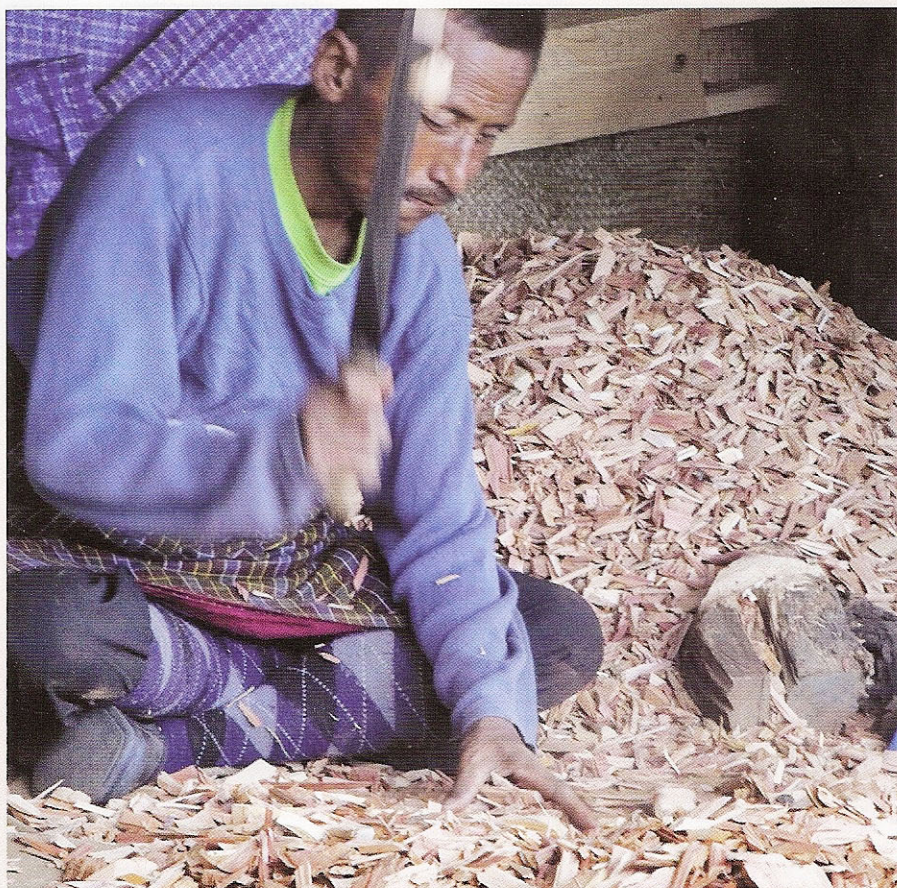
The ritual acts both as an obeisance to the gods and as aromatic aids to relax and purify the mind. On any given morning wisps from such votive offerings curl heavenward from the tents of yak herders in the high mountains, village farmhouses in the mid Himalayan range and from modern city apartments in the capital and regional towns. At each of the thousands of holy sites that dot the Bhutanese landscape, from the grandest temple to the most humble farmhouse, sticks of fragrant incense rise into the air to infuse the landscape with the deepest spiritual aspirations of the people who light them.

During my fourteen trips to Bhutan as a curious onlooker raised outside the tradition of incense or Buddhism, I often wondered what the significance was of all this smoke. I asked my guides and drivers but the information gleaned from them only made me want to find out more.

The Buddha himself extols the spirit of inquiry so I decided to learn more about this ancient Bhutanese tradition. The intellectual heft and weight of no less than two well-known Bhutanese scholars and a duo of Bhutanese incense manufacturers significantly aided my quest.

The first of my resources, Dr. Karma Phuntsho, was born in the small village of Ura in Bumthang valley. He trained as a monk first in Bhutan and then in India. Afterward, he received a Master of Studies degree and a Doctor of Philosophy degree in Oriental Studies at Balliol College, Oxford. Dr. Karma is currently a researcher at the Department of Social Anthropology in Cambridge, a position that requires him to divide his time between Bhutan and the United Kingdom.

