

An Introduction to the Hermitages of Sera



Purchok Hermitage (Phur lcog ri khrod), to the east of Se ra.

As the saying goes, “Se ra is surrounded by hermitages, Dga’ ldan is surrounded by self-arisen images, and ’Bras spungs is surrounded by dharma protectors.” Sera Mahāyāna Monastery (Se ra theg chen gling) is therefore surrounded by hermitages as numerous as the stars on the fifteenth day of the lunar month.

—*Dge bshes ye shes dbang phyug*¹

Among the three great seats of learning of the Dge lugs school, Se ra is the one renowned for its hermitages (*ri khrod*). At least nineteen such institutions are found tucked away in the mountains behind and around Se ra.² In this section of the Sera Project website, you will learn more about each of these hermitages. To go directly to the Hermitages interactive map, please [click here](#).

The Tibetan compound word *ri khrod* – the word that we translate here as “hermitage” – literally means “in the midst of” or “on the side of” (*’khrod*) “the

¹ Ser smad spom ra dge bshes ye shes dbang phyug, *Ser smad thos bsam nor gling grwa tshang gi chos ’byung lo rgyus nor bu’i phreng ba* [*A History of the Sermé Tōsam Norling College: A Garland of Jewels*] (Bylakuppe: Sermey Printing Press, 1984), 35-36.

² Lists of the Se ra hermitages vary. For a list from 1820 (found in the *Extensive Explanation of the World* [*’Dzam gling rgyas bshad*]), see Turrell Wylie, *The Geography of Tibet According to the ’Dzam-gling-rgyas-bshad* (Rome: IsMEO, 1962), 82-83.

mountains” (*ri*).³ Hermitages are small monasteries found in relatively isolated mountain locations. At least in their early stages, they were the homes of individuals variously called “retreatant” (*mtshams pa*), “meditator” (*sgom chen*), “recluse” (*gcig bu pa* or *dben sa pa*), and of course “hermit” (*ri khrod pa*). A hermitage often began as the residence of a single individual,⁴ but most of them grew. When they became relatively large, they often ceased to be called hermitages and began to be called “monastery” (*dgon pa*), but the dividing line between these two terms – hermitage and monastery – is fuzzy. There are some hermitages, for example, that have more monks than many institutions that bear the name “monastery.” Many of Tibet’s greatest monasteries began as the hermitages of individual monks.

Hermitages usually begin as the retreat places of individual monks, tantric priests (*sngags pa*), pious male lay practitioners and, less frequently, nuns and laywomen.⁵ They are the places where these individuals settled for intensive, solitary practice. Originally, these sites may have had no buildings at all but only caves. When a cave did not exist, a monk might have built a simple stone and mud hut for his personal use. A monk often chose as the site of his hermitage a place that was considered holy (*gnas rtsa chen po*) – places where former saints had lived, places associated with certain deities, or places marked by certain geosacral signs such as self-arisen images or magical springs with curative powers. Holy places are said to bring blessings (*byin rlabs*) to those who reside there. Like a magnifying glass, they have the power to amplify or increase the merit derived from any religious practice performed there, and in general they are said to increase the chances of success in religious practice.

What would a monk have done in his hermitage? He would have engaged in meditation, ritual, study, writing, memorization, and a host of spiritual practices classified together under the general rubric of “accumulation and purification” (*gsag sbyang*).⁶ Or he might have engaged in a combination of all of these various activities. Even monks who were not committed to eremiticism as a permanent way of life often settled in isolated locations for limited periods of time – for

³ Other words are also used – for example, *dben sa* or *dben gnas*, literally “solitary place” or “solitary site”; see the discussion that follows.

⁴ Among the Se ra hermitages, it appears that only one (Ga ru) was not originally the meditational retreat of an individual monk but was instead founded as an institution – in this case as a nunnery – from the beginning. See, for example, Bshes gnyen tshul khriims, *Lha sa'i dgon tho rin chen spungs rgyan [A Catalogue of the Monasteries of Lhasa: A Heap of Jewels]* (Bod ljongs mi dmangs dpe skrun khang, 2001), 30-31.

⁵ Nuns tended to be more wary about living alone in isolated locations for fear that they might be attacked or robbed; at least that is the rhetoric that we find in both the oral and written sources. Hence, when nuns retreated to the mountains, they tended to do so in groups. None of the hermitages we study here, even those that are nunneries, were founded by women.

⁶ This includes such things as prostrations, ritual offerings of the universe (*maṅḍala* offerings), recitations of the hundred-syllable mantra (*sngags*) of Vajrasattva (Rdo rje sems dpa'), water-bowl offerings, guru devotion practices, and so forth.

example, when they engaged in short or longer-term deity-focused practices like the so-called “enabling retreat” (*las rung*) or “approximation retreat” (*bsnyen pa*).⁷

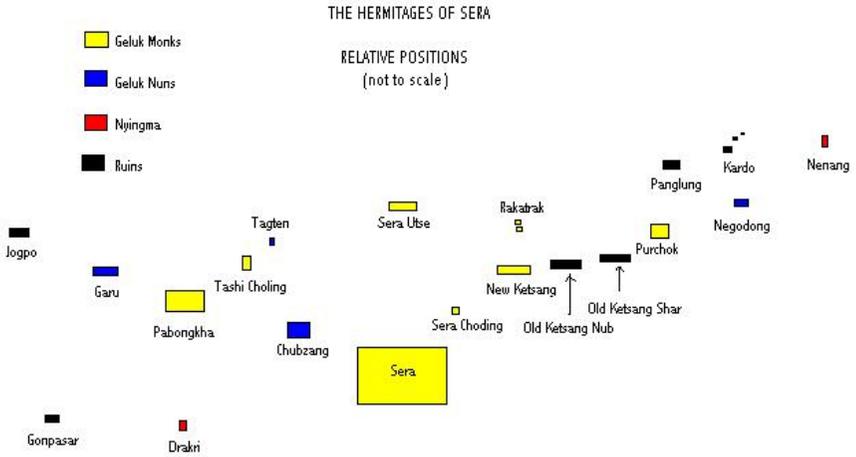
Many hermits traveled widely before settling on one spot as their permanent residence. And some, of course, never settled at all, but remained itinerant throughout their entire lives. Those monks who chose to settle usually picked a site that provided them with privacy. But the site also had to be relatively close to a populated area – close enough to allow them to obtain food and other necessities (usually in the form of donations from the laity). After remaining at a particular site for some time, the monk might gain a certain level of renown. In this case, he might attract students. If he did, an institution would begin to coalesce around him. First, students would build their own huts close to that of their master, and eventually they might build a temple where the monastic community could come together for rituals and teachings. If the community managed to attract the financial sponsorship of lay patrons, the hermitage would grow. When the original *bla ma*-founder died, the reincarnation might be identified, and in this way the succession would be maintained, and the hermitage would continue to develop as an institution. This is how private retreats evolved into more formal hermitages, and (in some instances at least) into larger monasteries. This is a well-known pattern in the history of Tibetan religious institutions. It is a model applicable not only to the evolution of Se ra’s hermitages but also to other monasteries throughout Tibet.

Location and Institutional Affiliation to Se ra

Most of the Se ra hermitages are located in the mountains to the north, east and west of the monastery along a (roughly) fifteen kilometers east-west span from ’Jog po and Dgon pa gsar hermitages in the far west to Gnas nang in the far east. The rough map that follows gives the relative location and some basic information about the hermitages of Se ra as of 2004. The map operates on a usual north-south axis, with the mountains to the north of the hermitages and the city of Lha sa to the south. The hermitages to the right (northeast) of Se ra are located in what is today a suburb of Lha sa known as Dodé.⁸ The hermitages to the left (northwest) of Se ra are located in the suburb known as Nyang bran.

