

Chapter 3

Education in the Monasteries

History of the Growth of Monastic education

One can tentatively place an isolated and sparsely populated Bhutan in its prehistoric period stretching between 500 B.C. to 600 A.C.¹ As mentioned in the later Bhutanese chronicle, *Lhoyi Chhoejung* that in this prehistoric age, groups of people stayed in separate and isolated places without resorting to trade or communication and education, even in the broadest sense, was non-existent.²

Prior to 1914, when two schools were started to impart modern education, monastic education system was relied upon for spiritual and human resource needs. Although the two schools, in Bumthang and Haa, opened the gates for modern education the country had to wait till the 1950s for the door to be completely opened to allow for organized system of modern education.³ Nevertheless the traditional monastic education remained despite the leaps and bounds of progress by modern education. Monastic educations here refer to the teachings through the Mahayana Buddhist traditions. Consequently it becomes necessary to refer to the advent of Mahayana Buddhism in the early seventh century A.C. With Buddhism came the monasteries which became centers of education where calligraphy, music, astrology, herbal medicine, philosophy, stylized dances etc were taught. The main texts of literature consisted of “[1] *chhoejung* (religious literature viz. *Kangyur* and *Tengyur*), [2] *namthar* (religious biographies), [3] *gyalrab* (historical chronicle), [4] *logyu* (records of chronicles), [5] *terma* (treasure texts), [6] *srung* (epics eg. Gesar of Ling), [7] *glu* (folk songs), [8] *nyam gyur* (religious poetry), [9] *nyan ngag* (ornate poetry), [10] *karchang* (catalogues), and [11] *tshig dzod* (dictionary).”⁴ Monastic education would have also included almost all of the *Zorig Chusum* (the thirteen traditional arts and crafts).⁵

Historian Bikrama Jit Hasrat is of the opinion that Buddhism not only brought a religious transformation of the people but it also laid down a process of historical evolution of the country.⁶ It is popularly believed that the Tibetan King, Songtsen Gambo (A.C. 627-649), built two monasteries, the Kyichu Monastery in Paro and

Jambay *Lhakhang* in Bumthang⁷ although another authority casts doubts over this belief.⁸ Whatever be the merits in these claims, Songtsen Gambo is totally overshadowed by the visit of the omniscient saint and teacher Padmasambhava,⁹ about a century later in 746 A.C.¹⁰ He established several sacred religious sites and amongst them Kurjey *Lhakhang* in Bumthang and Taksang Monastery in Paro constitute major spots of pilgrimage for the Buddhists.¹¹ Through his teachings, it is believed, he shed on the country the initial influence in the social and cultural lives of the people.¹² In second visit to Bhutan he was accompanied by the great scholar and translator Denma Tsemang (750 A.C.) and on his back to Tibet he was accompanied by several Bhutanese students.¹³ Gradually various Buddhist schools established in Bhutan which were implanted there from Tibet where they had their origins. The aim of different schools was to promulgate individual traditions. Each had its own set of ritual cycles, meditative techniques and philosophical interpretations. Among them mention can be made of *Bonpo*, *Nyingmapa*, *Brugpa (Drukpa)*, *Kagyupa*, *Gelukpa*, *Sakyapa* etc. *Bonpo* tradition held its sway in Bhutan in the 11th century. This school always maintained a complex substratum of pre-Buddhist beliefs and never gained recognition in Bhutan, though some of their ritual practices still hold sway on the village level.¹⁴ *Nyingmapa* with its sub sects flourished in different regions of Bhutan at different times. This sect also has a unique claim to maintain its teaching intact ever since they were introduced into the monarchical phase of the Tibetan history.¹⁵ Padma Lingpa (1450-1521), a great saint of the *Nyingmapa* School, established several institutes that became some of the most robust centers of Buddhist learning.¹⁶ Another important event was the introduction of the *Brugpa (Drukpa)* Kagyu School in the beginning of the 13th century by Phajo Drugon Zhingpo who belonged to the Middle *Drukpa* (Bar-druk). The two other *Drugpa Kagyu* also entered Bhutan about the same time (Lower *Drukpa Ma-druk* and Upper *Drukpa To-druk*) but were ultimately absorbed into the Middle *Drukpa*.¹⁷ It was the descendants of Phajo Drugon Zhingpo who spread to different parts of Bhutan establishing monasteries and their rule over the lands. Bhutan historian Michael Aris is of the opinion that this “it was surely due to them that Zhab-drung Ngag-bdang rNam-rgyl...was able to build his state after arriving as a refugee...”¹⁸ *Gelukpa* school was founded in Tibet by Tsongkhapa (1357-1419) and this sect drew its spiritual and doctrinal inspiration from Indian teacher

