

The Land of Monasteries

By

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Abstract

The biggest virtue is the ability to listen to our inner voice, to be able to understand one's true self.

Dharamshala (also called Dharamsala), literally meaning “the abode of Dharma”, is a small town situated in Kangra district of Himachal Pradesh. Located in the Dhauladhar range of Himalayas, Dharamshala (along with McLeod Ganj) is a picturesque and serene place that boasts of a large number of monasteries, after being chosen by His Holiness, 14th Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso, as his city of abode, on being exiled from Tibet in 1960. The upper division of the city, also called McLeod Ganj, was specifically the place where Dalai Lama stayed.

The presence of various Buddhist temples has made this place recognized worldwide for meditation and peace. Moreover, the sight of monks clothed in vibrant maroon and saffron robes is refreshing and calming in some way. One can find traces of Tibetan culture in the entire region.

This popular tourist destination also finds a mention in ancient Hindu scriptures such as Rigveda and Mahabharata.

Keywords

Monastery, Buddhism, Monks, Spirituality, Thangka

Introduction

This article provides an overview of few monasteries of Kangra region.

Meaning of Monastery

Dictionary meaning of the word 'monastery' is a building or complex where monks live and worship. Buddhist monasteries are also called 'vihara' in Pali, although in Tibetan Buddhism, monasteries are often called 'gompa'. Life inside a monastery is usually governed by the rules, customs, restrictions and traditions adopted by the particular monastery. Most of these monasteries also serve as learning centers for its community of monks.

Monasteries usually allow visits to tourists as well as spiritual seekers. On my visit to Dharamshala, I noticed some peculiar features common to all monasteries.

Spectacular Buddha Statue

All the monasteries had a huge statue of Buddha, about 10-15 ft high, in the prime meditation area or temple where utmost silence was maintained. There was calmness and peace in the atmosphere that immediately pacified one's soul. I found myself being allured to the magnificent interiors inside the temple.

Oil Lamps

I also noticed a series of oil lamps placed near Buddha statue and was curious to know their significance.



Image 1: Buddha statue

According to the literature on Buddhism, a lamp is regarded as an important offering to Buddha. A lamp, light or lantern, also known as *dīpa* in Pali, were offered before Buddhist stupas, images of the Buddha and sutra scrolls, and were believed to be a laudable deed on behalf of the donor. Buddhist sutras mention lamps with various kinds of oil. The Lotus Sutra refers to lamps of champaka oil, lamps of *sumanā* oil, lamps of *pātala* oil, lamps of *vārshika* oil, lamps of *navamālikā* oil, and lamps of *utpala* oil, indicating the trees and flowers that produce the particular oil. In Buddhism, the lamp is compared to wisdom, the “light” of which dispels the darkness associated with ignorance. It also teaches that one should be one’s own light.

Prayer Wheels

A series of Prayer Wheels were installed, usually on the circumference of the temple, in each monastery. Spinning the Prayer Wheel was a meditative experience in itself.

Prayer Wheels, in Tibetan Buddhism, are cylindrical devices that are typically made of metal, wood, or cloth and contain Buddhist mantras written on paper, inscribed on metal

plates, or embossed on the object. The outside of the cylinder may also feature various auspicious symbols such as a lotus flower, golden fish, or endless knot. Each turning of the wheel by hand is equivalent in efficacy to the prayer's oral recitation multiplied by the number of times the mantra is printed on the scroll. The prayer wheels are spun clockwise in order to accumulate merit and blessings.



Image 2: Prayer Wheel

Traditionally, a mantra is written in Tibetan script on the outside of the wheel. The mantra Om Mani Padme Hum is most commonly used, but other mantras can also be used. 'Om Mani Padme Hum' is considered as the most beneficial mantra, and often thought of as the condensed form of all the Buddha's teachings.

The most common type of prayer wheel in Buddhism is the Mani wheel. This is a small personal handheld version of a prayer wheel. It is commonly used by Buddhists throughout Tibet, Bhutan, Mongolia, and northern India. Mani means "jewel" or "precious stone" in Sanskrit, and it is believed that spinning this wheel increases the power of the mantra within.

Meditation Bowl

I was intrigued by the concept of meditation bowl, which were available in various sizes, at almost all the shops outside the monasteries. Also called singing bowl, Buddha bowl, prayer bowl, or Himalayan bowl, it is a metal bowl with a thick wooden stick, which when moved around the rim of the bowl produces a melodious sound. I was fascinated to hear a unique soothing musical note from each bowl. It needed some amount of practice and concentration to get that pleasant sound that not only appeases your senses but also creates a vibration in your arm that slowly extends to your body.

