

## **The Importance of *bLor-zin* as a part of learning at FoTM (Faculty of Traditional Medicine).**

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### **Abstract**

My research is an action research and it is based on real setting of Faculty of Traditional Medicine (FoTM) views and opinions on *bLor-zin* (The rote learning) system. The main purpose of carrying out my research is to conclude or find out whether the *blor-zin* is effective method in learning for the 21<sup>st</sup> century when some other institutes and schools have been already substituted with modern ways of teaching and learning strategies. Some Students and faculty express out not having such a system in the curriculum as *bLor-zin* was found bit difficult compared to the other ways of learning methods. However, there are also some who want *bLor-zin*. Actually these were just the debating issue. So, in the means of debating I thought why not problem be solved instead of keeping for the chaos topic. That is why from my research it can be explained whether *bLor-zin* should be kept or not according to the opinions of participants.

### **Background**

About 2500 years ago, the eminent of the beings, the Buddha turned four wheels of dharma to benefit all sentient beings in the world. That time his close disciples like Ananda and many others transcribed all the discourses in the form of written text without having any mistakes and broken phrases in between. (History of Buddhism, n.d). Those exactly transcribed words of Buddha is termed as *Kaa* (Canon or words of Buddha) (Tibetan Buddhist canon, n.d) Buddha's teachings had become extremely difficult to understand and practice. The first and foremost problem faced while learning Buddhist philosophy is that it is very difficult to grasp the meaning written in the text. Though, one can understand the

meaning, it consumes lots of time and space to complete whole folios of Buddha's teachings.

In order to overcome the above problems, many Bodhisattvas, Buddhist scholars and Buddhist masters have abridged the whole canons into one simple text. This summarized text is called *Toenjur* (commentaries) (Tibetan Buddhist canon, n.d.). The commentaries are written so that even ordinary people can understand the Buddha Dharma easily. In the commentaries, its main feature is attributed in such a manner that it can be in the utility of human life and so that followers can keep its concept clearly attached with their body, speech and mind.

In learning Buddhist principles, the peculiar method adopted was through “rote learning” commonly known as *bLor-zin* in Dzongkha. *bLor-zin* is a memorization technique based on repetition. Here one has to memorize the canons and commentaries exactly as written on the scriptures. Any addition or deletion or alteration is not entertained while in western culture literature. This culture had prevailed since a long time and is still alive especially in the monastic bodies, nunneries, Buddhist colleges & universities. The main reason behind the *bLor-zin* system of Learning is to preserve the originality and sacredness of the teachings. Furthermore, it is also to keep the followers have cascading faiths and beliefs in the religion in truly hearing the adages and phrases in the course of religious conversations and discourses.

Like Buddhism, Bhutanese traditional medicine (*gSo-ba Rig-pa*) system also took its birth in the land of India. It is said that the *Sangay Smenlha* (medicine Buddha) transformed himself into two incarnated forms, namely to *Drangsong Rigpai Yeshey* and *Yeeth Lekay*. The two incarnated beings introduce custom of Gyud-zhi (four Tantras) where the four tantras are *rTsarGyud* (the root tantra), *bShed-rGyud* (the explanatory tantra), *Menga-rGyud* (the oral tradition tantra)

and *Chima -rGyud* (the subsequent tantra) (Traditional Tibetan Medicine, n.d.). Later, the scholars from Tibet took great interest in learning traditional medicine system. The Tibetans started translating them into their own scriptures which helped spread all over the Himalayan regions, including Bhutan.

Since *Sangay sMenlha* is the one who taught *gSo-ba Rig-pa*, some scholars considered it as *Kaa*. Some great scholars considered as all the three Buddhist cannon (*Kaa*), commentaries (*Teonjur*) and revealed text (*Terma* or treasures) with their justification, supports and reasons. Similar to the Buddhist teaching in propagating the original essence of *gSo-ba Rig-pa* it should be transmitted through lineage. In the lineage system of transmission, both the teachers and students are engaged in learning. Teacher transmits to his students whatever he learnt from his teachers. In the course of learning students too can ask questions and clarify the doubts. Under guidance of the teacher, students too can become teacher for the next learner to come. In olden times students had to learn and memorize the four volumes of root texts of traditional medicines in order to preserve the originality and similarity of the teachings of Buddha.

Even with advancement in science and technology and changes the traditional system of rote learning in traditional medicine still exist without introduction of alternative means of learning. Generally, our traditional medicine texts are so simple and easy to understand but very difficult in keeping in the mind for long time without daily revision.