Atisha.¹⁹ Disciples of Tsongkhapa founded many monasteries in western valleys of Bhutan. But this school did not lie so deep in the Bhutanese soil. Consequently they appear to have collapsed as an integrated force when Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal unified the country under *Brugpa* rule in the first half of the 17th century.²⁰ *Sakyapa* school was the last to arrive in Bhutan and they too built their monasteries particularly in Northern Bhutan. Each of these sets of Sakyapa monasteries had its own lineage of lamas. Memoirs of the Sakyapas are preserved in folk tales still recited in Thimphu and Punakha valleys.²¹ Thus along with the light of Buddhist religion, literature and spirituality of various schools were introduced in different learning centres with monks as a disciples or students. Small residences, built by the students, had emerged in the area to give the appearance of a new settlement which came to be known as “*Drong Sar*”.²² This was pronounced as “*Trongsa*” in the local dialect, later became the name of the *Dzong* area. Thus the very name “*Trongsa*” is connected with the idea of education.²³

The medieval society of Bhutan was marked by the existence of a number of petty rulers and different religious traditions in different monasteries. The diversity of traditions and rulers caused great inconvenience to the citizens. Arguably the most vibrant era in Bhutanese history was the 17th century when Ngawang Namgyal, the great leader of the *Drukpa* school of Mahayana Buddhism, arrived in 1616. Commencing with the Simtokha *Dzong* in Thimphu he constructed many important *dzongs*, monasteries and religious institutions leading to the establishment of *Drukpa Kagyu* as the State religion.²⁴ The *dzongs* provided the space for monastic education. He introduced monastic education as a formal learning system by establishing the first monk body in 1622 with the *Je Khenpo* as the head in the monastery of Chary, Thimphu.²⁵ The central Monk Body was established to facilitate learning in Buddhist philosophy, linguistics etc.²⁶ Later *rabdeys* (monastic branches) and *drubdeys* (meditation centers) were initiated in different districts.²⁷ As a consequence, some of the monks emerged as scholars and authors of repute between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.²⁸ Notable in the list were “Shakya Rinchen (1710 - 59), the ninth *Je Khenpo*, Tenzin Chogyal (1701 - 66), the tenth, and Yonten Thaye (1724 - 84), the thirteenth.”²⁹

Ngawang Namgyal also created the office of the *Desi* the head of which came to be known as *Deb*. The *Desis* were the temporal rulers who succeeded one after another from 1651-1907. From the above it is apparent that monastic centres had a crucial role in the progress of the country. It is necessary to add that in the 17th and the 18th centuries, monks took up arms and fought with *Desis* in driving away multiple Tibetan and Mongolian incursions. They also gave moral and spiritual support by invoking the blessings of the guardian deities. *Desi* system came to an end with the enthronement of the first hereditary monarch in 1907. Some of the temporal head of the country were also patron of learning. The second *Deb*, La Ngoenpa Tenzin Drugda (1656 to 1668) introduced the study of medicine, carpentry, arts and education.³⁰ Himself an expert in medicine, arts, sculpture and literature, he established schools for the study of these subjects.³¹ The fourth *Deb*, Tenzin Rabgye (1680 to 1694) exhorted families with three children to send one of their sons to a monastery.³² Though this practice has now completely stopped and children are sent only voluntarily. Sonam Lhundub (1769 to 1773), the 16th *Deb* organized many monastic schools.³³ The 22nd *Deb* Drug Namgyal (1799 to 1803) had many wooden printing blocks made to print many religious books.³⁴

In the year 1783 East India Company's first Governor General of India Warren Hastings sent Captain Samuel Turner to Tibet through Bhutan. In his journal "An Account of an embassy to the court of Teshoo Lama and Narrative of journey through Bhutan", Turner wrote in details about the country. He found the Bhutanese monasteries as the educational centres of the country.³⁵ Government officials were selected from those educated and trained in this educational and religious centers.³⁶

Captain Godwin Austen who was attached to the "Mission of Ashley Eden to Bhutan" in 1863 - 64 has left a valuable account on western Bhutan. He saw "one good result of the monastic system viz. that reading and writing is practiced and taught in the monasteries, the latter often not to be surpassed in beauty and evenness of form."³⁷

On national scale literary activities declined between the mid-19th century and mid-20th century, perhaps because of the political upheavals during the period.³⁸ However, Bhutan experienced a renaissance in traditional learning in the second half

of the twentieth century. Scholars of repute in this period were “*Je Khenpo* Gedun Rinchen, Lopen Norbu Wangchuk, Lopen Nado, Lopen Pema Tsewang, Dasho Lam Sangak, Lopen Gombo Tenzin, Dasho Tenzin Dorjee” - all of whom contributed in the fields of history, language and religion.³⁹ A major landmark in the progress of traditional education came about when Semtokha *Lobdra* (Semtokha School) was established in 1961 under the supervision of Tibetan master Dilgo Khyentse.⁴⁰ Following the Chinese occupation of Tibet and the subsequent influx of Tibetan refugees in India and Nepal numerous Buddhist institutes were established by eminent scholars and masters towards the last part of the twentieth century. It was to these institutes the Bhutanese monks found a fresh source of learning and hundreds of Bhutanese monks went to study there.⁴¹