The sounds of the singing bowls are extensively used for meditation purposes, and are said to create a kind of energy that may center the frequencies of the body, mind, and soul. Playing these bowls is also believed to cause the left and right sides of the brain to synchronize together, creating a tranquil experience during meditation.

Singing bowls originated in Mesopotamia over 5,000 years ago, and made their way to the regions of Tibet, Nepal and India some 2,000 years ago.



Image 3: Meditation Bowl

Namgyal Monastery

Namgyal Monastery is the current residence of His Holiness. Initially established by second Dalai Lama in the 16th century, this place was re-established by 14th Dalai Lama after his exile from Tibet.

The monastery is located uphill, and has a beautifully decorated temple with a huge serene statue of Buddha, a learning center and a library. The main temple area is surrounded with a series of Prayer Wheels. The monastery allows visitors to sit for meditation, or be a part of the rhythmic chants. With focus on the preservation and conduction of Tibetan Buddhist rituals and practices, it exudes Tibetan culture, and hosts a number of Thangka paintings. The place is surrounded by a marketplace that is a hub for Buddhism inspired products and Tibetan products.



Image 4: Namgyal Monastery

The monastery also has a connected learning center called Tsuglagkhang Complex where monks receive education. One is amazed to see the impressive architecture of the complex. Here you can listen to the lively discussions, converse with monks, and also witness their day-to-day lives.

Entering this place transports you to another world which is calm and tranquil beyond the worldly chaos.

Gyuto Tantric Monastery

Simple architecture, peaceful ambience, immaculate grounds with a breathtaking backdrop of Dhauladhar mountains and lush greens– that was my first impression of Gyuto Tantric Monastery, which is located at a distance of 8 kms from Dharamshala at Sidbhari.



Image 5: Gyuto Tantric Monastery

Spread over a wide area, the cleanliness and serenity of this monastery is so inviting that you find yourself walking up the stairs to the temple which adorns the big Buddha statue among others, thangkas (scroll paintings), and other religious artefacts that provide a perfect glimpse into Buddhist practices and rituals. The temples surrounding the monastery have beautiful and unique architecture with several rows of Buddha statue.

The monastery was founded in 1474 in Tibet by the main disciple of the first Dalai Lama, Jetsun Kunga Dhondup and was re-established in India in 1959. It is the abode of His Holiness the 17th Karmapa Ugyen Trinley Dorje Pel Sangpo since 2000. The Gyuto Monastery specializes in the study of Tantric meditation, Tantric ritual arts, and Buddhist philosophy, and houses about 500 monks.

The rich heritage preserved by this monastery leaves an indelible mark on one's memory.

Norbulingka Institute

Seeped in Tibetan heritage, art and culture, and glorified by a beautiful Norbulingka Japanese-inspired garden with a variety of plants and fountains, this place unfolds like a dream or illusion with captivating views in every corner.

The center of attraction here is a two-storied building called Deden Tsuglakhang Temple or the 'Seat of Happiness Temple' which has a colossal 14 ft tall statue of Buddha Shakyamuni, lovingly crafted by Norbulingka artists from hand-hammered copper sheets. Painted behind the statue are the 12 principal deeds of the Buddha Shakyamuni, and on the sides are the painting depictions of the Sixteen Arhats, the leading disciples of Buddha Shakyamuni. Around the 44 ft high main temple hall, the walls embellish an astonishing 1,173 painted and engraved murals of Buddha. It also has frescoes and drawings of all the Dalai Lamas ever lived. The place of worship is decorated with prayer flags and different Tibetan Buddhist essentials.



Image 6: Buddha Statue in Norbulingka Institute

Norbulingka Institute offers various learning opportunities like woodwork ancient painting, stitching, etc. Once inside the institute, you can see various beautiful pieces of art made by the students, such as garments, home furnishings, artworks and art objects. It also has a doll museum where you can walk through the artistic creations.

Norbulingka offers a perfect atmosphere for soaking oneself in the Tibetan heritage as well as Buddhist teachings.

Conclusion

The journey to knowing oneself that leads one to the path of spirituality has been followed by many before us. Their teachings and wisdom are available in the form of various scriptures followed and taught by different schools of learning and religion. Spirituality and Buddhism are largely considered as synonymous to each other, and Dharamshala is blessed to have been chosen as the sacred place for preserving and imparting such knowledge in its monasteries.

Acknowledgment

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About the Author

Vandana Bhasin is a banker turned writer and artist based out of Gurugram. She is a published author and recipient of numerous prestigious awards for her literary contributions including ALS Wordsmith Award for three consecutive years. Her works are published in more than two dozen anthologies. Her debut book "Roads" was awarded "Best Debut Poetry Book" by ALS in Feb 2021. A bilingual writer, she enjoys writing poetry, short stories and articles.

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