

Negodong Hermitage (Gnas sgo gdong ri khrod)



The nunnery as viewed from the fertile Dog bde Valley

Location and Layout

Gnas sgo gdong nunnery is located in the Lha sa suburb known as Dog bde, northeast of Se ra (and also of Lha sa). The nunnery is about one kilometer from the main road – that is, from the road that leads from Lha sa to 'Phan po. It sits on a small rise overlooking the Dog bde villagers' [fields of barley](#). It is about a two hour walk from downtown Lha sa, and slightly less from Se ra. Today most people would take the bus from Lha sa to Dog bde and walk from there. The nunnery is also located at the base of the mountain below the [Khar do Hermitage \(Mkhar rdo ri khrod\)](#).

As is typical of the hermitages (*ri khrod*), the surrounding landscape is imbued with religious significance. For example, the “imposing, dark-colored, solid-rock mountain shaped like a triangle” to the east of the nunnery is believed to be the soul-mountain or *bla ri* of the protector deity of the nunnery, Lha mo nyi gzhon. It is called Jo mo si si, and is reckoned as one of the “Three Great Mountains” (Ri chen gsum) on the outskirts of Lha sa. The peak north of the monastery is called “The Soul-Mountain of Juniper Forests” (Shug pa'i nags bla ri), because it used to be covered with juniper trees (some juniper trees are still to be found close to the top of the mountain today). Two other nearby peaks¹ were sites that local

¹ The Na chung rtse mo ri and the Ri 'go sgo ma.

Lhasans would visit (to) make burnt juniper offerings and raise flags (*bsangs gsol dar 'dzugs*) on the third day of the Tibetan New Year.

There are two important springs very close to the hermitage: the Ravine Spring (Grog mo chu mig) and the Sound-Catcher (or Ear) Spring (Sgra 'dzin chu mig). Each of them is said to have clean, clear water with medicinal properties. The water, it is said, never freezes, but continues to run even during the coldest winter months. The area around the springs is used as a picnic spot by the local laity, who will often take their noontime meal here when they come to the nunnery for worship.



The front façade of the main temple.

According to its self-description, the nunnery contains the following buildings and rooms:

- A two-pillar [temple front porch](#)
- A five-pillar [temple](#) with a four-pillar [assembly room](#)
- A two-pillar [scripture chapel \(Bka' 'gyur lha khang\)](#)
- A four-pillar [kitchen](#) (just west of and sharing a wall with the main temple)
- A two-pillar [storage room](#) on the other side of the main entrance from the kitchen
- A twenty-two-pillar [dormitory](#) with three stories (located behind the main temple)

To this “self-description” we might add that the main temple has a [reception room](#) and a [protector deity chapel](#) on its [second floor](#). This is also where the present administrator – a senior nun – has her [rooms](#). Some [newer buildings](#) have recently gone up just northeast of the main temple. They contain nuns’ living quarters, and at least one of these contains a [small improvised chapel](#) that appears to have been added almost as an afterthought to attract the donations of lay visitors.

The nunnery is reckoned as one of the three practice-centers (*sgrub sde*) associated with Khardo Hermitage (Mkhar rdo ri khrod) (the other two being Khardo Hermitage itself, and Gnas nang).

History

Little is known about the early history of Gnas sgo gdong. Tradition has it that it was originally used as a retreat site by the great scholar of the Jé College's (Grwa tshang byes) [Gomdé Regional House \(Sgom sde khang tshan\)](#), [Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan](#) (1532-1592).² It was founded as a formal monastery with seventeen monks.³ We do not know precisely when the site came under the aegis of the Khardo Lama's estate (Mkhar rdo bla brang), although it obviously must have been sometime after the founding of Mkhar rdo in the eighteenth century.⁴



Nuns outside the main entrance to the nunnery.

Initially the nuns in this region lived not at Gnas sgo gdong but in the more remote [Gnas nang](#) (up-valley and east, about a one-hour walk from Gnas sgo gdong). Living so far from the village, the nuns were afraid for their safety, having been attacked, robbed and raped by brigands at least once before.⁵ They asked to move closer to Mkhar rdo, and so the Mkhar rdo bla ma had the monks residing at Gnas sgo gdong trade places with the nuns. Gnas sgo gdong thus became a nunnery, and the more remote Gnas nang (the original home of the nuns) became a hermitage for male monks. This occurred sometime around 1930.

According to a former monk of Khardo Hermitage, sometime in the 1930s or early 1940s (we do not know exactly when) there was talk that the nunnery was too close to the village. Around this same time the Tibetan government's "money printing press" (*ngul gyi par khang*), which had been located in Dog bde where

² According to an informant, Sgom sde pa (1532-1592) was given permission to build the hermitage by the Third Dalai Lama (Da lai bla ma sku phreng gsum pa). The monastery, by order of the Da lai bla ma himself, was to specialize in the ritual practices of the Medicine Buddha (*sman bla*). This informant claims that when Sgom sde pa decided to go back to his home region in eastern Tibet, he asked the first Mkhar rdo bla ma to take responsibility for the monastery. However, the first Mkhar rdo bla ma, Mkhar rdo bzod pa rgya mtsho (1672-1749), lived almost one hundred years after Sgom sde pa, making this scenario impossible.

³ The number of monks at the time it was a male monastery is based on an oral account by a former monk of Mkhar rdo monastery.

⁴ That is, after 1706, the date of the founding of Khardo Hermitage, and before the founding of Gnas nang. (To go to the Gnas nang webpage now, [click here](#)).

⁵ This is according to an oral account by a former Mkhar rdo monk. One must be careful about claims like this, however, for they sometimes serve as justification for bringing independent nunneries into the control of a male authority figure.

Gnas sgo gdong now sits, moved, and the large complex of buildings was bought by the Khardo Lama's estate. The Khardo Lama's estate then moved the nuns into this much larger facility, and took the site that was originally the nunnery and made it into a large residence that became the headquarters of the Khardo Lama's estate in the Dog bde Valley. After all of the possessions of the Mkhar rdo rin po che were confiscated by the Tibetan government in the wake of the Rwa sgreng (d. 1947) affair,⁶ the government decided to move the nuns back into the mansion-like residence (which was, in fact, their original residence before they were sent to the printing house buildings). All of the buildings comprising the printing house complex were then destroyed by order of the Tibetan government. This took place sometime around 1949 or 1950.

The nunnery was close to being in complete ruins after the Cultural Revolution. In the 1980s, one of the former nuns of Gnas sgo gdong, Phun tshogs 'phrin las (twentieth century), went on a begging tour throughout different regions of Tibet to raise money to rebuild the nunnery.

Before 1959, the principal deity inside the main (three-story) temple was a statue of Lokeśvara made of sandalwood with a figure of Padmasambhava (Padma 'byung gnas) on its crown. It is said to have been donated to the monastery by the Seventh Dalai Lama Kelzang Gyatso (Da lai bla ma sku phreng bdun pa bskal bzang rgya mtsho). The protector deity of the nunnery is Lha mo nyi ma gzhon nu. All of the statues inside the temple today appear to be new.

⁶ On this event, see the [Introduction to the Hermitages](#).