The two collections- *Kangyur*, the words of Buddha and *Tengyur*, treatises and commentaries by later masters, have been well preserved in Bhutan. In the times past several copies were written in gold and ink upon handmade paper. In the 17th century these were meticulously carved on wooden blocks for printing. Editions using modern press came about in 1995 with 150 volumes consisting of the *Kangyur* and *Tengyur*: *Kangyur* containing 1,115 texts on 65,420 Tibetan folios (450,000 lines, 25 million words) and *Tengyur* containing 3,387 texts on 127,000 folios (835,000 lines, 48 million words). The texts of *Kangyur* were translated over a number of years by approximately 250 Pundits and *Lotsawas* (translator). *Tengyur* has writings of over 700 great masters and were translated into Tibetan by over 370 *Pundits* and *Lotsawas*.⁴²

Monastic educational system in the past

Father William Mackey, the pioneering champion of modern education in Bhutan has mentioned the rich tradition of monastic education in such a way- “Bhutan always had monastic education. Clever young monks were sent to Tibet for 12 to 15 years. They returned to Bhutan with a solid foundation in scripture, astrology, mathematics, medicine and Choeki, the religious of the Kanjur and Tenjur and Zungchen Thusum. These lopons set up centres of Bhutanese religious learning.”⁴³

Nearly every valley in Bhutan had monasteries of its own which preserve the greatness of the Bhutanese artistic and religious traditions.⁴⁴ But those were not only the centres of ritual and religious offerings, knowledge and learning but also was the core of the material wealth. Nobility, aristocracy and commoners all alike supported

these monasteries, where a large number of monks and nuns were constantly engaged in religious discourses, debates, production of sacred literature and other type of sacred performance,⁴⁵ each monastery had a hall for teaching purposes.⁴⁶ The religion encourages the monks and the laity to devote their time to meditation and learning.⁴⁷

Je Khenpo was the head of the monastic system in Bhutan and post still continues today. *Gomchens* or lay monks and *Anims* or lay female monks studied under various masters in monasteries. When a child was selected for entering a monastery he had to go through certain physical tests against deformity and defects in his limbs. After passing the tests, he entered the probation in which he was taught the alphabets, preliminary prayer books and didactic proverbs. After the probationer had memorized the necessary preliminary texts, he was made to formally apply for admission to novitiate ship. He was supposed to pay necessary fees. As part of the admission tests, he had to answer various questions satisfactorily. Then he had to narrate what he had learnt as a probationer. Once he was admitted to the novitiate ship a vigorous training ensued in which even harsh corporal punishments were inflicted for negligent behaviour. Young novices were attached to senior and respectable masters who took the charge of the young students. They taught how to read, the art of liturgy, how to make various types of ritual cakes, instruction in the use of musical instruments, and monastic etiquette. The instruction was mainly in ritual and dogma, but they were also trained as craftsmen. The candidates had to pass many examinations. Till that time, they had to run around as errand boys to the senior monks. The candidates were to display orational and intellectual capabilities in public disputation.⁴⁸ It was the responsibility of the teachers to prepare the novices to master the scripts and also to develop other skills such as learning mask dances, arts and painting.⁴⁹

A young monk learnt his lessons in *Choekey* or dharma language by rote and memorized line after line and verse after verse.⁵⁰ At a later stage the monk could choose to go to a *Shedra* and engage in higher studies in literature, language, philosophy and meditation.⁵¹ When the learner was emotionally and intellectually matured to accept the teachings of Buddha, he was given those teachings. Young and promising monks from different monasteries, spread throughout the country, were sent to the monasteries in Tibet for rigorous study. They came back as scholars well

versed in *chhoe-ked* (the religious classical language of the *Kangyur*, *Tengyur* and *Zungchen*), astrology, health and medicine. Ashley Eden, British envoy to Bhutan in his 'Report on the State of Bhutan' in 1863-64 mentioned that, “---an occasional Lama goes to Lassa for his education and brings back with him a reinforcement to the theological knowledge of the Monasteries.”⁵² They set up centers all over the country along with places of worship. The rich and devout *Drukpas* patronized shrines as a matter of religious merit. Landed estates were set apart occasionally for the up-keep of such establishments, where monks and nuns were housed and maintained invariably at the cost of the state exchequer.⁵³

