

## *Zhung Dratshang:* **The Central Monk Body of Bhutan**

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Bhutan is regarded as one of the last Buddhist countries where the Vajrayana tradition of Buddhism has flourished uninterrupted and undiluted since its arrival in the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD. Bhutanese culture, tradition, customs, history, and landscape bear the influence of Buddhism. This is attributed to the institutionalisation of the *Zhung Dratshang*, or the Central Monk Body, since its establishment in 1620 by His Holiness Zhabdrung Rinpoche Ngawang Tenzin Namgyel, the Father of the Nation. The unification of the country, codification of the laws, and organisational development of the dual system of governance happened only after establishment of this significant primary institution.

### *Basic Structure*

Although Bhutan had many great scholars and spiritual masters between the 9<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, none of them could establish a formal monastic community or Sangha in Bhutan. It was Zhabdrung Rinpoche who instituted the Sangha at Cheri, as the base for administration at the time. Later, in 1637 the Sangha was moved to Punakha Dzong, which today continues to serve as the winter residence or headquarters of the *Zhung Dratshang*, while Thimphu Tashichhoedzong serves as the summer residence. Currently there are 7,373 monks (with the numbers increasing when district Dzongs were completed in other parts of the country), 275 nuns, and 461 *Gomchens* registered with the Central Monk Body.

According to the Constitution of Bhutan, the *Zhung Dratshang* is an autonomous institution, financed by an annual grant from the Royal Government.

At the head of this institution is His Holiness the Je Khenpo, the crown jewel of the religious hierarchy. The present *Je Khenpo*, His Holiness Ngawang Jigme Choedra, is the 70<sup>th</sup> in line and assumed office in 1996. He is assisted by five *Lopen Lhengyes* who are masters in specialized religious disciplines. They are the members of the Supreme Sangha Council and are conferred ranks equal to a government minister by the Constitution.

Each of the *Lopen Lhengye* is in charge of one of five areas: religious tradition, ritual services, social services, institutions for education, and administration & finance. The Dorji Lopen is chief of the five *Lopens* and normally succeeds to the Vajra Throne of His Holiness the Je Khenpo. Below them are eight deputy minister-ranking officials: the two *Zimpons* (chamberlains), two *Getshog Lopens* (masters of the rites), and the four Prefects. They are further assisted by District Abbots, Heads of Institutions, administrators, and junior monastic officials who are in charge of various divisions such as ritual performers, Mandala and arts, various religious music, masked dances, astrology and twenty-nine offices.

### ***Monastic Education and Practice***

For centuries, the monasteries were the only available centres for learning. The medium of instruction are *Choekey*, the classical language, and Dzongkha, the national language. The unique Dzongkha script known as *Juyig* was created in the early 9<sup>th</sup> century by the scholar Dhenmang Tsemang, and is widely used by monks and nuns. Since the ultimate purpose of monastic education is to impart human values and make one self-supporting in this life, and to enable spiritual progress in the next successive lives, students are taught the revered skills in ritual performances, arts and crafts, grammar, poetry, philosophy, meditation, and a series of codes of conduct that train them to become good human beings.

Skills learned and taught in monastic institutions were not only meant to enhance the spiritual progress of the students, but also prepare them to become productive citizens, to be self-sufficient, and live a happy and contented life. That was how our forebears safeguarded and nurtured the country, making it possible to hand it to us in splendour and in a well-preserved state.

Until the introduction of modern education, monastic education was the only avenue to acquire education and scholarship. Monastic educational institutions remain vital transmitters of knowledge. The medium of instruction is still in *Choekey*, the classical language, and in Dzongkha; therefore, a proficiency and high standard in our national language Dzongkha is maintained.

The monastic schools are categorized into three: *Zhirim* (primary), *Dingrim* (secondary) and *Thorim* (college). In a *Zhirim*, the curriculum begins with the alphabet, spelling, and reading, and proceeds to the memorisation of prayers and chants accompanied by observing daily monastic rules and regulations. The memorisation of texts is essential and consumes quite a number of hours daily. The students also learn various vocational skills in arts and crafts such as painting,

sculpting, tailoring and carpentry. As they proceed to higher classes, in addition to grammar and philosophy, they may specialise in artistic skills such as painting and creating Mandalas, astrology, masked dance, embroidery, or the use of ritual instruments. Many monks become professionals in these arts and crafts.

English is also taught now in the monastic schools and institutions to cope with the changing world, by enabling the monks to become more effective communicators at a time when Bhutan is increasing its contact with the outside world. After completion of their studies from *Zhirim*, they join *Dingrim*, where Buddhist philosophies and other additional subjects such as poetry, dialectics and debating are taught. These studies continue further as students join colleges and are initiated into deeper philosophies at the *Thorim* level.

Besides the Prajnaparamita sutras, Vinaya, Abhidharma, and the thirteen great sciences<sup>1</sup> are taught as main subjects. In addition to these studies, monks have to conduct the daily ritual prayers and services of the monastery or institute and that of the communities living around. All staff and students have to observe very strict monastic rules and regulations due to the fact that they are members of the Sangha community.

