

An Overview of Bhutan's Monastic Education System [1]

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1. Introduction

Bhutan is regarded as one of the Buddhist countries where Buddhism flourishes uninterrupted. Buddhism plays a very important role in the ways of life of Bhutanese people from birth to death. Its culture, customs, history and landscape bear the most venerable traces of the influence of this noble religion. Historically, Buddhism was first spread to Bhutan in the 7th century A.D., but until 9th century Buddhism made relatively little impact on the lives of the Bhutanese people.

From 10th century up to the beginning of the 17th century, it was thriving period of Buddhism in Bhutan. Numerous scholar-saints of different sects of Tibetan Buddhism appeared and established many monasteries and temples throughout the country. It brought profound influences both on the people's way of life and on the growth of the country's religio-cultural and traditional customs.

Although numerous scholar-saints appeared between 10th to 17th century, none of them could establish formal monk community (i.e. Sangha) in Bhutan. It was Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel (1594-1651),¹[3] the founder of the Bhutanese Nationhood, who for the first time instituted the Sangha in Bhutan in the 17th century. He began it with only 30 monks when he completed the first monastic centre at Cheri about 14 kms. north of Thimphu in 1621-22. Later, in 1637 when the construction of Punakha Dzong [in another valley towards east from the capital, Thimphu] was completed, monks of Cheri were moved there. The Punakha Dzong, even today, continues to be the winter residence of the Central Monastic Body (main Sangha Centre at Punakha/Thimphu), while Thimphu is their summer residence. Thus today's Sangha has its origin in that.

Subsequently, the number of monks increased as and when Sangha Centres were completed in other parts of the country. At the end of Zhabdrung's reign [i.e. in 1651] there were 360 monks in the Central Monastic Body and by 1774 there were about 661 monks. Whenever there was decline in the number of monks, the state monastic body ensured the sustainable size of monks by making families to supply monks to the monasteries either voluntarily or by decree. This system was known as *tsunthrel* or monk tax, and it was first introduced by the Zhabdrung. The system required every family to contribute a son to the monastery if the family had more than three sons. Sending a son also earned the family exemption from certain taxes collected by the government. This practice has, however, died away over the centuries.

According to record of the Planning Commission, there were 4000 monks supported by the state by 1992. As per the record of 2001 maintained by the Central Monastic Body, there were total of 3,877 monks in various Sangha Centres, 1062 *drubdeps* (those undergoing meditation) and 848 novices in Monastic Schools.

2. The Present Structure of Sangha

The general structure of Sangha at present draws continuity from the one established in the 17th century by Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel. At the head of the Central Monastic Body is the supreme abbot known as *Je Khenpo*, equal in rank to His Majesty the King in the civil office. The present *Je Khenpo*, Trulku Jigme Choeda is the 70th the line and elected to office in 1996. He is assisted by four acharyas who are masters in specialized religious disciplines. They are equal in rank to government ministers. Below them are preceptors and three prefects, and many junior acharyas which are not considered here.

The monastic community in a district is headed by an abbot known as *Lam Neten*. And Buddhist colleges and Meditation Centres are headed by principals and meditation masters.

There are a total of 20 registered Sangha Centres with 19 primary-cum-junior high and high schools attached to them, 13 Buddhist Colleges, 27 Meditation Centres, and 214 Lay-monk Centres (Upasaka Centres) and 13 Nunneries. Among the 150 members of the National Assembly (the Kingdom's Parliament), 10 monks are represented for the Sangha including two monks in the Royal Advisory Council (RAC) who are also become the member of the cabinet.

3. Purpose of Monastic Education

Till the introduction of modern education, monastic education was the only avenue of acquiring literacy and scholarship. The monasteries were the centres of learning. The medium of instruction was *choekey* – classical language.

The ultimate purpose of monastic education was spiritual progress. Skills earned and taught in monastic institutions were meant to enhance the spiritual progress of the student. Besides getting student trained in many mundane arts, he is required to get trained in the essential part of the teachings which include recognition of the perfect human birth, impermanence and death, the law of karma, the misery of samsara, generating Bodhicitta, moral values and principles, the training of the mind and much other such training. Thus the monastic education is mainly geared towards providing guidance to liberate oneself from the cyclic existence.

Later, parents had the choice of the kind of education their children should receive. Given the advantages brought about by modern education, most chose to send them to schools. But the introduction of modern education was not undertaken at

the cost of abolishing monastic education. On the other hand, it was maintained continuity, and even grown in size and number over the years.

Due to their holy character and superior learning, the monk body commanded great public respect and so great privileges that almost all political power rested with them for over three centuries from 17th to 19th century. All civil responsibilities were the concern of monastic officials. However, later, an increasing number of laymen came to hold high office, gradually displacing the monks. Today, the situation is completely changed. Except in the teaching fields, monks seldom take part in the administrative matters of the civil organizations. But the ecclesiastical elements continued to dominate society.

Since almost every important occasion in the life of average Bhutanese is invested with religious significance, the monks visit households to perform rites related to diverse events such as birth, marriage, sickness, death, construction of houses, consecration ceremonies, promotion of govt. officials, inaugural ceremony and other day-to-day functions.

4. Monastic Education and Practice

Curriculum of monastic education consisted largely of religious rituals, grammar, poetry, numeracy, graphic arts, painting, chanting rhymes, philosophy, logic, meditation etc. It will not be possible to elaborate each subject prescribed, within this limited scope of the paper, and therefore only general outline of the curriculum at different levels is given hereunder:

4.1. Monastic School

The monastic school is equivalent to today's modern high school. The curriculum begins with the learning of the alphabet, spelling, reading, and proceeds to the memorization of prayers and other relevant texts besides observing daily monastic rules and regulations. Besides memorization of texts, they also learn various ritual arts, metrical rhymes, trumpet, making ritual cakes etc. As they proceed to higher classes, they learn grammar, prosody or literary science which is geared towards pursuing higher Buddhist philosophical studies.

