

Religion and Resilience: The Role of Bhutan's Central Monastic Body During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Note: In this article, certain names of institutions, people, gods, and titles are first romanized based on popular pronunciation in Dzongkha. They are followed by renditions in Classical Tibetan or Chokey (chos skad) done in the Wylie scheme. After the second instance, only the romanized version is used. Where the name is a proper noun, it is not italicized. The Bhutanese words are not pluralized using the English grammatical norm. Their singular or plural forms have to be read in the context of their usage.

Keywords: Buddhism, Je Khenpo, Medicine Buddha, pandemic, Parnashavari, religiosity, resilience, spirituality, vaccine, Zhabdrung, Zhung Dratshang

Introduction

THE success story of Bhutan's fight against COVID-19 has gained global attention. The admirable success achieved by a small, mountainous, and resource-strapped country has been widely reported in international media, both print and broadcast. As of March 5, 2022, there have been 14,451 confirmed positive cases of which only seven have resulted in death.¹ The closure of the international border on March 23, 2021 and activation of various prevention and containment measures have been very effective. When the nationwide vaccination was rolled out, more than 90 percent of the adult population was inoculated within a week both for the first dose and also later for the second dose. This again made global news.

The key to Bhutan's success has been rightly attributed to the leadership of His Majesty the King and the Royal Government. Since I have discussed this at greater length in another paper,² here, I will only highlight the fact that he has been on the road and at the forefront of operations for more than 500 days in the last one and a half years and has subjected himself to over 70 days of quarantine after returning from

high-risk zones. Meeting with various local task forces, encouraging frontline workers, providing strategic guidance and advice, and granting a Nu. 30 billion relief package to thousands of individuals, families, and businesses affected by the pandemic, he has been at the helm of the fight against the pandemic. The government, too, has been relentless in planning and enforcing various measures. ‘Resilience’ best defines Bhutan’s response. And there is no doubt that the people’s collective resilience against prolonged impact of the pandemic has been possible due to the King’s sacrifice and leadership, his persona and moral authority, and the agency of the government and its institutions.

Following the exemplary leadership of the King, other institutions have also come to play critical roles in building resilience and contributing to the fight against the pandemic. People from all walks of life have participated in different ways to serve during this difficult time. An important agency in building up moral and psychological resilience has been the monastic community through the conduct of prayers, ceremonies, and rituals. These rituals were not carried out within the strict spatial confines of monasteries and monastic institutions but accommodated popular participation in various ways. Hence, they brought a cultural and spiritual dimension to the shaping of the collective effort in battling COVID-19. It is the role of this other agency, events, and processes, which have not been captured in the international discourse on Bhutan’s success story, that I seek to discuss in this article. Within Bhutan, the role of the monastic community is known and appreciated. It has been acknowledged by none other than the King in various forums.

The monastic community is a broad term encompassing members and institutions of both the Central Monastic Body (Zhung Dratshang [gzhung graw tshang]) as well as numerous private establishments. Here, I will primarily focus on the role of the Zhung Dratshang. By doing so, I do not seek to privilege its role and marginalize that of private monastic institutions. The sheer availability of information on websites and social media as well as newspaper reports has determined this approach. After all, the building up of resilience from the socio-cultural and spiritual angle is not the privileged site of the Zhung Dratshang alone. Nonetheless, the visibility and reach of its agency has been enhanced by coverage as well as participation of mainstream Bhutanese media and an unprecedented use of social media, particularly the Facebook page of Zhung Dratshang, on which this article heavily depends.

My arguments are as follows. One, various activities like prayers, ceremonies, and rituals have contributed to bolstering the psychological resilience of the people. Two, threats and risks posed by the COVID-19

pandemic have provided the monastic community both the time and space to renew and strengthen its relevance to national society. Three, the activities of the Zhung Dratshang often converged with state activities, providing it both visibility and legitimacy. Four, these activities were reproduced in local settings to transmit and achieve the same goals of healing and strengthening resilience. And fifth, the COVID-19 situation gave a boost to the spiritual worship of certain Buddhist deities, which were not as popular and widespread earlier. In order to situate my discussion within a context, it will be helpful to look at recent studies concerning the nexus between religion and spirituality with resilience.

Review of Recent Studies

Substantive and interesting works done in different countries have established how recourse to religion or spiritual pursuits has played a significant role in boosting the resilience of people as they experience emotional and psychological distress and anxiety resulting from impacts of the pandemic. Even in a non-COVID situation, the positive relationship between religiosity and mental health has been well documented. Koenig et al., for example, argued in their review of studies concerning this subject that “religious involvement can serve as a resource that enhances individuals’ mental health and well-being and can prevent the development of mental disorders or speed their resolution”.³ This position has been validated through studies of people who have experienced various negative emotions and mental distress or disorder during the current pandemic.

Zhang et al. examined ‘spiritual fortitude’ among people who experienced resource loss, depression, and anxiety.⁴ They interpret spiritual fortitude as people’s ability to fall back upon or use spiritual and religious resources to deal with negative emotions induced by ‘stressors’ such as the pandemic. After the United States, it was Brazil where the pandemic had the most disastrous impact with over 652,000 people succumbing to the virus. Lucchetti et al. studied the impact of religion and spirituality on minimizing or easing suffering experienced as a result of isolation in Brazil.⁵ They found direct correlation between social isolation and increased vulnerability to negative emotions and, consequently, increased mental health issues. They concluded that spirituality and religion indeed reduce suffering by influencing health outcomes and that it is important for public health measures to ensure access and continuity of spiritual and religious activities during the pandemic.

Another study in Pakistan looked at spirituality as the ‘mediator’ between resilience and hopelessness in the context of the pandemic.⁶ The authors examined the correlation among 540 participants with ages ranging between 18 and 60. They observed that “the negative influence of hopelessness has a strong effect on resilience, but mediator spirituality [plays an] important part to control the negativity and enhance resiliencies during the outbreaks such as pandemics”.⁷ A very similar study by Gülerce and Maraj was done in Turkey through online survey of 546 adults between 20 and 69 years of age using a resilience scale. They arrived at a similar conclusion as the Pakistan case study, i.e., the levels of spirituality and hopelessness have an inverse relationship.⁸ The higher the level of spirituality, the lower the level of hopelessness, and therefore, the higher the resilience.