Difficult living conditions in the isolated hilly terrain of Bhutan led to the growth of a distinct society and culture in that country. Inhabitants were little aware about the outside world and lived happily in their socio - cultural life. In times of crisis they invited monks to recite the dharma scripts so that the harmful spirits would hear the Buddha's teachings and virtues.⁵⁴ The local *Gomchens*, lay monks, had even created a small group of literati Bhutanese in many villages. This literati rural folk had a tremendous influence on the common people as they were well versed in *Choekey*, religious literature, Tibetan type of medicine and folk traditions. These grassroots literates were naturally sought upon for guidance, encouragement, and assistance in time of sickness, birth, marriage and death.⁵⁵ Monastic institutions were the upholder of the tradition of scholarship and learning and at the same time contributed to the establishment of system of human governance. People of Bhutan continued to turn to religious leaders for advice and guidance, not just for religious matter but also for emotional and psychological counselling. The people relied on enlightened lamas on every occasion and they played a multi-functional role of offering basic education, care of the sick, providing moral and ethical guidance to the people. They held a high social status due to their superior learning as religious practitioners.

When the educational facilities were rare, monasteries were the only form of education available and access to it was only to a privileged few- the monks and children of upper level of the society. But with the gradual of awareness among the masses, many sought their education under a private master, who were themselves trained in Tibet on religion, language, poetry, etc.⁵⁶ Thus the monastic education has sustained the Bhutanese society in its spiritual fold for many centuries.⁵⁷

Development of Monastic Education System

Teaching and learning in the monasteries have remained unchanged for a very long time. As the order of the organization became established, it became a tradition. The traditional system developed by the masters became unchangeable and the traditions passed down the generations and changes, if any, was minimal. It is through the respect, faith, and belief of the followers in the masters of the Dharma that the monastic institutions have been able to preserve what had begun many years ago. Monastic education still follows the traditional way of teaching on Buddhist philosophy, logic, astrology, traditional medicine, literature, religious arts etc. Almost all the subjects are related to Buddhism and religion plays the dominant role. When common sciences such as logic, language etc. are taught, it is with a purely spiritual bend.⁵⁸ So traditional education remained more or less traditional strongly steeped in Buddhist morals values. The medium of learning in this system is either *Choekey* (classical Tibetan) or *Dzongkha*. The monks who imparted education in different monastic institutions were trained in meditation and ritual practices. In addition to *gelongs* (ordained monks), there were additionally *gomchens* (lay priests) who undertook monastic instruction in numerous institutions.⁵⁹ Traditional training followed the Buddhist monastic methods of learning by rote, contemplation, debates, exposition etc.⁶⁰ Although there are a variety of schools of Buddhist teachings, monastic education generally attempted to offer simplicity of living⁶¹ with inner enlightenment as the ultimate goal.

When a novice first joins, often at the tender age of 5-6 years, he sits at the rear end of the row inside the central hall of the *dzong*. He is taught under the pastoral care of an elder monk. With the passing of time, he moves up along the row indicating a promotion compatible with his mastery of the scripts and skills. If anyone does not progress as much as he is required to do, he gets moved out of the row to work as temple caretaker inside the monastery and in small monasteries. Often the mature monks are given responsibilities befitting their intelligence and capabilities to look after certain temples, perform ritual tasks and as masters of various instruments and dances. The top graders attend higher education and are put through long years of meditation and discourses under learned masters. They often return as head of the monastery or sub-monasteries or as officials in various capacities.⁶²

A report of the Kuensel published on 3 August 1986, mentioned that, “More than 40 high school students from all over Bhutan were ordained as monks on July 11, the auspicious day of the first sermon by Lord Buddha in Sarnath. They joined the sangha voluntarily from schools in Kanglung, Sarbhang, Samchi, Tongsa, Paro, Yanchenphug, Punakha and Deothang. The initiation was conducted by His Holiness the *Je Khenpo* at Tashichhodzong in Thimphu. The novitiates had to spend a period of acclimatization in Tashichhodzong and then sent to the Tango, Cheri, and Phajoding centres of Buddhist studies. Among other disciplines, they studied the 13 Grade texts of the *Kagyü* and *Nyingmapa* traditions for about nine years. Besides *Choekey*, they had to study Sanskrit, English and Pali. The students were initiated after a special recommendation commanded by His Majesty the King to the *Dratshang Lhentshog* and the Department of Education. An intensive interview was held by the *Dratshang Lhentshog* Secretary and the Director of Education who were later joined by the *Khenpo* of the Phajoding Shedra to base the final recommendation on an in depth understanding of each individual monk. Interviews were held to identify and study their family background, intellectual ability, influences on their decisions, knowledge and understanding of Buddhism, understanding of their choice and its implications and long term religious aspirations. The interviewers were most surprised by the remarkable sense of maturity, confidence and unwavering conviction that was common among all the candidates during the interviews. The interviewers felt that each individual had made his own decisions and had, in fact, been waiting for such an opportunity. Almost every candidate reportedly indicated that the religious inclination had developed in them as early as class five or six. The interviewers report said that at least 75 percent of the students were likely to finish their studies and would play a critical role not only in the promotion and preservation of our country as a Buddhist kingdom but in spreading the Buddhist faith in the world at large”.⁶³ Again a report in the Kuensel stated that “Eight more students have joined the monk body from schools of Punakha, Samchi, Motithang and Choden, from class eight to ten”.⁶⁴

