

MONASTIC EXISTENCE



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Ngawang Tenzing Gyatso and the Dalai Lama

Each year when I see him, my friend Tim Whelan he asks me, “When are you going to show your Tibetan pictures again?” I always say, Never. He is talking about the pictures I made during several visits to monasteries of the Drukpa Kagyud order in India. But the slides are dispersed, and beside that I’m on to new work.

Then a few weeks ago I got a letter from my friend Ngawang Tenzing Gyatso, a monk of the Drukpa Kagyud order. He’d been brought to exile in India by his parents at the age of one, and so had no memories of his birthplace. Nevertheless, he’d dreamed all his life of returning. And now he was just back from his first visit to Tibet.

He wrote that he’d made a try for a visa in Hong Kong and been turned down by the Chinese authorities. He was getting ready to travel back to India, when, quite by chance, he ran into a friend who told him that for some reason the proceedings were looser in Macao. So he took the ferry there, applied, and he was in!

It was a poignant visit, of course, and one of the most moving parts was seeing the old main monastery of his order. It had been destroyed during the Cultural Revolution, like so many, but is now being rebuilt.

He asked me if there was a way that I could support this work, and that set me to thinking. First, I rounded up some of the photos from my visits. Then I got out a story I had written about a winter visit to the monastery at Chemre in Ladakh.

And with them I made up the little booklet that you see here. Doing it brought me gratefully back to an extraordinary experience. I hope that it will give some idea of the preciousness of this culture, and that it will lead your thoughts in some good way.



Ten steps, eleven, twelve, then stop. Heart sends a throb of blood crashing into my scull. When I stop, the pain calms. I can't stop. His Holiness is waiting up ahead.

I climb up toward the walls of the great monastery at Hemis, wedged into a side canyon off the Indus River valley. The ground is rough, blown snow and sand-scoured rock. Himalayan desert in winter. Little moisture falls here, and its cold enough that when it falls as snow it more or less just blows around until the Spring.

I have walked for maybe ten minutes when I enter into the deep shadow of the walls. The huge door looks like a prop from some movie, cracked varnish over thick boards. No doorbell or rope or anything. I push in and look around. Maybe sign that says *Office*? No.



I wander around the courtyard, following the echo of voices, until I surprise a monk as he comes around a corner.

“Drukchen Rinpoche?” I ask. I am looking for the young boy who, at 16, is the head of the Kagyud Drukpa order. The monk leads me up dark stairs to a room at the top of the building. Tall ceilings, windows all around that look across the valley to the snow peaks on the other side. The valley floor is at 12,000 feet. Who knows how high those mountains are. Sixteen, eighteen thousand feet? Twenty? A marvel in Colorado, but nothing special here.

His Holiness the XII Gyalwang Drukchen Rinpoche walks in with a gust of friendly warmth. He remembers me from previous visits to the monastery in Darjeeling. I am welcome, he says. Come and stay at the monastery at Chemre, a bit down the valley, where a ceremony honoring Mahakala, the main protector of Tibetan Buddhism, will begin in a few days.

And then—I’m not sure how—we get on the subject of stunt men. He has recently seen television for the first time



on a visit to the Dalai Lama at Dharmasala, and he is still buzzing with amazement at the shootings, the car crashes, and spectacular falls. He wonders how such things are done. Don't the horses get hurt when they fall? I explain about camera angles and foam pads and what little else I know.

It is a pleasant, easy visit, and when it is done the walk back to my car is down hill, so there is less throb, and I drive off across the cold, arid landscape for Leh. I will return in a few days to the monastery at Chemre for the Mahakala puja.