The monk's education does not end by his gaining proficiency in Buddhist studies alone. 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* (three years and three phases of the month).

Apart from the main course—the Mahamudra and various creation and realisation meditations—the six yogas or treaties of Naropa (the yoga of psychic heat, the yoga of illusory body, the yoga of clear light, the yoga of consciousness transference or transmigration, the yoga of dreams, and the yoga of intermediate period); six-fold transmission of equal taste or instructions on experiencing the single taste of all phenomena (taking conceptualisation as a path, taking delusions as a path, taking illness as a path, taking gods and ghosts as a path, taking suffering as a path, and taking death as a path); and the seven-fold teachings of Tsangpa Jare on interdependence origination bestowed by the seven Buddhas (Vipasiyan, Sikhin, Visvabhu, Krakuccanda, Kanakumuni, Kasyapa and Sakyamuni) are practiced. These practices are exclusive to the Drukpa Tradition only and are still prevalent in Bhutan.

<sup>1</sup>Pratimokshasutra (*sosor tharpai dho*), Vinayamulasutra (*dbulwa dhotsawa*), Abhidharmasamuccya (*ngoempa kuntoe*), Abhidharmakosa (*ngoempa dozed*), Prajnanamamula-madhiyamaka (*uma tsawa sherub*), Madhiyamakavtara (*umala jugpa*), Catuhasatakasastra (*uma zbijapa*), Bodhisattvacaryavataara (*jangchub sempai choedpala jugpa*), Abhisamayalamkarana-prajnaparamita (*ngoentok gen*), Mahayanasutralamkara (*dodey gen*), Madhiyantavibhanga (*yuetha namjed*), Dharmadharatavibhanga (*choedhang choenyi namjed*) and Mahayanottarantatra (*tbegpa chenpoi gyudlama*)

### ***Engagement in State and Society***

The Central Monk Body has played a vital role in nation-building. For centuries, Bhutan was ruled by either members of the *Zhung Dratshang* or by persons trained and educated in the monastery. Until the institution of monarchy in 1907, members of the Sangha not only assisted the government in planning and development of systems but also in decision-making. There are many accounts of such meetings being held in the *Kachuna* (the high level monastic council).

Until 2008, the Monk Body sent ten representatives to the National Assembly and two representatives to the Royal Advisory Council. This ensured continuity of our unique dual system of governance and permitted intersections of the spiritual and political systems. This also provided a means for both the spiritual and the political systems to benefit each other and to serve the people better. After the transition to democracy, the monastic contribution to the Royal Advisory Council was dissolved. It has not been an easy transition, and there have subsequently been tensions between the government and religious organisations. It could be useful to consider restoring the Monk Body's Representatives in the National Council.

With the advent of democracy in 2008, another major change is that members of the Monk Body are not permitted to vote. This was viewed differently by different sections of our society. As far as we are concerned, it is aligned with the provisions of the Constitution. One significant feature in the Constitution is that any political party that wins the election forms the government and becomes the patron of the *Zhung Dratshang*. Therefore, it is not appropriate for the members of the Monk Body to vote during elections, as their duty is to support whichever political party is duly elected. This is also in accordance with Articles 3 and 7 of the Constitution. In fact, the Sangha, as the refuge and basis of inspiration and blessings for the people, cannot be biased towards or against any political party approved by the Election Commission of Bhutan.

Given the long religious history of the country, the Central Monk Body continues to play an important role in the spiritual and cultural lives of the people. It not only engages in religious practices, but also participates in social services such as helping and supporting programs and projects at national and grassroots level. Besides taking part in fundraising activities, it also makes significant contributions to several non-governmental organisations and national Trust Funds such as the Health Trust Fund and the Bhutan Trust Fund.

Several monastic institutions and temples provide scholarships to children from poor

families. Many elderly men and women are fed and sheltered by the monasteries and temples. The *Dratshang Tewa*, *Rabdeys*, *Shedras* (institutions for higher Buddhist studies) and *Lobdra Tewas* (zonal monastic primary schools) provide scholarships to quite a number of students, most of whom are orphans or disabled. Thus, the Monk Body makes enormous contribution to bettering the lives of people in local communities, as is encouraged by the Monastic Act and the country's Constitution.

The Monk Body is also an important custodian of our unique culture and language. Many historical buildings and sacred art and objects are in the care of the *Dratshang*, to be protected and maintained for future generations. Further, the *Dratshang* preserves and promotes Bhutanese wisdom and traditions. All monks have training in Bhutanese arts and crafts, and in a series of codes of conduct such as the 253 vows, and Bhutanese ethics and conduct. Monks also continue to use special words, phrases and vocabulary in both *Choekey* and *Dzongkha*. As such, the continuity of our national language usage is preserved and continued.

The Monk Body continues to provide spiritual guidance and service to the Bhutanese people in many ways. Since almost every important occasion in the life of an average Bhutanese is invested with religious significance, the monks visit households to perform rites during birth, marriage, sickness, death, construction of houses, consecration ceremonies, promotions, inaugural ceremonies, and other day-to-day functions. They also provide teachings and instructions when requested.