⁷ These are retreats that involve mantra (*sngags*) accumulation of a specific deity and that allow one to subsequently engage in a variety of ritual actions with respect to that deity.

⁸ At least two variant spellings of the word commonly pronounced *dodé* exist: *dog bde* and *rdo gter*. The spelling *rdo gter* is also preferred by *Lha sa dgon tho*, passim. Phun tshogs rab rgyas, *Phur lcog rigs gsum byang chub gling gi byung ba mdo tsam brjod pa dad gsum ’dren pa’i lcags kyu* [A Brief History of Purchok Riksum Jangchup Ling: A Hook to Draw in the Three Types of Faith; hereafter *Phur byung*], *Bod ljongs nang bstan* [Tibetan Buddhism] 1 (2004), 55, gives the etymology: *dang po ltar na phu dog cing mda’ bde bas na dog bde dang /_ phyi ma ni yul ’dir rdo rigs sna tshogs kyi gter kha yod pa’i cha nas rdo gter zhes ’bod srol yod/*. The author prefers the first spelling and etymology. He also states that excavations have shown that this was an area of “several tens of thousands of households during the imperial period,” but cites no source for this other than oral tradition.



In 1959, all of the hermitages on this map were thriving institutions. Two of them – Gnas sgo gdong to the east, and Ga ru to the west – were nunneries. The rest were monasteries for male monks. They ranged in size from about ten to well over one-hundred monks or nuns. In the case of monks' hermitages, it was not uncommon for there to have been a core group of six to eighteen fully-ordained monks (*dge slong*) that is what gave the institution its formal status and legitimacy as a monastery. But all of the monasteries also had many novices, non-monastic lay workers and support staff. If the hermitage was also the seat of a *bla brang* or *bla ma*'s estate/household, the support staff (including novices) could be three to four times as large as the number of fully ordained monks. For example, the Keutsang West Hermitage (Ke'u tshang nub ri khrod), the official residence of the Ke'u tshang bla mas, had a core group of twenty-five fully ordained monks, but if one includes novices and non-monastic staff the population was closer to ninety.⁹

Of the nineteen Se ra hermitages nine were the seats of *bla mas* – that is, they were the headquarters for lama's estates. With two exceptions (noted below) the name of the *bla ma* lineage and that of the hermitage were identical. The lama's estate hermitages were:

- 'Jog po

⁹ Dung dkar blo bzang 'phrin las, *Dung dkar tshig mdzod chen mo* [*The Great Dungkar Dictionary*] (Krungrig'i bod rig pa dpe skrun khang, 2002), 92.

- Dgon pa gsar
- Brag ri
- Bkra shis chos gling, since 1930 the seat of the Pha bong kha sprul skus
- Se ra dbu rtse, the seat of the Sgrub Khang sprul skus
- Keutsang West
- Phur lcog
- Spang lung
- Mkharr do



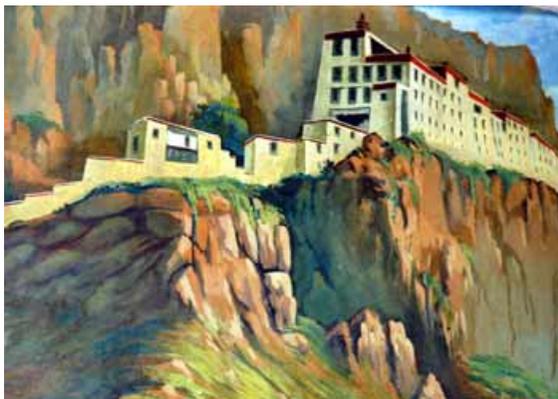
Se ra as viewed from Chöding Hermitage (Chos sdings ri khrod)

Despite the fact that all of the hermitages are called “hermitage of Sera” (*se ra ’i ri khrod*), their relationship to Se ra is actually quite varied and often shifts over time. Some are related to Se ra only insofar as they were founded by Se ra monks, or because as they were taken over by Se ra monks at some point in their history. In several cases, hermitages were independent institutions with only nominal ties to Se ra. In other instances, hermitages were actually the property of Se ra. In between these two poles – minimal affiliation to Se ra at one extreme, and ownership by Se ra at the other – there were a variety of kinds and degrees of affiliation. If the hermitage belonged to a Se ra *bla ma*, then it was this *bla ma*, and not Se ra, who owned the hermitage. But even then there could be different degrees of affiliation between Se ra and the hermitage.

For example, in 1959 Keutsang West belonged to the Ke’u tshang bla ma. All of the monks of the hermitage belonged to the Keutsang Lama’s estate (Ke’u tshang bla brang). But all of the official monks of Ke’u tshang were also official monks of the Hamdong Regional House (Har gdong Khang tshan) of Sera Jé College (Se ra byes grwa tshang), and enjoyed all of the privileges of being Se ra monks with regional house affiliations.¹⁰ Purchok Hermitage (Phur lcog ri khrod), by contrast, appears to have been much more independent, and had a weaker affiliation to Se

¹⁰ This entitled them, for example, to the money offering to monks (*gyed*) made to the college and regional-house monks.

ra. Phur lcog monks belonged principally to the Purchok Lama's estate (Phur lcog bla brang), and it appears that many (perhaps most) did not have official membership in either the Jé College or in one of its regional houses.



A painting of what Keutsang West Hermitage looked like before 1959.

To take another example, the nunneries¹¹ of Ga ru and Gnas sgo gdong belonged not to Se ra but to the lama's estates of the Brag ri and Mkhar rdo *bla mas*, respectively, and these *bla mas* served as their abbots. It is clear, then, even from these few examples, that the question of the institutional relationships of these hermitages to Se ra is a complex one. Because few elder monks from these various monasteries are still alive, it is a challenge to piece together the kinds of affiliation that the various hermitages had to Se ra before 1959. This is something that in many cases still remains to be determined.

Clearer is the present status of the hermitages today. In 2004, hermitages were either independent institutions or they belonged to – in the strong sense of being staffed and run by – Se ra. Of the twelve hermitages that are still active (i.e., that are not in ruins) and that remain Dge lugs, five belong to Se ra: 'Jog po, Pha bong kha, Se ra dbu rtse, Se ra chos sdings, and Ra kha brag. The other three male-monk hermitages (Bkra shis chos gling, Ke'u tshang and Phur lcog) and the four nunneries (Ga ru, Rtags bstan, Chu bzang, and Gnas sgo gdong) are independent institutions. The affiliation of a hermitage today is largely the result of who claimed and rebuilt it after the Lha sa municipal government began to give permits for this purpose in the 1980s. Se ra laid claim to the five hermitages it owns today. It has at least partially rebuilt four of these. One ('Jog po, located to the far west in the pasture lands of the Nyang bran Valley) is used as the base for its herds of yaks, and has been only minimally rebuilt. The other hermitages – the ones that do not belong to Se ra today – were rebuilt by individuals, albeit with community support. Bkra

¹¹ In 1959 there were only two nunneries: Ga ru and Gnas sgo gdong. Today there are four nunneries (Chu bzang and Rtags bstan were taken over by nuns after liberalization permitted the rebuilding of religious institutions in the 1980s).

shis chos gling was rebuilt by a devotee of Pha bong kha rin po che, the previous *bla ma*-owner. Ke'u tshang and Phur lcog were rebuilt by former monks of those hermitages, as were Ga ru and Gnas sgo gdong nunneries. Rtags bstan and Chu bzang were slowly taken over by nuns with no formal prior affiliations to these institutions. They therefore became nunneries simply by virtue of the fact nuns gradually moved to these sites over the years.