I'm sitting on the top wall at Chemre, which itself sits on top of a high hill looking over the little town at the edge of the wintry valley. I am trying to catch and store a sensation of heat, something that I can call up in the cold rooms on the bitter nights. A few trees dot the banks of the Indus River in the distance. Everything else is sand, rocks, and peaks. It is Earth





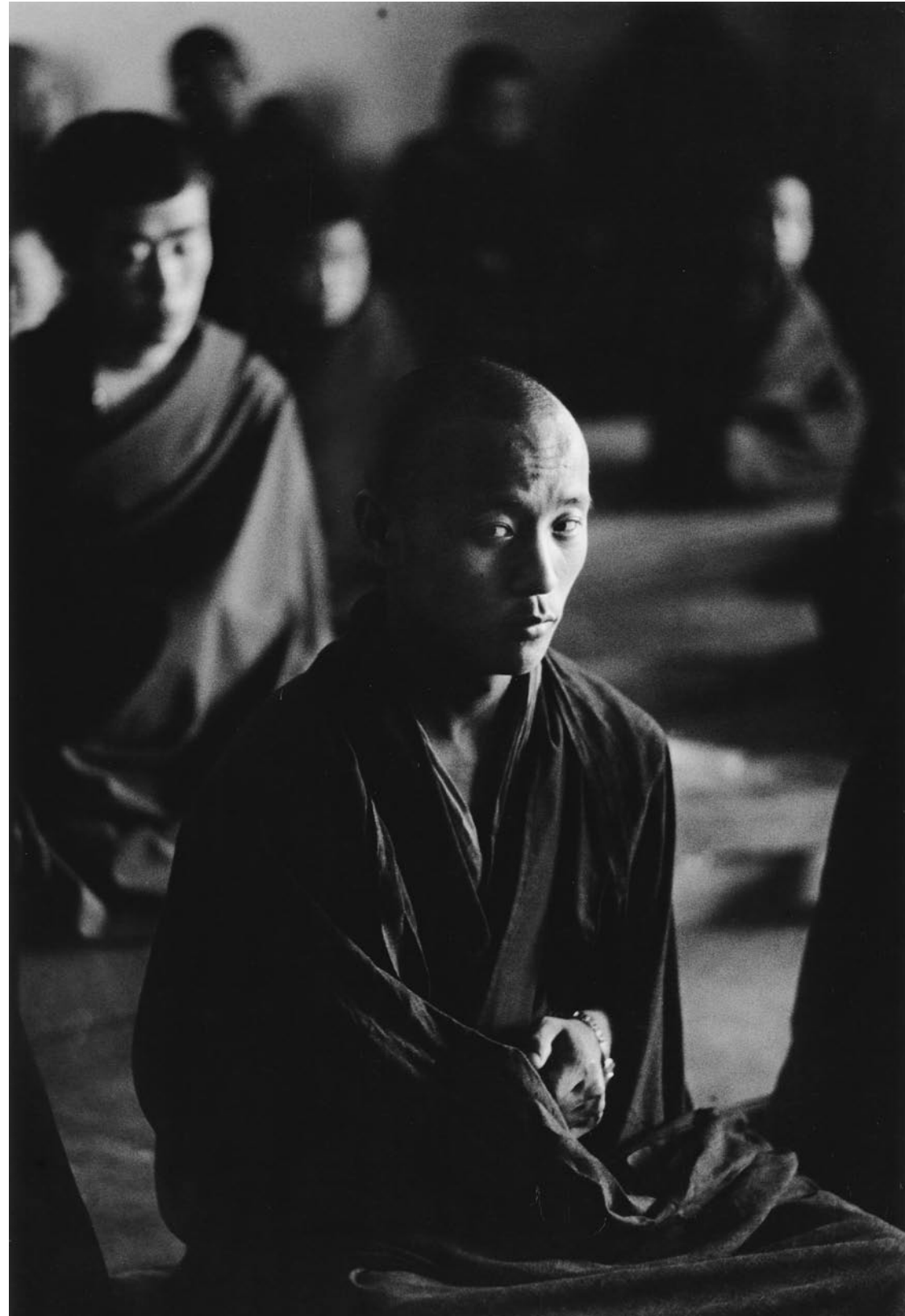
unfinished. Alexander's armies got to this cold river and stopped. I can see why.



I had another talk with Drukchen Rinpoche this morning. He has never been in the small temple room at the foot of his stairs. He tells me that it is the tradition for the Drukchen Rinpoche to go someplace, go to a room and then just stay there. He does not stop along the way, or poke into places to satisfy his curiosity. Those who wish to see him come to him. And whenever he moves from this room to the main temple he is preceded by two monks in ceremonial dress playing reed instruments, *gyalings*.