The introduction of traditional medicine in Bhutan dates back to third king Jigme Dorji Wangchuk's reign. In year 1967 he commanded the Health Department to introduce Traditional Medicine Services in the country. It was further strengthened by *Thukten Legpai Loday* popularly known as *Ladakh Amji*, in

accordance with royal decree (History of Traditional Medicine in Bhutan, n.d). During his time, students had to memorize all four tantras of medical text. The reason behind using rote learning was with the notion that if the root texts and its supplementary elaborations are kept ready in the mind, it will be easier for the practitioners to solve the patient's problem easily and diligently without having to look during treatment process. In addition, the memorized root text can be used to narrate it to the patients in order to convince them about health and well-being. Therefore, to this day, *bLor-zin* forms an important component of assessment at the Faculty of Traditional Medicine (FoTM) in Thimphu.

Four decades ago, school students too needed to memorize the letters, essays, poems, mathematics, and many other subjects. It was during the time when education system in our country lacked trained teachers and teaching tools. Nevertheless, now days, education system in our country has taken historical transition from rote learning to experiential and activity based learning. Curriculums were reviewed and newly introduced as per the demands of the world and situation. Students throughout the country are taught not through rote learning but by adopting the 21st century pedagogy systems. Unlike in Buddhist institutions, teachers in the schools no more demand students to memorize the whole text. Instead, students are encouraged to understand interpret the concepts from the text based on their understanding. The assessment criteria are not on how well versed and fluently they can tell the answer as in the book, instead they are assessed referring to the six levels of Blooms taxonomy, which serves as an indicator for lifelong learning that that prepares them to face the modern world with confidence and competence.

In line with this changing trend in education system, teaching methods and styles at the FoTM have also been relatively changed from its old traditional method of

oral transmission to modern methods of using more activity based, student-centered teaching in many ways. However, the system of *bLor-zin*, having to memorize the original text remained as a very important component of the curriculum. One cannot skip it if one has to get promoted to a higher grade. *bLor-zin* is a must for both continuous assessment and semester end examinations. Therefore, all students are seen in and around the college campus memorizing the texts day and night, weekends and holidays in order to qualify for the next grade.

Each and every semester is followed by varieties of assessments which includes the *bLor-zin*.. There are cases where some learners don't finish memorizing even during the semester end examinations, due to which they have get “back papers” resulting in the loss of time and resources to the individuals as well as to the government. There are some instances where students with poor memory power had to give-up the training due to repeated failure in *bLor-zin*.

Some Students and even some FoTM alumni often gossip that *bLor-zin* is not as effective as expected when it comes to its practical application in the field. They think that what has been memorized is forgotten easily unless frequent recitation is done. Otherwise, there is no point in memorizing with hardship if it is not going to remain in memory for long. Students wish *bLor-zin* to be completely removed from the syllabus, since they face difficulty in memorizing the text even without understanding the meaning.

My hypothesis is that *bLor-zin* is done successfully by the students under compulsion and just for the sake of passing the examinations. *bLor-zin* is not as useful as it is expected to be for practical application in the field because many people forget what they have memorized not long after the examinations.

However, whether it is “thoughtless expression” or “laziness talk” is yet to be explored. Hence this research seeks to find out the value of *bLor-zin* as an important part of training at FoTM.

### **Objectives**

- To find out the practical application of *bLor-zin* (rote learning) in the field.
- To find out the perception of *gSo-rig* students on *bLor-zin*.
- To determine *bLor-zin* is for the written examination and field application.

### **Method**

The research was conducted using purposeful sampling. The participants were the health practitioners of National Traditional Medicine Hospital (NTMH) and students and lecturers of Faculty of Traditional Medicine (FoTM). The data was collected by using questionnaire. The questionnaire was distributed to 55 participants from NTMH, FoTM and students. Before collecting the data, the questionnaire was pilot tested 5 students. Participants were selected using purposeful with the practitioners and lecturer while simple random sampling was done for students. Before collecting data 5 samples were selected for pilot test. This was done mainly to check strength and weakness of my question concerning format and clearness of questions. This is done mainly to allow respondent express their feeling and thought openly. They were allowed to write their opinions without any fear and worry.