"Incense-smoke is not merely an offering of fragrances but it forms



a medium for the visualisation of a much greater and multifarious offering," explained Dr. Karma, somewhat academically. "The incense and other substances to be burned are first purified through a deep meditative dissolution into the state of Emptiness. Then, the billows of smoke, which illusorily arise from the expanse of Emptiness, are transformed into immeasurable clouds of wonderful items of offering through

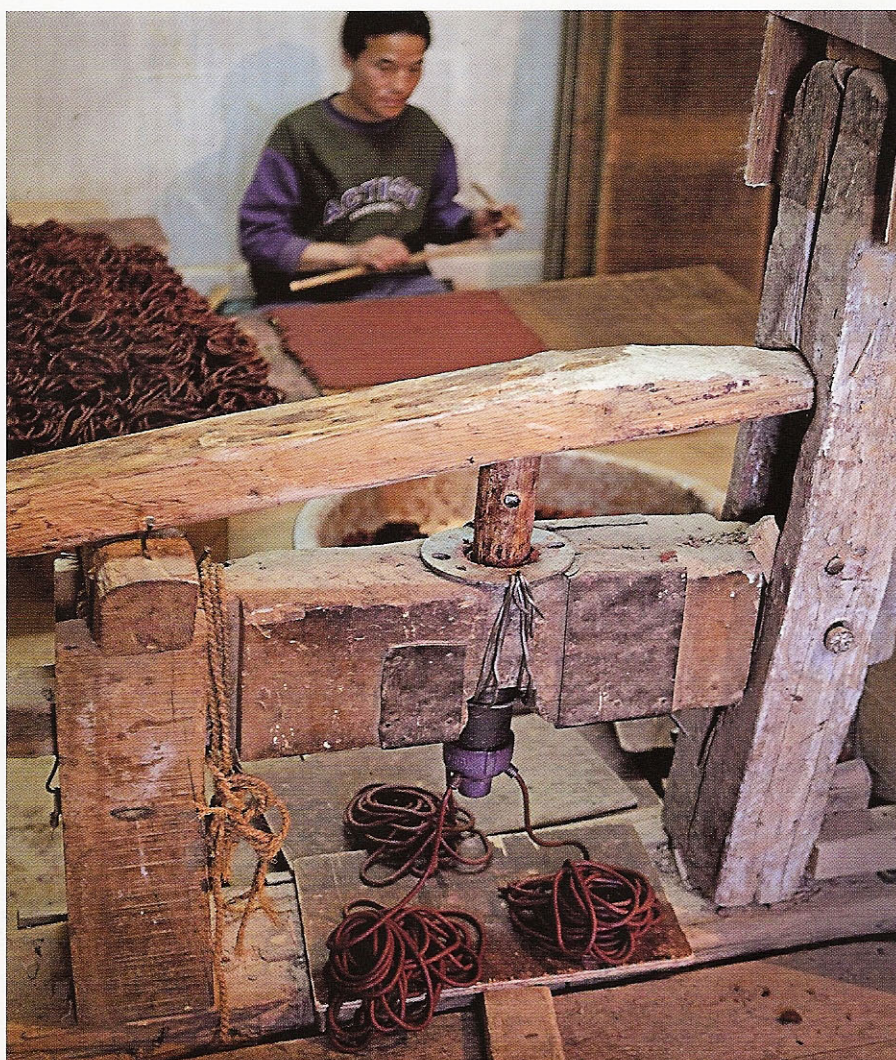
a meditative projection."

The next scholar I consulted, Khaling Karma, has studied Buddhism since he was a boy and consults on the ancient art of Bhutanese healing. Most recently the author of *The Buddha's Recipe*, written in English and published under the royal patronage of Her Majesty the Queen Mother Ashi Dorji Wangmo Wangchuck, Khaling Karma is as formidable a source as one might find on the matter. In fact, his book is a primer on Buddhism intended for students and admirers of Buddhism alike.

"Before the inception of Buddhism in Bhutan," Khaling Karma said. "Each community worshiped their own territorial deity, both male and female. The deity could be in the form of a stone, tree, cave, marsh, mountain, cliff, rock, lake or even a small stream. Whenever disease or natural calamity struck these communities they offered incense and several forms of edible essences, including animal sacrifice,

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By doing this not only will you be spreading the word of Buddhism and Gross National Happiness wherever the incense may waft in the air but you may also find yourself in a more relaxed and purified state of mind.

**Left:** The incense mixture being extruded through a mechanical press into long thin coils that resemble cooked spaghetti, only these are crimson in color.

to appease local animistic spirits.

"However, following the advent of Guru Rinpoche, all these malevolent deities were subdued, reformed and indoctrinated. Their devotees were no longer required to kill animals as part of the ritual offerings. Instead, to appease the local deities (known as *Yul Lha Shibda* or *Kachong Choechong Sungma*), the Guru encouraged local worshippers to continue the tradition of incense offerings, a practice that remains current to this day."

Continuing on the incense trail I met the two incense makers at their facilities, the first located in the capital, Thimphu, the other further east in Chumey Valley, Central Bhutan. Graciously, the owners of both *poizokhangs* (Houses of Incense) showed me around and explained

the process. I witnessed firsthand the use of centuries-old techniques to grind, mix, press and dry the incense sticks. First, all ingredients were ground and mixed into a powder, then stirred with water, sugar and honey. Juniper powder was the base ingredient and I learned that the quality of the incense was determined by the amount of juniper used in the mix (less juniper means more fragrant incense sticks as it necessitates the use of other more aromatic ingredients).