So his days are rather sedentary. As a matter of fact, he has been told by a doctor that it would be good if he could jog a few miles each day. I envision His Holiness trotting along mountain paths preceded by two attendants gasping for breath enough to play their *gyalings*. It wouldn't work.

Some little monks, the youngest about 7 or 8, stick their heads around the corner near me. "Ssht, ssht! Take foto!" They scuttle up and sit around me, watching everything I do. A few older monks join them. One looks at the camera which hangs by my side. He inspects the clear, bright glass of the lens it, then lovingly wipes it



with a butter-covered thumb, and smiles up at me. A lovely smile.



In the large temple hall several hundred people sit and chant. The monks are in rows in the center , with the villagers along cloth runners around the outside of the room. They sit by families, lined up like bobsled teams.

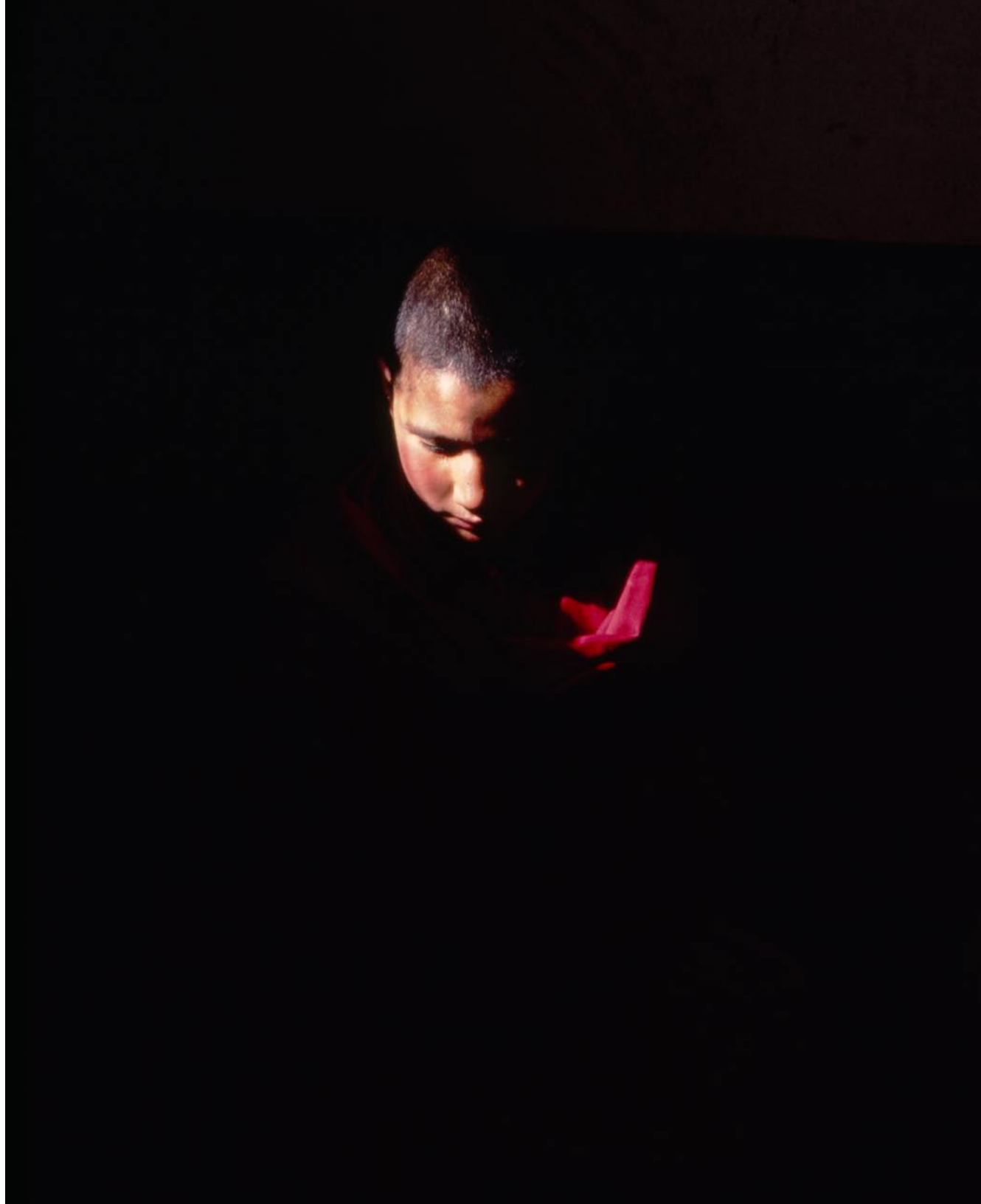
And the sound! The hundreds of chanting voices make a tone, a hum with no beginning or end. It must be what creation sounded like from a distance. I start to hum the same mantra. The sound fills me and I'm thoughtless.

