

BUXA CHOGAR:

Saving Tibetan Buddhism in Exile

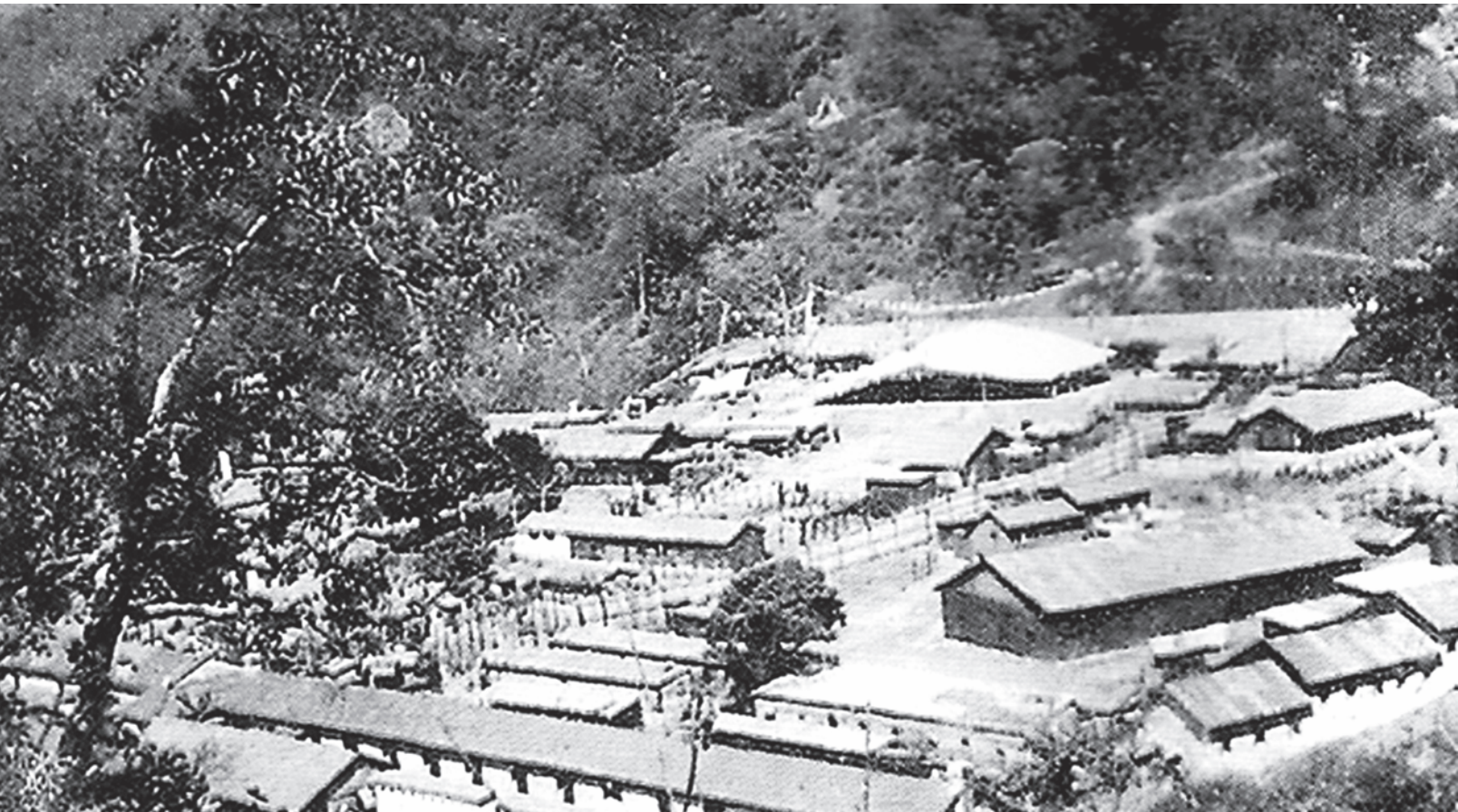
By Robyn Brentano

Many students of elder Tibetan Buddhist geshees may be familiar with the name Buxa Duar, the area in West Bengal, India, where 1,500 monks and nuns lived and studied after escaping Tibet in 1959. The actual camp was informally called Buxa Chogar, which roughly translates as “the Dharma camp at Buxa.” Robyn Brentano, an American long-time student of Tibetan Buddhism, has spent the last three years doing research and oral history interviews about Buxa Chogar and shares the story of this critical chapter of Tibetan history.

When His Holiness the Dalai Lama and 80,000 Tibetans fled the Chinese takeover of Tibet in 1959, they sought refuge in India, Bhutan, and Nepal, thinking it would be only a matter of months before they could return home. Among the refugees were thousands of Tibet’s greatest scholars, spiritual masters, reincarnate lamas, and aspiring students from the four lineages of Tibetan Buddhism and from the Bon tradition.

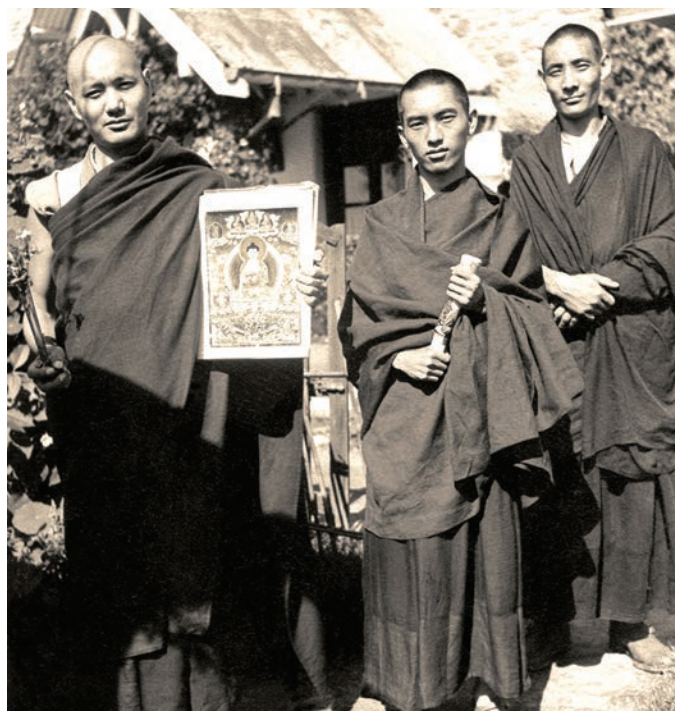
Some Tibetan monks and nuns found refuge in sister monasteries in Sikkim, Bhutan, and Nepal, but thousands of others had to work on road-building projects in India in order to survive. This labor proved deadly for many who were already suffering from trauma, inadequate food and shelter, and exposure to disease and the heat of subtropical India. Recognizing that Tibet’s unique scholarly traditions would perish in a generation if there were no place for the monks to continue their studies and for the monasteries to regroup, the Dalai Lama negotiated with Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru to establish a nonsectarian educational institution for 1,500 monks and nuns in a former British prison camp in Buxa Duar in a remote area of West Bengal.