After it was blended to perfection, the incense mix was stored in a large container in a warm dry environment, usually a sun-struck storeroom or shed. I learned that the beginnings of the fragrances that distinguish each batch of incense are detected after about a

week, at which time gum resin is added to hold the mix together. The enhanced mixture is then mashed again before being extruded through a mechanical press into long thin coils that resemble cooked spaghetti; only these are crimson in colour. The coils are then straightened, cut to size, bundled into rolls of about thirty sticks, placed on wooden boards, and then stacked in the shade to dry for four or five more days before they are packaged and priced according to quality and ingredients.

"My main market is in central Bhutan," Lhendup, the incense master in central Bhutan said. "I sell to local businesses and monasteries [in the region], and rarely to Thimphu or outside the country. The government recently built a feeder road to





my village and now it is much more successful because local people and businesses can drive right up to my factory.”

Like Nado Poizokhang in the capital, Lhendup’s Urok Poizokhang contributes to the local economy by employing several villagers, paying wages to those who have traditionally provided for their families mainly by sustenance farming.

Both incense makers say that they adhere to age-old practices and standards in producing their incense and that, except for the grinding machine, every part of the process is done by hand.

Both establishments contribute to Bhutan’s policy of Gross National Happiness by providing employment in a trade that promotes and honours the kingdom’s centuries-old Buddhist traditions. Every newcomer to Bhutan should buy at least a few packages (just ask your guide to direct you to these two factories or look for them in markets and gift shops).

By doing this not only will you be spreading the word of Buddhism and Gross National Happiness wherever the incense may waft in the air but you may also find yourself in a more relaxed and purified state of mind.

*Robin Smillie is a travel writer and photographer based in Tampa, Florida. He is the owner of [www.rainbow-phototours.com](http://www.rainbow-phototours.com) and can be reached at [fsrobin@aol.com](mailto:fsrobin@aol.com).*

### *A Recipe for Tranquility*

There are a few somewhat rare ingredients called *bzang po drug*, or Six Noble Substances that are the most sought after because they are very aromatic and believed to invoke positive emotions that make the mind tranquil and states of mind such as love, compassion, empathy, contentment, clarity, concentration and intelligence. The Six Noble Substances also work in the opposite by deterring negative emotions such as hatred, lust and greed. The Six Noble Substances are greater cardamom, bamboo manna, clove, saffron, nutmeg and lesser cardamom. These are crushed and ground and made into powder then mixed with a base made mostly of juniper but sometimes cedar or sandalwood.

To these are also added a wide range of other Bhutanese herbs and plants with medicinal and fumigating power.

### *Bhutan’s Incense Goes Worldwide on the Internet.*

If you are a serious aficionado of incense and passionate about fine scent then you might enjoy reading critiques much like those of fine wines at this blog about incense. Here is a link to a critique of Bhutanese incense—you can also purchase Bhutanese incense here: <http://olfactoryrescueservice.wordpress.com/2008/03/26/nado-poizokhang-grades-a-c/>

### *From the Olfactory Rescue Service blog:*

“There are a couple of grades attributed to Bhutanese creator Lhendup, however I only received a sampler of the top A grade. Naturally this is sort of the typical Bhutanese style stick, roughly similar to Nado Poizokhang’s incenses or World Peace Grade B or Kuenzang Chodtin, with a pinkish hue and a similar berry-like tang to it. The consistency isn’t quite as snappy or plastic-like as some of these other incenses and there’s a bit deeper of a tone to it. Overall there’s a lot of sandalwood, both white and red, spice, cherry, musk and at times a slight unique gentle floral that sets this apart from other Bhutanese sticks. Quite interesting overall, although it’s difficult to tell whether it earns its asking price or not.”

### *Resources:*

To purchase *Buddha’s Recipe* or arrange for a private forum discussion, call Khaling Karma at 00975-1-335939. The book is also available at Pekhang Book Shop in Thimphu and River Lodge in Bumthang.

To contact Lopen Karma Phuntsho at Cambridge, send email to [karma@loden.org](mailto:karma@loden.org). Lopen Karma is a trustee and the Director of the Loden Foundation, a charitable organization dedicated to fostering an enlightened and happy society in Bhutan through the promotion of education, learning and entrepreneurship among the Bhutanese children and young adults. The foundation also supports a monk entertainer who produces incense to support Baeyul Langdra Temple in Wangdi district.