



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

Read the original page at: <https://dzongplum.netlify.app/en/seven-pillars/simplicity>



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?

Simplicity here 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 it

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.

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. Technology can serve useful purposes. The

problem is not the existence of material things, but attachment to them — and Buddhist teaching

examines closely the way craving works: satisfying one desire does not reliably bring lasting

contentment, and very often another desire simply takes its place.

By limiting unnecessary possessions and consumption, a practitioner meets a plain 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](/en/about/history), 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 — **pratīyasamutpāda**. 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:

1. Soil

1. Rain

1. Sunlight

1. Seeds

1. A farmer

1. Water

1. Transport
1. Someone purchasing the food
1. Someone carrying it
1. Someone cooking it
1. Someone serving it

The monk eating that rice may be studying philosophy, memorising scripture, 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 around us. 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 of people built, taught, cooked, gave offerings, preserved texts and [accepted responsibility for one another](/en/seven-pillars/community).

The Mahayana image for this is **Indra's Net**: an infinite web of jewels, each one reflecting every other, so that the whole is present in every part and every local action propagates through the entire system.

Interdependence is therefore not only something to be [debated philosophically](/en/seven-pillars/study/madhyamaka). It is visible in everyday life.

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.

A healthy human community depends upon the conditions that sustain it. Clean water matters because beings drink it. Healthy soil matters because beings depend upon food. Forests, rainfall, climate and biodiversity are not simply resources outside human life; they are part of the conditions through which life continues.

> **A distinction worth keeping**

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> 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 that the river itself suffers as a person does.

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> 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 that 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 becoming 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. They also connect directly to monastic discipline: the [Vinaya](/en/seven-pillars/study/vinaya) places ordinary material life within an ethical framework, concerning not only prayer and meditation but the responsible use of the conditions that support religious life.

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 and other materials eventually become 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 extraordinarily 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 appear 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 religious and cultural tradition. The monastery maintains a traditional [incense-making centre](/en/seven-pillars/rituals), 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. Pigments, cloth, wood and clay become paintings, statues, ritual objects 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 allow that tradition to continue.

Use What Serves the Purpose

Dzongkar Choede exists in the modern world. Its younger monks receive [contemporary education](/en/community/western-school) alongside monastic training, and the monastery preserves its traditions using modern tools.

Buddhist simplicity does not require rejecting useful technology. The Dalai Lama makes the

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. It can help younger monks learn. It can carry teachings to someone thousands of kilometres away. It can help administer a community. Used wisely, modern tools need not contradict a life of simplicity — a question taken further under [Buddhism in a changing world](/en/seven-pillars/buddhism-in-a-changing-world).

Responsibility for What Comes After

Dzongkar Choede understands responsibility across generations particularly well. Its present community exists because a tiny number of monks who survived the destruction of the original monastery refused to allow its traditions to disappear.

They rebuilt.

They taught.

They reconstructed rituals.

They preserved chanting, philosophical traditions, artistic knowledge and communal memory.

What they had received from earlier generations, they tried to pass onward.

Environmental responsibility asks something remarkably similar of us. The Dalai Lama has argued that people living today have responsibilities toward future generations, and that we should pass on an environment at least as healthy as the one we 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 upon 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 to Dzongkar Choede will not become monks, and monastic life is not a model that can 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 become accustomed to it?
- Where did the things I use come from, and who made them?
- 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 therefore not to withdraw from the world. It is to see our relationship with the world more clearly — the water we drink, the soil our food grows in, the people whose labour supports our lives, the generations from whom we inherited what we have, and the generations who will receive what we leave behind.

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.