

Keutsang Hermitage (Ke'u tshang ri khrod)



A view of the Keutsang Hermitage (Ke'u tshang ri khrod)

Location and Layout

The word *ke'u tshang* means “cave,” “cavern,” or “overhang.”¹ Tsong kha pa (1357-1419) lived for a time in a very precariously situated cave over a steep gorge to the east of the original Keutsang Hermitage, and it is possible that the hermitage derives its name from this cave. While Tsong kha pa was living there, there was a serious earthquake, and he exclaimed “*a ma*”!² The letters “a” and “ma” then imprinted themselves onto a rock next to the cave, and these, we were told, can be seen to this day. The cave itself fell in a landslide, and no longer exists.

The present Keutsang Hermitage is the rebuilt version of **Keutsang West** (Ke'u tshang nub), which today lies in ruins. The rebuilt Ke'u tshang abuts the ruins of Keutsang West on the former's eastern side. Rather than rebuilding on the ruins of the old hermitage, the monks chose to start from scratch and to relocate the hermitage just to the west of Keutsang West, which they say was a site more suitable to building.

¹ An informant, a former monk of the hermitage (*ri khrod*), says that the word *ke'u tshang* means “small monastery.”

² The Tibetan word *a ma* literally means “mother,” but it is also a cry of fear.

Ke'u tshang is located to the east of Se ra on the side of a mountain above Lha sa's principal cemetery. Ke'u tshang is also located just below (about a five-minute walk from) [Rakhadrak Hermitage](#) (Ra kha brag ri khrod). It takes about fifty minutes to walk from Se ra to Ke'u tshang. The hermitage is the second-to-last stop on the Sera Mountain Circumambulation Circuit (*se ra'i ri 'khor*) route that pilgrims navigate as part of the Sixth-Month Fourth-Day (*drug pa tshe bzhi*) festivities. (To see images of the pilgrimage taken in 2002, please click [here](#).)

The hermitage is enclosed by a perimeter wall with two gates, one to the [west](#) and one to the [east](#). Outside the western gate there is a [tiny chapel](#) that houses a self-arisen rock-image of the deity Acala (Mi g.yo ba) that was originally on a boulder in the area that is presently the "Dharma courtyard" (*chos rwa*). It was moved from the Dharma courtyard to its present spot because the head of the hermitage believed that at its former site it was too close to an area where the monks urinated.

At the center of the compound is the (two-story) [main temple](#). The first floor contains the monastery's principal assembly hall (*'du khang*). The second story contains a [reception and meeting room](#). Just to the east of the temple is the [monastery kitchen](#). The monks for the most part eat communally, and all of the meals are prepared here. Flanking the temple-kitchen complex on both sides are two wings of [monks' living quarters](#). Just to the west of the western wing of monks' rooms, adjacent to the western gate, is a [new guest house](#) that was just being completed in 2004.



The monks of Ke'u tshang in a prayer-assembly inside the main temple. They wear the yellow ceremonial robe (chos gos).

Behind the main temple is the large, three-story "[secondary temple building](#)."

- The first floor of this building contains little more than the stairway to the second floor and some storage rooms.
- The second story contains, on one side, a [Scripture Temple \(Bka' 'gyur lha khang\)](#) that houses the collection of scriptures. This room also contains a small [protector deity altar](#). The main figure in the middle of the alter is

Dpal ldan lha mo; she is flanked on one side by Rdo rje g.yu sgron ma, the “site deity” (*gnas bdag*) of this location, and on the other by Nyang bran rgyal chen. These three are the chief protector deities of the hermitage. On this same level but at the other end of the building there is a **Tengyur chapel** (*Bstan 'gyur lha khang*) that houses the collection of the translated Indian treatises.

- The third floor contains the **private quarters of the Da lai bla ma**, the **rooms of the Ke'u tshang bla ma** and the Maitreya Chapel (*Byams khang*), whose main image is a famous two-story Maitreya (*Byams pa*) that overlooks the cemetery below the hermitage. Like the **stone Buddha image** at Pabongkha Hermitage (*Pha bong kha ri khrod*), this Maitreya (*Byams pa*) is said to guarantee rebirth in a pure land to any individual whose remains are brought to the cemetery beneath Ke'u tshang. According to another tradition, this Maitreya statue and the one in the Maitreya Chapel in the northern end of the **Bar skor** in Lha sa are said to constantly exchange rays of light with one another.



The two-story Maitreya image on the top floor of the secondary temple building at Ke'u tshang.

Finally, to the east of the secondary temple building (in the northeastern corner of the hermitage) there is a large “**Dharma enclosure**” or *chos rwa* that in 2004 was just being completed. Since Ke'u tshang is a ritual monastery, the younger monks principally use the Dharma enclosure as a place to sit and memorize ritual texts when their rooms become cramped and they want some fresh air.

