

Community & Daily Life

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Summary: A monastery cannot live through prayer and study alone. Meals must be prepared, halls cleaned, buildings maintained, young monks taught, elderly monks looked after, accounts kept. At Dzongkar Choede these ordinary responsibilities form a quieter dimension of monastic life, and the tradition treats them as practice rather than as the chores that make practice possible. The same action performed with a different mind is a different action: a monk who washes dishes knowing that hundreds depend on a working kitchen is doing something other than getting the dishes done. When the monastery was rebuilt in exile in 1972, mud and bamboo became living quarters, community kitchens and prayer halls — the three together, because rebuilding a spiritual community and rebuilding everyday communal life were inseparable.

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SEVEN PILLARS

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Sacred Service: Work as Spiritual Practice

Visitors to a Buddhist monastery naturally notice the prayer halls, statues, chanting, debate and ceremonies. These are the most visible expressions of monastic life. But a monastery cannot live through prayer and study alone.

Every day, meals must be prepared. Prayer halls have to be cleaned and arranged. Younger monks need teaching and care. Buildings require maintenance. Offerings must be prepared. Books and ritual objects need looking after. Guests have to be received. Accounts must be kept. Elderly and unwell monks need attention.

At Dzongkar Choede these ordinary responsibilities form another, quieter dimension of monastic life. They remind us that Buddhist practice is not confined to the meditation cushion or the prayer hall. How we perform even the most ordinary task — and why we perform it — can become part of the path.

A Monastery Must Be Lived Into Being

Dzongkar Choede today is home to more than 300 monks. Alongside prayer and ritual, its monks study Buddhist philosophy and debate, preserve traditional chanting and Cham dance, create butter sculpture and sand mandalas, educate younger monks, and maintain traditions such as incense making. The monastery states that its philosophical studies follow the textual tradition of Sera Jey

Monastic University.

None of these activities exists independently. A monk may spend hours studying a philosophical text because another person has prepared his food. A prayer assembly can take place because someone has cleaned the hall, arranged the cushions and prepared the offerings. Young monks can learn because teachers give their time and others look after the practical needs of the school.

The visible spiritual life of the monastery rests upon an enormous amount of largely invisible work.

This has been true for as long as there has been a monastery — through the centuries in Mang-yul Gung-thang as much as in India. Exile did not create the dependence; it made it briefly visible, because everything had to be built again at once. When the surviving monks began rebuilding in South India in 1972, they did not begin with the monumental buildings visitors see today. Simple structures of mud and bamboo became living quarters, community kitchens and prayer halls. The three belonged together. The monks needed somewhere to pray. They needed somewhere to live. And they needed somewhere to prepare food for one another. Rebuilding the spiritual community and rebuilding everyday communal life were inseparable.

Serving the Sangha

In Tibetan Buddhist monastic life, practical work can be understood as service to the Sangha — the community of ordained practitioners. This is particularly clear in the Sera Jey educational tradition to which Dzongkar Choede is connected through its philosophical curriculum: monks, especially in their early years, combine their studies with service in the kitchen, the canteens and the fields, and that service is explicitly associated with the accumulation of merit.

This gives ordinary work a different perspective. When a monk prepares food for hundreds of fellow monks, he is not simply completing a kitchen duty; his work helps sustain a community devoted to studying and practising the Dharma. When someone cleans the prayer hall, the immediate result is a clean floor — but because of that work, the community can gather there. When a teacher spends hours guiding younger monks, he is helping transmit knowledge that was itself passed down through earlier generations.

The value of the work extends far beyond the task itself.

Intention Changes the Meaning of an Action

Buddhism places great importance on motivation. The same physical action can have very different meaning depending upon the mind with which it is performed.

One person may wash dishes while thinking only about finishing as quickly as possible. Another may perform exactly the same task while consciously recognising that hundreds of people depend upon a functioning kitchen. The outward action is identical. The inward orientation is different.

This does not mean that every chore automatically becomes meditation simply because a monk performs it. Rather, ordinary activity becomes part of spiritual training when the mind brought to the

activity begins to change.

A difficult task may reveal impatience. Repetitive work may reveal resistance. Being asked to do something unnoticed may expose pride. Working alongside others may require patience, cooperation and restraint. In this sense, everyday responsibility becomes another place in which a monk encounters his own mind.

Interdependence Made Visible

One of Buddhism's central insights is dependent arising: things do not exist independently but arise through causes, conditions and relationships. Monastery life makes this easy to see.

