



Dzongkar Choede Monastery

Life Together

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Summary: Three hundred people share this place, and it runs on assigned tasks that rotate: cooking, sweeping, setting out the hall, sitting with an elder who can no longer walk easily to the dining room. What a visitor notices is not the organisation but something missing from it — the flicker of this is beneath me. A good part of the community is children, some arriving at eight or nine from the Himalayan border regions, who live in monastic houses with guardian teachers alongside them. Nobody is ranked against anybody: standing rests on conduct, attention and restraint rather than output, so there is no line to fall behind.

Tags:

COMMUNITY

INTERDEPENDENCE

MONASTIC LIFE

Read the original page at: <https://dzongplum.netlify.app/en/community/life-together>



Three hundred people share this place. They are fed three times a day, the courtyards are swept, the hall is set out before a ceremony, and someone sits with an elder who

can no longer walk
easily to the dining room. None of that happens by itself.

The tasks are assigned and they rotate. What a visitor tends to notice is not the organisation

but something missing from it: the flicker of **this is beneath me**. It is community service in the plain sense of both words — service, in service of living together. Buddhist

teaching has a term for the way this all hangs together, **pratītyasamutpāda**, dependent

origination, taken up on the pillar of
[community](/en/seven-pillars/community). In the kitchen it is just the
rota.

The monastery has run this way for seven and a half centuries — through the years in Mang-yul Gung-thang as much as
[since 1972](/en/about/history) in South India. Exile did not create the arrangement. It made it briefly visible, because everything had to be built again at once.

The Work of an Ordinary Day

The work is not an interruption of the practice. It is where a good deal of the practice actually happens.

The Kitchen

Cooking for three hundred starts before the rest of the monastery is awake. Rice, vegetables, tea in quantity, in pots too large for one person to move. Monks rotate through the work, and

a young monk who arrived last year will find himself doing it alongside someone who has been
here for thirty.

Nobody describes this as a spiritual exercise. It is simply the case that everyone in the hall
eats because a few people got up early.

Courtyards and Common Rooms

The debate courtyard is swept by the monks who debate in it. The temple grounds are kept by the
people who use them. There are no staff for this.

Living four to a room, taking your turn at the washing, waiting for others before eating — the

effect of it is not dramatic, and it is not announced. It is simply harder, under these conditions, to keep thinking of yourself as the main character. The same understanding shapes

the work of the [\[health clinic\]](/en/community/healthcare-center) and the monastery's approach to [\[simplicity\]](/en/seven-pillars/simplicity).

The Young Monks

A good part of the community is children. They come from the Himalayan border regions — the

Monpa community of Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh, the Tibetan region of Tsum in Nepal — and from

Tibetan settlements across India. Some arrive at eight or nine.

Who Looks After Them

The school is residential, and the young monks live in monastic houses with guardian teachers

who live alongside them rather than visiting. The job is closer to a parent's than a housemaster's: whether a child has a cough, whether his homework is done, whether he has fallen

out with someone, whether he is homesick.

Which is the part most easily left out of an account of monastic life. These are children a long

way from their families, and somebody has to notice when one of them is unhappy. What they study

is set out under [\[Buddhist education\]](/en/community/buddhist-education) and the [\[western school\]](/en/community/western-school).

Who Decides What

Three hundred people living together need someone to settle who cooks on Thursday and what

happens when two monks stop speaking to each other.

How It Is Organised

The community operates under a transparent hierarchy designed to support practice rather than

exert power. Spiritual leadership is guided by the Abbot (*Khenpo*), while day-to-day discipline, coordination, and communal organization are managed by the disciplinarian (*Gegu* or *Gegeu*) and an administrative committee appointed by the monastery's general board. The people who hold these roles are introduced under [\[abbots and leadership\]](/en/about/abbots-and-leadership) and

[administration](/en/about/administration).

When It Goes Wrong

People who live at close quarters fall out. Here that is dealt with by talking it through rather than by adjudicating between the parties — the aim being that both can go on living in the same building afterwards, which a verdict does not accomplish.

It is worth being plain that this does not always work smoothly, or quickly. A monastery is not exempt from irritation, and three hundred people in one place is three hundred people in one place.

What Is Not Here

A monk who takes twelve years over material another finishes in eight is not behind. He is studying. Nobody is ranked against anybody, because standing here rests on conduct, attention and restraint rather than on output — and those are not the kind of thing that produces a league table.

The effect is easier to notice by its absence than to describe directly. There is no anxiety in the room about falling behind, because there is no line to fall behind.

Something You Can Check

Monks walk differently, and it takes a while to work out why. They are not slow. They set off and arrive when they arrive. What is missing is the slight forward lean of someone whose mind is already at the destination — a lean anyone who has hurried down a street will recognise in themselves.

Nothing has been added to produce that. Something has simply been left out. Seven and a half centuries of people cooking for each other and sweeping their own courtyards is one way of leaving it out, and the monastery will go on doing it whether or not anyone is watching.