Monks and nuns are, therefore, highly regarded by people from all walks of life. In a fast-changing society driven by globalisation and modernisation, they provide a counterweight of meaning, wisdom, and possibility. Their visible presence cultivates a positive hope to maintain a balance between material and spiritual development; self and others; and to strike the right balance for mutual benefit between the outer world and the inner living beings. As a result, the *Zhung Dratshang's* contribution remains deeply appreciated in our society, to the extent that many monks and nuns are seen as a refuge and are treated with great respect and devotion.

### ***Challenges***

The Central Monk Body functions according to the traditional system that was enshrined in the Vinaya Sutra. Administrative and other decisions are made in accordance with the age-old culture of harmony and fraternity. In policy matters, every decision has to be unanimous and righteous. Therefore, most of the proposed changes that are vital and in accordance with the time and need do not get approval.

For example, projects and programs developed in-house for values education do not get approved by the Supreme Sangha Council due to the fact that the proposal was not conceived or submitted by the intended beneficiaries. The principle is that Dharma teaching has to be requested and received in accordance with the Sutra. It cannot be forced and bestowed for any benefit. However, in modern times, people do not understand this principle, and so, many presume the teaching is not available as they do not know that it needs to be requested.

Another problem is that many members of the public or institutions primarily speak English, so they are not able to receive spiritual guidance from the members of the Central Monk Body, which cannot impart the teaching in English.

Because of both the principle of not teaching unless requested, and its lack of English-speaking members, some even think that the members of the *Zhung Dratshang* are uneducated and not professional practitioners. Thus, several Bhutanese go to the extent of coordinating teachings and empowerment from Buddhist teachers from abroad. Therefore, it is a big challenge for the Monk Body to close the gap with such individuals, and to develop closer relationships and stronger communication with the general public regarding the full set of spiritual resources it has to offer.

For in fact, the spiritual practices prevalent in our country are authentic and undiluted. The practices nurtured by the Central Monk Body are embedded with both theory and practice. In Bhutan, most of the office assistants of the *Zhung Dratshang* have completed one or two terms of *Losum Chogsum* (three years three month retreat). There are several earnest practitioners who have completed several rounds of Three Years Retreat and are still living in the mountains, spending their whole life in meditation and practice.

The Monk Body is also torn between upholding age-old traditions, and at the same time reforming and incorporating new ideas and technologies. For example, in accordance with the traditional system prevalent at the Nalanda University, the Buddhist University at Varanasi has replicated the course levels to two years for BA and three years for MA. This matched the levels and course content for Buddhist studies. Therefore, we followed this tradition at Tango Buddhist University. But all other secular colleges under the Royal University of Bhutan have the 3 + 2 system, which was adopted as per the norms in most of the universities in the world including India. So, we are also compelled to change our system to award a bachelors degree after completion of the first *Rigzhung Lopen* (MA) course, and not after the final year of the *Toenchoedkhen* (BA) courses.

One area that the Central Monk Body has not pursued is the development of closer ties with other Buddhist organizations in the world. We cannot keep ourselves secluded, and our doors closed. It is time we make ourselves known to the world—for many Buddhist masters in other traditions are not aware of the strength and vigour of our practice and heritage. Likewise we wish to know more about other Sanghas and organizations. Apart from the Bhutan Temple at Bodhgaya in India, constructed by the Royal Government, the *Zhung Dratshang* does not have any centres or temples outside the country. Instead, other Buddhist organisations are establishing temples and centres in Bhutan.

Property and fund management is another area that the Monk Body must steward wisely. This is difficult because the monks' extensive training does not cover such topics. All the land and endowments offered by the Royal Government and generous patrons cannot be wasted. They have to be used properly and for the sustenance of the Sangha, the Buddha Dharma, and earmarked ritual services.

However, because monks are not trained in financial and property management, a few companies have taken advantage of these scarce resources and used quite an amount of monastic funds in the form of company shares, but provided zero returns for a decade. Since these funds belong to the monastic community, concerned national organizations and authorities such as the Druk Holding and Investments Ltd. should extend their help and provide their expertise to the Monk Body. I personally favour this because the growth of monastic funds will lead to sustenance of the Sangha, greatly benefitting our country and people.

### **Conclusion**

Bhutan is well known in the world as a peaceful, culturally rich, Buddhist country. We are a country that promotes Gross National Happiness (GNH). Therefore, it becomes the responsibility of all members of the Sangha, as well as other citizens and the Royal Government, to join hands to make sure that the Central Monk Body is sustained and continues to flourish for all times to come.

It is anticipated that our unique culture and traditions, language, Bhutanese ethics, peace, harmony, and GNH will continue as long as the *Zhung Dratshang* continues to exist. Moreover, the existence and activities of this key institution will enhance our inner spiritual development, and make it possible for us to confront or balance the external economic and material development. This will ensure balanced growth, bring harmony and promulgate happiness in our small Buddhist country.