Then an old woman comes into the hall and starts greeting friends with great yells and whoops. In a church at home she would be glared into silence, but here no one minds and she just carries on, merrily disruptive, until everyone is thoroughly greeted.





A few days later there is Lama dancing. These dances are essentially teaching stories that the monks mime to music. It all starts with the temple silent. Then a huge crash of drums and cymbals, *gyalings* and huge long horns. It sounds like all the sounds ever made, but all at once. Then an intense and pure silence, from which voices begin to chant. The whole sound rises and overlaps and mixes in the vast stone-walled room. From the blackness behind the altar there is a stirring, and, with another crash of instruments the dancers start to enter, dressed in rich brocade costumes. Huge masks representing various deities in their different aspects (wrathful and peaceful)



cover their heads completely. They move with a stalking, swinging walk, like giants swinging from side to side. They make slow, stately swirls. The chanting rises in intensity.

In among the dancers weaves a small figure, a little monk dressed as some kind of attendant figure in fur pants and tunic with an animal mask. As he moves his pants start to lose their purchase on his hips. Suddenly everyone is aware of him. He moves his legs wider apart, but the pants keep slipping, and finally he has to exit back behind the altar, while the audience of villagers and monks chortle.

Afterward I sit with His Holiness in his room, the highest in the building. And the warmest. He sits cross-legged on a low bed, talking while his mother sits on a mattress on the floor, knitting him some bright orange socks. Periodically she walks over and measures them against his feet.

He asks me if I got good pictures of the dancing.

I doubt it, I think to myself. I don't explain this to him, but I am a person who would never walk into a religious ceremony and start firing away with a flash. So I said that because of the dim light I had just opened the shutter and hoped that I'd get anything at all. He looks at me, puzzled. "Why you don't use flash?" he asks.

Downstairs I can hear the murmur of the crowd of people who have come from miles around for the festival. At the foot of the stairs leading up to His Holiness' rooms waits a line of people hoping to see him for a few minutes.

All these people have come to see you," I say. "Yes. . . but why? They are human, I am human. Perhaps they have come to see you because you're so big!" He laughs and laughs, and looks down at my size 12 shoes.

Our talk over these few days has been punctuated with laughter and fun. It must contrast with his usual life. Since his assumption of the leadership of the order at the age of two (he is considered to be the 12th reincarnation of the founder of the order) he has had contact mainly with older men who have been training him and educating him in the Dharma and his responsibilities, the deepest questions of existence. I am completely out side of all this, and perhaps that's why things are a bit lighter.

His Holiness talks of his life as though it were dream. "Eat. Pray. Give blessing. That's all." It's not a complaint.



I walk out onto the parapet of the monastery . On a far rampart two monks in tall ceremonial hats play gyalings. Broken reedy flutings fall on the blue air of the growing night. Starlight flows onto the mountains. Am I on Earth?



In the room that is serving as a dormitory for the monks visiting with His Holiness a lama goes slowly through his possessions, as though he were looking for something but not very hard. First he looks at a notebook. Then a tin box with razor and some coins. Now a bag. He takes things out, examines them in the dim light of an oil lamp, then puts them back. Clink of coins on wood, pencils tapped on a glass, spoon on a table. The light in this night room is like a liquid, greenish, yellow-brown.