The monk debating philosophy in the courtyard depends upon the monk preparing tea. The young monk learning Tibetan depends upon the teacher who gives his time. The prayer ceremony depends upon those who prepare the hall, offerings, instruments and ritual objects. The library depends upon generations of people who copied, preserved, transported and cared for its texts. An elderly monk depends upon someone noticing when he needs assistance. And the monastery itself depends upon the wider community of devotees and supporters.

What Buddhist philosophy describes intellectually as interdependence becomes something monks encounter every day. No one sustains a monastery alone.

Work, Study and Practice Are Connected

It is tempting to divide monastery life into two parts: the spiritual activities — prayer, philosophy and meditation — and the practical ones — cooking, cleaning, administration and maintenance. Monastic life does not fit comfortably into such a division.

Study requires food, buildings, books and teachers. Prayer requires preparation. Ceremonies require organisation. Young monks need care as well as instruction. And the preservation of an ancient tradition requires people willing to carry responsibilities that may receive little public attention.

Dzongkar Choede embodies this interconnection. Alongside philosophical study and ritual practice, the monastery maintains a school for younger monks and preserves Tibetan cultural traditions including chanting, ritual mask dance, butter sculpture, sand mandala and incense making. It has also taught thangka painting. Each depends upon people performing particular tasks faithfully over many years.

Merit: The Invisible Result of Work

Much of modern society measures work by visible outcomes. How much was produced? How quickly was it completed? What did it earn?

Buddhist thought introduces another measure: what kind of mind, and what kind of benefit, did the action create? The Tibetan concept of merit — *sönam* — is not simply a reward received for completing religious tasks. It is connected with wholesome intention and with actions that create beneficial conditions for oneself and others.

Seen this way, apparently small actions have consequences extending beyond what is immediately visible. Preparing one meal helps a monk continue his studies. Teaching one young monk helps transmit a tradition. Repairing one roof protects a place of prayer. Preserving one old manuscript may allow teachings to reach another generation. The physical result matters — but it is not the whole result.

No Service Is Spiritually Insignificant

A Tibetan monastery is not without hierarchy. There are teachers and students, senior and junior monks, officeholders and different areas of responsibility, and Tibetan monasteries developed sophisticated systems for allocating religious, disciplinary, economic and administrative duties. Service does not mean that every monk performs every task.

But Buddhist practice challenges the idea that certain forms of useful work are beneath us. A monk teaching philosophy and a monk preparing food have very different responsibilities. Both contribute to the continuation of the community.

This cultivates humility — not because the differences disappear, but because one learns to recognise the value of work that might otherwise go unnoticed.

Discipline in Everyday Life

Monastic discipline gives ordinary actions a spiritual context. Monks live within the Vinaya tradition, which regulates not only religious ceremonies but many aspects of everyday conduct. Monastic training therefore concerns how one lives with others as much as what one believes.

The underlying principle is simple but demanding: spiritual practice does not begin when prayer starts and end when the prayer hall is left behind.

Speech matters. Conduct matters. Care for communal property matters. How food is received and used matters. How one responds to irritation matters. How responsibility is carried matters.

Receiving a Tradition, Passing It On

The present monastery exists because earlier generations refused to allow its traditions to disappear. After the destruction of the monastery in Tibet, fewer than five percent of its community of approximately 600 monks survived. Those who escaped rebuilt Dzongkar Choede in India, beginning again in modest conditions in the early 1970s.

They rebuilt buildings. But more importantly, they rebuilt a community. Despite the destruction in Tibet, the monks in India were able to preserve the monastic tradition that had been transmitted to them. They taught younger monks. They reconstructed rituals. They preserved chanting and Cham. They restored texts, knowledge and memory. They cooked. They cleaned. They organised. They began again.

Every generation at Dzongkar Choede receives something that was maintained through the labour and dedication of those who came before. Its responsibility is to care for that inheritance and pass it

onward.

Work as Practice

Perhaps this is where monastic life speaks most directly to people outside the monastery. Most of us cannot spend our lives studying Buddhist philosophy or participating in monastic rituals. But everyone washes dishes. Everyone cleans. Everyone has responsibilities they would sometimes rather avoid. Everyone experiences impatience, boredom and the wish to finish difficult tasks quickly.

Buddhism suggests that these moments need not stand outside spiritual life. The question can gradually change from how quickly can I get this finished, to how can I do this well, and whom does this action benefit?

At Dzongkar Choede the Dharma is preserved not only in scriptures, teachings, debates and ceremonies. It is also preserved when someone prepares a meal. When a teacher patiently explains a lesson. When a monk prepares the prayer hall before others arrive. When someone looks after a younger or elderly member of the community. When a building is repaired. When accounts are carefully maintained. When a manuscript is protected.

The task may remain ordinary. The intention with which it is performed can transform it.