As mentioned in a report of the Ministry of Education, Thimphu there were following monastic establishment in Bhutan in different districts during the Fifth Five Year Plan period-

- 1) “The monk body of Thimphu district plays an important role in promotion of monastic education. The Education Department renders assistance for

promotion of monastic education in the monastic schools in the form of salaries of 18 teachers. This is felt necessary with a view to preserve our rich cultural heritage and religion. These schools are situated at the monasteries of Tango and Cheri, Dechhenphodrang, Paga Goempa and at Phajoding.”⁶⁵

- 2) “The Education Department renders assistance for promotion of monastic education for Mongar Monastic Body in the form of salaries of one teacher for one school in Mongar dzong. This is felt necessary with a view to preserve our ancient and rich cultural heritage and religion, and further promote it.”⁶⁶
- 3) “The monk body of Wangdiphodrong district is regarded as one of the most important organization. The Education Department renders assistance for promotion of monastic education for Wangdiphodrang Monastic Body in the form of salaries of two teachers of one monastic school in Wangdiphodrang dzong. This is felt necessary with a view to preserve our ancient and rich cultural heritage and religion.”⁶⁷
- 4) “The Education Department renders assistance for promotion of monastic education in the district of Bumthang to the monk body in the form of salary of one teacher in Tang Thodra Goenpa. This is felt necessary with a view to preserve our ancient and rich cultural heritage and religion.”⁶⁸
- 5) “The monk body of the district (Lhuntshi) is regarded as one of the most important organization. The Education Department renders assistance for promotion of monastic education for the Lhuntshi Monastic Body in the form of salaries of one teacher of one monastic school in Lhuntshi dzong. This is felt necessary with a view to preserve our ancient and rich cultural heritage and religion and further promote it.”⁶⁹
- 6) “The monk body of Paro district is regarded as the second next to the Central Monk Body. The Education Department renders assistance for promotion of monastic education for the Paro Monastic Body in the form of salaries of two teachers in one monastic school. This is felt necessary with a view to preserve our ancient and rich cultural heritage and religion. This monastic school has at present 20 students (Gelong).”⁷⁰
- 7) “The monk body of Daga district plays an important role in promotion of monastic education. The Education Department renders assistance for promotion of monastic education for the Daga Monastic Body in the form of salaries of 1 teacher of one monastic school in Daga Dzong. This is felt

necessary with a view to preserve our ancient and rich cultural heritage and religion.”⁷¹

Not only the government is taking initiative for establishment of monastic institutions but some of the institutions have been established and run by religious minded people. As mentioned in a report of the Kuensel dated 1 April 1995 that, “After five years of construction with an investment of more than Nu.10.00 million, Garab Rimpoche’s monastic school in Ranjung in Eastern Bhutan is well on its way towards becoming one of the biggest private schools for Buddhist studies in the country.--- With contributions and voluntary labour from the people in the area, about 95 percent of the construction was financed by Garab Rimpoche’s overseas sponsors.- ---Side by side with the construction classes are being conducted for more than 200 monks and anims from all parts of Eastern Bhutan. About 50 more will be admitted in the next few years. -----The aim was to produce monks and anims who would serve the religious needs of the people and to uphold the dharma”.⁷²

Monastic institutions in Bhutan are offering traditional approach to education by preserving and promoting Bhutan’s inherent culture. Monastic institutions are –

Monastic University Committee - The primary duties of this committee are to evaluate policies and programs related to advanced level of studies in the monastic system.⁷³ It has a Chairperson and Vice Chairperson. It also deputes teachers in the *Shedras*.

Dratshang Lhentshog (Monastic Commission) - Established in 1984, it is the uppermost policy making body for the monasteries with Chief Abbot as the Chairperson assisted by members from notable bodies together with the National Assembly.⁷⁴

Zhung Dratshang (Central Monastic Body) - Central monastic body has its seats in Punakha in winter and Thimphu in summer. It controls the monastic educational system all over the country.

Rabdey (Dzongkhag Monastic Body) - Bhutan has 20 dzongkhags in total, each with a Rabdey and a Lama (Priest). The monks’ strength lies between 50 and 400 in each *dzongkhag*.⁷⁵

Dratshang (Dzongkhag Monastic Branch) – They constitute the branches of Dzongkhag Monastic Body and emphasize on monastic arts & rituals.⁷⁶

Drubdey (Meditation Centers) – These being meditation centers are few in number and are situated in secluded areas.