Now the monk is up and stirring the twigs in the small smoky tin stove. The flames sing in a small voice. Downstairs in the kitchen a monk serves food from a huge pot while holding a flashlight in his mouth and singing the same vocal figure over and over. A mantra, most likely. Another takes a small folded paper packet, opens it and sprinkles salt over his food carefully, like a blessing.



Downstairs the boy monks chant evening prayers. Dim butter lamps are the only light in the room.

Sudden sound. Reeds, horns, conches, cymbals, drums.



At lunch the next day I ask His Holiness about the figure to whom this festival is devoted. “Who exactly is Mahakala?” I inquire. He smiles, leans toward me, pokes my shoulder, and says softly, firmly. “You know who Mahakala is!”



I went into Leh to arrange my ticket back to Delhi, and on the way back to the bus station I walked through the bazaar. The women are selling mostly root crops now, potatoes, desiccated carrots, onions and bunches of things I don’t recognize. No fresh vegetables will be brought in until the passes open in May.

Here’s a shopping list of things you can buy at the Leh bazaar:
cast-off army fatigues,
fragments of metal hardware,



bright cloth, blankets, enameled white pots,
Ladakhi coats and pointed shoes,
brilliant sashes from Bhutan,
small and gracefully turned wooden tea bowls,
beads, glass bangles, and flashlights,
radios that strain for the broadcasts that leak over the mountains,
old coins (Mughal, Indo-Greek) from traders who passed this way,
soccer balls, bloody meat, tea and padlocks,
incense, chilies, goat skins,
huge brass-handled tailor's shears, thermal underwear,
Hot Wave magazine (Group Sex Special Issue),
tin trunks, thick candles, tall fur hats,
tsampa, chick peas, nylon rope, hair oil, rock candy,
chains, hinges, and shells from the sea far away.

Did I forget anything?



Back at the monastery I start to be aware of a date, some days
hence, when I will leave. Timelessness gives way to a sense of dates and
schedules. I wander around looking at things as though they were clues



I'd have to remember.

Just as I look into the prayer hall the monks' handbells break into short, sharp peals, a hundred tiny discords falling onto the air, then abruptly ending. The silence that follows is much sharper. Then chanting resumes. Each syllable seems to take on body as a small vapor cloud in front of each mouth.

Outside the prayer hall the littlest boys shoes lie scattered in all directions.





An old woman, the boys caretaker, walks past. She stops and stoops to straighten a pair of orange sneakers, ignoring all the other shoes. Then she walks off. Does she have a favorite?

Suddenly prayers are over. The boys come, rummage among the shoes. “Foto, foto, foto,” whispered as they flow past me. Then they’re gone.



Taking photos is the reason I give myself to come to places like this, but I keep thinking that what is happening here lies beyond any medium. What things look like is only the shadow of what is happening. Monks chant and chant, then stop and sip tea, and a wisp of vapor curls up before them. It’s the tea that makes a picture, but it’s the chanting—and the silence beyond it—that makes the life.

Still... “The form of the truth is the truth.”



I go outside and stand on the top wall of the monastery. The sun drops and icy night begins. I take off my gloves to take a picture. Within seconds my hand starts to hurt with cold. I look out over the frozen valley with its snowy fields, lacy paths, stone walls running to the frozen river, and at the white mountains opposite. The cold comes down filling every empty place in the valley—slowing, stopping, fixing everything.





Thubten Sangag Choling Monastery in Darjeeling was founded by this man, V.V. Thuksey Rinpoche, who functioned as regent of the Drukpa Kagyuid order when H.H. Drukchen Rinpoche was very young. He more or less held things together for the refugees as they re-established their broken lives in India. He passed away in 1983. Homage.

If you'd like to know more about the order and the monastery there is an extensive website about the monastery at www.sangling.com. There is also H.H. Drukchen Rinpoche's website, www.drukpa.org.