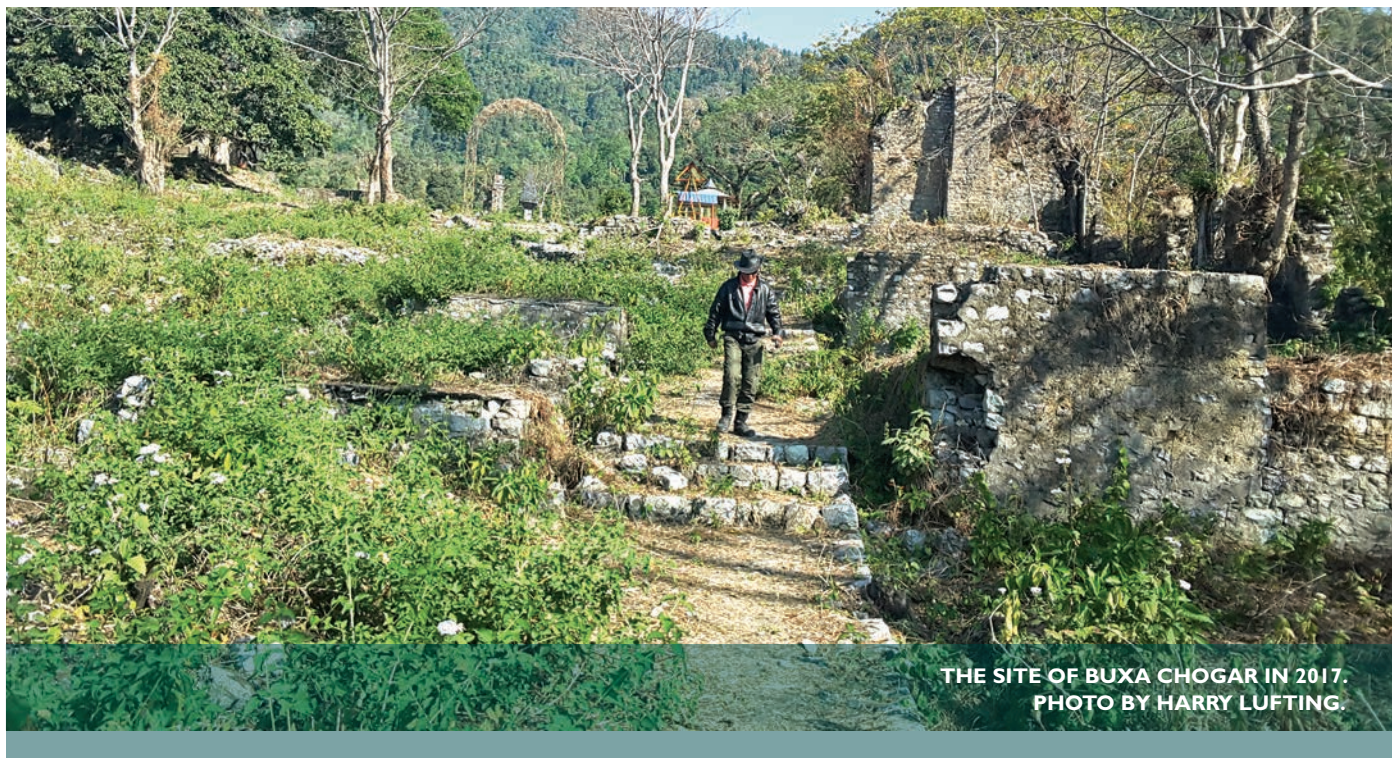
For the next ten years, as the systematic destruction of 6,000 monasteries and temples and the genocide of the Tibetan people continued in Tibet, the Buxa abbots, teachers, monks, and nuns endured the harsh conditions of refugee life to sustain their monastic education and way of life. Their story of personal sacrifice and perseverance in the face of inconceivable loss is an important chapter in the preservation of Tibetan Buddhism and its eventual transmission around the world. For the first time in Tibetan history, monks and nuns from the four monastic lineages lived together under a single institutional roof. Due to the Dalai Lama’s tireless efforts to revitalize the Tibetan monasteries, the rigors and high standards of monastic education have survived the terrible rupture in Tibetan Buddhism’s long history. Tibet had safeguarded and refined the wisdom culture that it inherited from India’s great Nalanda University. Through the rebuilding of Tibet’s monasteries in exile, including the great three Gelug monasteries of Drepung, Ganden, and Sera, the Nalanda tradition has been restored to its birthplace in India.



ABOVE: BUXA CHOGAR, WEST BENGAL, INDIA, 1963. PHOTO © LIBRARY OF TIBETAN WORKS AND ARCHIVES.
BELOW: LAMA YESHE AND LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE WITH GESHE LOSANG GYATSO (ON RIGHT), ALTOMONT VILLA, DARJEELING, INDIA, 1967. PHOTO BY NIKOLAUS DUTSCHKE; COURTESY OF LAMA YESHE WISDOM ARCHIVE.

