

## Gomchen: Lay Ritual Specialists



Gomchen reading ritual texts

*Gomchen* (ལྷོ་མེན་) means "great meditator". This title refers to the lay priests in Bhutan; in other Himalayan regions, such lay priests are referred to as *ngagpa* (ལྷག་པ་), which means "tantric practitioner". For centuries, *gomchen* of Bhutan have played an important role in promoting and maintaining the spiritual well-being of our communities.

It is said that the *gomchen* tradition was started in Bhutan during the 8th century when Guru Rinpoché introduced Vajrayana Buddhism into Bhutan. Guru Rinpoché was a fully enlightened being, supreme teacher of dharma, and also a *gomchen*. Tradition maintains he had an assistant named Haminatha (ཧམིན་ཐ་) from central Bhutan. This student of the Guru is considered the first *gomchen*, and Khandro Mönmo Trikhyil Drön (མཁའ་འགྲོ་མོན་མོ་བློ་གྲོལ་ལྷོ་མེན་) was the first female *gomchen*. Under Guru Rinpoché's guidance, *gomchen* Haminatha accompanied Guru Rinpoché to Tibet. Being highly skilled and trained in all the arts, Haminatha helped construct Guru Rinpoché's treasure boxes that he used to guard precious dharma texts and objects as concealed teachings (*terma*). As a result, generations of *gomchens* have trained in the similar arts such as painting, calligraphy, etc. In addition to the arts, the young *gomchen* train in astrology, medicine,

sacred dance, and drawing mandala-s. They develop competency in all ritual arts and often spend years becoming competent at using ritual instruments such as short and long trumpets, vajra, bell, drums and cymbals. Then they learn how to prepare and care for shrines as well as make tormas.

In Bhutan, there are three primary types of dharma practitioners in the village: monks (དགེ་སྦྱོར་), nuns (མཚོན་མོ་), and gomchens (གློག་མཚན་). Monks and nuns reside in renunciant communities whereas the gomchen are free to stay either in a monastery or in a household. Gomchen is a very special category, and is different from ordained renunciants. They are permitted to marry, have a family and live within the lay community, where he can serve as a spiritual support for the society. Gomchen often earn their living in secular occupations such as farming, but they have received religious trainings and teachings that permit them to perform ceremonies for the faithful. They dress in a red gho that is slightly longer than that of other laymen. In addition, they sometimes have long hair knotted in a ponytail and have a very wide, dark red ceremonial scarf that closely resembles a monk's cloak.

The people who conduct longer-terms retreats are called *tsampa* (མཚན་མཁའ་པ་). They devote their entire lives to retreat, moving from cave to cave, mountain to mountain and from forest to forest seeking the reclusive life in complete isolation. Therefore, the term *tsampa* took over the essence of *gomchen*, as a *tsampa* more or less solely dedicates his entire life to retreat in caves or monasteries, meditating and praying. As with *gomchen*, the term *tsampa* also refers to a meditator. A *tsampa*, however, has long hair and may be wearing a red striped scarf. Those *tsampa* who achieve an advanced stage of meditation may be honoured with a *khamar kabney* as a sign of their higher realizations and thereafter be called *neljorpa* (ནལ་འབྱོར་པ་).

Gomchen have played a crucial role in the traditional early education system. Gomchen receive their education from monastic institution or from private tutors. There are two ways that a young gomchen can train: one is to study as an individual student of an older established gomchen wherein the youngster is like an apprentice who learns directly from the master from start to finish. Many children of established gomchen train this way directly from their father and assist him in rituals as he goes to different villages to meet their requests. The fathers teach their children all arts of rituals, the Buddhist texts, mind training and meditation. If a parent is a non-gomchen, then they can bring their child to a relative who is a gomchen to request the gomchen education and training, or they can request a non-relative yet senior gomchen to take their child as a novice gomchen for individual training. The second way gomchen can receive training is through enrollment in a monastery school. Since the gomchen path is the path of meditation and imparting the Dharma to others, from an early age, gomchen are educated and trained in Buddhist principles.

Gomchen play an extremely important role in their communities, as they conduct most of the rituals needed by local residents. Before the modern education system, the gomchen was usually the most educated person in a town or village, and he was needed for a variety of services. Gomchens had to be a sort of "jack-of-all-trades" and fulfill a variety of requests, from increasing fortunes to removing hindrances through conducting rituals. If a household lacked economic resources, then gomchen would perform the god of wealth puja in those houses in order to invoke the blessing for increased material resources. For those with infertile soil, the gomchen inter sanctified vases in the earth to promote abundant crops. Gomchens also conduct funerals for the lay population, lead public festivals, and officiate weddings. During the festivals, many gomchen entertain the community by performing sacred dances.

In Bhutan, the gomchen are an integral part of every community and serve as an accessible source of Buddhist authority on the community level.

Sonam Chopel is a researcher at Shejun Agency for Bhutan's Cultural Documentation and Research.