

Ecology & Simplicity

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Summary: A monastery is a spiritual community and also a material one: monks need food, water, clothing, shelter and books, and a community of hundreds depends on land, energy and the work of many other people. Buddhism does not treat those needs as wrong. It asks a different question — how much is enough? Simplicity here is not minimalism and not poverty, but a training in distinguishing genuine need from the endless multiplication of wants. Behind it lies dependent origination: a bowl of rice contains soil, rain, a farmer, transport and a cook, and the monk who eats it studies on a network of relationships he will never see. The Dalai Lama's distinction between the container and the contained puts it plainly — we care for the river because life depends on it.

Tags:

ECOLOGY

SEVEN PILLARS

SIMPLICITY

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Living Simply

A Buddhist monastery is a spiritual community, but it is also a material one. Monks need food and water. They need clothing, shelter and books. Buildings require maintenance. Kitchens need fuel. Prayer halls need light. A community of hundreds inevitably depends upon land, energy, transport and the work of many other people.

Buddhism does not teach that these material needs are wrong. It asks a different question: how much is enough?

At Dzongkar Choede, simplicity is not an attempt to reject the material world. It belongs to a much older Buddhist training in contentment, restraint and freedom from excessive attachment. And behind that simplicity lies another fundamental insight: nothing exists by itself.

A Life of Enough

Modern life often encourages us to measure well-being through accumulation. A larger house. More possessions. Greater convenience. The next purchase. Buddhist monastic life begins from a different premise.

Material things have their place. Food sustains the body, clothing protects, buildings create spaces for study and prayer, books preserve knowledge, and technology can serve useful purposes. The problem is not the existence of material things, but attachment to them. Buddhist teaching examines

the way craving works: satisfying one desire does not necessarily bring lasting contentment, and very often another desire takes its place.

By limiting unnecessary possessions and consumption, the practitioner meets a fundamental question: what do I genuinely need in order to live well, practise well, and benefit others? His Holiness the Dalai Lama has connected the Tibetan Buddhist attitude of contentment directly with environmental responsibility, observing that contentment places natural limits on indiscriminate consumption.

Simplicity, seen this way, is not deprivation. It is learning to recognise enough.

Mud and Bamboo

For Dzongkar Choede, simplicity is more than a philosophical idea. It is written into the monastery's history. The original monastery in western Tibet was destroyed, and of a community of approximately 600 monks, fewer than five percent survived. In 1972 those who remained began rebuilding in South India, among green forests and farmland utterly unlike Tibet.

The first structures were humble: mud and bamboo became living quarters, community kitchens and prayer halls. The monks needed somewhere to sleep. They needed somewhere to prepare food. They needed somewhere to pray. That was enough to begin again.

What visitors see today grew from those structures into a community of more than 300 monks. The richness of a monastery cannot finally be measured by the grandeur of its buildings. What matters is the life those buildings make possible.

Nothing Exists Alone

One of Buddhism's central teachings is dependent origination — *pratītyasamutpāda* — Things arise through causes and conditions; nothing exists completely independently. The Dalai Lama has explained this not only philosophically but environmentally: oceans, clouds, forests and the planet itself exist through intricate relationships, and disturbing them deeply enough sends effects far beyond the original action.

Consider a single bowl of rice. Before it reaches a monk's table there has been soil, rain, sunlight, seeds, a farmer, water, transport, someone purchasing the food, someone carrying it, someone cooking it, someone serving it. The monk eating that rice may be studying philosophy or preparing for a prayer assembly. His ability to do so rests upon an immense network of relationships he will never see.

The same is true of nearly everything. A wooden door once depended upon a tree. A robe required fibres, water and labour. A book required paper, ink, knowledge and human hands. Even the monastery exists because generations built, taught, cooked, gave offerings and accepted responsibility for one another.

The Mahayana image for this is Indra's Net: an infinite web of jewels, each reflecting every other, so

that the whole is present in every part and every local action propagates through the entire system.

The Container and the Contained

Tibetan Buddhist environmental thought has a particularly clear way of expressing this. The Dalai Lama refers to the traditional distinction between the container and the contained: the environment is the container, and the beings who live within it are the contained. Neither has meaning entirely apart from the other.

He also makes an important distinction. Buddhist compassion is directed toward sentient beings — those capable of experiencing suffering and happiness. Caring for a river or a forest need not mean believing the river itself suffers as a person does. We care for the river because life depends upon it.