Tibetan Buddhism has touched and transformed the lives of countless people and is changing modern society through the spread of Dharma centers, academic programs, and secular applications of the Buddha's profound wisdom and methods. Since Buxa closed in 1969, several generations of geshe have been trained, and many have gone on to teach in international Dharma centers and academia. Lama Thubten Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche, who both lived and studied in Buxa until they moved to Altomont Villa in Darjeeling, began teaching Western students in 1967. In 1975 they founded the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT). Since then, dozens of geshe have served as resident teachers in the more than 160 international centers affiliated with FPMT. As students of Tibetan Buddhism, we have much to be grateful for: If not for the resilience and dedication of the abbots, high lamas, and young scholars, and the concerted efforts of Tibetan and Indian government officials, lay people, and international aid agencies, Buxa would not have helped set the stage for the flourishing of Dharma in the modern world.





THE SITE OF BUXA CHOGAR IN 2017.
PHOTO BY HARRY LUFTING.

EARLY DAYS IN EXILE

On March 31, 1959, the Dalai Lama and members of his party were granted asylum in India and taken by train to Mussorie, where he was welcomed by Prime Minister Nehru. They discussed the future of the refugees, who by then had begun pouring into India. For various reasons, including the evolving political relationship between India and China, Nehru took personal interest in the Tibetans' situation. He also served as Minister of External Affairs and created a special Tibetan Refugee Section in that department to ensure that the refugees' affairs would be handled at the highest level of government. Soon after that, the non-governmental Central Relief Committee-India (CRC-I) was formed to coordinate aid from scores of relief agencies based in India and abroad. The Tibetan government administrators and the Dalai Lama's Private Office faced complex bureaucratic and logistical challenges, but the Indian government officials were supportive and worked closely with them to manage the refugees' needs.

The Indian government set up two reception camps: One at Missamari in Assam for the refugees who arrived through Mon-Tawang and the other at Buxa Duar for those who came through Bhutan and Sikkim. The camps opened on May 16 and processed about 60,000 refugees over the next year.

Missamari and Buxa Duar were unbearably hot and humid for the Tibetans, who were used to the cold, clear air of the Tibetan plateau. They arrived exhausted, injured, sick, and

destitute. The camps' make-shift bamboo huts offered little respite from the heat. They were forced to shed their woolen and sheepskin clothing and wear lightweight, Indian-style pants and shirts that one geshe described as looking like a prison suit that stripped everyone—men and women, monastics and lay people—of their personal identity. As Geshe Lhundub Sopa recounted, “Mentally we were sad and disoriented, physically we were miserable. We wondered, ‘Where are we going from here?’ We had no idea what would happen next. We just knew that we were a long way from home.”

The Indian authorities did their best to provide for the refugees' needs, but overcrowding, unsanitary conditions, polluted water, and minimal medical care meant that hundreds succumbed to dysentery, malaria, tuberculosis (TB), and other diseases. The monks conducted pujas for the deaths that continually occurred. Within a year, 167 children and sixty-five adults died in Missamari alone.

As the situation worsened in Tibet, it was clear the refugees would not be returning any time soon and they would need some form of employment to survive. The Indian government decided to send all able-bodied refugees to work on road construction in Sikkim, Himachal Pradesh, Kullu, Manali, and elsewhere in the Himalayan region. It was agreed that everyone under the age of twenty-five should go to school. To retain Tibetan language and identity, the Tibetan government-in-exile began to set up its own schools and kindergartens. The elderly would be sent to old age homes, and those who had relatives or other connections in India were free to leave the camps.

BUXA CHO GAR

In addition to the refugees' immediate welfare, the Dalai Lama was very concerned about sustaining the religious and cultural legacy of Tibet. More than 6,000 monks and nuns had escaped from Tibet by early summer. Many, including thousands of young monks whose philosophical studies had been disrupted, were already joining the road crews. The Dalai Lama saw that the scholarly traditions of Tibet's great monasteries would be lost unless the monks could continue their education and the monasteries could rebuild. "If the abbots, tulkus, and monastics are scattered and mingled with the rest of the refugee population, this will be a huge loss not only for Tibet, but for the world of Buddhism in general," he said. He envisioned a nonsectarian monastic institution where monks and nuns from all the Tibetan lineages could study, so he traveled to Delhi to petition Nehru for help.

Elements in the Indian government had been critical of Nehru's decision to admit the Tibetans into India, resulting in some pressure to put all of the Tibetans to work, including the monks, so that aid could be reduced as quickly as possible. Responding to the Dalai Lama's appeal, the Indian government agreed that 500 monks could stay in Buxa Duar to continue their studies based on the ancient cultural and religious ties between India and Tibet. This was hardly enough to reestablish the monastic structures that would be needed to support the monks' long-term education or to produce a sufficient number of graduates to sustain the monasteries in the future, so the Dalai Lama asked for more. Indian officials were unfamiliar with the rigorous form of scholarly training in the Tibetan monasteries that required up to twenty-five years of study to earn a geshe degree. After considerable discussion, the Indian authorities agreed that 1,500 monastics could live in Buxa Duar and 500 in Dalhousie.

Thardoe Chosum Chogar Ling, commonly called Buxa Chogar by Tibetan officials and monks, was formally established in August 1959. In September, abbots and scholars of the four Tibetan Buddhist sects and the Dalai Lama's representatives held a week-long meeting in Kalimpong to decide where each of the monasteries would go. They agreed that Gyuto and Gyudmed tantric colleges, Namgyal Monastery, and elder abbots, tulkus, and geshe would stay in Dalhousie, while 200 from the Nyingma, Sakya, and Kagyu monasteries along with 1,300 abbots, teachers, and "dedicated learners" from the three great Gelug monasteries, would go to Buxa. Twenty-one Kagyu nuns who had escaped with their abbot, Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche, also would stay in Buxa. Since thousands of lay people already were living in the Buxa camp and thousands of monks were in Missamari, Kalimpong, Bomdila, Gangtok, and areas where road construction was under way, the Tibetan

Indian officials were unfamiliar with the rigorous form of scholarly training in the Tibetan monasteries that required up to twenty-five years of study to earn a geshe degree.

administrators and abbots had to begin the arduous process of sorting everyone out and verifying the identities and eligibility of the monks. To be admitted to Buxa Chogar, the Gelug monks had to be screened, pass an improvised exam, and prove they had at least begun the first year of Collected Topics (a preliminary subject for formal monastic education) in Tibet.

