

The History of Dzongkar Choede Monastery

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Summary: Dzongkar Choede Monastery was founded in 1270 in western Tibet's Mang-yul Upper Gung-thang region by the Tibetan king Tri-bum-de-gon, facing his palace Khunzong Karpo — “The White Nest of Eagles”. For centuries it flourished as a center of Buddhist learning, tantric ritual, sacred art and monastic music, housing around 600 monks across Upper and Lower Dzongkar Choede. After the Chinese occupation and the destruction of the Cultural Revolution, surviving monks carried its lineage into exile; in 1972, under His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama and with the support of the Government of India, the monastery was re-established in South India. Today more than 300 monks continue its traditions of study, ritual and Tibetan sacred arts.

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A Living Legacy of Royal Tibet, Sacred Art, and Monastic Learning

Dzongkar Choede Monastery is one of the great historic monasteries of Tibet, with roots reaching back to the royal civilization of western Tibet. Founded in the Mang-yul Upper Gung-thang region, the monastery grew into a renowned center of Buddhist learning, tantric ritual practice, sacred art, monastic music, and Tibetan cultural life.

For centuries, Dzongkar Choede stood near the royal palace of Khunzong Karpo — “The White Nest of Eagles” — facing the seat of the Tibetan king Tri-bum-de-gon, the last great scion of Tibet’s ancient royal descendants. From this sacred landscape, the monastery became a spiritual heart of western Tibet and a guardian of some of Tibet’s most treasured religious and artistic traditions.

Though the original monastery in Tibet was destroyed in the tragic decades following the Chinese occupation of Tibet, the living tradition of Dzongkar Choede did not disappear. Surviving monks carried its lineage, memory, rituals, and sacred arts into exile. In 1972, under the guidance of His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama and with the support of the Government of India, Dzongkar Choede was re-established in South India.

Today, Dzongkar Choede Monastery continues as a vibrant monastic community, preserving the ancient traditions of Tibetan Buddhism while educating new generations of monks in both classical Buddhist studies and modern knowledge. Its chanting, ritual mask dances, butter sculpture, sand mandalas, thangka painting, incense-making, and monastic discipline remain living expressions of a proud and unbroken heritage.

1270 — Royal Foundation in Western Tibet

Dzongkar Choede Monastery traces its origin to the year 1270, when it was founded in western Tibet in the Mang-yul Upper Gung-thang region by the Tibetan king Tri-bum-de-gon. King Tri-bum-de-gon is remembered as the last great scion of Tibet's royal descendants. His palace, known as Phodang Khunzong Karpo — “The White Nest of Eagles” — stood as a symbol of royal authority and Tibetan civilization in the region. Dzongkar Choede was built facing this palace, linking the monastery from its very beginning with the royal heritage of Tibet. This royal foundation gave Dzongkar Choede a special place in Tibetan history. It was not only a religious institution, but also a guardian of the spiritual and cultural life of western Tibet.

14th Century — Establishment as a Monastic Seat

Following its royal foundation, Dzongkar Choede developed into a recognized monastic seat and an important center of Buddhist practice and learning. Over time, the monastery became associated with the great currents of Tibetan Buddhist study, ritual discipline, meditation, and tantric practice. It served monks who dedicated their lives to the preservation of the Dharma and to the continuation of Tibet's sacred traditions. The monastery's name became closely connected with ritual excellence, monastic discipline, and the unique artistic culture of western Tibet.

Centuries of Growth — A Spiritual and Cultural Center

For many centuries, Dzongkar Choede flourished as one of the most important monasteries in western Tibet. It became a thriving spiritual community and a focal point of Tibetan civilization. Monks at Dzongkar Choede studied Buddhist philosophy, practiced meditation, performed tantric rituals, and preserved the monastery's distinctive traditions of sacred music, chanting, ritual dance, and religious art. The monastery also became one of the largest repositories of Tibetan folk and monastic art in the region. Its monks preserved sacred objects, ritual instruments, costumes, musical traditions, butter sculpture, sand mandala practice, and other forms of Tibetan artistic expression. In this way, Dzongkar Choede was not only a place of prayer and study. It was a living treasury of Tibetan culture.

Upper and Lower Dzongkar Choede

At the height of its flourishing, Dzongkar Choede consisted of two monastic communities within the same walls: Upper Dzongkar Choede and Lower Dzongkar Choede. Each section housed more than 300 monks, making the monastery a large and active religious institution with a total community of around 600 monks. The monks followed a full program of Buddhist studies, meditation, tantric ritual practice, chanting, monastic arts, and religious observance. Generations of learned and realized masters dedicated their lives to sustaining the monastery's teachings and traditions. The existence of

Upper and Lower Dzongkar Choede reflects the monastery's historical strength, scale, and influence in western Tibet.

