

LOSAR TRADITIONS

Tibetan New Year, called Losar, is celebrated every year in February, coinciding with the New Moon. The date is calculated by the Tibetan lunar calendar and is the first day of the first month of the year and does not occur on exactly the same date every year. It is good timing here in the northeast of North America. February is the last winter month and somehow spring is always in the air after Losar.

This is definitely the biggest holiday in Tibetan culture. Losar can be traced back to pre-Buddhist Tibetan ceremonies that celebrated the arts of cultivating, irrigation, and bridge building. Many customs and traditions are followed, both at the monasteries and in people's homes. Losar was formerly celebrated for fifteen days but now the festivities range between three and seven days depending on the country.

In monasteries, protector pujas are begun on the 29th day of the twelfth month in preparation for Losar ceremonies. Depending on where you live you might be able to attend a fire purification puja and have the opportunity to cast out your negativity from the old year. On that day, gu tuk, the traditional soup with nine surprise ingredients, is served by the household elder. Made of mashed and boiled grains, and flavored with dried yak cheese, the soup contains dumplings with messages or small objects. It is a kind of divination soup, where everyone has fun sharing their message, as people all over the globe now do with fortune cookies.

The last day of the year everything is cleaned. People clean their homes or apartments especially well, dusting on top of high furniture and under cabinets, and prepare their dress clothes for the coming occasion. Most Tibetans in exile wear traditional dress on Losar. In monasteries, elaborate shrine room decorations are made with special ceremonial cakes called torma and huge offerings of food, all artistically arranged and consecrated in the early morning puja. These are given to all the people who attend the ceremonies.

In times past, preparations for this day would include the yearly bath in the river for nomads living in the harsh climate of the Tibetan plateau. When Losar was celebrated over a fifteen-day period, one day was set aside for men to bathe, groom, and socialize, and another day for women. The best animals were also cleaned and adorned with colorful woven tack, bells, and jewelry. All children born during the previous year celebrated their birthday on Losar.

Losar begins at sunrise with prayer. Everyone assembles in the shrine room where the first cup of tea and a taste of sweet rice and chang are offered to the Three Jewels. Other ceremonial foods offered at the shrine might include yogurt, dhoma, and the decorative cookies called khapsey, which are all then shared at a sunrise meal. The sweetness of the chang, the fine texture of the yogurt, and the rich flavor of the tea all herald the auspicious nature of the New Year. Many wishes of “Tashi deleg”—“Good luck!”—are exchanged.

The day is spent close to home, resting and appreciating the day. Foods that can be eaten by hand along with the dishes made especially for Losar morning are available. These would be dried or boiled meat, fresh and dried fruit and nuts.

At large monasteries, traditional Lama Dances are performed on Losar. These are extraordinary to behold. Monks of all ages are involved in the all-day event, which is the culmination of many months of practice to learn the precise steps and forms of these ancient symbolic dances. The costumes are all made at the monasteries according to tradition and are very elaborate and beautiful. In times past, Tibetans from the countryside would travel many miles to attend these dances, which celebrate the triumph of good over evil and depict Tibetan secular and religious history. These were very important teachings for a largely illiterate population. Fortunately, this powerful tradition is still intact and can be seen at Buddhist monasteries in Nepal, India, and Tibet.

The remainder of Losar is spent visiting family and friends. Everyone brings khapsey and other foods as gifts. The welcoming host greets guests at the door with che mar, an offering of flour to toss in the air before entering. Tea, sweet rice, and chang are served, news and stories of “the old days” exchanged, and card games are often played. In the countryside where tribes would congregate, games like tug-of-war, running races, heavy lifting contests, and horsemanship competitions took place. These huge gatherings of hundreds of people are still taking place in some regions in the summer when the weather is good.

Some new Losar traditions have been adopted among Tibetans in exile. Tibetan families like to stay in touch with their distant relatives at Losar and cannot always take the time to travel, so a new industry of Losar greeting cards has sprung up. Also, some shrine decorations that were formerly sculpted from butter and grains, such as the sheep’s head, which is an ancient symbol for abundance, can now be purchased in painted ceramic and saved from year to year, the way some of us save Christmas ornaments.