In Italy, COVID-19 containment measures required people to stay in their homes for three months. As in many other countries, it was a traumatic experience for people with physical and social distancing impacting mental health and well-being severely. Coppola et al. surveyed 1250 adults during the first lockdown in 2020 (February 25th–May 26th) to study the spiritual well-being of the people and psychological impact of the lockdown.⁹ The study also confirmed the existence of a relationship between spiritual well-being and mental health. Those who experienced lower spiritual well-being also experienced poorer mental health.

Recognizing the importance of spirituality to deal with adverse and traumatic life situations, the US Veterans Administration Health Care System has developed the Mantram Recitation Program, which encourages veterans to recite a mantra from different spiritual traditions. Oman, et al., are almost prescriptive in recommending the integration of reciting holy words and names built into the mantras as a means of managing stress and improving the ability to cope with COVID-19 on a daily basis.¹⁰ Their study argues that in the short term, reciting mantras fosters mindfulness, shifts focus from unhelpful and negative thoughts, and activates “adaptive, coping-supportive mental frameworks”.¹¹ In the longer term, it has the benefit of “managing immediate stress and building long-term resilience”.¹² Likewise, Koenig provides six suggestions for remaining healthy and resilient. Three of them are religious: 1) deepen your religious faith, 2) love thy neighbor as thyself, and 3) love and care for your neighbor in practical ways.¹³

A quick scan of studies concerning resilience and religiosity in different communities along different faiths generally confirms the positive relationship between mental health or well-being and people’s

spiritual practices and background. Most of the recent studies are based on such a framework and the surveys and analyses conducted using various methodologies are specific to the pandemic and draw from people's experiences during lockdowns and isolation such as quarantines. However, there are either limited or minimal references to the actual religious or spiritual practices other than mentioning prayers, supplications, group online activities, and recitations of scriptures. The studies have looked at people as consumers and beneficiaries of religious activities and how these have impacted their lives during the pandemic. The details of the actors, activities, strategies, modes, and organizational and institutional arrangements for conducting, providing, or facilitating religious activities and spiritual services during the pandemic are generally missing or mentioned only in passing.

The studies also shy away from looking at the pandemic as an opportunity for some people and communities to further renew or strengthen their spiritual pursuits and are limited to viewing religiosity from a largely therapeutic and clinical understanding related to stress, anxiety, and depression. Religious involvement and spiritual pursuits indeed transcend the therapeutic and clinical benefits. As much as they improve or bolster resilience during critical moments or life situations, their primary goal of spiritual salvation, enlightenment, or liberation for the devotees is not reduced or marginalized by privileging therapeutic benefits like stress management through love and compassion or meditation.

This article, therefore, seeks to approach the question from a different angle by focusing instead on the religious institutions and spiritual leaders who have provided the space, access, guidance, and support to contribute to people's overall well-being and resilience. In doing so, it provides a perspective and appreciation from another agency and point of view. The study is limited nonetheless in that it has not conducted surveys or interviews to assess how the religious activities and spiritual services have either sustained or enhanced people's resilience. This is a subject matter for another enquiry. Another issue that merits further enquiry is to look at the religious activities during the pandemic as serving the twin purposes of healing and resilience as well as the pursuit of ultimate enlightenment as during non-pandemic times.

The Zhung Dratshang: Historical and Contemporary Roles

Establishment

Since this article will scrutinize the role of the Zhung Dratshang

in providing religious and spiritual services during the pandemic, it is important to understand the Zhung Dratshang's historical and contemporary roles in Bhutanese society. This will situate the study in its proper context. The Zhung Dratshang was founded in 1621 when 30 monk novices were enrolled at Chari in North Thimphu. Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel (hereafter Zhabdrung Rinpoche) conducted the initiation ceremony of this group, which would constitute its founding members. While he remained the overall head of both secular and religious administration of the country, the responsibility of everyday management of the community and education of the monks was entrusted to a senior and accomplished monk, who would later serve as the First Je Khenpo¹⁴ (rje mkhan po) or Supreme Abbot.

Although it was founded in Chari, it moved to Punakha Dzong after the latter's construction in 1637. By then, there were about 300 monks.¹⁵ Punakha Dzong became the center for both the monastic community and the new state of Bhutan. The monastic community moved to Tashichho Dzong in Thimphu for its summer residence and to Punakha in winter, as it does to this day. The Zhung Dratshang thus came to be known also as Pungthim Dratshang, the monk body of Punakha-Thimphu, while its branches in different parts of the country came to be known as *rabdey* (rab sde), although they are also now increasingly referred to as *dratshang* of particular districts. Assisting the Je Khenpo were four senior monk leaders known as *lopens* (slob dpon), a number which increased to five in 2005.¹⁶ Each of them is responsible for specific monastic tasks and is assisted by different monk officials. In the districts, the *rabdey* continue to be headed by an abbot called Lam Neten. He, too, is assisted by local monk officials.

Governance

Zhung Dratshang actually means the monastic body of the state or government (*zhung* [gzhung]). Since it was the center of learning and scholarship, the rulers of Bhutan initially originated from the monasteries. The monastic government of Bhutan — a Buddhist government known as Palden Druk Zhung (dpal ldan 'brug gzhung) — was first proclaimed around 1626. Zhabdrung Rinpoche remained the head of the new state. Before he entered strict retreat and passed away in 1651, he appointed a monk ruler known as Druk Desi ('brug sde srid — hereafter *desi*) to look after the secular administration of the country. Although the *desi* and Je Khenpo administered the secular and spiritual affairs of the country respectively, they derived their authority from Zhabdrung Rinpoche and later from his successors known as *gyaltshab*

(rgyal tshab). This unique political system of diarchy came to be known as Chhoe-sid Lug-nyi (chos srid lugs gnyis). While the first four *desi* and a few subsequent ones among the 59 of them were monk rulers, all the 16 *gyaltshab* were monks. Thus, the Zhung Dratshang played a critical role in the governance of the country for 280 years between 1626 and 1906, when the last *desi* retired.