As one can see from the map, most of the hermitages survive to this day as Dge lugs institutions (either as monks' hermitages or as nunneries). Of the nineteen¹² original hermitages, all but two remain Dge lugs. Brag ri (mixed nuns and Tantric priests, located in the far south), and Gnas nang (a nuns' retreat center in the far northeast) are now Rnying ma practice centers (*sgrub grwa*).

Of the original nineteen hermitages, five are in ruins and have not been rebuilt. It is interesting that most of the hermitages that have *not* been rebuilt – 'Jog po and Dgon pa gсар in the far west, and Spang lung and Mkhar rdo in the far northeast – lie farthest from Se ra. New Ke'u tshang is in fact the newly rebuilt version of Keutsang West, and so one can count Keutsang West as one of the hermitages that *has* been rebuilt (albeit not in exactly the same site as the original institution). Keutsang East (Ke'u tshang shar) belongs to Purchok Hermitage and lies in ruins. The monks of Phur lcog have decided to put their energies into the main Phur lcog hermitage rather than taking on the additional burden of rebuilding Keutsang East. With this one exception, then, the rule (just mentioned) applies: the closer a hermitage was to Se ra, the greater its chances of being rebuilt.



A nun-meditator from Nenang Hermitage.

History

Several of the hermitages have a history that predates the rise of the Dge lugs school. For example, Pha bong kha, arguably the most important of all of the hermitages, is said to date to the *imperial period*. Gnas nang is said to have been a retreat site of Gu ru rin po che, and, if this is true, dates to the *ninth* century. Garu Nunnery (Ga ru dgon pa), founded by Pha dam pa sangs rgyas (b. eleventh century), dates to the *eleventh* century, and Spangs lung, originally the meditation site of

¹² There are actually twenty hermitages on this map, but what is labeled “New Keutsang” is the newly built version of “Keutsang West.” This accounts for the discrepancy.

one of Pha dam pa sangs rgyas's students, to the early *twelfth* century. Of course, each of these sites was later taken over by Dge lugs pa monks, and so even when a site has a pre-Dge lugs pa history, it also has a Dge lugs pa "founder."

Tsong kha pa (1357-1419), the founder of the Dge lugs school, is intimately connected to three hermitages – Se ra chos sdings, Se ra dbu rtse, and Ra kha brag. Each of these are places where tsong kha pa meditated, taught, and/or authored some of his most important works.¹³ So there is a sense in which Tsong kha pa "founded" these three hermitages in the *fifteenth* century, even if he himself probably had no notion of establishing formal



A stylized painting of Purchok Hermitage as it existed before 1959. The deity shining rainbow light from the clouds onto the monastery is byams pa.

institutions at these sites. And, indeed, there is no other founder of Chos sdings ever mentioned besides Tsong kha pa. But the tradition considers another later *bla ma*, Sgrub khang dge legs rgya mtsho (1641-1713) to be the founder of the other two hermitages – Se ra dbu rtse and Ra kha brag – at least *qua* monastic institutions. Two other hermitages were founded in the *sixteenth* century: Negodong Hermitage (Gnas sgo gdong ri khrod), founded by an eminent Se ra scholar, Sgom sde nam mkha' rgyal mtshan; and Takten Hermitage (Rtags bstan ri khrod), founded by one of the most famous early meditators of the Dge lugs tradition, Dben sa pa blo bzang don grub (1504/5-1565/6), who is often reckoned as the Third Penchen Lama (Pañ chen sku phreng gsum pa). One hermitage, Chu bzang – founded by a monk who was a student (and regent) of the Fifth Dalai Lama (Da lai bla ma sku phreng lnga pa, 1617-1682) as well as the uncle of his most famous regent, *Sde srid sangs rgyas rgya mtsho* (1653-1705) – was established in the *seventeenth* century. But the remaining hermitages, eleven in all, were founded in the *eighteenth* century.

Why this spurt of hermitage-building in the eighteenth century? Why this passion for "taking to the hills" at this particular moment in time? Socio-economic and political factors may have played some role in monks' decisions to leave Se ra and seek the relative peace and quiet of the mountains. We know, for example, that by the late seventeenth century, Se ra had a monastic population of close to 3000

¹³ There is a tradition that Tsong kha pa also meditated at Pha bong kha, and in a small cave between Keutsang West and Keutsang East (this cave no longer exists), but these sites are not as important in the Tsong kha pa biographies and oral lore as the three just mentioned.

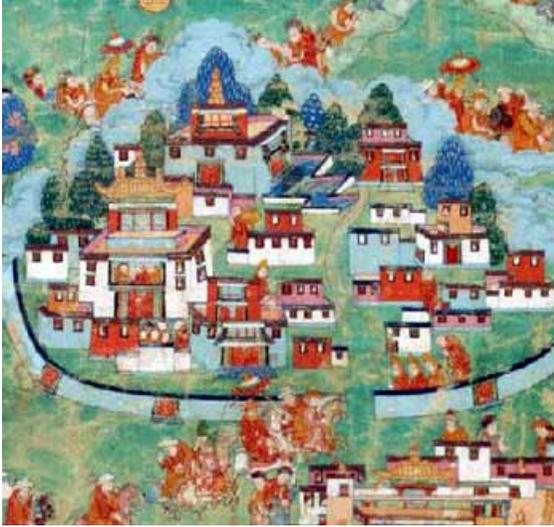
monks.¹⁴ While an intellectually stimulating atmosphere in which to pursue one's studies, a monastery of this size is hardly the type of place that a monk with a contemplative bent would want to call home. Moreover, the eighteenth century saw a huge building boom at Se ra. All three of Se ra's largest temples – the [Sera Great Assembly Hall](#) (Se ra tshogs chen), the [Jé College Assembly Hall](#) (Byes 'du khang) as well as the [Mé College Assembly Hall](#) (Smad 'du khang) – were built between 1707 and 1761. This means that during these years monks would have had to put up with the chaos that comes from living in the midst of large-scale building projects. Nor is it inconceivable that junior monks, even if they were textualists, might have been conscripted to serve as laborers in these mammoth architectural undertakings.

Political factors also might have played a role in the exodus of monks. With the growth of the Gdan sa gsum – the three great Dge lugs seats of learning – there also came increased political power for these institutions. After the Fifth Dalai Lama's consolidation of power in the middle of the seventeenth century, the seats of learning began to play an increasingly important role in Tibetan politics. While perhaps not as influential as 'Bras spungs – the seat of the Ganden Palace (Dga' ldan pho brang), the headquarters of the Da lai bla ma's government – Se ra, as the closest of the three seats of learning to Lha sa – also played a major role in the politics of the day. Se ra monks, we know, took stances either in support of or opposition to the Qushot Mongolian chief, Lha bzang khāng (d. 1717), in his successful bid to overthrow the Fifth Dalai Lama's regent, Sde srid sangs rgyas rgya mtsho, in 1705. For example, the then-abbot of the Mé College (Grwa tshang smad) of Se ra opposed Lha bzang khāng, a position that he paid for with his life once the Qushot ruler came to power.¹⁵ But Lha bzang khāng also rewarded the seats of learning financially when they supported him. At Se ra, for example, he built the [Great Assembly Hall](#), and he moved his personal ritual college into the old Se ra assembly hall – today the site of the [Sera Tantric College](#). In the same year that he had the Mé College abbot killed, he also gave to Se ra the Grong smad estates that used to belong to the regent Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho.¹⁶

¹⁴ Sde srid sang rgyas rgya mtsho, *Dga ldan chos 'byung bai dūrya ser po* [*Yellow Lapis: A History of the Ganden (School)*], 142, states that Se ra had a population of 2850 monks at the time of writing this work.