Buxa Duar sits 2,800 feet (850 meters) above sea level in northwest Bengal, near the border with Bhutan. The camp itself occupied the ruins of an ancient fort that had been seized by the British in 1865 and converted into a high-security prison for political dissidents during India's independence movement. Gandhi and Nehru were rumored to have been incarcerated there, but no contemporary records confirm this. The two-story-high outer wall, covered with barbed wire, and long concrete barracks with barred windows were still standing when the Tibetans arrived in 1959. A large metal gate and police post guarded the single entrance where the monks had to obtain permits even to visit nearby Alipurduar. The compound sat on a flat promontory perched over a river 1,000 feet (300 meters) below. Thickly wooded mountains on three sides sealed the camp's claustrophobic atmosphere and trapped the cold, foggy winters, unbearable summer heat, and torrential monsoon rains. Watchtowers built by the British at points along the ridges of the mountains served as an ironic reminder of the constraints on the monks' lives.

The compound was scarcely large enough to hold everyone, yet the monasteries did their best to divide the buildings equitably, set up communal kitchens, and designate spaces for debate, teachings, and ceremonies. The nuns were given a small house in the center of the compound next to the Indian administration building. With only two small windows high up in the walls, the interiors of the long, narrow barracks were dark and stultifying. Lama Zopa Rinpoche described the living arrangements in the building where he initially stayed: thirty beds lined up on each side of the central door. He, some geshe, and the Sera Me monks lived inside. The Sera Je monks built new bamboo houses outside in the courtyard. Lama Yeshe's house was over the drain for the water pumps, making it quite smelly and unpleasant.

"Sera Je and Sera Me monks would gather in that same building to do pujas," Lama Zopa Rinpoche said. "The older monks would sit on the beds, while the abbots and incarnate lamas sat up

front and other monks sat on the floor.” The monks replaced the toilets at the ends of the buildings with altars that they fashioned out of bamboo. Sharpa Tulku recalled, “Some of the monks were so talented and creative. They made beautiful bamboo furniture, not only altars, but beautiful bamboo beds with crushed bamboo on top, so you didn’t need a mattress. It was so soft.” Poisonous snakes living in the bamboo overhead would drop down on the monks’ beds, but as one of the geshe explained, the snakes kindly took care of the rodents under foot. The monks hung curtains between the beds for privacy so they could study and do their practices, but that did not stop TB and other illnesses from spreading like wildfire.

The environment in and around the camp was exceedingly unhealthy. The water looked clean, but it was polluted by runoff from a military installation upstream. It darkened the monks’ skin and clothes and caused gastric problems. Bed bugs and other vermin made it impossible to get a good night’s sleep. When the monks took walks in the forest to relax, they got terrible blisters from poisonous trees. Since they could not afford shoes, they made sandals from old car tires. For robes, they pieced together whatever scraps they could find including wheat flour bags donated by the United States. On his first visit to Buxa Chogar on Ganden Ngamchoe, the anniversary of Je Tsongkhapa’s death, a wealthy benefactor from Kalimpong, Tehor Gyurmey Sadutsang, saw the monks debating in lay clothes, which was considered inauspicious, so he donated cloth for each of the monks to make a full set of robes.

Most of the monks had difficulty adjusting to the Indian diet. The Indian government provided basic rations of rice, lentils, corn flour, oil, potatoes, sugar, and goat meat. International aid organizations sent wheat, milk powder, and tinned meat. In the beginning, the rations were good quality, but corrupt local officials began intercepting incoming supplies and replacing them with poor quality rice and pulses infested with insects and full of stones. Between the bad food and dysentery, many of the monks and nuns suffered from lengthy bouts of diarrhea.

By mid-1960, the government began to reduce the already meager rations, which caused considerable anxiety among the monks. The Tibetans pressed government leaders to continue the promised level of support, which they did for the time being. The camp faced a food shortage again in 1966 due to famine in Bihar. In 1967 when a Naxalite Maoist insurgency in West Bengal cut off the supply route to Buxa Duar, everyone went without food for twenty days. The Dalai Lama appealed to Indian officials for help, “These scholars constitute the nucleus of our learning. Our strongest hope in the preservation of Buddhism and our culture lies in these people, and for this reason I have always considered their welfare of utmost importance.”

In the early days of Buxa Chogar, a one-room clinic was set up and staffed by local doctors who lacked equipment and

medicine to properly treat all the ailments that were occurring. Quite a few of the geshe remembered a particularly bad-tempered health worker who used the same hypodermic needle over and over again. When it became dull, he would sharpen it on a stone, all the while cursing at his patient.

Hundreds contracted TB. Those with severe symptoms were sent to Indian hospitals where they underwent surgery to remove parts of their lungs. Ganden Tri Rinpoche Lobsang Tenzin was treated at a Christian hospital in Rajasthan that had so many Buxa monks it built a special section for them. “Every two weeks, we would have the monks’ confession ceremony and do pujas and prayers together at the hospital,” Rinpoche said. Sharpa Tulku recalled, “Of those who were fortunate enough to return to Buxa, many were missing a rib and did not live very long. It seemed like every few days there would be a cremation. It was a real demonstration of impermanence.”