The political system of monastic government established by Zhabdrung Rinpoche became increasingly vulnerable to factionalism, conspiracy, and civil wars, which weakened it over the centuries. To succeed it, a modern monarchy was established in 1907. Since then, the Zhung Dratshang focused primarily on spiritual affairs with a minimal role in governance, but its influence in society was undiminished. It continued to be supported by the state. When the National Assembly of Bhutan was established in 1953, a few seats were allocated to the Zhung Dratshang and *rabdey*. Likewise, it also was given representation in the Royal Advisory Council established in 1965. Its members represented and articulated views concerning monastic affairs. When parliamentary democracy was introduced in 2008, the monastic representation ceased, in keeping with the Constitutional provision that religion and politics should be separated and that religious personalities must remain above politics. Buddhism was recognized as a spiritual heritage with the Constitution, requiring the state to provide support to the Zhung Dratshang. The Constitution also specifies how the Je Khenpo and senior monk leaders will be appointed.

Historical and Contemporary Roles

Although the Zhung Dratshang's role in governance and legislation has ceased, three important historical roles it performed continue even in contemporary times. The first is its primary and fundamental responsibility as the repository, holder, and promoter of the lineage of Drukpa Kagyu ('brug pa bka' brgyud) Buddhism. This school originated from Mahasiddha Tilopa (988–1069 CE) in India, and was introduced to Tibet by the Great Translator and Yogi Marpa (1012–97 CE). Through an unbroken line of succession, it continued and flourished in Bhutan. The Kagyu School branched into three schools known as the Upper, Middle, and Lower Drukpas between the 12th and 13th centuries. Later, in the 17th century, the Middle Drukpa branched into a Northern and a Southern school. The one that flourishes in Bhutan is the Southern Drukpa Kagyu or Lhodruk (lho 'brug), introduced by Zhabdrung Rinpoche. In order to preserve and promote the teachings, it is organized into educational institutions (*lobdra* [slob graw]) and *shedra* [bshad

graw]), prayer and ritual centers (*dratshang* and *rabdey*), and retreat centers for meditation (*drubdra* [grub graw]).

The second important role the Zhung Dratshang executes is providing religious and spiritual services to the lay people and local communities. From conducting rituals and ceremonies during birth, illness, and death of people, holding mass initiation and blessing events, reciting prayers and performing rituals during auspicious days in homes, performing consecration ceremonies for construction of houses and monuments and propitiating various deities, to providing astrological services, the Zhung Dratshang's influence and embedding in society is primarily through this role. Besides, it also conducts religious festivals known as *tshechu* (tshe bcu) and *domchoe* (sgrub mchod) at periodic intervals in monastic establishments. These include the performance of prayers and mask dances for the spiritual benefit and entertainment of the people. For those interested in practicing spirituality alongside their lay occupations, the monks also administer vows and initiations, *wang* (dbang) and *luung* (lung), to recite mantras or engage in specific spiritual activities.

The third is a very significant role as priest-officiant for state functions and events. In fact, this role provides the Zhung Dratshang an important interface with state and politics in symbolic, ceremonial, and spiritual roles. It is the Je Khenpo and Zhung Dratshang's most important customary role to preside over the coronation of the Kings of Bhutan by conducting special prayer ceremonies and transformative rites as the Dharmaraja.¹⁷ They have also presided over royal weddings and naming ceremonies of the Crown Prince. The opening sessions of Parliament and many local governments are presided over by monks from the Zhung Dratshang who perform specific prayers and rituals. They also preside over consecration ceremonies of government projects, monuments, or official celebrations. For example, the celebrations of National Days, His Majesty's birthday, and other national events are always preceded by prayers and ceremonies performed by them. While the Zhung Dratshang has the primary responsibility of presiding over state functions and events, it is not closed to masters and monks from private monasteries. There are shared spaces as well, and members of monastic communities of the Zhung Dratshang and other Buddhist schools often cooperate with each other over religious matters.

Having discussed the historical origins and contemporary roles of the Zhung Dratshang, I will now highlight and analyze various activities and services it provided and performed during the pandemic. We will see how the various activities fall within the purview of its three roles, particularly the second and third ones.

Sadhana of Medicine Buddha and Tara Parnashavari

Bhutan is one of the three Buddhist kingdoms in the world, the other two being Thailand and Cambodia. It is one of the seven Buddhist countries, the others, apart from the three kingdoms, being Sri Lanka, Mongolia, Myanmar, and Laos. However, it is the only Buddhist country where Vajrayana Buddhism is popularly practiced. Hence, the practice of various Buddhist deities has flourished for centuries. The practice of Medicine Buddha has not been unknown, particularly to those who provided or sought healing from various ailments and afflictions. That of Tara Parnashavari was less known. The onset of the pandemic led to the widespread popularity of these two deities owing to faith and belief in their quick and potent healing powers. The popularity was enhanced and heightened by the broadcast and social media. I will now discuss how each of the deities gained popularity within the context of the pandemic.

Medicine Buddha

Before proceeding further, it is important for non-Buddhist readers to understand who Medicine Buddha is. Known as Sangye Menlha (sangs rgyas sman lha) in Tibetan and Bhutanese, he is depicted in iconography seated in a lotus posture. His whole body is blue, which symbolizes healing and purity. In his left hand, he holds a bowl filled with medicines. His right holds a medicinal plant.

It is said that the practice of Medicine Buddha was taught by Lord Buddha himself at Vaishali in India at the request of Bodhisattva Manjushri. It was introduced in Tibet in the eighth century by Indian Buddhist master-scholar Shantarakshita.