¹⁵ See Luciano Petech, *China and Tibet in the Early 18th Century: History of the Establishment of Chinese Protectorate in Tibet*, T'oung Pao Monographie 1 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1972, second ed.), 13.

¹⁶ Petech, *China and Tibet*, 13. See also *Lha sa 'i dgon tho*, 75, where it states that Grong smad, the birthplace of the regent, is about two miles from Se ra.



A detail of a painting of Se ra from the eighteenth century depicting the monastery before all of the major temples had been constructed. The large (light blue) building in the rear of the monastery is undoubtedly the original Se ra Assembly Hall (today the assembly hall of the Tantric College [Sngags pa grwa tshang]). The three-story white building in the lower left may be what today is called the Se ra theg chen khang gsar, a palace-like residence said to have been built by Sde srid sangs rgyas rgya mtsho. This image is a detail of Item No. 65275 in the Collection of the Rubin Museum of Art, from the www.himalayanart.org website.

But Lha bzang made some fatal political mistakes early in his rule. In the first year after assuming power he (or his wife) had the regent Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho beheaded. The following year Lha bzang khāng sent the Sixth Dalai Lama (Da lai bla ma sku phreng drug pa, 1683-1706) into exile in Beijing (the Da lai bla ma died on the way). Lha bzang khāng also set up a puppet Da lai bla ma, declaring him to be the true sixth Da lai bla ma. Economically, opposition to Lha bzang among the Kokonor (Mtsho sngon po) faction of the Qushots caused the latter to withhold donations to the great monasteries. This was financially devastating to the seats of learning, and it caused the Paṅ chen bla ma to send a mission to Kokonor in 1716 to try and reinstate Kokonor Qushot patronage of the great monasteries.¹⁷ All of these various moves cost Lha bzang khāng the support of both the people and the seats of learning, and so when Dzungar Mongolian forces moved against him in 1717, promising to enthrone Skal bzang rgya mtsho (1708-1757), a child from Li thang, as the Seventh Dalai Lama (Da lai bla ma sku phreng bdun pa), the seats of learning gave the Dzungars their support. They provided these rivals of the Qushots with monk soldiers and scouts who knew the

¹⁷ Petech, *China and Tibet*, 24.

terrain,¹⁸ and gave them provisions after their arrival on the outskirts of the city. Se ra monks also joined the Dzungar troops as soldiers for the final push against Lha bzang khāng.¹⁹ The Dzungars defeated the Qushots, but Dzungar rule would prove to be disastrous for Tibet. Even if the seats of learning were spared, the Dzungars sacked and looted Lha sa.²⁰ They began to intervene in internal affairs of the seats of learning, purging what they considered to be the riffraff from the great monasteries.²¹ Far more serious, they destroyed many Rnying ma monasteries, especially in southern Tibet, where they murdered scores of monks and sowed the seeds of bitter sectarian rivalries that would plague Tibet for most of its subsequent history.



Pho lha nas (right), and his son (left): detail of a mural in one of the regional houses (khang tshan) of Se ra (Tibet).

The Chinese Manchu emperor – who had managed to protect the young Seventh Dalai Lama from being captured by the Dzungars in 1717 – saw Tibetans’ disillusionment with the Dzungars as an opportunity to weaken this powerful Mongol group that they had for some time perceived as a threat. The Manchus, therefore, decided to march on Lha sa with the young Da lai bla ma (a crucial symbol of political legitimacy) in tow. Forming an alliance with several Qushot Mongol factions, and with pro-Qushot Tibetans – most notably Pho lha nas (1689-1747), one of Lha bzang’s former and most able commanders – they entered Lha sa in 1720, overthrew the Dzungars, and enthroned the young Skal bzang rgya

¹⁸ Petech, *China and Tibet*, 34. This is not the first time that Se ra monks had acted as soldiers. In 1639-1640 the Fifth Dalai Lama himself used Se ra monks in this capacity. See Zahiruddin Ahmad, *Sino-Tibetan Relations in the Seventeenth Century*, Serie Orientale Roma, XL (Rome: IsMEO, 1970), 125.

¹⁹ Petech, *China and Tibet*, 44.

²⁰ Apparently, even the monks who acted as soldiers participated in the sack of Lha sa; see Petech, *China and Tibet*, 46.

²¹ Petech, *China and Tibet*, 54.

mtsho as the Seventh Dalai Lama. They also took this opportunity to purge the seats of learning of Dzungar influence by expelling all Dzungar *bla mas* from the great monasteries.²²

A series of events initiated by the death of the Manchu Kangxi (Kang shi, 1654-1722) emperor in 1722 destabilized the delicate political balance in Lha sa yet again. However, by 1729 Pho lha nas had, with Manchu backing, managed to consolidate power. He ruled for eighteen years and, like his original Qushot mentor Lha bzang khāng, he was a great patron of the Dge lugs seats of learning. At Se ra, he is chiefly known as the individual who provided the funds for the building of the Jé College Assembly Hall.²³ His funerary *stūpa* is housed on the main altar of that very building.



The remains of one of Tibet's great kings, Pho lha nas, are said to rest inside this funerary stūpa on the main altar in the Jé College Assembly Hall.

As we can see from this brief historical overview, the first half of the eighteenth century was an exceedingly turbulent period in Tibetan history. Se ra, it is clear, was a major player in the power-politics of the day. Was Se ra's involvement in the political machinations and power struggles during the first half of the eighteenth century at all related to the establishment of the hermitages? We cannot say for sure, but it is hardly a major leap to conclude that monks with a more contemplative calling – monks who wished to remain aloof from political intrigues in order to pursue study and meditation – might have chosen to avoid an institution like Se ra. Or else they might have chosen to enter for a limited time to pursue their studies,

²² Petech, *China and Tibet*, 77.

²³ His son is credited with having built Se ra's largest regional house, the [Hamdong Regional House of the Jé College](#) (Byes har gdong khang tshan).

but then quickly to exit. And this is in fact what several of the founders of the Se ra hermitages did at this precise time.

Socio-demographic factors (such as the size of Se ra and its physical expansion), and political factors (such as Se ra's increasing involvement in the chaotic politics of the day) might have been contributing factors to the founding of the hermitages, but one cannot reduce the rise of the hermitage movement to these factors alone. Clearly, religious motivations were at work as well. If the number of hermitages founded during a given period is any indication of a generation's desire for meditation and isolated retreat, then the eighteenth century must be considered one of the most "contemplative" centuries in the history of the Dge lugs school, or at least in the history of Se ra. It seems likely that the exodus into the mountains at this time was in large part the result of the influence of one charismatic figure, the great meditator and scholar Sgrub khang dge legs rgya mtsho. Sgrub khang pa is so important to the history of the Se ra hermitage tradition that it behooves us to say a bit more about him.²⁴

Sgrub khang pa was born in Zangskar (Zangs dkar) in 1641. His father died when he was six years old, and he spent most of his youth caring for his sick mother. His mother passed away when he was 17, and it was at this point that he began his religious career. He spent two years at the monastery of Byams pa gling, and then, at the age of nineteen, he set out for central Tibet to further his studies. On his way, he took novice monastic ordination from Drung pa brtson 'grus rgyal mtshan (fl. seventeenth century), a student of one of the most important figures in the history of Se ra, 'Khon ston dpal 'byor lhun grub (1561-1637). Sgrub khang dge legs rgya mtsho then went to Se ra. We do not know why his stay there was so short, but he quickly left Se ra and enrolled instead at the Dakpo College (Dwags po grwa



A detail of an eighteenth-century painting in the collection of the Rubin Museum of Art ([Image no. 105 on the www.himalayanart.org website](http://www.himalayanart.org)) identified as Sgrub khang pa.

tschang), where he remained for sixteen years. He returned to Drung pa rin po che to take full ordination. After Drung pa brtson 'grus rgyal mtshan's death, Sgrub khang pa continued his studies at Bkra shis lhun po with some of Drung pa rin po che's students. After a couple of years there, he returned to Se ra, where he became a student of the abbot of the Jé College, Jo ston bsod nams rgyal mtshan

²⁴ The account that follows is based on that found in *Dung dkar tshig mdzod*, 431-32, entry for Mkhar rdo bzod pa rgya mtsho (Dung dkar rin po che says that he bases his account on Yongs 'dzin ye shes rgyal mtshan's *Lam rim bla ma brgyud pa'i rnam thar*); see the same text, 735-36, for Sgrub khang pa.