TB continued to spread unchecked. Adding to the trauma of their escape and loss, the monks were disturbed by the sound of stones dropping on the barracks’ roofs at night, which they attributed to the troubled spirits of prisoners who had been executed by the British. As the reality of their situation sank in—that they would not be returning to Tibet any time soon and that the international community would not recognize Tibet as an independent nation—some of the monks succumbed to despair and mental illness. A few committed suicide. The abbots and Tibetan officials repeatedly requested of the Indian authorities to move the monks to a cooler place and to set up a separate TB ward, but nothing was done until 1966. By then 309 monks (twenty-six percent of the population) had TB and another 203 had already died. The CRC-I finally sent a special medical team to Buxa and built a separate TB barrack. Tibetan officials continued their search for a more conducive location for the monks. They found a property in Palumpur near Dharamsala, but the Indian government, international aid agencies, and UNHCR (the UN Refugee Agency) could not finance the purchase of the land. The Tibetan government-in-exile launched an urgent

Hundreds contracted TB. Those with severe symptoms were sent to Indian hospitals where they underwent surgery to remove parts of their lungs. ... “It seemed like every few days there would be a cremation. It was a real demonstration of impermanence.”



LEFT: HIS HOLINESS THE DALAI LAMA'S JUNIOR TUTOR TRIJANG RINPOCHE TEACHING AT BUXA CHOGAR, WEST BENGAL, INDIA, 1962. PHOTO © LIBRARY OF TIBETAN WORKS AND ARCHIVES.

SECOND ROW FROM LEFT: DEBATE ANSWERER GESHES FOR THE WATER TIGER YEAR, GESHE LHUNDUB SOPA IS SECOND FROM RIGHT, BUXA CHOGAR, WEST BENGAL, INDIA, 1962. PHOTO © LIBRARY OF TIBETAN WORKS AND ARCHIVES.

ALL THE MONKS ATTENDING TSOG, BUXA CHOGAR, WEST BENGAL, INDIA, 1962. PHOTO © LIBRARY OF TIBETAN WORKS AND ARCHIVES.

THIRD ROW FROM LEFT: INTERPRETER GESHE NYIMA TSERING (ON RIGHT) SHOWS GANDEN SHARTSE GESHE GYALTSEN KALSANG ARCHIVAL PHOTOS OF BUXA CHOGAR, MUNDGOD, KARNATAKA, INDIA, 2016. PHOTO BY ROBYN BRENTANO.

THE CIRCULATION OF LORD JAMPA AFTER MONLAM CHENMO, BUXA CHOGAR, WEST BENGAL, INDIA, 1962. PHOTO © LIBRARY OF TIBETAN WORKS AND ARCHIVES.





**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:
A CELL BLOCK AT THE SITE OF BUXA
CHOGAR, INDIA, 2009. PHOTO BY VEN. TRISHA
DONNELLY. COURTESY OF LAMA YESHE
WISDOM ARCHIVE.**

**VEN. TRISHA DONNELLY AT ENTRANCE TO THE
SITE OF BUXA CHOGAR WITH MAP DRAWN BY
LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE. PHOTO BY FRANCES
HOWLAND, COURTESY OF LAMA YESHE
WISDOM ARCHIVE.**

**THE ABBOTS OF BUXA CHOGAR (FROM LEFT)
DREPUNG GOMANG KHENPO TENPA TENZIN,
GADEN JANGTSE KHENPO UGYAN CHOPHEL,
DREPUNG LOSELING KHENPO PEMA GYALTSEN,
SERA JE KHENPO GESHE DHEPO, SERA ME
KHENPO NGAWANG THEKCHOG, GADEN
SHARTSE KHENPO LOBSANG CHOPHEL, AND
SAKYA KHENPO NGAWANG SANGPO, WEST
BENGAL, INDIA, 1962. PHOTO © LIBRARY OF
TIBETAN WORKS AND ARCHIVES.**



fundraising campaign in the settlements, and the refugees gave wholeheartedly, but their donations fell short of the goal.

Despite the difficult living conditions, the monasteries resumed their daily schedule of study, classes, debate, prayer sessions, and common rituals. Geshe exams began in 1962. As news of the destruction of monasteries in Tibet continued to arrive at the camp, the monks realized just how much the preservation of Tibetan Buddhism depended on them. They threw themselves into their studies. They were aware, Sera Je Khensur Rinpoche Lobsang Gelek said, that the Indian government was providing long-term support, “so the abbots advised the monks, if we just take the food that the Indian government is giving us and we don’t study, it would be a

total betrayal of trust. It’s our responsibility to study as long as we can. The monks took that to heart and studied hard. ... It’s especially important to note that in Buxa the monks didn’t have any other work to do at all, so the quality of study was very high. And it’s because of that that now the monasteries and the Dharma have been preserved in the way they have.”

While hundreds of important teachers had been unable to leave Tibet, many highly qualified and revered abbots and scholars did come to Buxa Chogar. The traditional process of teacher-to-student transmission, so crucial to the young monks’ intellectual and character development, was reestablished. In Tibet monks were free to choose their own teachers and would

have done this within their own monastic college, but with all the monasteries so close together in Buxa, they could take teachings from any of the great scholars there regardless of lineage. Lama Yeshe, who was keenly nonsectarian, had many new students come to him for teachings and advice, so he studied texts from all the other traditions as well as his own.

The Dalai Lama was especially concerned about providing the best possible conditions for the monks' education. "You could tell that the state of affairs in Buxa was constantly on his mind," Sharpa Tulku said. "We were constantly receiving letters from him for all kinds of occasions. He requested his tutors Kyabje Ling Rinpoche and Kyabje Trijang Rinpoche to come when they were traveling in the vicinity. ... He was always trying to provide encouragement to officials like Phala [Thubten Woden, the former Lord Chamberlain of Tibet and Chief Secretary to His Holiness the Dalai Lama] and Kundeling [Woeser Gyaltzen, at the time the Director of the Council for Cultural and Religious Affairs of the Tibetan Government in Exile], and he sent the great master Gyudmed Khensur Ngawang Lekden, who would give the most fascinating lectures and convey His Holiness's advice, prayers, and support. This happened constantly, and it was very uplifting." Later, the Dalai Lama sent Khunu Lama Tenzin Gyaltzen Rinpoche, a highly revered Buddhist master from Kinnaur, to give teachings on Shantideva's *A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life* and Atisha's *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment*.