The oldest Medicine Buddha sutra we know about dates from the seventh century. In that sutra, we are told the story of a bodhisattva, Medicine Buddha, who made twelve vows about how he would help living beings after attaining enlightenment. The holistic healing of mind and body was an important focus of his vows: he promised to help eradicate pain, disease, and disabilities of all kinds, as well as promote good health and optimal flourishing.¹⁸

Even as the pandemic was beginning and spreading from Wuhan in China, His Holiness the Je Khenpo, who is the Supreme Abbot of the Central Monastic Body, conferred spiritual initiation and blessings of Medicine Buddha on March 20, 2020. Only two weeks earlier, i.e., March 5th, the first positive case had been detected in Bhutan. In

adherence to the COVID-19 protocols, which had then been recently instituted, the initiations were given live through TV and social media and from his official chamber in Tashichho Dzong. Actually present in the chamber were a few senior monks and government officials. The announcement for the initiation was done through both social and mainstream media. For example, the Facebook page of the Zhung Dratshang notified:

To pacify and heal all the outer and inner sickness and diseases including the COVID-19 pandemic around the globe and for the wellbeing of all sentient beings, His Holiness the Je Khenpo Trulku Jigme Choedrak will confer a Medicine Buddha initiation which will be a live broadcast on BBS1 and 2 on 20th March from 2.30 pm–5.00 pm.¹⁹

The BBS or Bhutan Broadcasting Service is the public radio and TV station. This announcement was followed by a four-line prayer, in Tibetan with English translation, for the purpose of the invocation of Medicine Buddha.

The Je Khenpo said before the initiation that the Bhutanese people must pray wholeheartedly and with devotion for the pandemic to end, for infected people to be cured, for others to remain uninfected, and for those who succumb to attain peace and liberation. He also said it was important to pray for the accomplishment of the goals of decisionmakers and front liners and for scientists and researchers to develop a vaccine soon. When prayers, aspirations, and strategic interventions go hand in hand, it is certain to achieve results. The initiation and empowerment blessed and taught people the basic method of visualizing Medicine Buddha and reciting prayers and mantras associated with him.

The Je Khenpo attributed the genesis of the pandemic to centuries of exploitation of other animals and their habitats to meet food and other requirements of humankind, and other destructive habits. The pandemic, he said, was karmic retribution. But we can pray and engage in practices to overcome it.

It was a significant prefacing of the actual initiation and empowerment. Since the Je Khenpo is highly revered, his words and advice are respected and taken seriously: “More than 9,000 Bhutanese including those from the Middle East, the USA, Australia, and beyond received the oral transmission (*Lung*) and blessings (*Wang*) online.”²⁰

In the aftermath of this initiation, many people started the practice of Medicine Buddha. Besides individual practice in homes, I have seen

groups of people at different times and in different locations undertaking the practice. The BBS frequently broadcasts a short recorded video of a small group of monks led by a senior master of the Zhung Dratshang conducting a condensed practice. This video is actually a guided practice for those who either missed the initiation or need continued spiritual coaching on how to carry out the practice after having received the blessings and initiation. For the benefit of ordinary people who are interested in undertaking the practice, the Je Khenpo also composed a brief daily *sadhana* of Medicine Buddha and made it widely available.

Besides granting initiation and blessings to the people, he also presided over the conduct of major accomplishment prayers and rituals of Medicine Buddha. For example, one such commenced on December 22, 2020 at the monastic centre of Namdroling in Lhuntse, Eastern Bhutan. Likewise, he led 300 monks presiding over and conducting Medicine Buddha prayers and *sadhana* for nine days from May 3 to 12, 2021. Many sacred pills (*jinlap*) and holy water (*ngagchhu*) were consecrated during that time. These pills and water are believed to be blessed by Medicine Buddha as he is invoked during the *sadhana* practice.

The Zhung Dratshang stated, “And today, in an effort to pacify the aggravation of the current pandemic, the Central Monastic Body distributed *Ngagchhu* (holy water) and *Jinlap* (sacred pills) to be distributed across Bhutan.”²¹ The sacred pills and holy water were sent to hundreds and thousands of people including Bhutanese living in Australia and the United States. The COVID vaccines were yet to be developed, undergo trials, and to be approved. For the devotees, the sacred pills became the Bhutanese-Buddhist antidote to the disease. It boosted confidence and psychological resilience of the Bhutanese people and other devotees.

Parnashavari or Loma Goenma

The worship and practice of this deity was hardly known in popular spiritual space before the pandemic. This is not to suggest the worship and practice did not exist. She is 20th of the 21 Taras, a popular Buddhist *dakini*. The most widespread practice of Tara constitutes reciting the 21-praise *sadhana*. Each *sadhana* consists of a four-line stanza. One such stanza is dedicated to Parnashavari.

Homage to you, Tara, whose two eyes — the sun and the moon —
Radiate an excellent, illuminating light;
By uttering HARA twice and TUTTARA,

You dispel all violent epidemic disease!²²

But, unless one is a practitioner who understands the spiritual architecture, content, and meaning of the prayers, which are always in classical Tibetan, the ordinary persona saying Tara prayers may not know who Parnashavari is, let alone the 21 Taras. The *sadhana* of the 21 Taras is generally succeeded by the recitation of the 10-syllable mantra of Green Tara (*om tare tuttare ture soha*), whereas the mantra specifically invoking Parnashavari has 19 syllables (*Om Pishatsi Parnashavari Sarvazora Prashamanaya Sowaha*). *Encyclopedia Britannica* describes this deity as follows.

Parnashavari, Sanskrit **Parṇaśavarī**, in Vajrayana or Tantric Buddhism, a goddess distinguished by the girdle of leaves she wears. She is known as Lo-ma-gyon-ma in Tibet and as Hiyōi in Japan. Parnashavari is apparently derived from an aboriginal deity, and one of her titles is Sarvashavaranam Bhagavati, or “goddess of all the Shavaras” (a tribe in eastern India). Invoked to fight disease and epidemics, she is represented with a smiling but irritated expression, stamping on personified figures of fever and smallpox.²³

The Zhung Dratshang administered initiation and blessings for the practice of this deity. To encourage and guide people in the practice, the BBS continues to air the melodious and moving mantra. A concise *sadhana* practice of her was compiled by Leytshog Lopen or Karma Acharya of Zhung Dratshang and shared through social media.²⁴ The practice of this deity as well as of Medicine Buddha was encouraged by Buddhist masters and monasteries of other countries as well. For example, there was a live transmission by Lama Choedak Rinpoche on April 11, 2020 ‘To Heal the Coronavirus Pandemic’.²⁵ Likewise, the Drong Ngur monastery in Tampa, Florida, also has hosted weekly Parnashavari practice sessions with Drupon Thinley Ningpo Rinpoche since March 20, 2020. They were held on Zoom and livestreamed through Facebook. This monastery is part of the Drikung Kagyu Dharma Centers of Chetsang Rinpoche. He requested his centers all over the world to practice the Parnashavari *sadhana* and mantra to mitigate the effects of the current COVID-19 pandemic.²⁶

While the Zhung Dratshang promoted the practice of Parnashavari in the context of COVID-19, similar developments were taking place in other Buddhist centers and communities. Because of easy accessibility online to various events and teachings abroad as well, it reinforced and

legitimized what the Zhung Dratshang also promoted. This promotion received further legitimacy, recognition, and visibility due to the involvement of the BBS, a public broadcasting media, as a primary means of reaching out to individuals and communities.