(seventeenth century). He left Se ra sometime shortly after 1692²⁵ to begin a series of pilgrimages and meditation retreats in important sites throughout central and southern Tibet.²⁶ He returned to the Se ra foothills some thirteen years later, in 1705. It was at this time, it seems, that he founded three hermitages:

1. **Phur lcog**, where he built the famous Temple of the Three Protectors (Rigs gsum mgon po lha khang). He entrusted this institution to his student, Ngag dbang byams pa (1682-1762). Tradition has it that Sgrub khang pa established Phur lcog with one-hundred monks.
2. **Ra kha brag**, established with twelve fully-ordained monks, and
3. **Se ra dbu rtse**, established with seventeen fully-ordained monks. He made this latter hermitage his home.



A statue of Phur lcog ngag dbang byams pa, located in the cave in which he first meditated at Phur lcog, a hermitage that he co-founded with his teacher Sgrub khang pa.

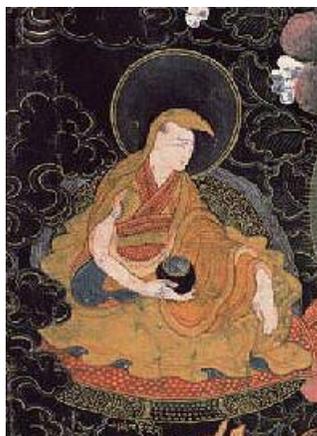
Sgrub khang pa influenced several important young scholar-meditators of his day. Phur lcog ngag dbang byams pa we have already mentioned. This influential figure gained a reputation as a brilliant scholar at a very young age. But he also had a passion for meditation, which is obviously what led him to seek out Sgrub khang pa as his teacher. It appears that they first met in 1699, but it was not until Ngag dbang byams pa had finished his studies in 1707 that he began to study intensively with Sgrub khang pa. Under Sgrub khang pa's supervision he remained at Purchok Hermitage in meditation for many years. Later in life he was called to

²⁵ *Phur byung*, 59, puts the date of his departure for 'Ol khar at the time that Sgrub khang pa was 59 – that is, in 1699.

²⁶ The biography of Phur lcog ngag dbang byams pa states that he met Sgrub khang pa in 1699, so perhaps Sgrub khang pa continued to come back to Se ra even during this time of pilgrimage and retreat.

public service, most notably as the tutor to the Eighth Dalai Lama Jampel Gyatso (Da lai bla ma sku phreng brgyad pa 'jam dpal rgya mtsho, 1758-1804). Phur lcog ngag dbang byams pa is credited in one source with being the founder of another hermitage, **Keutsang East**. He also influenced other figures in the hermitage tradition: for example, Klong rdol bla ma ngag dbang blo bzang (1719-1794), and Yongs 'dzin ye shes rgyal mtshan (1713-1793),²⁷ who founded Tshe mchog gling at the opposite (southern) end of the Lha sa Valley.

Another student of Sgrub khang pa, Mkhar rdo bzod pa rgya mtsho, also known as Blo bzang sgom chung, was responsible for founding the Khar do Hermitage on the mountainside across the road from Phur lcog.²⁸ Mkhar rdo bzod pa rgya mtsho was born near Lha sa in 1672. He entered the Jé College of Se ra when he was thirteen years old and studied all of the major scholastic subjects under the Byes mkhan po rgyal mtshan don grub (seventeenth century). At age twenty, Mkhar rdo ba took full ordination under this same teacher and then spent the next several years in retreat in different locations in central and southern Tibet. It was during this time that he perfected different alchemical techniques for extracting nutritive powers from water, pebbles, and flowers.²⁹ In 1706 he came back to Lha sa with the few students that he had gathered in his travels. It was perhaps at this time that he apprenticed himself to Sgrub khang pa.³⁰ In any case, we know that it was shortly after his return to Lha sa that Mkhar rdo ba settled on a bluff at the far northwestern end of the Lha sa Valley, across from Phur lcog, where he began to build a hermitage, and to teach extensively. He continued to travel intermittently even



A detail of a painting in the collection of the Rubin Museum of Art (Image no. 105 in the www.himalayanart.org website) identified as Mkhar rdo bzod pa rgya mtsho (1672-1749).

²⁷ Ye shes rgyal mtshan (1713-1793) began coming to Purchok Hermitage for retreat and instruction beginning in the year *me sbrul* (1737). He spent that entire year in meditation there, living very humbly and receiving instructions from Phur lcog rin po che. He returned to Purchok Hermitage many more times over the years, and after Phur lcog rin po che's death he continued to look after Purchok Hermitage "as if it were his own"; *Phur byung*, 64.

²⁸ The account of Mkhar rdo ba's life that follows is based on *Dung dkar tshig mdzod*, 431-2. Another account of his life based on an interview with a former monk of Khar do Hermitage can be found under the description of that hermitage. (Click here to go to the [Khar do Hermitage](#) site now.) Since I have no access to a biography of this figure, I have not tried to reconcile the two sources, which vary considerably.

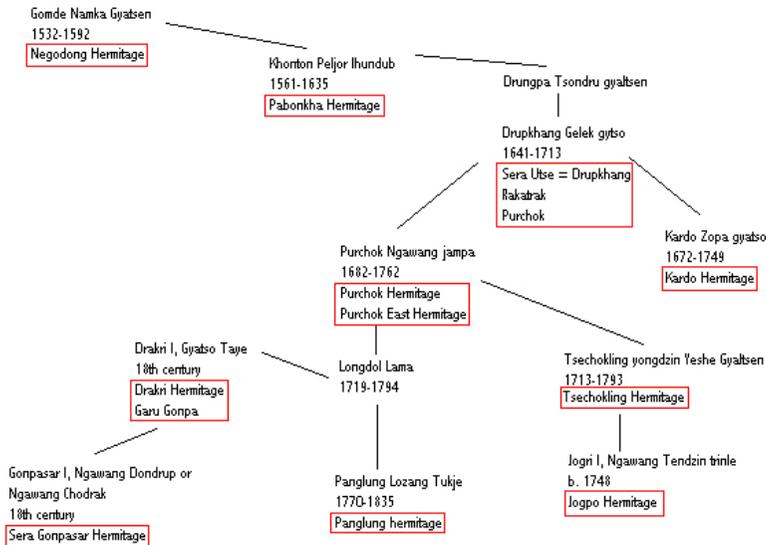
²⁹ *chu dang / rde'u dang / me tog bcud len*. A text on extracting the nutritive essence from flowers is listed among his known writings.

³⁰ It is not inconceivable that he met Sgrub khang pa while both of them were at Se ra, or even while on his travels, since both Sgrub khang pa and Mkhar rdo ba studied at Se ra at about the same time, and both were doing pilgrimage and retreat in similar places at precisely the same time: from 1692-1705/6.

after he had founded his small hermitage, gathering many students from different parts of Tibet.