Lobdra (Schools) - There are the centres where new learners get elementary education on monastic order.⁷⁷

Gomdey (Lay Clergy Body) - These comprise of clergy who are married and their process of learning differs from the usual monk order where emphasis is given on practical & ritual performances of Buddhism.

Anim Dratshang (Nunneries) - In these institutions the learners are only women. They follow the same system like other monastic institutions.

Shedras (Colleges) - Monastic institutes for higher studies are called Shedras where monks of high caliber can continue tertiary level education in literature, philosophy, arts, language etc and devote themselves to long period of meditation⁷⁸ unlike in other centres where the primary activities lies in the physical way of conducting ritual and ceremonies. A *Shedra* is arranged as *Zhirim* (Elementary), *Dzingrim* (Middle) and *Therin* (Higher). These are similar to higher secondary (4years), bachelors (2 years) and masters (3 years).⁷⁹ Therefore, a monk enrolled in a *Shedra* undergoes 9 years of rigorous learning. Bhutan currently has 15 *Shedras* spread across the country. As far as the admission is concerned monks who would have spent at least 8 years of study in other centers (*Rabdey, Lobdra, Dratshang*) are eligible for admission to *Shedra*.⁸⁰ Of the 15 *Shedras* or colleges in Bhutan only two of them offer Bachelors and Masters Degree courses. These are Tango Buddhist College in Thimphu and Sang Chokhor *Shedra* in Paro. Tango Buddhist College in Thimphu is a main *Shedra* in Bhutan which was authorized by the fourth King, Jigme Singye Wangchuck in 1988 to uphold and promote the Buddhist philosophy in the kingdom.⁸¹ It offers graduate and post graduate studies. The first batch of 20 monk scholars graduated from Tango *Shedra* in the year 1996. His Holiness the *Je Khenpo* awarded certificates and prizes to them and advised that “Do not make the mistake of thinking that your education ends here, the teachings of Buddha are limitless”.⁸² While some of the graduates had opted to remain in the service of the *Dratshang*,

many of them planned to go into retreat and meditation. In 1765 CE Choglay Trulku Sacha Tenzin founded Sang Chokher *Shedra* in Paro. Ugyen Dorji, Chamberlain of the first King, renovated, upgraded it as a Buddhist college in 1991 with 25 students and began to offer post graduate courses in 2000.⁸³

Curriculum to Monastic Higher Secondary level

Before entry in to the degree level students of the monastic order have to take up four years pre university course with a deep curriculum. This includes- Buddhist philosophy, logic, religious history, Buddhist values and monkhood, evolution of Buddhism in Bhutan and functional English language. Curriculum in particular has relevance to discussion of the depth and quality of contents of Royal University of Bhutan's admission of *Dzongkha* candidates into the initial teacher education and their competency in the subject.

Table 3.1: Curriculum Structure of Monastic Higher Education

SL.	Course Concentration	Degree name in Sanskrit	Degree name in English	Year
1	Tenchoe Khenpo Year I (Master of commentarial works)	Shastri	Bachelors	XIII
2	Tenchoe Khenpo Year II (Master of commentarial works)	Shastri	Bachelors	XIV
3	Rigzhung Lopen Year I (Teacher of ten sciences and philosophies)	Acharya	Masters	XV
4	Rigzhung Lopen Year II (Teacher of ten sciences and philosophies)	Acharya	Masters	XVI

(Source-Namgyel, Singye, *Quality of Education in Bhutan: Historical and Theoretical Understanding Matters*, DSB Publication, Thimphu, Bhutan.2011, p.75)

Specialization leading to a Doctoral Degree

A *Shedra* keeps records of the performance of the students in various subjects. A student is expected to give more effort in the specialized subject. When a student finished Masters Degree, he is considered the master of the subjects: Logic, Language and Philosophy. A student completes all the 13 philosophies which can be condensed to the four theologies of Buddhism which both the Tibetan and Bhutanese Buddhism follow. A student with Masters Degree can continue teaching his subject of specialization for two years, equivalent to an M. Phil. During this tenure, the candidate can enrol for rigorous three years Ph.D. course in the same subject of specialization which also requires writing a thesis. Allowing students to specialize in a field has been adopted from the Nalanda University model, the first ever Buddhist University of the time.⁸⁴

Drawbacks of the Monastic system

The chronology of events establishes that education in the monasteries served the intellectual needs of Bhutan for centuries and that monastic higher education was prevalent before similar rung was attained in the secular one. Graduate and post graduate studies in Buddhism were evident from 1988 when the establishment of a National University of secular order remained a policy document as recent as 1999.⁸⁵ But there are some drawbacks in the monastic system that is why today it has lost priority over the modern system of education. The Government is on the track towards achieving the so called ‘education for all’ goal by 2020 or even earlier and in this endeavour modern education finds a huge favour. Today, with the majority preferring secular schools only a negligible percentage go to monastic institutions for education. In the year 2000 there were 288 monastic institutions in the country with a role strength of 10,035 comparing with 343 modern school with 107,792 number of students⁸⁶ There are various causes behind this -

