

HISTORY OF DREPUNG

Drepung in Tibet

The Drepung monastery was established in 1416 near Lhasa, by Tsongkhapa, the founder of the Gelukpa sect of Tibetan Buddhism. The Gomang *dratsang*, or college, is the oldest of the four colleges of Drepung. Each college has its specialty, and the focus of Gomang is in philosophy, logic, and debate. The college has a proud history of many great Tibetan scholars and theologians.

Drepung was perhaps the most celebrated monastery in Tibet, and was home to over 10,000 monks before the Chinese invasion—the Gomang *dratsang* alone accounted for 5,500. But in March of 1959, rising tensions between native Tibetans and the Chinese occupiers finally boiled over. Amid a popular revolt, Chinese troops tasked with quelling the uprising moved aggressively against the monastery; the monks fled. Only a handful of Drepung's inhabitants were able to eventually escape to India, following the Dalai Lama. Drepung, sadly, now numbers among the 6,000 monasteries damaged or destroyed by the Communist Chinese.

The Buxa Camp

Expatriate monks, representing all the diverse Tibetan orders, first set up a monastic study center and refugee camp in Buxa, India, on the grounds of a jungle-bound former prison camp. Life there was difficult. The weather was hot and humid, and insects of all types abounded. Food was sufficient, though of a very different type than the Tibetans were accustomed to, and the jungles of India also harbored bacteria unknown in Tibet. Disease, particularly tuberculosis, was a constant foe, and many monks did not survive these years.

Despite the harsh conditions, many held out hope for a prompt return to Tibet. One monk notes, "If we had been told at our arrival that Tibetan independence would be a matter of years, the disappointment would have been unbearable, and many of us would have fallen into a state of depression ... After several years, we realized that independence might not be around the corner, and that countries like India had to wait decades before obtaining it."

Although some were not so resilient, succumbing to despair, others escaped into their studies. "All I thought of was debating—what I had debated yesterday, with whom and



Refugee Camp at Buxa

how and what I was going to debate tomorrow. If it rained, I worried that the debating session might be cancelled,” recalls one monk. Every effort was made to keep monastic studies intact, although resources were greatly diminished. Missing pages or even entire books were copied by hand, mainly on the wrappers of U.S.-donated powdered milk. Holidays were celebrated, albeit without all the usual festivities. Examinations were administered, and many geshe, some of them now abbots of their own monasteries, received their degrees at Buxa.

Relocation and Re-establishment

In 1966, the Indian Ministry of External Affairs was alerted to the conditions of the refugee camps, and it became apparent that the Tibetan refugees would have to be relocated to a place with a more suitable climate. Many monks opposed initial plans for resettlement, fearing having to begin self-supporting schemes in a nation still largely foreign to them and anxious at the prospect of permanent or semi permanent expatriate settlement. A message from the Dalai Lama, urging them to think of the future and to strive for sufficiency, and the option of settling near other Tibetan refugees convinced them to move, and in 1971 the first monks moved to their new locations at Bylakupee (the destination of the Sera and Kagyupa monks) and Mundgod (home to the Ganden, Drepung, Sakya, and Nyingma traditions), both in the state of Karnataka.

Though the Indian government donated the land and provided some assistance with heavy machinery, much of the work of clearing the jungle and laying the foundations of their new homes had to be done by the monks themselves. Previously accustomed to a life of meditation and study, the monks had to learn how to lay bricks and plow fields. Agriculture proved to be difficult, owing to jungle foragers, the monks' inexperience, and the lack of tools (let alone horses or oxen). The necessary manual labor disrupted the atmosphere of study and meditation which the monks had tried so hard to maintain at Buxa.



Rebuilding Gomang Monastery

Yet gradually the new settlements took shape, and the monks' despondent attitudes began to shift. They began to feel, for the first time in years, that they had some control over their destinies. The new monasteries would allow them to properly re-establish their teachings and pass them on to new generations. Self-sufficiency would allow Tibetan culture and religion to be preserved, even in exile, as the monks would no longer be dependent on handouts and rations. As

the final housing quarters were completed in 1974, a monastic routine re-emerged, including the necessary studies and discipline.

Monastic Schools in Exile

The knowledge expected of a student in Tibet was immense, and monks had to devote themselves entirely to their studies. The diverse curricula, traditions, and syllabi of the various monastic orders have been wholly preserved, a point of pride for many Tibetans, but interruptions such as weeding and harvesting sessions—or fending off wild pigs from



Palden Tashi Drepung Gomang Temple Today

the corn crop all night—have been detrimental to the progress of new monks. Time is precious, as geshe who obtained their degrees in Tibet are becoming rare. Many did not survive the years of hardship, and the generation who would otherwise have been succeeding them had their religious education interrupted by exile and resettlement. Those advanced monks who, in Tibet, might have been preparing for their geshe examinations, instead had to contribute their labor to rebuilding their communities. Many of the brightest monks and geshe have left the monastic community to become teachers in Tibetan schools, liaisons to international organizations, or the heads of Buddhist centers.

Between donations, profits from their restaurants, and sales from surplus corn or produced goods like sweaters, the monastic communities have made enough money to plant rice and hire Indian workers to supplement the time-starved monks, but their days remain full of exhausting toil. The monks themselves hold all their land and its production in common, sharing the burdens and the fruits of their labor. But the land grant from India's government was intended to provide only for the original monks from Buxa, and left little room for expansion; growth has been consequently slow.

New monks have been admitted steadily, although at a much younger age than in Tibet, and without the wealthy endowments that often accompanied upper-class students. Life is difficult, as a novice monk does not share in the commune's assets until he is old enough to work, and so he must share meals and living quarters with his teacher. Many of the young monks suffer from impoverished diets and are threatened by malnutrition.

Despite the hardships, these dedicated monks keep the traditions of Tibet alive, and hope remains. Just 62 Gomang monks arrived at Mundgod in 1970, and today the grounds are home to roughly 2000.

Tour Groups

At the behest of the Dalai Lama, Drepung has supported international tour groups since 1999. These small groups, usually numbering around eight monks, travel to foreign lands for months at a time, touring dozens of locations in the USA, Canada, Mexico, or Russia. Exhibitions of sacred art, traditional Tibetan dances and music, religious chants and blessings, and other performances are made with the aim of spreading a message of peace, fostering interfaith dialogue, maintaining the endangered Tibetan culture, and raising money and awareness for their monastic family.



*His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama with the 2003-2004 Tour Group, Sept 7 2003,
at the Tibetan Cultural Center in Bloomington, Indiana*

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