Khardo Hermitage came to be the dominant force in Dodé (the area northeast of Lha sa). At some point in time, the Khardo Hermitage assumed responsibility for the small hermitage of **Gnas sgo gdong** that was located just beneath it at the foot of the mountain near the village of Dodé. And in the mid-nineteenth century, the third Mkhār rdo bla ma, Chos kyi rdo rje (b. eighteenth century?), built **Nenang Nunnery** at the far end of the Dodé Valley. These three hermitages – Gnas sgo gdong, Gnas nang, and Mkhār rdo itself – came to be known together as “the three practice centers of Khardo” (Mkhār rdo sgrub sde gsum).

To summarize, seven of the nine hermitages to the east of Se ra were founded either by Sgrub khang dge legs rgya mtsho or by one of his direct disciples in the eighteenth century. **Panglung Hermitage**, just behind Phur lcog, was founded by one of Sgrub khang pa’s great-grand-students, Spangs lung sku phreng dang po blo bzang thugs rje (1770-ca. 1835).³¹ The chart that follows traces the teacher-student relationships between some of the figures we have mentioned so far.



The building of hermitages in the environs of Se ra comes to a halt around the end of the eighteenth century. After the beginning of the nineteenth century no

³¹ He was a student of the great scholar and meditator Klong rdol bla ma ngag dbang blo bzang, who was in turn a student of Phur lcog ngag dbang byams pa, Sgrub khang pa’s chief disciple.

new hermitages were built. Why? Although we cannot answer with absolute certainty, we can speculate as to the reasons. One possibility is that a kind of saturation point had been reached. Hermitage building always required the permission of the Ganden Palace (the Tibetan government), and it usually required the endowment of these institutions with estates. It is not inconceivable that the government felt that a limit had been reached as regards its ability to provide for these institutions through estate endowments. Or perhaps the government felt that it was putting undue burden on the local populace, which was obligated (morally, if not legally) to further subsidize the hermitages with donations. It is also not inconceivable that the Se ra administration might itself have protested the building of new hermitages, since the seats of learning were institutions that competed with the hermitages both for donors and for monks. A second possibility is that, given the relative political stability of the seats of learning from the mid eighteenth century, fewer monks felt the need to leave Se ra, making the building of new hermitages unnecessary. Third, perhaps monastic life in the seats of learning became so normalized and idealized that the isolated contemplative life of the solitary *yogi* was no longer as valued (or as encouraged) as it had been in earlier days. Finally, it is not inconceivable that senior monks of Se ra dissuaded their more promising students from going into isolated life-long retreat, encouraging them instead to either enter the Tantric Colleges, thereby launching them on the process of ascending through the stages of the Dge lugs hierarchy, or else to remain as teachers at Se ra, where there was always a demand for good textualists. Or perhaps it was a combination of all of these factors that brought an end to the founding of new hermitages.

Not only did hermitage-building cease, but the hermitages that already existed underwent a fairly radical transformation at the end of the eighteenth century. Within one or two generations of their founding, *all* of the hermitages became prototypical ritual monasteries – that is, monasteries where ritual (*cho ga phyag len, zhabs brtan*), rather than, say, individual meditation on the graded stages of the path (*lam rim*) and on the *tantras*, was the principal activity of the monks and nuns. True, some hermitages kept a few meditation huts for monks who wanted to do individual retreat, but even those institutions that made room for contemplatives in their ranks transformed into monasteries where the primary focus was ritual. Why did *this* happen?

The original hermitages began as meditation retreat centers. But to thrive as a meditation retreat center an institution requires the leadership of a charismatic contemplative. Almost all of the founders of the hermitages had this type of drive and charisma. Once these founding figures had passed away, however, the leadership of the hermitages passed on *not* to a senior student (who might also have had this same vision), but rather to the next incarnation of the founding *bla ma*. These later incarnations were rarely as committed to the contemplative life as were their predecessors. There were several reasons for this. The young incarnations (*sprul sku*) – or *bla mas*, as they are called in the seats of learning – were given

official status at Se ra.³² As *bla mas* they were expected to enter Se ra for their studies, where they were then enculturated from a very early age into the life of the seat of learning and into its ethos. Wherever the yearning for a contemplative life comes from, it does not generally come as the intentional product of seat of learning life. Put another way, the goal of the seats of learning was not to produce hermits and meditators, but to create scholars who were the embodiments of the Dge lugs tradition: to fashion monks who exemplified the teachings of Tsong kha pa through their learning, comportment, and ritual skills. Young *bla mas* learned this lesson well, and they almost never rejected this ideal in favor of the life of the solitary *yogi*. This is not to say that the life of the solitary meditator-*yogi* was not (and is not) an ideal among the Dge lugs pas (Tsong kha pa, after all, was precisely this for much of his life), nor is it to deny that many *bla mas* also might have had such an inclination. But even those *bla mas* who had a yearning for the hermit's life would have found it difficult to live out this calling by renouncing their position and heading to the mountains, for once a young boy had been identified as the leader of a now-institutionalized hermitage, there were a variety of forces and interests to keep him in this position. For example, the *bla ma*'s household (or lama's estate) depended on the physical presence of the *bla ma* for its fiscal survival, and the hermitage, in turn, depended on the lama's estate for its financial stability. In brief, there were many reasons – sociological, economic, and even political – that caused the subsequent incarnations of the hermitages' founders not to be as committed to the kind of contemplative lives that their predecessors had led. Lacking the contemplative charismatic leadership of the original founders, it is not surprising that the institutions headed by these individuals also changed. But change into what? There was no need for the hermitages to transform into educational institutions. The seats of learning already had a monopoly in this sphere, and the smaller monasteries near an institution like Se ra could not have competed with the seats of learning when it came to providing monks with a textual education. This left only one other option: ritual. In the absence of leaders with contemplative charisma, the only option for the hermitages was to transform into institutions whose primary focus was communal ritual. And this is in fact what happened.

Perhaps the historical lesson here is a simple one: hermitages (or, to be more specific, Dge lugs hermitages near the seats of learning) do not stay isolated, meditation-oriented institutions for long. The centripetal pressure to grow, and the centrifugal pressure to institutionalize, to become part of the Dge lugs establishment and to become affiliated to larger and more powerful institutions like the seats of learning is simply too great for these establishments to remain small, independent, and contemplatively-driven for very long. With their transformation into ritual institutions, the hermitages were, of course, no longer the classical “solitary sites” (*dben gnas*) sought out by *yogis*. And just as the founders of the hermitages had to leave Se ra for the mountains around the monastery in order to pursue their

³² In several instances they occupied the highest rank in the *bla ma* hierarchy, that of “Incarnation of the Great Assembly Hall (*tshogs chen sprul sku*).” This was the case with the Phur lcoog, Mkhar rdo and Brag ri *lamas*, for example.

contemplative vocation in the eighteenth century, latter-day *yogis* would have to leave not only Se ra but also the hermitages. At least this is what they would have to do if their goal was to meditate in relative isolation and without the responsibilities that come from being a member of a ritual monastery.

After the events of 1959, the hermitages were all forcibly shut down and fell into disrepair. Monks and nuns started rebuilding them after the liberalization of the 1980s. Most of the hermitages were rebuilt in the 1990s. Initially, the local Lha sa government was fairly generous in granting permits to rebuild these institutions. In the last few years, however, it has been close to impossible to get permission to rebuild – and, indeed, even to add new structures to already rebuilt hermitages or to make modifications to existing buildings. The attitude in the Lha sa bureaucracy today is more stringent in part because of the prevailing attitude among government bureaucrats that there are already too many monks and nuns in and around Lha sa. (This is not surprising, given that monastics have been very vocal in protesting the Chinese occupation of Tibet over the last two decades.) Hence, there are restrictions not only on rebuilding and renovation, but also on the number of monks and nuns that can live in the hermitages. As a result, those five hermitages that have not already been rebuilt will probably never be rebuilt. As the elder monks who knew the traditions of these institutions pass away, these institutions, like so much of Tibet's rich religious culture, will disappear from cultural memory just as they are physically disappearing from the landscape of Lha sa.