Firstly, in the monastic system, belief and devotion to the teacher form the crux in this system and the student is discouraged from contest the authority of the

teacher & texts. Although rationality is there in this learning as logic forms the major part in Buddhist philosophy, a learner is seldom given chance to ask questions to fulfill his curiosity. The traditional education is therefore distinguished by passive reception and repetition of an ancient system.⁸⁷ It is not uncommon in the *Shedras* to have a lesson, at times lasting for hours, and have it repeated again in the next day, thus feeding monotonous hours to the student. It is also a fact that the syllabi are also not well formulated and lack a systemic & categorized approach.

Secondly, despite the resistance to modern education and a preference to monastic one in the times gone by modern education has stolen a huge march in the recent years. By 1980's modern education gained predominance and the younger generation looked down the traditional education as a resilient system.⁸⁸ According to their view point monastic learning is static and repetition of rituals. Most traditionalists have not tried to modernize themselves with country's changing times. Majority of the monks have limited knowledge about the Buddhism of philosophy & principles.⁸⁹ The old generation had accepted the liturgical role of the *Dratshangs*, but these are no longer attractive to the younger generations.

Thirdly, actually there is a linguistic and cultural gap between monastic and modern system of education. Medium and mode of communication in monastic education is either *Choekey* or *Dzongkha* and English is absent while in modern system medium of instruction is English though *Dzongkha* is the national language.

Fourthly, among the traditional institutions there is a better system in the *Lobdras & Shedras*. Here the liturgical and pastoral functions are also taken care of besides, as the chief guardians of traditional learning and scholarship, the contribution of preserving and disseminating moral and philosophical leanings as enshrined in the Buddhist canons.⁹⁰ The present curricula are more modern and written examinations have been introduced though no attempt has been taken to blend traditional learning with modern method.

Fifthly, earlier it was the wish of every parent to send at least one of their son in monastery, now the parents dream that their children should continue modern education because today education is considered as a means to attain a comfortable

mode of life. Scientific knowledge and knowledge of English language are considered most valuable in modern society. In contrast monastic education is aimed at one's inner enlightenment rather than worldly happiness and material comfort.

Government's attitude towards the Monastic education

With the initiation of planned economic development in the 1960's, there was a paradigm shift in the state's responsibility from one focused to supporting the monastic order to that on delivering social welfare through economic development.⁹¹ By the middle of the last century, the third King Jigme Dorji Wangchuck, felt a need to de-emphasize priority given to old traditional system if the nation was to prosper.⁹² Mr. Apa B. Pant, Political Officer in Sikkim, in a letter to T. N. Kaul, Joint Secretary to the Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi, dated 23rd may 1955 wrote that, "---- the Maharaja is really a remarkable character. He told me of his plans for the reorganization of the monasteries. He also wants all the monks now to pass an examination before they are formally and permanently taken in. Those who fail are turned out of the monasteries. Formerly all those who were too lazy used to flock to the monasteries. He has also started to give the monks instructions in painting, weaving, curving etc. He said, 'Mr. Pant I want the monasteries to be really places of culture and devotion'. He has been able to get all this done because of his popularity with the common people."⁹³ The fourth King, Jigme Singye Wangchuck, initiated the concept of 'Gross National Happiness' which initiated a fresh concept of philosophy for the kingdom. Bhutanese monarchy has made an attempt towards political liberalization, economic development & social sustainability. In addition to economic sustainability importance was accorded to social sustainability in the objectives and development strategies where it also included the 'preservation and promotion of cultural and traditional values.'⁹⁴ The Government has assured to give impetus in traditional education. Owing to the unique history there is a continued political commitment to monastic education and it appears to receive equal attention as the secular one. Religion and monastic education form the root aspects of Bhutanese culture. One of the elements to Bhutan's pride lies in its culture and existence of Buddhism in its pristine form. The Royal Government is aware of the role played by religious bodies in Bhutanese lives, and it worked in close cooperation with the monastic institutions in the establishment and promotion of *Rabdeys*, *Shedras*,