Monastic Edicts

In addition to initiation and blessings bestowed upon the people to practice prayers and *sadhanas*, the Zhung Dratshang also conducted prayers, rituals, and ceremonies on its own to avert and mitigate the dangers posed by the pandemic. Most of these were conducted in monastic establishments and institutions as well as retreat centers spread across the country, especially after the Je Khenpo and Dratshang Duenmang (graw tshang 'dun mang) or Monastic Assembly issued monastic edicts. In the last one year, four such edicts were issued to the monastic institutions under the Zhung Dratshang.

The first one was directly issued on December 23, 2020 under the seal of the Je Khenpo. It was a very brief one instructing masters and monks of the monastic community to conduct purification rituals of deities like Vajrasattva (rdor rje sems pa) and Vajravardarana (rdo rje rnam 'joms). In order to invoke blessings and sanctify the water used in the purification ritual, he prescribed the recitation no less than 10,000 times of the mantras of the deities. Alternatively, he prescribed three to seven days of Peaceful Fire Offering (*gzhi wai sbyin sreg*), less ostentatious in external display of ritual proceedings but focusing more on accumulating the mantras and on the deity's practice. Along with this, he reminded ordinary people to recite the mantras of Medicine Buddha, Avalokitesvara, or Guru Padmasambhava.

The edicts and directives were immediately implemented in the monastic community. A December 24th post reads,

In obedience to His Holiness the Je Khenpo's command, 100 monks led by His Eminence Dorji Lopen is presiding over the Lhamo Barchoed in the Dukhang of Punakha Dzong. Simultaneously, His Eminence Laytshog Lopen along with 100 monks are performing the Medicine Buddha ritual. All are requested to make aspirations and offer prayers.²⁷

The next day, i.e., December 25th, Dorji Lopen made the Fire Offering for three consecutive days at Domla Goemba in Punakha. Another post on December 28th states, "In accordance with His Holiness the

Je Khenpo's command, all Dratshangs and Shedras are conducting prayers to combat the Covid-19 pandemic. In addition, smoke offerings, and Lhamo Dhueselma rituals, among others are being conducted in Dratshangs all over the country."²⁸

The second edict was issued on January 13, 2021 by the Monastic Assembly on the instructions of the Je Khenpo. It began by highlighting the danger posed to the country by the pandemic and the relentless effort and sacrifice of the King, the government, as well as the people in ensuring that not a single life was lost to the pandemic. It stated that the Je Khenpo had conducted divinations to decide which rituals and ceremonies would be most effective in deterring the threat posed to the Bhutanese people. It went on to applaud the members of the monastic community for having endured for many days in conducting rituals and ceremonies for the welfare of the country and the people, but said that the times called for greater perseverance. In the past also, when plagues and epidemics had affected the country, the recitation of the supplication prayer for Zhabdrung Rinpoche, emanation of Avalokitesvara, had been found to be most effective. The edict urged members of the monastic community to do likewise in the ongoing crisis, devoting no less than two hours to reciting the supplication for more than three months, in addition to other rituals and ceremonies.

Following this edict, His Eminence Laytshog Lopen provided live on BBS the initiation and interpretation of the supplication prayer on January 30, 2021. The previous day, the Zhung Dratshang had shared a video on its Facebook page encouraging everyone to recite the prayer "as much as possible in order to combat the current pandemic and consequently, bring world peace".²⁹

The third edict was issued on May 13, 2021 in the context of the second wave of the pandemic in India. It asked all monastic institutions to devote themselves to reciting sacred mantras associated with Guru Padmasambhava, Avalokitesvara, Medicine Buddha, and *sadhana* of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal for over a month commencing the following day. The edict was prefaced by the following: "Since the origin of COVID-19 last year, it has spread all over the world. The situation in our neighbouring countries have become unbearable, and the danger to our country is also imminent."³⁰ This short edict ended by instructing the monastic establishments to distribute to people in different communities sacred water blessed after performing *sadhanas* associated with Vajrasattva and Vajravidarana.

The fourth edict of January 21, 2022 was issued by the Monastic Assembly specifically in the context of the omicron wave. To mitigate

it, the monastic establishments under Zhung Dratshang were asked to perform three days of rituals associated with Palden Lhamo (dpal lhan mo) or Mahakali as well as the supplication prayers for Zhabdrung Rinpoche.³¹ The following day, Zhung Dratshang posted a video clip showing the Dorje Lopen leading 300 monks at Punakha Dzong performing the ritual.³²

Supporting Government Initiatives

Extending support to various COVID-19 protocols, restrictions, and containment measures which were prescribed and initiated by the government has been an important role that the Zhung Dratshang continues to play in the fight against the virus. This is significant as it lends a degree of informal but spiritual and moral legitimacy to prescribed health practices and protocols. Although the Zhung Dratshang is apolitical and hence will not contradict or undermine any government actions or inactions, any lukewarm support or even absence of it can be a challenge for the success of government initiatives.

For example, a Facebook post of January 6, 2021 showed pictures of monks seated to pray in monasteries wearing facemasks and observing social distancing protocol. The post read, “Glimpses of monks in Dratshangs and Shedras diligently following the COVID Protocols repeatedly reminded by the Ministry of Health”.³³ During the two nation-wide lockdowns (August–September 2020 and December 2020–January 2021), and third lockdown enforced in districts where community transmission of omicron was detected (since January 16, 2022), monasteries and temples were also closed to the public. Religious festivals are major events annually for congregation of people in hundreds of thousands. One of the most popular is the Thimphu Tshechu conducted annually within the sacred precinct of Tashichho Dzong. In September of 2020 and 2021, the Tshechus were held with only monks performing mask dances while a cultural troupe performed folk songs and dances. These were broadcast live on TV and even streamed on social media so that people did not miss the festivals, yet remained protected from the possibility of festivals turning into super-spreader events.