The monks began their day at 6:00 A.M. with a rigorous schedule of memorization, teachings, class debate, and prayers, as Lama Zopa Rinpoche explained, so they could "purify, collect merits, and pacify obstacles in order to complete their studies, gain realizations, and achieve enlightenment. They would do Tara prayers, White Umbrella Deity, *Heart Sutra*, and so on. There were also many prayer requests for people who had died or were sick" and from the Tibetan government for success in its affairs. These were followed by one-on-one debate, lunch, more teachings, dinner, private study, and more debate that lasted many hours into the night.

In Tibet, the monasteries were distant from one another so there were not many opportunities for intramural debate except during the Great Winter Debate after the Monlam Chenmo festival. In Buxa, space for debate was very limited so the six Gelug colleges had to share three areas. The largest area, near Ganden Jangtse's house, was where Indian prisoners had been executed. One of the geshe said, "It was a sad place, but we did a lot of prayers and gradually the presence of the ghosts was diminished."

In the mornings and afternoons, the monks debated with members of their own college. In the evenings, the colleges debated together and the Nyingma, Kagyu, and Sakya monks were welcome to join, which they often did. The effect on the monks was galvanizing. Sharpa Tulku recalled, "When we came together

"It's especially important to note that in Buxa the monks didn't have any other work to do at all, so the quality of study was very high. And it's because of that that now the monasteries and the Dharma have been preserved in the way they have."

for debates, we were able to exchange ideas from all the monastic traditions, which was really fantastic. ... It was even more exciting than debating within our own monastic tradition because it presented a lot of challenges, different views, and ways of understanding the same topic [whether] authored by Je Rinpoche, Khedrup Je, or the Indian pandits. They were all the same great masters. ... I think that's what the scholars and teachers really enjoyed, looking forward to this common gathering and sessions." While the monks debated together like this, the Dalai Lama asked each of the monasteries to take care to preserve their own unique debate manuals and scriptural authorities.

The largest debate ground was paved over with concrete and the monks sat outside, rain or shine. Eventually a large tent was erected. "When we first came to Buxa, the sutra classes followed the same schedule as in Tibet, with debating all night long," Sera Je Khensur Rinpoche Geshe Lobsang Delek explained. "When there was a geshe examination ceremony, we would start debate at 5:00 in the evening and go until 5:00 in the morning, but later His Holiness advised the monks not to stay up all night because it would harm their health." The monasteries stopped the debates at 1:00 A.M., but as Lama Zopa Rinpoche explained, the monks would return to their rooms and continue to memorize texts. "After finishing hours of debate, Sera Je Khensur Rinpoche Lobsang Delek would come back, drink some black tea, then put a seat outside his room and recite many of the hundreds of pages that he had memorized ... especially Lama Tsongkhapa's famous text, *The Interpretable and Definitive Meanings: The Essence of Good Explanation*. ... It is a very, very important text and difficult to learn, but he had memorized hundreds of pages. ... He would recite very loudly until about 3:00 A.M. Then he would go to sleep for two or three hours. In the early morning, he would get up and begin memorizing again. That is just one example of how the monks dedicated their lives [in Buxa] to study Dharma."

Over the course of their studies, monks are expected to memorize a vast amount of material so they can argue decisively in debate. The twenty-to-twenty-five year geshe degree curriculum covers the five great treatises, or philosophical topics of *pramana* (functioning of the mind and logic), *prajnaparamita* (the way to develop realizations on the path to enlightenment),

madhyamaka (the view of emptiness), *vinaya* (monastic discipline), and *abhidharma* (phenomenology and psychology). Monks have to memorize the Indian root texts and commentaries, the Tibetan commentaries of their particular lineage masters, and extensive study and debate manuals and liturgies of their individual monasteries. Reliance on these texts ensures that the transmission of knowledge from generation to generation will be accurate and vibrant.

A monastery in Bhutan and some lay Tibetans offered texts for study and memorization, but there were far too few in Buxa for all the students at all the levels of classes. The monks had to make do by studying a few pages at a time and circulating them among their classmates. Initially, those who could write transcribed texts that their teachers and senior scholars knew by heart. They used any paper they could find—powdered milk and butter wrappers from overseas donations were especially prized for their durability.

Around 1962, Khensur Pema Gyaltzen, the abbot of Drepung Loseling monastery, sent three of his monks to Kalimpong to learn lithography from Dorje Tharchin Babhu, a Christian Tibetan intellectual and journalist who published the first Tibetan newspaper, *The Mirror*, in 1925 and began printing Tibetan Buddhist texts as early as 1944. The printing process was physically demanding and required considerable skill to set up and run, but after much trial and error, the monks were able to reproduce legible texts. For the next three years, they worked hard to meet the demand for texts. Eventually they brought two machines back to Buxa and set up a printing office where the other monasteries sent staff to create master copies of their texts to be printed.

Kyabje Zong Rinpoche was a renowned and beloved scholar and tantric master from Ganden Shartse monastery. He could easily have settled in Dalhousie, where most of the high lamas and tulkus were, or gone to live in comfort with well-off Tibetan benefactors in Kalimpong and other places, but he rejected many invitations and chose to live in Buxa instead. He knew that many tantric lineage-holders were still in Tibet and that the tantric teachings and practices would be lost in exile if they were not transmitted to the upcoming generation. He stayed in a barrack with the Ganden Shartse monks and Lama Zopa Rinpoche.

Despite his strict and imposing demeanor, he was immensely popular and hundreds of monks from all of the sects flocked to his teachings and initiations, which included Guhyasamaja, Hayagriva, Thirteen Deity Yamantaka, Solitary Yamantaka, and Vajrayogini. “He was so artistic,” Sharpa Tulku recalled. “The entire room where he stayed became a beautiful teaching hall. In lieu of butter sculptures, he decorated the offerings with the most creative wooden and paper ornaments. He even made portable play torma offerings for some of the young tulkus. It was always crowded in his room, so he developed a huge fan made from crushed bamboo and covered with cloth and then one or two monks in the back would pull it back and forth and it would cover the entire room!”