### **Ethical Concerns**

The most important step in this study was to seek informed consent from the individual participants. The participants selected were introduced to the study

beforehand by informing them about the overall purpose of the study. The informed consent was taken from the participants only after they had clear insight into the research design and their role in the study. The participation was voluntary and they were given the full right and freedom to withdraw from the study at any time. There was no risks and inconvenience caused during the time of data collection. No other people have access to the research documents besides the researcher and the participants. All research documents, consisting mainly of questionnaires and process notes were kept confidential.

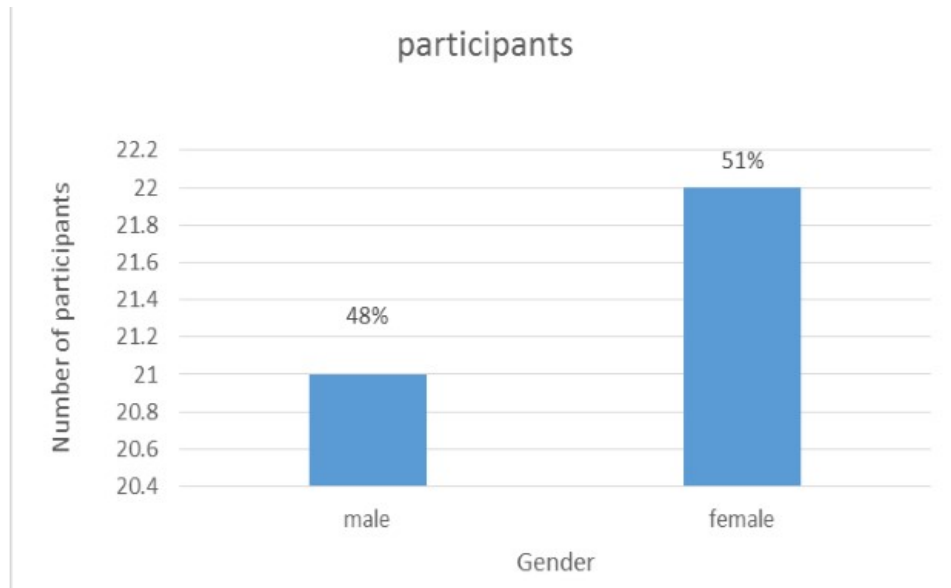
### **Data analysis.**

Data gathered for the quantitative study was analyzed using Microsoft Word Document, Microsoft Excel Database and Microsoft worksheet. The other results and discussion were analyzed in charts and tables.

### **Data collection**

Data was collected using questionnaire. Of the 55 people invited to participate in the study, 43 people had responded (response rate 78%). Among the respondent 7 were lecturers and 26 were students from Faculty of Traditional Medicine (FoTM), 10 *drungdtshos* and *sMenpa* from National Traditional Medicine Hospital (NTMH). All the participants were from Thimphu. Of the 43 respondent 51% (n= 22) were females and 48% (n=21) were males. The questionnaire were distributed to the samples who could read and write English. No separate Dzongkha questionnaire was made to collect data from the samples who could not read and write English and also face to face interview is not conducted. Furthermore its anonymous or voluntary, which means confidentiality is kept. All the participants range their ages from 18-70 years. Based on their opinions collected through questionnaire methods data was analyzed.

