

Traditional Perspectives on Hair Cutting

Bhutanese hold many traditional beliefs concerning cutting one's hair. Hair is seen as an important and sacred part of the body. Many older people used to collect their hair and burn it after a haircut, although many people these days leave it behind in the hair salon to be disposed of in the garbage. It has been believed that throwing away one's own hair in inappropriate places is contrary to the Buddhist belief, giving rise to the idea that merits will be accumulated if one takes care of one's own hair cuttings.

Many elderly people believe that, cutting hair after sunset will be equivalent to shortening one's own life. They also advise that it is wiser to burn it rather than dump it in the garbage. If one carelessly disposes of one's hair and others then step on it, it is believed misfortune and illness will arise in one's life.

Haircuts are strongly driven by Buddhist precepts and the activity has to be done in accord with astrological configurations, which means there are certain days, dates and time good for cutting hair. There is also a Bhutanese saying associated with these four specific days—*དགུ་ལྗོངས་གནམ་གང་མགུ་མ་འཇུ། རྩོམ་གཅིག་ཚེས་གཉིས་སྐྱ་མ་བརྟོག།*. It is considered inauspicious to wash one's head on 29th or 30th days of every lunar month and it is also advised not to cut one's hair on 1st or 2nd days of the lunar month. *Gutong* (དགུ་ལྗོངས་) and *namgang* (གནམ་གང་) refers to the last two days of the month, 29th and 30th, and *gumachu* (མགུ་མ་འཇུ) means not to wash one's head or bathe on either of these days. Similarly, *Tsechi Tsenyi* (ཚེས་གཅིག་ཚེས་གཉིས་) refers to the first two days of the month, and *chamatok* means do not get a haircut on any of these two days.

Hair is believed to be connected with one's vital life force. Therefore, when a practitioner is performing longevity practices, s/he will not have a haircut for the duration of the retreat. Special attention is paid to which day(s) of the month is favorable for cutting hair in general. According to astrology, the favorable days for cutting hair are 8th, 9th, 10th, 11th, 26th and 27th of the lunar month. If one gets a haircut on the 8th, it promotes longevity. If one gets on the 26th or 27th, it brings good luck. But if they are cut on 1st and 2nd day of any lunar month, one will have a short life and many diseases. These two days are considered unfavorable for a haircut.

A child's first haircut will be performed once her/his hair is long enough. Usually the first haircut is done by a brother of the child's mother, or in some cases parents take the child to a Lama for the first haircut, believing that the Lama doing so will furnish for good luck, vitality and longevity. Cutting your hair inside your house is a bad omen, and it is thought that if you do, your mother will die. These kinds of beliefs are still observed in contemporary Bhutanese culture. They play an important role in the lives of Bhutanese people across the country.

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