1950–1959 — Occupation and Upheaval in Tibet

The peaceful life of Dzongkar Choede and the wider Tibetan world was violently disrupted after the Chinese occupation of Tibet. Between 1950 and 1959, Tibet's political, religious, and cultural institutions came under increasing pressure. Monasteries, which had long served as centers of learning, spiritual guidance, community life, and cultural preservation, became targets of repression. Dzongkar Choede, like many monasteries across Tibet, faced a time of immense suffering. Monks were forced to flee, religious practice was restricted, and the ancient way of life that had sustained the monastery for centuries was shattered. Of the approximately 600 monks who belonged to the original monastic community before its destruction, only a small number survived to carry the story and traditions of Dzongkar Choede into the future.

1960s — Destruction During the Cultural Revolution

The destruction reached its most devastating point during the Cultural Revolution. During this period, Tibet's monasteries, religious objects, sacred texts, artistic treasures, and traditional institutions were attacked with great intensity. Dzongkar Choede Monastery was razed to the ground. Its buildings, sacred images, ritual objects, and artistic heritage suffered immense destruction. Yet even in this dark period, the spiritual lineage of Dzongkar Choede was not extinguished. The surviving monks carried with them what could not be destroyed: the prayers, chants, rituals, memories, disciplines, and living transmission of the monastery. The physical monastery in Tibet was destroyed, but the heart of Dzongkar Choede remained alive.

1972 — Rebirth in South India

After years of hardship and uncertainty, Dzongkar Choede Monastery was re-established in exile in 1972. Under the auspices of His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama and with the support of the Government of India, the monastery found a new home in South India, near the Arabian Sea, among the green forests and farmlands of coastal Karnataka. The beginning was humble. Mud walls and bamboo thatches served as living quarters, kitchens, and prayer halls. The monks rebuilt their community with courage, discipline, and faith. This rebirth in exile marked one of the most important chapters in the history of Dzongkar Choede. It showed that although the monastery had been destroyed in Tibet, its spirit and tradition could rise again.

The Exile Monastery Takes Root

In South India, Dzongkar Choede slowly grew from a fragile refugee institution into a functioning monastic community. The surviving monks worked to restore the daily rhythm of monastic life: prayer, study, debate, ritual, chanting, meditation, and service. Younger monks were trained in the traditions of the monastery, ensuring that the sacred knowledge carried from Tibet would not be lost. The exile monastery also became a center for the preservation of Tibetan cultural arts. Ritual mask dance, monastic chanting, butter sculpture, sand mandala creation, thangka painting, and incense-making

continued to be practiced and taught. Through these efforts, Dzongkar Choede became not only a place of religious practice, but also a living bridge between old Tibet and future generations.

Dzongkar Choede Today

Today, Dzongkar Choede Monastery is home to a monastic community of more than 300 monks. It remains an active spiritual, educational, and cultural center open to all. The monks continue the monastery's ancient traditions of Buddhist study, chanting, tantric ritual arts, sacred dance, butter sculpture, sand mandala, thangka painting, and traditional incense-making. At the heart of its study program is the training of monks in Buddhist philosophy, logic, debate, meditation, and ritual practice. The monastery follows the Sera Jey monastic university texts for Buddhist logic and debate, connecting Dzongkar Choede with one of the great scholastic traditions of Tibetan Buddhism. The monastery also runs a school for young monks, providing both traditional monastic education and modern learning. In this way, Dzongkar Choede prepares young monks not only to preserve the spiritual traditions of Tibet, but also to meet the needs of the modern world. Its thangka painting class and incense-making center help preserve traditional Tibetan arts while also offering skills and opportunities to young Tibetans.

A Living Heritage for the Future

Dzongkar Choede Monastery stands today as a symbol of resilience, continuity, and faith. Born from the royal civilization of western Tibet, destroyed during one of the darkest periods in Tibetan history, and reborn in exile through courage and devotion, the monastery continues to serve the Dharma and the Tibetan people. Its history is not only a story of the past. It is a living heritage carried forward every day by its monks, teachers, students, artists, supporters, and devotees. From the palace of Khunzong Karpo in western Tibet to the fields of South India, Dzongkar Choede remains a guardian of Tibetan Buddhist wisdom, sacred art, ritual culture, and spiritual discipline. The monastery's journey is a testimony to the enduring strength of Tibetan civilization — and to the unbroken spirit of those who preserve it for future generations.