All of the images in Ke'u tshang's various temples and chapels are new.

History

Centuries before Dge lugs pas began to use the site as a place for meditation retreat, Ke'u tshang was renowned as a retreat site used by famous *bla mas* of the past. For example, it is said that a cave at Keutsang West was a retreat site of the famous twelfth-century founder of the Tshal pa bka' brgyud school, Bla ma zhang (1123-1193).³ As has been mentioned, Tsong kha pa also lived at one of the caves here for a period of time. Keutsang West Hermitage (Ke'u tshang nub ri khrod) was formally established as a Dge lugs institution by the first Keutsang incarnation Jampa Mönlam (Ke'u tshang sku phreng dang po byams pa smon lam), the seventeenth abbot of the Jé College (Grwa tshang byes) of Se ra. He retired from the abbacy early to enter into retreat. Taking up residence in one of the caves at Ke'u tshang, he eventually built a retreat hut. Students began to come to him for instruction, and by the time of his death a small institution had coalesced around him at the site.



A statue of one of the early Ke'u tshang bla mas in the Maitreya Chapel.

His reincarnation, the second Keutsang incarnation Lozang Jamyang Mönlam (Ke'u tshang sku phreng gnyis pa blo bzang 'jam dbyangs smon lam), was born into the wealthy Rdo ring aristocratic family of Lha sa.⁴ Given the wealth of this family, one might hazard to guess that it was during the time of the second Keutsang incarnation (Ke'u tshang sku phreng gnyis pa) that some of the more important buildings at the site were constructed, but only further research will bear this out. We know little about the third Keutsang incarnation (Ke'u tshang sprul sku), but the fourth was one of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama Tupten Gyatso's (Da lai bla ma sku phreng bcu gsum pa thub bstan rgya mtsho) closest associates. After the Da lai bla ma's death, the fourth Keutsang incarnation (Ke'u tshang sprul sku) was one of the principal figures responsible for identifying the present (fourteenth) Da lai bla ma. One assumes that because of this the hermitage grew greatly in fame, prestige, and wealth during the time of the fourth Ke'u tshang incarnation. The present and the fifth Keutsang incarnation (Ke'u tshang sku phreng lnga pa) was

³ Dung dkar blo bzang 'phrin las, *Dung dkar tshig mdzod chen mo* [The Great Dungkar Dictionary] (Krunq go'i bod rig pa dpe skrun khang, 2002), 92.

⁴ An informant tells us that even the first Ke'u tshang bla ma was born into the Rdo ring family, but this has yet to be verified.

jailed and suffered greatly during the Cultural Revolution. He left Tibet and went into exile in India in the 1980s.

The hermitage had a strong relationship to Se ra throughout its entire history. Every official monk of the hermitage was also, *de facto*, a monk of the Hamdong Regional House (Har gdong khang tshan) of the Jé College. This is no longer the case, however, since today the hermitage is an independent institution (albeit one that has amicable ties to Sera Jé College [Se ra grwa tshang byes]). While on the subject of institutional affiliations, it should also be mentioned that from the early nineteenth century up to 1959 Ke'u tshang was the official owner of the famous Drapchi Temple (Grwa bzhi lha khang) located in the northern part of Lha sa. The Ke'u tshang bla ma kept rooms atop the Drapchi Temple for his personal use.

The original Keutsang West Hermitage was destroyed after the events of 1959. Using principally his own funds (and with a great deal of volunteer labor from the local community), a former monk of the hermitage began the work of reconstruction in 1991. By 1992, both the main temple and the secondary temple had been completed and one year later the monks' quarters were finished. Today the hermitage is home to about twenty-five monks.



Some of the monks gather outside the main temple for a group picture.

As is the case with all of the Se ra hermitages that have survived, Ke'u tshang today is a ritual monastery. The hermitage always celebrates the new and full moon, as well as the tenth and twenty-fifth of the lunar month. Groups of monks will also go to the homes of local villagers to do rituals when requested. This is an essential source of income for the hermitage.

In addition to the regular monthly ritual cycles, the hermitage also, of course, engage in regular *annual* ritual cycles: for example, during the Tibetan New Year, and in the fourth Tibetan month, when the monks do eight sets of two-day Avalokiteśvara fasting rituals (*smyung gnas*). The monks also observe the rainy

season precepts in the summer. In the eighth Tibetan month all of the junior monks must submit to a memorization exam on the ritual texts they have learned throughout the year. At this time, a senior scholar from Se ra is invited to the hermitage to conduct the examinations.