As Lama Zopa Rinpoche explained, in Tibet the monks had to complete their studies before they could engage in tantric practices, but in Buxa, “so many monks were able to do retreat because of Zong Rinpoche’s kindness. He advised, don’t do only sutra and debate, but take time to practice, take initiations and practice, and prepare for the next life. Have some realizations and achieve enlightenment.” Zong Rinpoche presided over many of the major rituals, including the *torgyag* after the Monlam festival at the end of the year to cast out evil influences. He would remind his students: “Right now, people in Tibet are experiencing hell on earth and don’t have any rights. We weren’t able to abandon the materialistic world by ourselves, but now the Chinese have separated us from worldly ways. We are lucky to have freedom here. If Dharma practitioners think carefully about this, then there’s no need to be attached to anything.”

As the senior-most abbot in Buxa, Drepung Loseling Khenpo Pema Gyaltzen worked with the abbots of all the sects to carry out the Dalai Lama’s instructions that Buxa function as “a new college ... [offering] the curriculum of all four schools of Tibetan Dharma.” While each of the schools sustained their own courses of study, the historic juncture of all the lineages living side by side at Buxa opened a new horizon for intra-monastic relations. Sharpa Tulku observed, “The monks from the different colleges came together for daily prayers, monthly sojongs, and Monlam Chenmo. It was amazing that out of the 19,000 monks from the three great Gelug monasteries in Tibet, here were a thousand all meeting in this one small place. ... I’ve never seen such a united spirit of sharing—just the feeling we are all just the same, Tibetan Buddhists. It was the best part of being in Buxa.”

AN EXPERIMENT IN MODERN EDUCATION

By mid-1960, as the Indian government and the Tibetan administration solidified plans to move the refugees to permanent settlements, the Dalai Lama began to consider the long-term prospects for the Buxa Lama Ashram, another name for Buxa Chogar. The Indian government raised concerns about having to support the monks beyond the usual period of two to three years for humanitarian assistance. They proposed that the monastic system be converted into a university-style system that conformed to modern educational standards and pedagogical methods. If the Tibetans agreed to this, the Indian government could rationalize their support of the monks as students under the government’s Education Department.

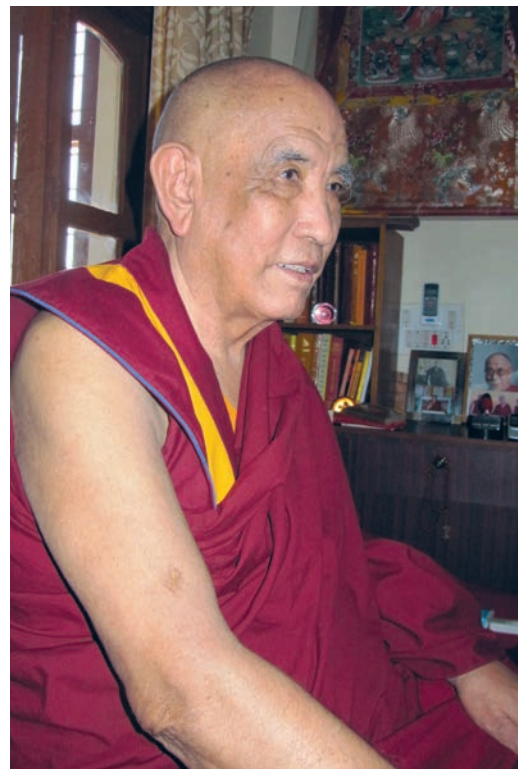
Once again, the Dalai Lama sought Prime Minister Nehru’s advice. They agreed on the idea of establishing a Tibetan institute of higher education that would serve the refugees and people from

the Himalayan regions who share religious, cultural, and linguistic ties with Tibet. The Dalai Lama had already conceived of Buxa as a single institution encompassing all the monastic lineages, so he thought that the Indian government's proposal to convert Buxa's course of studies to a modern academic framework would be worth trying. According to Samdhong Rinpoche, who helped facilitate early-stage discussions about the conversion, when the Dalai Lama presented the idea to the abbots, they were generally open to it. Their main concern was that they would have to abandon the centuries-old teacher-student relationship, which enshrined the deep process of transmission that sustained the Dharma as a living tradition. Under the new system, the monks would have a different teacher for each topic.

Over the next six years, the Dalai Lama, the abbots, Tibetan scholars, W. G. Kundeling, and other Tibetan government officials undertook the complex process of planning the conversion. In November 1963, at the first meeting of the heads of all the Buddhist and Bon schools, a formal resolution was passed to transform Buxa into a unified center of learning. In May 1964, the Dalai Lama met with M.C. Chagla, India's Minister of Education, to reaffirm the Tibetans' intentions for a higher learning institute. Chagla asked for a detailed plan and budget for the Indian parliament to review that September. On July 13, 1964, the Dalai Lama convened a week-long meeting with the abbots, scholars, and Tibetan government officials to develop the plan. He presented his ideas for a modern-style university: It should be open to lay men and women and foreigners, have monthly and annual exams, and teach Hindi, science, and other modern topics. Sampurnanand Sanskrit University representatives gave a presentation on their university's system. The final plan for the Central Institute for Higher Tibetan Studies (CIHTS) was approved in December 1965. It was agreed that it would be implemented in Buxa and at Sampurnanand Sanskrit University and that all the monks would gradually shift to the CIHTS in Varanasi.

In the meantime, a Teacher Training Center was launched in May 1965 in Mussorie for fifty-six senior scholars from Buxa to learn modern teaching methods, curriculum development for traditional subjects, and other topics. The Dalai Lama requested Zong Rinpoche to be the center's principal and Khunu Lama Rinpoche to be the head teacher. After six months of training, the teachers returned to Buxa and began the new program. The monks attended eight forty-five-minute classes per day covering topics from the five great treatises. Many were in the early years of studying logic or the prajnaparamita when they escaped from Tibet. Under the new system, they also had to study madhyamaka, vinaya, and abhidharma. "The way we studied in Tibet," Sera Je Khensur Rinpoche Geshe Lobsang Delek said, "was that we memorized the root texts for each of the five treatises. But under the new system, we could only get a rough understanding of the topics because there was not enough time to memorize the root texts. ... After a year or two, the monks were asked which way they preferred to study, and they said they preferred the way before because they could memorize the root texts and get a good understanding of one topic before moving on to the next. So after two years, they changed back to the system as it had been in Tibet."