Rigneys, Drubdeys and Anim Dratshangs. The *Dratshang* was reorganized in 1984 by Jigme Singye Wangchuck to enable the monks to fulfill their ever-increasing duties and obligations. A high-powered body named Council for Ecclesiastical Affairs was set up along with a Secretariat. Since then new *Dratshangs* have been established in Haa, Chukha, Shemgang, Bumthang, Soe, Mongar, Kurtoe, Pemagatsel, Geylephug, Chirang and Samchi. A number of *Shedras, Drubdeys, Gomdeys* and *Anim Dratshangs* have come up.⁹⁵ Since 1987, monastic institutions have taken on an unconventional part by being involved in health and rural sanitation programmes.⁹⁶ The King had a special concern for the progress of traditional education and he frequently visited the institutions of traditional education. We can cite an example from Kuensel dated August 15, 1987, "On July 28, His Majesty the King graciously attended the first anniversary of the newly instituted *Shedra* in Dordey Drak for the ex-students of modern schools who joined the monastic education last year. ----- Addressing the students, the King expressed his appreciation for the great religious devotion displayed by them in joining the monastic order. His Majesty was confident of the progress they would make in their chosen vocation and the benefits they would thereby bring to themselves and to all sentient beings. He acknowledged the challenges and sacrifices facing the students in pursuing a religious life after modern education and career prospects. The Royal Government would make every effort to ensure that they would be well looked after in view of the role they would play in preserving and promoting our religion and culture. His Majesty said that in due course numerous opportunities would open up to the students who pursued their studies conscientiously. Some of them would become Senior *Lopons* or *Netens* in *dzongkhag* monastic bodies, others would become Principals or lecturers in *Shedras* and *Drubdeys*, while a third group might opt for Buddhist medicine. The best and the brightest students also receive training and instructions in various international Buddhist institutions to further enhance their knowledge and understanding of the Dharma. His Majesty advised the students that though traditional education was the most important part of their curriculum, elementary meditation, if carried out side by side, would stand them in good stead by way of mental and spiritual advancement.---- His Majesty's visit was an unprecedented gesture, and is an eloquent reflection of his deep personal interest and involvement in the promotion of the kingdom's religious and cultural heritage".⁹⁷

But following the Five Year Plans of the Government, we notice that a little attention has given to expand country's traditional education. Budget outlay for promoting monastic learning is a very small amount. The total allocation to the Council for Ecclesiastical Affairs, Special Commission for Cultural Affairs and Dzongkha Development Commission during the Eight Five Year Plan was 1.78% of the total budget⁹⁸ with five thousand monks coming under the support of the state.⁹⁹ Additionally, many traditional training centres ran privately with scholars receiving no government support¹⁰⁰ and about 3000 were living on private patronage.¹⁰¹

Conclusion

In spite of various hindrances traditional education in Bhutan is thriving as because of the faith in Buddhism & spread of teachings by Buddhist institutions. After the mushrooming of *Shedras*, and the emergence of many Buddhist scholars, from centres both Bhutan and outside, monastic education nowadays finds itself rejuvenated¹⁰² and is being reinforced through new approaches, methods & curriculum.

Upholding the traditional value system has a deep influence on the Bhutanese majority. The traditional values accords great stress in the proper teacher-pupil relationship keeping in mind the function of the teacher in dispelling ignorance and providing the teachings of knowledge & wisdom.¹⁰³ The system requires the students to observe themselves as patients, the teacher as physician, the teachings as medicine, and the adoption of teachings as a cure.¹⁰⁴ Much importance is given to devotion to the teacher and subjects and texts of the teachings are to be treated with respect.¹⁰⁵ In this learning "education is to be viewed as a process of edification and knowledge as a tool for benefiting the world."¹⁰⁶

Bhutan's basic dilemma and challenge today appears to be a case of striking a balance between modernizing and developing the country without ignoring to preserve its traditional and cultural uniqueness.¹⁰⁷ According to Michael Aris, a great historian of Bhutan studies, "Bhutan was to produce scholars who combine a knowledge and appreciation of its traditional heritage with the new perspectives and methodologies of our own age."¹⁰⁸

Notwithstanding the country's changing phenomenon, respect for traditional learning is stated in a government document looking to Bhutan in 2020 where it is noted: "Our religious and monastic institutions have played a decisive role in the evolution of our nation."¹⁰⁹ One Government of India's report of the year 1977 mentioned that, "Bhutan is the only surviving Mahayana Buddhist monarchy and the subtle accommodation of a new and modernizing monarchical polity with the long background of the theocratic culture provides unique example of attempting modernization without altering the traditional mould of Bhutan."¹¹⁰

However, Bhutan is really facing a sensitive issue because the lion's portion of population are tradition bound people believe in their traditional system, as well as many modern educated people still show strong attachment to the traditional system and they do not perceive it as a conflict but as a question of faith on the traditional system. Perhaps geographical isolation of Bhutan gives shape and supplies impetus to this kind of outlook. Elsewhere the western or modern education has been a bone of contention and conflict but in Bhutan people have adopted modern education despite never having discarded the traditional system of education and approach. Monastic learning systems may be traditional and ancient and at odds with the modern education, but it finds a wide space in the life and thoughts of the Bhutanese where Buddhism teaches spiritual values over material ones, compassion in place of indifference, and detachment rather than accumulation of wealth.

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