A September 8, 2021 post stated, “The annual Thimphu Lhamoi Drubchen and Tshechu will be broadcast LIVE on the Zhung Dratshang Facebook page since spectators will not be allowed to gather in person due to the pandemic.”³⁴ Similar announcements had been made in September the previous year.

Likewise, a bi-annual highlight of the Zhung Dratshang's activities is the movement from Thimphu to Punakha for its winter residence and vice versa in summer. It is both a sacred and spectacular event as monks walk in procession carrying the most sacred relics for some distance and then carry on in vehicles. Thousands of people throng the street to receive blessings from the monks and relics. The Zhung Dratshang discouraged the people from doing so in the pandemic. A May 10, 2021 post read:

In line with age old tradition, the Central Monk Body will be returning to Thimphu from their winter residence Punakha on the 12th of May, 2021, corresponding to the 1st day of the 4th month according to the Bhutanese calendar. Unlike the previous years, due to the current surge in COVID cases, the Zhung Dratshang would like to announce that people are requested not to gather and line up along the roadside. We request everyone to adhere to the health protocols.³⁵

On October 15, 2020, His Eminence Laytshog Lopen posted a short video clip urging everyone to take seriously the practice of washing hands with soap to prevent the transmission of the virus. He recalled how Lord Buddha, Nagarjuna, and other great masters emphasized physical well-being constituting an indispensable fundamental for spiritual pursuit.

On November 1, 2020, the Je Khenpo launched an initiative called 'Our Gyenkhu' to instill a sense of collective responsibility in the public to fight the pandemic. The video recording of the event's proceedings was posted on Facebook. Likewise, in the very early days of the pandemic, he emphasized the importance of following health advisories and COVID-19 protocols. Before the initiation and blessings of Medicine Buddha on March 20, 2020, he pointed out how important it was for people to follow the health advice of experts. He highlighted how even Lord Buddha heeded the advice of physicians even though he was already enlightened. "I cannot stress enough on how important it is for us to listen to the advice of the health experts. It is critical for us to follow the instructions of the DOs and DON'Ts. Even in my own case, I too, am following instructions given by the health experts."³⁶

During the rollout of the nation-wide vaccination in March and April 2021, the Zhung Dratshang asked all monks and nuns above 15 years of age to register for the vaccine on the website of the Ministry of Health. "While the vaccine is VOLUNTARY, it is MANDATORY to REGISTER."³⁷ On March 29th, the senior monks of the Dratshang

became some of the first people in the country to take the first dose of the vaccine. The Zhung Dratshang posted the following that day: “Today, led by His Eminence Dorji Lopen Rinpoche, the four other Lopens of the Zhung Dratshang, His Eminence Gyalsay Tulku, and monks of Tago-Dorden Tashithang University got their first dose of the Covid Vaccine.”

The post had the picture of Dorji Lopen taking the vaccine from health personnel. Likewise, monk leaders in monastic establishments across the country also took the vaccine. This was very important in encouraging people to accept the vaccination when the global press was reporting side effects of various kinds which spread alarm and had the effect of discouraging people from taking the jab. Even when the second vaccination was rolled out, I was in Punakha Dzong on July 20, 2020. I was there for an official program that was not related to COVID vaccination. Since we could be administered the vaccine anywhere, I decided to take it at Punakha before the official function began. When I went to receive the jab, Tsugla Lopen, Yonten Lopen, and Tshokyi Lopen, having arrived early, had already taken their second jabs and were waiting for the mandatory 30 minutes of medical observation for any side effect. Other people followed them. The fact that senior and eminent members of the Zhung Dratshang volunteered to take the vaccines first was not only perceived to be auspicious for the vaccination program, it gave tremendous confidence to other people to follow their lead. Since vaccines were being administered within the precincts of the sacred Punakha Dzong, it assumed a heightened spiritual significance.

Prayers for Phuntsholing Outbreak

The border town of Phuntsholing became the battleground for Bhutan’s fight against COVID-19 between April and July 2021. The residents of the town had to live through 115 days of lockdown. This must have been one of the longest lockdowns anywhere in the world. People’s livelihoods were at stake with business having come to a total standstill. The King intervened to grant income support for four months to enable people to pay rents and utility bills as well as procure essential supplies. It came as a huge relief to the people.

The Zhung Dratshang conducted special prayers and rituals for the residents of this town. On August 16th, it circulated a message to eight monastic institutions in southern Bhutan instructing each one to perform a set of prayers and rituals. The circular stated that the specific prayers and rituals were identified through divination conducted by the Je

Khenpo and the School of Astrology based in Thimphu. For example, 20 monks led by Laytshog Lopen were tasked to perform the prayer ceremonies at Rinchening Goenpa in Phuntsholing. Between August 17th and 23rd, prayers started as early as 5 am and went on till 7 pm. “As commanded by His Holiness, the astrologers came together to see the astrological readings of the town. As the COVID-19 cases are more in the Southern belt, offering *Kurim* was one of the events to be conducted here to avert the risks posed by the pandemic.”³⁸

Other monks conducted similar prayer recitations and rituals in the southern districts bordering India. The list of monastic institutions and assigned prayers and rituals were as follows:

Sl. No	Monastic Institution	Prayers and Rituals
1	Rinchening Goenpa, P/ling	Zung Dra-nga, Ri-lung Thruesol, Palden Lhamo’s Thrukong, Neypo Gyatshar. To be performed for seven days by Laytshog Lopen and a group of monks from Zhung Dratshang. On the last day, the ritual of Lhamo Bachog must be conducted.
2	Kamji Lhakhang, Chukha Dratshang	Elaborate rituals of Namjom, Ri-lung Thruesol, Palden Lhamo’s Thrukong, Neypo Gyatshar. On the last day, the ritual of Lhamo Bachog must be conducted.
3	Tashi Choling Shedra, P/ling	Sa-dag Thrugchoe, Shagbum, Lhamoi Jinseg, supplication prayer of Jigten Wangchuk, Seryoed Do, Mamo Thrukong and as many Chi-glu and Sog-lu for one month.
4	Namgye Choling Dratshang, P/ling	100,000 Chabdro, 100 times of Lhamoi Torchung, 100,000 Mamo Thrukong, Sutras of Mamo, Medicine Buddha, mantras of Norjue and Norlha, Sherub Nyimpo, Sengdongma, Dugkar (100,000) and hoisting flags of Sengdongma, Dugkar and Siddhi.
5	Pasakha Dratshang, P/ling	Drolma Yudog, Shernying Duedog, 100,000 times Tshigduen Soeldeb, Lui Pangkong, Lu-bum Karnag Thrasum and Lu-tor for one month.
6	Samtse Dratshang	Complete recitation of the entire set of Kangyur.
7	Gelephu Rabdey	100,000 times recitation of the elaborate Sampa Lhundrup prayer.
8	Samdrup Jongkhar Rabdey	100,000 times recitation of the elaborate Barchoe Lamsel prayer.
9	Indo-Bhutan international boundary	Hoisting of prayer flags.

The circular also stated that 1000 prayer flags should be hoisted along the Phuntsholing-Pasakha highway, which is adjacent to the international border. Besides, sacred amulets pills and blessed water were to be distributed to the community in the south.

Purifying the Vaccines

Bhutan received a total of 550,000 doses of AstraZeneca vaccine as part of India's Vaccine Maitri program. The first lot of 150,000 doses was delivered on January 20th,³⁹ and the second lot of 400,000 doses on March 20th. In a symbolic diplomatic gesture, the Indian Ambassador to Bhutan along with the Prime Minister and Health Minister were at the Paro International Airport to receive the vaccine deliveries. In addition to the officials were the representatives of the Zhung Dratshang. Even before the vaccines were dispatched from the airport to the depot for storage before rolling out the jabs, they were purified at the airport by the senior monks. The January 20th post read: "His Eminence Laytshog Lopen Sangay Dorji Rimpoche conducted the purification ritual and offered his blessings as the AstraZeneca Covid vaccine arrive in the country, today."⁴⁰

Bhutan did not begin the vaccination immediately. It waited for the second shipment of doses to arrive in March. When it did, a three-day ritual of Medicine Buddha was conducted at Paro airport to bless and purify the vaccines. On March 20th, the post read, "Starting from today, the Sangay Menlha (Medicine Buddha) Drupchen is being presided for three days at the Paro International Airport to bless the Covid vaccine."⁴¹ The post on March 21st added, "Tomorrow, on the last day of the ceremony, the vaccines will be blessed through initiation, making the vaccine not only effective but also sanctified by the blessings of Sangay Menlha."⁴² On the last day, the purification rituals for the vaccines were conducted by Dorji Lopen and Laytshog Lopen.

The purification rituals and spiritual aspects elevate the status and position of the vaccine to the next level, beyond being mere medicine. In the socio-religious context, we observe the symbolic transformation of the vaccine from being a medical agent to a sanctified healing substance, maximizing its acceptability by the people. It is as much a vaccine as it is a blessed or sacred substance after the end of the rituals.

Astrological Readings and Recommendations

I have already mentioned in the table above the recommendations of the

School of Astrology regarding various rituals and prayer ceremonies. Astrology is deemed very important in the everyday life of the Bhutanese people. Although the first shipment of vaccines arrived by January 20th, the government decided to initiate the vaccination only by April. This is because the School of Astrology had identified March as *da-nag* or an inauspicious month. This also gave time for the second shipment to arrive. So, when the vaccination rollout began, not only were there enough doses for the entire adult population, the inauspicious month was also over.

Another significant contribution by the School of Astrology was the recommendation of the most auspicious day to initiate the vaccination. This astrological reading was prescribed based on the request made by the government to identify a suitable day. This day turned out to be March 27th! Prior to the vaccination drive commencing at 9.30 am on that day, the doses had been distributed throughout the country. Upon arrival of the vaccines in different districts, the monastic bodies in these districts conducted the purification or *thruesol* ceremonies once again. A *thruesol* by the Je Khenpo in Lhuentse on March 25th marked the completion of the vaccine distribution across the country.⁴³

The School of Astrology had also recommended that it would be auspicious if the first jab was given to a 30-year-old woman born in the year of the Monkey. Hence, Ninda Dem became the first Bhutanese to take the jab followed by the Prime Minister and his family members. In preparation for the moment, Ninda visited sacred sites the previous day. She was quoted as saying “I would visualise the person who would inject me as the Medicine Buddha and chant the Sangay Menlha prayer.”⁴⁴

Just as the *thruesol* ceremony was conducted upon arrival of the vaccines at the Paro airport, likewise, it was also conducted by the local administration and local monastic communities in different parts of the country where the vaccines reached. The local governments also went around looking for women born in the year of the Monkey to initiate their own local vaccination drives. A news report of March 29th reads: “The local governments then looked for women of that age to ensure nothing goes wrong with the campaign. Most of these women visited and prayed at the local temples, abodes of local deities, before receiving the vaccine. Most didn’t have any side-effects, a few experienced minor discomforts.”⁴⁵

Therefore, many 30-year-old women who were public servants, farmers, business owners, etc., became the first persons to take the vaccine in different parts of the country. In the district of Chukha, for

example, Thinley Choden received the jab from a pharmacy technician, who was not only of the same age but her close friend.