The planet, in his analogy, is our shared house. Caring for the house is part of caring for everyone living inside it.

Contentment Is Not Minimalism

Contentment does not mean passivity, and it does not mean nothing should ever be improved. It means learning to distinguish genuine need from the endless multiplication of wants.

This is why simplicity in a monastery should not be confused with modern minimalism. The aim is not to own fewer things because an uncluttered room looks attractive. The deeper training concerns attachment. Can something useful remain simply useful? Can food nourish without becoming an object of endless desire? Can technology remain a tool rather than a source of distraction? Can possessions serve life without becoming measures of identity?

These are questions about the mind as much as about material objects — and they connect to monastic discipline, since the Vinaya places ordinary material life within an ethical framework.

The Material Life of a Monastery

A community of this size inevitably has an ecological life. Hundreds of meals are prepared. Water is used for drinking, cooking and washing. Buildings require electricity and maintenance. Clothing wears out. Packaging becomes waste. None of this is uniquely Buddhist; it belongs to ordinary human life.

But Buddhist teaching encourages attentiveness to consequences. In his message to the COP26 climate conference, the Dalai Lama made this practical, emphasising that even small everyday decisions — particularly how we use water and what we do with things we no longer need — have consequences, and that care for the environment should become part of daily life.

How much water do we use? How much food is wasted? Do we repair something or immediately replace it? What happens to what we throw away? For one person a single action may look insignificant. Repeated across hundreds of people and thousands of days, it becomes something else.

Nature Within Tradition

The natural world also enters monastic life through culture. Dzongkar Choede maintains a traditional incense-making centre, preserving Tibetan skills and providing work for young Tibetans. Traditional incense is a reminder that religious culture itself has a material basis: plants, woods, herbs and aromatic substances become part of ritual life, and pigments, cloth, wood and clay become paintings, statues and buildings.

This does not mean that everything called traditional is automatically sustainable. Natural materials can also be overused. The point is a deeper relationship: cultural traditions depend upon the natural world their materials come from, so preserving a tradition also invites preserving the conditions that let it continue.

Use What Serves the Purpose

Buddhist simplicity does not require rejecting useful technology. The Dalai Lama makes this distinction himself: useful objects and technologies are not inherently problematic, and the question is whether they serve genuine needs or become part of unnecessary consumption.

Use what serves the purpose. Do not allow the tool to become the purpose. Technology can preserve manuscripts, help younger monks learn, carry teachings to someone thousands of kilometres away, and help administer a community. Used wisely, modern tools need not contradict a life of simplicity.

Responsibility for What Comes After

Dzongkar Choede understands responsibility across generations particularly well. Its present community exists because a tiny number of survivors refused to let its traditions disappear. They rebuilt. They taught. They reconstructed rituals. They preserved chanting, philosophy, artistic knowledge and communal memory. What they received from earlier generations, they tried to pass onward.

Environmental responsibility asks something remarkably similar. The Dalai Lama has argued that those living today have responsibilities toward future generations, and should pass on an environment at least as healthy as the one they inherited.

To receive something valuable is also to become its custodian. This applies to a sacred text, a ritual tradition, a language, a monastery — and equally to water, soil, forests and the wider conditions on which life depends. We are temporary beneficiaries of all of them. The question is what condition they will be in when they leave our hands.

What Simplicity Can Teach Us

Most visitors will not become monks, and monastic life cannot simply be copied into ordinary family or professional life. But the questions it raises belong to everyone. What do I actually need? What have I mistaken for necessity merely because I have grown accustomed to it? Where did the things I use come from, who made them, and what happens when I throw them away?

And perhaps most importantly: does having more necessarily allow me to live better?

The ecological crisis is, at bottom, a crisis of identity — rooted in the illusion of a separate self that seeks security through unlimited expansion. We do not need to consume more to be more.

Monastic life offers another measure of abundance. Enough food to sustain the body. Enough shelter to live and study. Knowledge worth preserving. A community in which people depend upon one another. A tradition worth passing on. And a mind gradually learning that contentment cannot be purchased.

To live simply is not to withdraw from the world. It is to see our relationship with the world more clearly. When we understand that nothing is ours alone, simplicity becomes more than using less. It becomes a way of caring for the web of conditions through which all of us live.