But let us end on a less gloomy note. It is a great irony that, in the wake of the destruction of the hermitages, some of these sites are once again becoming retreat centers for meditators. This is not to say that the newly renovated hermitages have renounced their focus on ritual. They have not. Rather, it is the ruins and caves of the hermitages that have *not* been renovated that are serving as homes for contemporary *yogis* (mainly nuns). For example, nuns have settled at Gnas nang and Mkhar rdo, transforming these ruins into meditation retreat centers – which is to say, into the types of places that their founders originally intended them to be. The phoenix rising out of the ashes of its own burnt body comes to mind as an appropriate metaphor for this phenomenon.

Life in the Se ra Hermitages

By 1959, almost all of Se ra's hermitages had been ritual institutions for close to two-hundred years. If a monk who had entered a hermitage wanted to study, he would go to Se ra. If he wanted to do life-long, isolated meditation retreat, he would seek a truly secluded place in the mountains. By the same token, if a Se ra monk *did not* want to study, and if he was content to lead the life of a ritualist, he could enter a hermitage (if permitted by his regional house and accepted by the hermitage). Of course, a monk who wanted to lead the life of a ritualist could remain at Se ra, but life in a hermitage was often much easier than life in a seat of learning, especially if the hermitage was the seat of a high *bla ma* who was wealthy. Be that as it may, those monks who entered the hermitages knew the type of life they would be living. They would either be engaged in ritual (especially if they had a good

voice or knew how to play a musical instrument), or they would serve as support staff for the hermitage: cleaning, tending altars, cooking, doing business on the hermitage's behalf, or supervising one of its estates.



Nuns perform a Medicine Buddha (Sman bla) ritual for a benefactor at Gnas sgo gdong nunnery.

To become an official monk or nun in one of the hermitages the postulant would have to submit to an examination (*rgyugs*). By the time monks and nuns were senior members of the institution, they would have memorized close to five-hundred pages of ritual texts.³³ Monks and nuns performed the rituals of the hermitage in monthly and yearly ritual cycles in accordance with the institution's liturgical calendar. If no sponsor was available, the fixed rituals would be "paid for" by the hermitage itself. That is, the monastery would provide the monks and nuns with food (often better than the day-to-day fare) for the duration of the ritual cycle. But local lay people, monks from other monasteries, and the Tibetan government often commissioned rituals – sometimes acting as sponsors for one of the monastery's own fixed ritual cycles, sometimes requesting the hermitage to perform special rituals on one of its free days. There were, of course, plenty of lay people in the Lha sa Valley and its suburbs who needed such rituals (*zhabs brtan*) to be performed on their behalf. On occasion, a small group of monks or nuns from the hermitage might also be invited to a lay person's home to do ritual there. Rituals have always been an important source of income for the hermitages and for their individual monks and nuns.

While there is some variation in the monthly and yearly liturgical cycles of the hermitages, there is also a great deal of overlap. Almost all of the hermitages, for

³³ Ngag dbang sman rgyal, *Gar dgon bsam gtan gling gi lo rgyus mun sel mthong ba don ldan* [A History of Gargön Samten Ling: Clearing Away Darkness, Meaningful to Behold; hereafter *Gar lo*] (lha sa?, 1997), 25-26: *rgyugs chen la ha lam dpe cha shog grangs lnga brgya skor yod*.

example, celebrate the new and full moon days,³⁴ as well as the tenth and twenty-fifth of the lunar month. Some of them also perform protector deity practices on an additional day every month.

There is also a great deal of similarity in the *yearly* ritual cycle. Monks and nuns perform quite extensive multiple-day ritual cycles during the New Year (Lo gsar), and during the “Sixth-Month Fourth-Day” (Drug pa tshe bzhi) celebrations. This latter holiday, also called “Festival of the Turning of the Wheel of the Doctrine” (Chos ’khor dus chen), is a major pilgrimage day for Tibetans from Lha sa and surrounding areas, as thousands of people travel along a route in the foothills above Se ra from Pabongkha Hermitage in the west to Phur lcog in the east. A good deal of the hermitages’ income for the year derives from the moneys and in-kind goods collected in the form of offerings on this day (at least if the hermitage is fortunate enough to lie on the pilgrimage circuit). At different times of the year (in the first fortnight of the fourth Tibetan month, for example) the hermitages also perform



Detail of a thangka of Nyang bran rgyal chen preserved in one of the regional houses of Se ra, India.

two-day Avalokiteśvara fasting ritual (*smyung gnas*) – often doing multiple sets of two-day rituals consecutively.³⁵ The hermitages also, of course, celebrate other major pan-sectarian holidays, like the Buddha’s birth/death date, as well as Dge lugs-specific holy days like the commemoration of Tsong kha pa’s death – the Ganden Feast of the 25th (Dga’ ldan lnga mchod) – that takes place on the twenty-fifth day of the twelfth Tibetan month. All of the hermitages, it seems, also maintained the “rainy-season retreat” (*dbyar gnas*) tradition, during which monks and nuns minimize their movement for a portion of the summer so as to avoid killing insects that are more prevalent on the ground during this time.

Of course, each hermitage has its own set of tutelary deities (*yi dam*) and protector deities (*srung ma, chos skyong*), and so the rites performed by the monks and nuns may vary from one monastery to the next. But given that all of them are Dge lugs institutions, there is also a great deal of overlap in the deities propitiated, and in the actual liturgies performed. Hence, for example, many of the monasteries

³⁴ The monastic confession ritual (*gso sbyong*) takes place on the new and full moon, but monks and nuns also do additional rituals on these days.

³⁵ At Garu Nunnery, for example, they do a minimum of eight sets of two-day fasting rituals, and if there is a sponsor, they will spend the entire month engaged in the practice.

perform the self-generation (*bdag bskyed*) and self-initiation (*bdag 'jug*) rituals of Vajrabhairava, and they propitiate protector deities like Dpal Idan lha mo, Mahākāla (Mgon po), Dharmarāja (Chos rgyal), and Vaiśravaṇa (Rnam sras). In some monasteries, especially in the hermitages to the west of Se ra, the protector Nyang bran rgyal chen, the local site-protector of the Nyang bran Valley, is also propitiated. The rites written by Pha bong kha bde chen snying po (1878-1941) continue to be as popular today as they were before 1959.

As an example, here are the principal ritual practices done at one of the hermitages, Garu Nunnery, in a one-month period (the dates given are the dates in the Tibetan lunar month):

Date	Ritual Practice (Tibetan)	Ritual Practice (English)
8	<i>Drölchok (Sgrol chog)</i> <i>Tungshak (Ltung bshags)</i>	Tārā Ritual ³⁶ The Ritual of the Thirty-Five Confession Buddhas
10	<i>Demchok Lachö (Bde mchog bla mchod)</i> <i>Jikjé Danjuk ('Jigs byed bdag 'jug)</i> ³⁷	Offering to the Master Based on the Deity Cakrasaṃvara Self-Initiation of Vajrabhairava
15	<i>Menla Deshek Gyé (Sman bla bde gshegs brgyad)</i> ³⁸	Ritual of the Eight Medicine Buddhas
19 ³⁹	<i>Gönpo Chögyel Lhamo Namsé dang Nyangdren Gyelchengyi Kangsol (Mgon po/ chos rgyal/ lha mo/ rnam sras dang/ nyang bran rgyal chen gyi bskang gsol)</i>	Propitiation Rituals of Mahākāla, Dharmarāja, Vaiśravaṇa, Penden Lhamo, and Nyangdren Gyelchen
25	<i>Demchok Lachö (Bde mchog bla mchod)</i> ⁴⁰ <i>Neljormé Danjuk (Rnal 'byor ma 'i bdag 'jug)</i>	Offering to the Master Based on the Deity Cakrasaṃvara Self-Initiation of Vajrayoginī
30	<i>Neten Chudruk (Gnas brtan bcu drug)</i> ⁴¹	The Sixteen Arhats Ritual

In addition to performing rituals, the monks of the male hermitages have traditionally seen it as part of their duties to keep a number of rooms open for

³⁶ See Stephen Beyer, *The Cult of Tārā: Magic and Ritual in Tibet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973).