For monks, the astrologers recommended that a male born in the year of the Dragon be the first to receive the vaccination. Hence, a young monk named Phub Tshering lead the vaccination rollout for the 335 monks of the Zhung Dratshang at Punakha. As the nationwide vaccination for children between the ages of 5 to 11 commenced on March 5, 2022, a girl born in the year of the Bird became the first one to receive the vaccine at 10.30 am. Again, the day and time was recommended by the School of Astrology.⁴⁶

Since January 16, 2022, lockdowns were enforced in many districts including the capital city after detecting community transmission of omicron. The omicron wave was triggered after a positive case was detected in a contained area accommodating expatriate workers for a hydro-power project in the district of Wangdi Phodrang. The administrative division of the Zhung Dratshang issued a notification preventing monks from leaving the precinct of Punakha Dzong, and requiring COVID-19 tests for those who needed to return inside the dzong.⁴⁷ Realizing that the closure of monastic precincts may make difficult the access to spiritual and religious services, particularly astrological readings for various everyday purposes, the Zhung Dratshang published the names and personal mobile numbers of all monk astrologers in the twenty districts of the country. People were encouraged to contact these monks for any astrology services.⁴⁸

Conclusion

The role of the Zhung Dratshang in enabling people to deal with the risks posed by the pandemic has been critical by boosting and shoring up their psychological resilience. As I have discussed here, this became possible through multiple spiritual services and other means. The spiritual services became available in three modes. One, through the provision of blessings and empowerment to practice the specific *sadhanas* and supplication prayers such as that of Medicine Buddha and Parnashavari. Two, through the performance of healing rituals and prayer ceremonies. Finally, through partnership with the government to conduct specific tasks such as supporting its initiative and undertaking purification rituals for vaccines and prescribing astrological recommendations in administering vaccines.

The provision of initiations and empowerment enabled ordinary people to do the spiritual practices at home or otherwise based on their

convenience. Once initiation and empowerment have been received, any lay person can also perform *sadhanas* and spiritual practices. In popularizing the practices of two deities associated with healing (Medicine Buddha and Parnashavari), those who took to such practice made spiritual healing and protection an individual effort. There was thus a diffusion of healing energy in society through the spiritual practice of *sadhanas* of these deities at the individual level. Led by the Je Khenpo and the monks in monastic establishments, the practice by ordinary people in their homes made the spiritual means of healing more widespread, which contributed to strengthening psychological resilience at both individual and community levels. Since Medicine Buddha and Parnashavari are not specific to any particular school of Buddhism, the spiritual practice of healing methods also gave a sense of national unity through shared practice, particularly among devotees of different schools. This shared practice became even more meaningful as the context of the practice is also the common and pressing challenge posed by the pandemic.

The various preventive, healing, and curative rituals and prayer ceremonies in monastic establishments of the Zhung Dratshang were conducted for the benefit of the national community at its own cost. These were based on divinations conducted by the Je Khenpo as well as by the School of Astrology. Then there were rituals conducted specifically to mitigate continuous community transmission in the border town of Phuentsholing, which had to undergo almost four months of lockdown. Moreover, dedicated prayers and rituals were also conducted for the benefit of the people of India when the second wave hit and thousands of people succumbed to COVID-19.

The power of blessings associated with these rituals and ceremonies continues to have a calming and comforting impact on the psyche of the people. People do not feel helpless or abandoned in the face of imminent danger from COVID-related risks. The spiritual services bring in a different level of support for them. They complement and reinforce other major national efforts led by the King and the government. Hence, the religious dimension adds to the economic relief granted by the King and other measures of the government. It enriches the overall national response by enhancing psychological resilience and morale, and helps sustain it.

The Zhung Dratshang's collaboration with the government through a spiritual interface was in fact, a privileged site to redefine and reassert its most important role as the priest-officiant for the state. The senior-most monks accompanied the Prime Minister, health and foreign

ministers along with the Indian Ambassador to the airport to receive the vaccines. They conducted the purification rituals for the vaccines both at the airport and other monastic or clinical precincts in the districts and provided astrological advice for the time and means of nationwide vaccination. This received a lot of publicity as part of the national vaccination narrative. Senior monks were generally among the first persons to receive the jab. By their presence and agency, they gave confidence to the public amidst global news of side effects of the vaccines. This was critical in ensuring the success of the vaccination program. More importantly, the vaccination-related activities initiated by the government derived a spiritual dimension rather than being a mere medical exercise. The Zhung Dratshang thus remains positioned to be able to express itself through these means and interface as an important constituent that defines the larger structure of the modern Bhutanese state, particularly in the softer aspects of state influence and power.

The role of the Zhung Dratshang has been acknowledged by the King, government, and the people. The pandemic provided to the Zhung Dratshang a distinct platform to renew its relevance to national society and also earn the admiration and gratitude of the people. In conducting prayers and rituals for people elsewhere, such as in India, the Zhung Dratshang also served as a positive influence and viable instrument for soft diplomacy. It relied on three primary means of reaching out to people, communicating with them, and keeping them engaged. One was direct and live contact wherever COVID-19 protocols permitted. But wider contact was realized through material substances such as blessed pills and holy water (*jinlab* [sbyin rlabs] and *ngagchu* [sngags chu]), which were distributed widely to the populace both within and beyond Bhutan. As much as the pills and holy water were blessed spiritual materials which are believed to have healing properties, they also became socio-religious tokens or currencies for connecting with the people during these difficult times. Hence, they assumed added significance as means of monastic–public relations.

The second means was communications through BBS radio and television, which are public media supported by the state. The various activities of the Zhung Dratshang received due coverage in the national media. Hence, its outreach was not only maximized and magnified, it was also sustained by regular news stories and articles. The coverage by the public media lent greater visibility and prominence in the public sphere and also imparted continued legitimacy and relevance. It helped the monastic body to remain alive in the popular imagination and

constitute an anchor for mental and psychological comfort.

As this article has shown, the third and powerful medium of communication and outreach was the social media, particularly the Facebook page of the Zhung Dratshang. Using text, photographic, as well as audio-visual content, it kept the public informed of the various activities which its monasteries and institutions were carrying out for the benefit of the public. Most posts were in both English and Dzongkha and hence catered to different readers. The social media presence of the Zhung Dratshang saw itself defined and elevated for the first time during the pandemic, like never before. In fact, most of the posts concerned prayers, rituals, ceremonies, and other activities related directly or indirectly to the pandemic.

The pandemic situated the Zhung Dratshang in a position where it was able to highlight through ceremonial, ritual, social, and other means about its deeper embedding in society as well as the outreach of its influence. In particular, it demonstrated its commitment and also its ability for even greater engagement with the society through spiritual services going beyond scholastic and meditative pursuits, which nonetheless remain fundamental to its existence and cause.

Notes

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