## Results and discussion

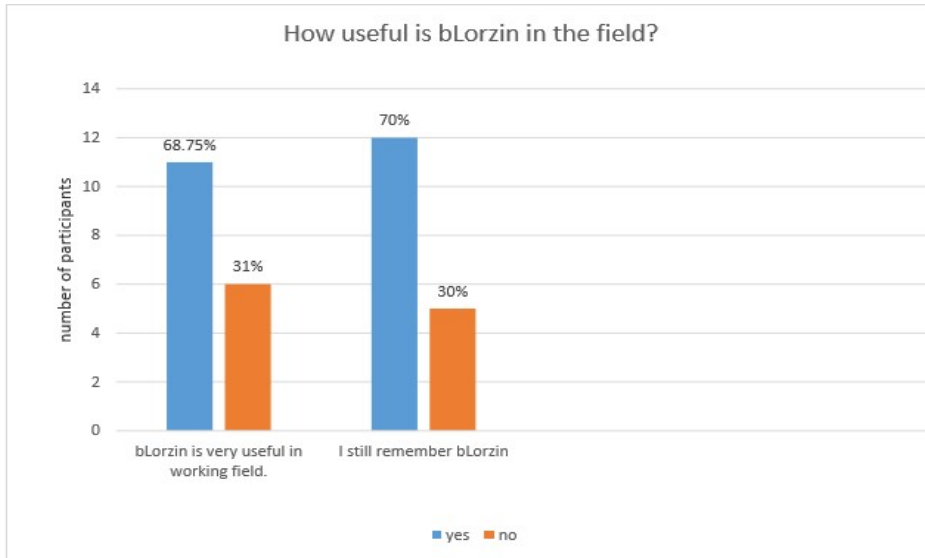


On the questionnaire that I have handed to my participants, all of them have responded with integrity and honesty. My aim and objectives of research is mainly based on how important is the bLor-zin as a part of learning in FoTM. Here three important questions were asked as follow:

1. Do you find *bLor-zin* very useful in carrying out your duty as a health practitioner?
2. Do you still remember the text which you memorized during training?
3. Did *bLor-zin* help you in written exam?

The two questions above were asked to various participants like lecturers and students of FoTM and *drungtshos* and *sMenpa* of NTMH. Question 1 and 2 were asked to lectures and *drungtshos* and *sMenpas* of NTMH whereas last question was asked to students. The Above two questions were not asked to students since they are still studying and they will not know how helpful the bLorzin is in the field until they work. Here is the data analysis as per the respond from *drungtshos*, *sMenpa*, lecturers and students.



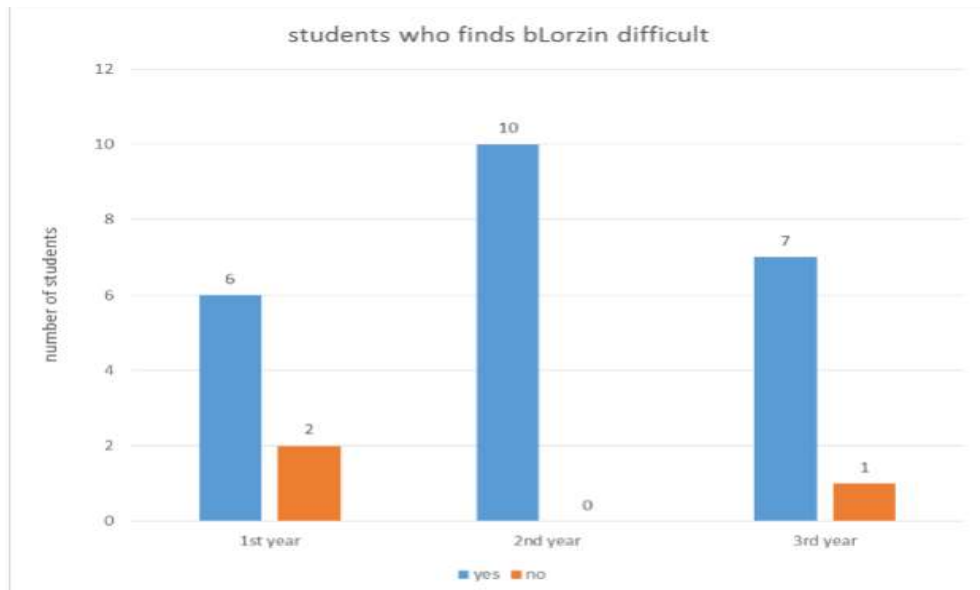


**Figure 1 How useful the *bLor-zin* is in carrying out duty as a health practitioner?**

Above question was asked to lectures of FoTM and *drungtshos* and *sMenpas* of NTMH. In total there are 17 experienced participants here. Pertaining to their role and duties in their present fields I asked this question “ is there any advantages of *bLor-zin* in their present working field?” toward this question 68.75% (n=11) participants have responded about having advantages whereas 31% (n= 6) participants expressed that there is not much advantages in the field. However the majority of participants have suggested their opinions to introduce more modern method of learning in FoTM.

