

Jé Khenpo: Bhutan's Chief Abbot

The institution of the Jé Khenpo in Bhutan started in the 17th century. Jé Khenpo literally means the Chief Abbot and designates the highest ecclesiastical post in Bhutan today. The post is also referred to as Lama Khenpo (ལ་མ་མེན་པོ་), the Master Abbot. Leading Bhutan's State Monk Body or Zhungdratshang (གཞུང་བླ་མ་ཚང) and following the Drukpa Kagyü tradition of Buddhism, the Jé Khenpo is the highest religious figure in Bhutan who is appointed based on merit.

The institution was founded by Zhapdrung Ngakwang Namgyel (1594-1651), although the formal title of Jé Khenpo may have been used only after Zhapdrung's demise. Zhapdrung started the new state of Bhutan with the dual system of secular and spiritual laws. The Zhapdrung and his male descendants were to become the hereditary rulers like a monarchy. This supreme throne was to be supported by the two arms of the state: the secular administration led by a Desi ruler and the ecclesiastical affairs which was headed by the Jé Khenpo. The plan for the hereditary rule however failed a generation after Zhapdrung Ngakwang Namgyel because his son and cousin failed to produce a male heir.

Sometime around the turn of the 18th century, the Bhutanese state resorted to having the spiritual incarnation of the founder to head the state. However, due to constant conflict between rival candidates to the throne, the secular power gradually got concentrated in the hands of the Desi and the Jé Khenpos emerged as the most respected religious figures.

The Jé Khenpo is normally appointed from among the senior elders of the State Monk Body based on the merit of the candidate. In addition to being a fully ordained monk, a learned scholar and an adept practitioner of the Drukpa Kagyü rituals and teachings, the candidate must hold the main transmission of the lineage and be able to pass it onto future generations. Thus, the Jé Khenpo candidate holds the post of one of the senior masters or Lopöns of the State Monk Body before becoming the Jé Khenpo. As a Jé Khenpo, the supreme patriarch presides over the most important state rituals and also travels the country giving religious sermons to the general Bhutanese public. He also appoints the monastic elders in the State Monk Body and in its regional monastic centres. Being on the level of

the King in traditional hierarchy, the Jé Khenpo today wears a yellow robe and also uses other symbols of status.

As most Jé Khenpos were learned, disciplined and enlightened monks, they played very important roles in safeguarding the peace and security in Bhutan in the 18th and 19th centuries, when the country was stricken with conflicts between power-hungry and bellicose political chieftains. Using their spiritual authority and influence, the Jé Khenpos often intervened in conflicts to stop major bloodshed and turmoil. They mediated between warring factions and spread the teachings of non-violence and compassion through their teachings. They also lead the State Monk Body to conduct regular rituals and prayers for the welfare of the country and its people.

Jé Khenpos were also great patrons for the preservation and promotion of religious art and architecture which were often destroyed during civilian conflict. Much of Bhutan's local literary heritage is also written by the erudite Jé Khenpos and the spiritual heritage of the Drukpa Kagyü tradition is almost entirely passed down through the Jé Khenpos.

Bhutan has seen 70 Jé Khenpos since the first Jé Khenpo Pekar Jungné (d. 1672) who was a son of the Changangkha *Chojé* nobility in Thimphu. A vast majority of Jé Khenpos were from western parts of Bhutan but a few including the current 70th Jé Khenpo Trülku Jikmé Chödruk (b. 1955) are from eastern parts of Bhutan. The 70th Jé Khenpo, as a progressive spiritualist promoting human wellbeing, animal welfare, ecumenism and cultural diversity, today draws universal respect from the Bhutanese population and also enjoys popularity among Buddhists abroad.

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