³⁷ The oral and written accounts differ here. Both of these practices were mentioned by one of the nuns in an interview, but the *Gar lo*, 25, mentions only the first of these on this particular date.

³⁸ *Gar lo*, 25, calls this Medicine Buddha [Ritual]: Yizhin Wanggyel (*smān bla yid bzhin dbang rgyal*), perhaps a reference to the title of the actual ritual text that is used.

³⁹ This is according to the oral account. *Gar lo*, 25, states that the protector deity practices take place on the twenty-ninth.

⁴⁰ *Gar lo*, 25, mentions only the second of these practices – which is there called *na ro mkha' spyod ma 'i bdag 'jug* – and it omits *bde mchog bla mchod*.

⁴¹ *Gar lo*, 25, calls this by the alternative name of *gnas brtan phyag mchod*.

visiting Se ra monks. Textualists or *dpe cha ba* from Se ra's two philosophical colleges – Byes and Smad – had a number of study breaks between the different study periods,⁴² and they would often seek the relative peace and quiet of the hermitages, usually *not* for meditation, but for intensive memorization retreats. This tradition still exists, although today the monks tend to request rooms in the hermitages owned by (and closest to) Se ra rather than seeking rooms in privately-held hermitages like Phur lcog, Se ra dbu rtse, Se ra chos sdings, and Ra kha brag have always been especially popular with Se ra monks who want to do such retreats not only because of their proximity to Se ra, but also because of the strong associations of these three hermitages with events in the life of Tsong kha pa.



A Se ra monk who in 2004 was engaged in a textual retreat (dpe mtshams) at Rakhadrak Hermitage. He is occupying a room adjacent to the cave of Tsong kha pa.

As with many monasteries in Tibet today, the population of the Se ra hermitages is quite young. The vast majority of the monks and nuns are under the age of thirty, and many are much younger. While the nunneries appear to be thriving, the fate of the male hermitages is not as clear. In pre-1959 Tibet, there were basically only two career options available to young men and women: they either became monks and nuns, or they chose a family life. If they chose the latter and they entered the workforce, they usually followed in the footsteps of their parents, who were either farmers (*zhing pa*), nomads (*'brog pa*),⁴³ or, less frequently, merchants (*tshong pa*). The life of the farmer and nomad was a difficult life. By comparison, the monastic life was more secure, and it provided opportunities for education – and

⁴² Whether or not all of these were considered official “textual retreats” (*dpe mtshams*) or “doctrine retreats” (*chos mtshams*), by my reckoning, monks had the opportunity for such kinds of memorization retreats on six separate occasions that correspond to the following dates (all according to the Tibetan calendar): 2/17-2/26, 4/8-4/15, 5/2-5/25, 8/1-8/8, 9/7-9/16, 10/17-11/15.

⁴³ Nomads raised animals – yaks (or yak hybrids), sheep, goats, and cattle – for meat, dairy products, and wool.

therefore for social and economic advancement – that were not normally available to ordinary villagers and nomads.

Today the situation is quite different. Young men and women have (at least in theory) more choices open to them. Secular education (almost exclusively in the medium of Chinese language) is now a possibility, even if it is still mostly accessible only to the middle and upper classes in urban areas. And there are a variety of career options that were not available before 1959 (mostly for those who are educated and who live in, or who relocate to, larger urban areas). How much opportunity *actually* exists for Tibetan youths – as important as this question is – is not really the issue we are concerned with here. Rather, what is most important for us as we contemplate the future of institutions like the hermitages is the *perception* that exists in the minds of young Tibetans about their possible future. In *their* minds, driven in large part by the visions they absorb from television and films, the world is filled with opportunities, life-choices and lifestyles that compete with the monastic life. But Tibetans are an extremely devout people, and monks and nuns continue to enter the monasteries and nunneries, often with a great sense of religious calling, and with an idealistic vision of what it will be like to live in such an institution. This influx of young Tibetans into small monasteries like the hermitages is not something that one sees changing anytime in the near future. What *is* changing is what happens *after* young people (and especially young men) enter monasteries. And here the pattern seems to be that most of the young monks leave the monastery before they are twenty years of age. The problem for the hermitages, then, is not one of recruitment but of retention.⁴⁴ At least this is the problem in smaller monasteries, and especially in smaller monasteries near a large cosmopolitan area like Lha sa, where, because of its physical proximity, the secular and modern life entices young monks with even greater force.⁴⁵

An elder monk from one of the hermitages complained to me, for example, that he had “lost” many young boys in their late teens, and that he was considering not accepting boys any longer, his theory being that if one holds out for more mature young men in their twenties (preferably already ordained), one is more apt to get candidates who already know what is in store for them, and who will not be so easily enticed by the lures of the world. It remains to be seen, however, how many monks there are who fit this description and are not already committed to another

⁴⁴ The situation at Se ra is somewhat different. While there is undoubtedly attrition, it does not appear to be as high as it is in the hermitages. For one thing, Se ra monks tend to enter the monastery at a slightly older age. There is also a long waiting list to become an official Se ra monk, and someone who has attained this status is not likely to give it up casually. Monks who are studying at Se ra also have a clear-cut goal (that of receiving a classical religious education), a goal that has an end-point, and that culminates in a socially prestigious degree – that of *dge bshes*.

⁴⁵ It should be noted that this is not only a problem for monasteries in Tibet. By some estimates about twenty percent of the monks of Se ra India are presently residing (mostly as illegal aliens) in the U.S. (principally in New York City), working menial jobs, and living “the American dream.” Anecdotally, I have heard that some of these monks are now beginning to return to Se ra India, and to their former lives as monks. This phenomenon deserves to be studied from a socio-ethnographic viewpoint. For an account of similar decisions faced by Tibetan Buddhist nuns in Nepal, see Alyson Prude’s forthcoming Masters thesis (UCSB).

monastic institution. Or, if such individuals do exist, it remains to be seen how many of them see themselves living out their lives in a relatively isolated, small, ritual monastery. If it is impossible to lure such monks to the hermitages, then the administrators of these institutions may have to resign themselves to the fact that their monasteries will be, for all intents and purposes, something akin to religious boarding schools for young men, the majority of whom will most likely leave once they reach their twenties. But even if they leave, perhaps these young men will return to the hermitages at the end of their life, to live out their final years in a religious setting, a pattern that we have seen in other Tibetan contexts.⁴⁶ Be that as it may, one thing is clear: life in the hermitages is different from what it was before 1959, and the problems that hermitages face today are as much due to global and market forces as they are to Chinese Communist ideology and bureaucratic regulation.

⁴⁶ In Se ra India, there are several cases of former Se ra monks returning to retire to the monastery. See also the essay on *Chu bzang*, an institution that before 1959 appears to have been a community of elderly Lha sa Tibetans engaged in intensive religious practice.