To assure that *bLor-zin* is useful in the field the question was asked “Do you still remember the text which you have memorized for *bLor-zin*? 70% of the respondent said they still remember what they have memorized in the past whereas remaining 30% said they have forgotten. In response to the question asked to students of FoTM is there any benefits of *bLor-zin* in their

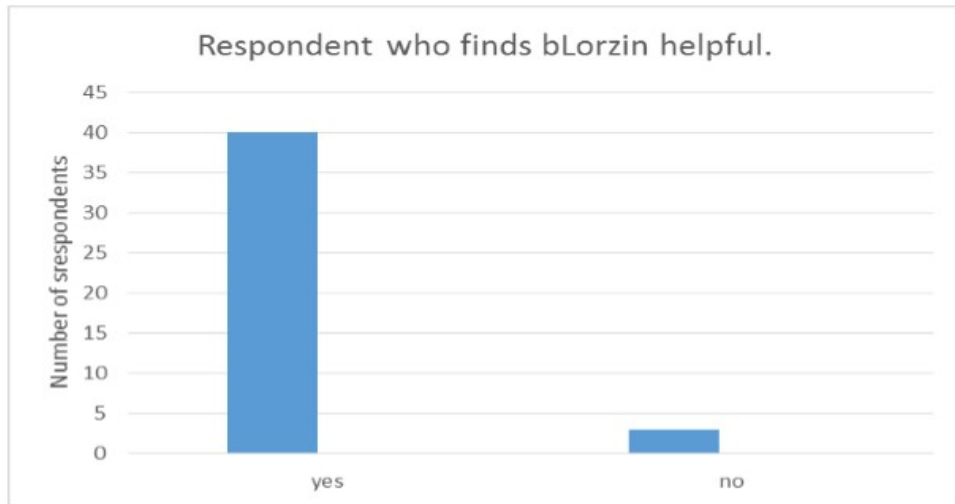
examination?’ Here in this case 39% responded ‘Yes’ and 61% responded ‘No’. Based on their response it can be concluded that there is no benefits in exam as 61% has expressed about having no benefits in written examination. However, *bLor-zin* has benefits in the working field since majority has responded it has benefit.



**Figure 2 Is bLor-zin very difficult to memorize?**

Above question was asked to students of FoTM. From 26 respondents 88% (n=23) has responded that *bLor-zin* is the toughest and challenging job for them where as 12% (n=3) has expressed *bLor-zin* is not that much tough and challenging job for them. From this data, we can conclude that *bLor-zin* is not easy as majority of them have expressed that it is challenging and tedious job with *bLor-zin*. All have stated that memorizing exactly as in the text is very difficult for them. Moreover they have stated “it’s difficult to memorize but very easy to forget quickly”. When i asked “Is it okay if the *bLor-zin* is excluded from curriculum? Here 10 out of 26 has responded ‘yes’ Whereas 16 responded ‘No’.

However they have shared their opinion that some *bLor-zin* which is that much important and useful in the field should be excluded.



**Figure 3 Can *bLor-zin* be substituted by other methods of learning?**

Many participants have suggested that methods of learning in FoTM as drastically changed compared to the past. One of the teachers has stated in the comment that in the past curriculum 90% of marks is *blor-zin* and only 10% is written examination. At present, only 20% is *blor-zin* and 80% is written exam. Above question was asked to the lecturer and students of FoTM and *drungtshos* and the *sMenpas* of NTMH. In response to that 93% (n=40) responded that *bLor-zin* can be replaced by other method and 6.9% (n=3) said that it cannot be replaced. However, most of the participants stated that memorizing is old age method which is easily forgotten, so it can be substituted by other modern methods. However 3 have respondent that *blor-zin* should be kept as it is and cannot be substituted by any other means with their own justification. All the 26 students has responded that *bLor-zin* can be substituted by other means of learning which will be much helpful and effective than *bLor-zin*.

## Conclusion

Faculty of Traditional Medicine is still following the old age method of learning, owing to the fact that there is still rote learning, which is commonly known as *bLor-zin*. However, many modern methods of learning has introduced at FoTM compared to the few decades ago. In the past it is said that students has to memorize whole textbook which carries 90% marks. At present there is only few *bLor-zin* kept in the curriculum that are very important. Result show that *bLor-zin* has benefits in the field. Majority of participants has responded that *bLor-zin* helps in carrying duty as health practitioner. But majority of students has responded that *bLor-zin* dont have benefits in written examination. Majority of the student said that 70% of the time is consumed by *bLor-zin* whereas only 30% is given for other studies. Many stated that *bLor-zin* is very challenging and difficult job for them as *bLor-zin* need frequent recitation to retain in mind otherwise it is forgotten too fast from mind. Students don't want *bLor-zin* to be totally excluded from curriculum but they are demanding few *bLor-zin* to be excluded which is not much useful in field. Any how many participants considers memorizing is the old age method and it can be substituted by other modern method which can be much effective than *bLor-zin*.

## References

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