

Education & Intellectual Training

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Summary: A monk's education at Dzongkar Choede runs on the Sera Jey curriculum and takes between nineteen and twenty-five years. It is built on five great Indian treatises — Pramāṇavādyāna, knowing, Prajñāramitāśāstra, Prajñāpāramitāśāstra, Madhyamaka on emptiness, Abhidharma on mind and matter, and Vinaya on monastic discipline. Monks memorize the root texts, which are written in mnemonic verse, but the commentaries and the debates are never memorized: memorization builds the structure, and debate is what tests whether understanding holds. Sera Jey follows the textbooks of Jetsün Chökyi Gyaltzen, who is said to have asked two disciples to explain the major texts differently from him, so that later students could sharpen their minds on the disagreement.

Tags: DEBATE EDUCATION SEVEN PILLARS

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A monk who arrives at Dzongkar Choede as a boy and stays the course will still be studying in his forties. The full programme runs between nineteen and twenty-five years. There is no version of it that can be hurried.

What he studies is not a syllabus of Tibetan Buddhism. It is five Indian treatises, written between the fourth and seventh centuries, which Tibetan monasteries have been arguing about ever since. Dzongkar Choede follows the curriculum of Sera Jey Monastic University, one of the great scholastic seats of the Gelug tradition.

The Five Great Treatises

Pramāṇavādyāna (tshad ma), from Dharmakīrti's Commentary on Valid Cognition — logic and epistemology; what it means to know something rather than merely believe it. Prajñāramitāśāstra (phar phyin), from Maitreya's Ornament of Realization — the stages of the path to enlightenment. Madhyamaka (dbu ma), from Candrakīrti's Supplement to the Middle Way — emptiness, and the Middle Way between existence and non-existence. Abhidharma (mngon pa mdzod), from Vasubandhu's Treasury — mind, matter, karma, and rebirth. Vinaya ('dul ba), from Guṇaprabhā's Vinaya Śāstra — the rules of monastic life.

The five run in sequence, each taking years, and the later ones assume the earlier. A monk does not choose between them.

The Fifteen Volumes

In the monastery library the curriculum occupies a single shelf: fifteen yellow volumes, each carrying the Sera Jey emblem — a lotus, a radiant syllable, two deer. This is the monastery's working edition of the five treatises. Fifteen volumes, twenty years. It is not a large shelf for a life's work.

They sit in the Zongchoe Library, begun in 2004 on the personal advice of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, which holds the monastery's philosophical texts alongside historical and cultural material. In late 2024 its holdings began to be catalogued and digitised, with support from the Department of Religion and Culture of the Central Tibetan Administration. There is something worth noticing in a monastery that regards the book as secondary nonetheless taking care to make its books searchable and hard to destroy. Losing the texts once was enough.

Memorization Builds the Shelf

Monks do memorize. Root texts are written in short mnemonic verse and are learned by heart, and in the early morning the sound of memorization carries across the monastery.

But what memorization provides is the organizational structure of the whole curriculum — a framework to hang understanding on. The commentaries and the debates are never memorized. They are retained in relation to the root text, not word for word. Memorization builds the shelf; it does not decide what goes on it.

The traditional sequence is listen, then contemplate, then debate.

There is a stronger version of this point. In this tradition the written book is not the primary carrier of knowledge: the courtyard is, and the teacher's oral transmission is. A text is closer to an index — it fixes the wording so that two monks arguing can point at the same line, but what it indexes is held in people. When the community in Tibet was destroyed and fewer than five percent of six hundred monks survived, what came out was not principally a library. It was the monks who had memorised, argued and taught — and that was enough to begin again.

Debate: Where Knowing Is Tested

Twice a day the courtyard fills. One monk sits — the defender, holding a position. Another stands — the challenger, taking it apart. The challenger may be one monk or a dozen.

Arguments take one of two forms: a syllogism, which states a thesis and its reason in a single sentence, or, far more often in practice, a consequence — an implication drawn out of what the defender has just conceded. The defender must answer: I accept, the reason is not established, or there is no pervasion. There is nowhere to hide in it.

The clap that punctuates each argument is not theatre. The right hand is method, and especially compassion; the left hand is wisdom; the clap brings them together. The left foot stamps at the same moment, representing the closing of the door to rebirth in the lower realms. A monk making an argument is enacting the structure of the path while he makes it.

The Disagreement Is the Point

Sera Jey studies the monastic textbooks — yigcha — of Jetsün Chökyi Gyaltzen, who died in the middle of the sixteenth century. His commentaries are themselves written in debate form.

Tradition holds that Jetsünpa asked two of his disciples to write commentaries explaining the major texts slightly differently from the way he had, so that students in later generations would be able to sharpen their intelligence by debating the discrepancies. Sera Me, the sister college, still uses one of those variant textbooks today.

The disagreement was built in on purpose, five centuries ago, and it is still running. This is why debate is not a teaching method the monastery happens to use. It is what the texts were written for.

The Long Arc

The first three years are spent on Collected Topics, Mind and Awareness, and Signs and Reason — not on Buddhism as such, but on how to reason at all. Only then does the curriculum proper begin: seven years on the Perfection of Wisdom, four on the Middle Way, three on monastic discipline, two on Abhidharma. For those who go on, a further six-year Lharam course ends in public examination and the degree of Geshe Lharampa.

Twenty years, to be examined in a courtyard by anyone who cares to stand up and object.