

Nenang Nunnery (Gnas nang dgon pa)

Location and Layout

Nenang Nunnery (Gnas nang dgon pa) is located at the end of a valley east of Negodong Nunnery (Gnas sgo gdong dgon pa). It takes about one hour to walk there from Gnas sgo gdong. A stream runs through the valley. Workers (mostly Chinese) use the valley as a quarry from which they harvest stones that are used in the Lha sa construction industry. There is considerable environmental damage to the Gnas nang Valley as a result of the stone quarrying that takes place there.

The site has a long-standing association with Padmasambhava (Padma 'byung gnas). One of the mountain peaks at the site, for example, is called Glorious Copper-Colored Mountain (Zangs mdog dpal ri), the name of Padmasambhava's celestial palace. There are also two large caves at Gnas nang that are identified as Padmasambhava's meditation caves (*sgrub phug*). A series of caves on the mountainside opposite the hermitage (*ri khrod*) are identified as the caves of the Sixteen Arhats (*gnas brtan bcu drug*).

The site is in such a state of decay that, apart from identifying the assembly hall (*'du khang*) and caves, it is impossible to say much about the original layout of the hermitage.

History

Gnas nang is, as we have mentioned, a site associated with Padmasambhava. Two large caves found near the main hermitage buildings are said to be meditation caves of this important ninth century Indian master, one of the legendary founders of Buddhism in Tibet. Of course, many hundreds (if not thousands) of caves throughout Tibet are associated with Padmasambhava, and we have no way of determining the accuracy of the claim that Padmasambhava (if he was a historical figure at all) lived in the caves at Gnas nang. However, there is a strong oral



One of the areas of ruins at Gnas nang.

tradition that maintains that this was a site at which Padmasambhava did a three-year, three-month retreat.



One of Padmasambhava's caves at Gnas nang.

An informant, a former monk of Khardo Hermitage (Mkhar rdo ri khrod), tells us that Gnas nang was founded as a nunnery by a certain Jetsün (or Khachö) Dröldor Wangmo (Rje btsun nam mkha' spyod sgröl rdor dbang mo), a nun who was considered to be a *dākinī*. During her lifetime, and during that of her next incarnation, the nunnery flourished, but then there were no further incarnations. The nunnery went into a period of decline, and it was at this time that the institution sought to affiliate with Khardo Hermitage.

Gnas nang was a site used as a retreat place by the third Khardo incarnation Rikdzin Chökyi Dorjé (Mkhar rdo sku phreng gsum pa rigs 'dzin chos kyi rdo rje). It is the place where he is said to have “practiced the special treasure teachings of Khardo.”¹ That same master is credited with later (re)founding a nunnery at the site (see [Negodong Nunnery](#)). The site has been under the control of the Khardo Lama's estate (Mkhar rdo bla brang) since this time.

Living so far from the village, the nuns, it is said, feared for their safety, and generally experienced great hardship. According to one oral account, a group of brigands actually attacked the nunnery, looting it, and raping several of the nuns. As a result, the nuns asked to move closer to Mkhar rdo, and so the monks then living at Gnas sgo gdong traded places with the nuns: Gnas sgo gdong became a nunnery, and the more remote Gnas nang became a monastery for male monks. In another version of the story, the exchange of the two institutions was ordered by the Thirteenth Dalai Lama (Da lai bla ma sku phreng bcu gsum pa). In any case, this occurred sometime around 1930. From the 1930s up to 1959, therefore, Gnas nang was a monks' hermitage.

¹ *mkhar rdo gter chos thun mong ma yin pa nyams bzhes.*



A nun meditator currently living at Gnas nang.

The site was forcibly closed sometime between 1959 and the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, and the buildings began to deteriorate. No one has formally taken on the responsibility of rebuilding Gnas nang. However, sometime in the last decade several Rnying ma pa nuns and one elderly man (the father of one of the nuns) have fashioned makeshift huts out of the ruins of Gnas nang's former buildings. These hermits all hail from Khams, eastern Tibet.