On January 1, 1968, the Dalai Lama formally inaugurated the CIHTS at Sampurnanand Sanskrit University. Initially 116 monks were enrolled, but there was no capacity to accept more than fifty monks per year after that. With 927 monks from the three great monasteries in Buxa at that point, it would have taken many years for all the monks to shift to Varanasi. By then, the Tibetan administration had exhausted its search for a new location so another solution was needed.



**ABOVE FROM TOP:
DREPUNG KHEN RINPOCHE LOBSANG YESHE,
MUNDGOD, KARNATAKA, INDIA, 2016.
PHOTO BY ROBYN BRENTANO.**

**GANDENTRI RINPOCHE LOBSANG TENZIN,
BYLAKUPPE, KARNATAKA, INDIA, 2016.
PHOTO BY ROBYN BRENTANO.**

The CIHTS represented an important development in the emergence of Tibetan Buddhism in the modern world and in the revitalization of the Nalanda tradition in India. Today it is a renowned university-level center for higher Buddhist studies. However, bringing the monasteries together under one roof with a common curriculum risked losing each monastery's unique commentarial tradition and liturgical texts. For this and other reasons, the Dalai Lama decided that it would be best for the monasteries to move to the settlements in South India where they could rebuild as separate institutions. When this was announced in Buxa, many of the monks objected on the grounds they would be living too close to the lay communities and their time would be taken up with clearing the land and farming rather than study. The abbots conveyed the monks' objections to the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala. He gave an impassioned response that was tape recorded and played for the monks in Buxa. They had never seen a tape recorder before so when they heard his message, they were riveted. He explained the need to begin a new life in self-reliant communities. They could not live on donated rations forever. As long as the monks remained isolated in Buxa, no new monks would join to revitalize the monasteries. He reminded them that, as the future abbots of the monasteries in exile, the survival of Tibetan Buddhism depended on them. They were persuaded, and the first batch of monks departed for South India in November 1969.

The Karnataka state government gave the monasteries land in the two largest Tibetan settlements in South India; the Drepung, Ganden, and Sakya and Nyingma monks went to Mundgod, and the Sera and Kagyu monks went to Bylakuppe. After making the 1,880-mile (3,000-kilometer) train trip south, the monks arrived to find themselves either in the midst of a dense forest or in barren fields with nothing more than tents for shelter. Drepung Khen Rinpoche Lobsang Yeshe remembered, "At that time we had very bad storms that destroyed the tents, which were old and tore easily. The monks didn't have any mats under them. They just slept on the ground. They got a salary of one rupee and fifty paise to work all day cutting down and uprooting the trees. They didn't have any breakfast and only a small amount of food for lunch. That's why these days we say the Buxa monks are very kind."

From these inauspicious beginnings, the monks gradually cleared and ploughed the land; built beautiful Tibetan-style prayer halls, dormitories, and kitchens; and resumed their studies. Since then, the monasteries have grown under the leadership of their great abbots and scholars, attracting monks from the exile community, newly arrived refugees, and others from the Himalayan region. Today almost 11,600 monks live at Drepung, Ganden, and Sera, and these monasteries have opened branches in India and the West, bringing the benefits of the Dharma to countless people.

"Buxa was extremely important [to the continuity of Tibetan Buddhism]," Ganden Tri Rinpoche Lobsang Tenzin observed. "If Buxa hadn't been there, then the monks who were scholars ...

would have gone their own way, some to make roads, some to other places. All that knowledge and tradition would have been lost. Instead, through the kindness of His Holiness and the Indian government, it was possible for the 1,500 monks to stay together in one place and for this tradition of education to continue and flourish."

Robyn Brentano has been a student of Tibetan Buddhism since 1975, when she attended the eighth Kopan lamrim course and met Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche. Since the mid-1980s, she has worked extensively with the Tibetan community on cultural preservation and humanitarian aid projects in exile and in Tibet, and she has directed an array of documentary and cultural productions related to Tibetan Buddhism. She has served as an executive and philanthropic advisor at various nonprofit organizations dedicated to international development; refugee resettlement; contemplative-based education; the environment and climate change; and the arts. She has been a trustee of the FPMT-affiliated Foundation for the Development of Compassion and Wisdom since 2008.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I was inspired to write about Buxa Chogar by Kyabje Lama Zopa Rinpoche, whose amazing stories shed light on Buxa's important role in "rescuing the Buddha Dharma from the ashes" as many of the elder monks said in our interviews.

Research for this article and the forthcoming book, *Buxa: Saving Tibetan Buddhism in Exile* (Wisdom Publications) was made possible by the kindness and expertise of many people. I am deeply grateful to Lama Zopa Rinpoche, His Holiness the Sakya Trichen, Ngari Rinpoche, Samdhong Rinpoche, Sharpa Tulku Rinpoche, Doboong Tulku Rinpoche, and forty-one former abbots and elder geshe from Drepung, Ganden, Sera, and the Nyingma monastery in Mundgod, as well as to Pencho Rabgey, Judy Pullen, and many others for their stories shared in extensive interviews.

I am also indebted to His Holiness the Dalai Lama's archive; the Central Tibetan Administration's archive; the Tibetan Department of Religion and Culture; the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives; Zong Labrang; Wisdom Publications; Lama Yeshe Wisdom Archive; the Tibet Fund; Geshe Dhonden for his book, *A Life Story*; our amazing interpreters Geshe Nyima Tsering, Geshe Tenzin Namdak, Ven. Lhundup Jampa, Ven. Tenzin Legtsok, Ven. Tenzin Tsomo, Jeffrey Allen, and Joshua Cutler, and translators Dawa Tenzin, Kalsang Tsering, Tenzin Norphel Lama, and Tenzin Sonam; our hosts in India; and the generous donors, whose support has sustained our work.

—Robyn Brentano