English and arithmetic are also taught so as to enable the monks to become more effective communicators at a time when Bhutan is increasing contacts with the outside world.

After completion of their studies from the schools, they join Buddhist Colleges (Shedras) for higher studies while others opt to join Central Monastic Body.

4.2. Monastic College

The monks after having gained a basic proficiency in religious studies from the monastic schools, they graduate to higher Buddhist philosophical studies. Besides

Prajnaparamita, Vinaya, Abhidharma, and the biographies of saints of the concerned Buddhist tradition, the 13 Great Texts are prescribed as the main subjects for the Buddhist colleges. The study of the above subjects forms the main part of the curriculum in the Buddhist colleges, besides ritual prayers and observance of daily monastic rules and regulations.

The course is of five years - i.e. two years bachelor's degree course and three years master's degree course.^{2[4]} Besides their regular studies, they observe summer retreat (*yarney*) during which they are not permitted to move out of the college compound for 45 days. The summer retreat begins from the 15th day of the 6th month and ends on the 30th day of the 7th month of the Bhutanese calendar [which precisely corresponds to June and July] with a day long thanksgiving ceremony to the protective deities.

4.3. Meditation Practice

The monk's education does not end by his gaining proficiency in Buddhist studies alone in the Buddhist colleges. After receiving theoretical teachings, he must undergo in one of the Meditation Centres a minimum of three years' meditation practice – referred to as “*Losum Chog Sum*”, which means three years and three faces of a month (one and half months).^{3[5]}

The meditation course depends on which tradition one belongs. The course begins with preliminary and proceeds to advance part, guided by the most accomplished master. After successful completion of three year meditation course, he is appointed either as a principal of Buddhist colleges or head of Meditation Centres or district Sangha Centres. One could also continue meditation further if one desires so, and could become a renunciate hermit wandering through isolated mountains.

4.5. Lay-monk Centre (Upasaka Centre) and Nunnery

According to official report of 2000, there are about 214 Lay-monk Centres and 13 Nunneries throughout the country. They are either private or state sponsored.

Like in the State Sangha Centres and district Sangha Centres, the curriculum begins with alphabet, spelling and reading. After becoming conversant in the above skill, they proceed to memorization of relevant ritual prayers, whereupon they gradually get trained in playing monastic orchestra or musical instruments such as the trumpet, the drum, the *damaru*, the bell, the *vajra*, making ritual cakes etc.

Their curriculum does not end by gaining proficiency in the ritual arts alone. If one is keen in taking up meditation practice, one can undergo meditation in one of retreat sites after receiving required instructions and precepts from a master.

Like monks, lay-monks and nuns are required to know ritual performance well so as to serve the people in diverse events. As a matter of fact, they play a very important role in spiritual needs of the people by guiding through ups and downs of their life, particularly in a village where there are no Sangha Centres.

5. Buddhist Education to World Peace

There are diverse benefits that can be derived from the Buddhist education. The Buddhist education is for the development of inward attitude and outward character of human being. The very important human qualities like love, compassion, sympathetic joy, equanimity, kindness, to abide in faith, loyalty, dedication and cooperation, understanding and positive attitude can only be blossomed with the Buddhist education.

All these are based on the well-being, progress, freedom and happiness of all living beings. They form a solid value system on which a Buddhist can build his or her spiritual life. The effort to practice these values should first come from single individual and this individual effort is then extended to members of the family, the community, the nation and finally the world itself.

For the rightly educated Buddhist, there remains no place for remorse. He is balanced, virtuous, mindful, ardent and modest. With the Buddhist education, it becomes easier for him to handle and solve any day to day problems. He develops as a perfect social being, capable of generating social harmony, spiritual calm and mutual understanding; thereby bringing goodwill, peace and harmony to society. He is in possession of the capacity to mould himself as he likes by directing his activities in the right direction. Thus Buddhist education is not only an indispensable aspect of the path to the Buddhist highest spiritual goal but also a way to live harmony with the world.

Today, many education systems in the world are paying due attention to the development of a culture where a man is taught to put the concerns of others before his own need. The innate goodness of beings is fostered through proper education and understanding. This can only be achieved through Buddhist education. A Buddhist values system is already recognizable in many organizations such as UNESCO, RED-CROSS, WHO and so on. Education system and media network in Buddhist countries, therefore, must spread these values through every means possible so that daily thinking of the people is affected and peace is prevailed on earth.

4[1] This paper is written in order to introduce the monastic education system that exists in Bhutan to eminent participants in the workshop organized to celebrate the Vesak in Bangkok, Thailand. I would, therefore, like to acknowledge that this paper is not a research paper but rather a report with information gathered from the State Monastic Body.

5[2] Dr. Yonten Dargye is a research officer at the National Library of Bhutan, under the Ministry of Home & Cultural Affairs.

6[3] He unified the country – Bhutan as one nation and ruled the country from 1616 – 1651. He introduced dual system of administration whereby a spiritual leader looked after the clergy and a temporal ruler looked after the affairs of the state. This system endured till the establishment of hereditary monarchy in 1907.

7[4] This is based on the course prescribed for the Tango Buddhist College, the state Buddhist college located in the upper Thimphu valley. The duration of course in other Buddhist colleges in the Kingdom may vary. Here I cannot say with certainty, since I have not been able to survey other Buddhist colleges.

8[5] A month is divided into two faces (*Chog*): the first face from the 1st day to the 15th day which is known as upper-face, the second face from the 16th to the 30th, known as the lower face. *Chog Sum* means a complete month (with upper and lower faces) and the upper face of the following month, which makes one and half months.