

Chupzang Nunnery (Chu bzang dgon)



The main temple at Chu bzang.

Location and Layout

The phrase *chu bzang* means “good waters,” indicating that this was probably the site of a spring in former times. Chupzang Nunnery is located in the foothills of the northern section of the suburb of Nyang bran, directly north of Lha sa and northwest of Se ra. It takes about forty minutes to walk from Se ra to Chu bzang. The hermitage (*ri khrod*) faces south in the direction of Lha sa.

The site can be divided into three major areas:

- Farthest north (and uphill) one finds a [field of *stūpas*](#) and large boulders with carvings or [self-arisen images \(*rang byon*\)](#).
- Directly below (south of) the field of *stūpas* in the northernmost area of the hermitage are the [main temple complex](#), the [dharma courtyard \(*chos rwa*\)](#), and the [secondary temple](#).
- Below the temples, farther south on the hillside is the residential (and by far the largest) area of the nunnery that contains dozens of private nuns’ huts.



The interior of the main temple.

The two temple complexes are located just below the *stūpa* field. These are:

- The **upper (main) temple**,¹ where the nuns gather for communal rituals. To the left of the main temple there is a small **butter-lamp offering house** (*chos me khang*, built in 2004), and a **kiosk** where tourists and pilgrims can buy snacks and religious memorabilia. The main temple has a two-wheel **mani [wheel] temple** (*ma ṅi lha khang*) at its southwest corner (access to which is from outside the temple). The principal figures on the main altar of the **assembly hall** (*'du khang*) are Tsong kha pa (1357-1419) and his two disciples. At the northwest corner of the temple (entrance through the assembly hall) there is a **protector deity chapel** (*mgon khang*) that contains a small statue of Gnas chung, as well as statues of Lha mo, Six-Armed Mahākāla (Mgon po phyag drug), Dharmarāja (Dam chen chos rgyal), Rdo rje g.yu sgron ma, and of the two tutelary deities (*yi dam*) of the nunnery, Vajrabhairava (Rdo rje 'jigs byed) and **Vajrayoginī** (Rdo rje rnal 'byor ma).
- West of the main temple complex one finds the **dharma enclosure** (*chos rwa*), an area where nuns sit when they want to memorize texts outdoors.

¹ We have some idea of the images that existed in this temple early in its history. Bshes gnyen tshul khriims, *Lha sa'i dgon tho rin chen spungs rgyan* [*A Catalogue of the Monasteries of Lhasa: A Heap of Jewels*; hereafter *Lha sa'i dgon tho*] (Bod ljongs mi dmangs dpe skrun khang, 2001), 74-75, cites Sde srid sangs rgyas rgya mtsho's (1653-1705) *Bai dūrya ser po* concerning the religious images found in the main temple at the end of the seventeenth century:

- The Buddha
- The Medicine Buddha (Sman bla)
- Avalokiteśvara
- The Fifth Dalai Lama (Da lai bla ma sku phreng lnga pa, 1617-1682)

In the Chapel of Deathlessness (*'Chi med lha khang*), there were statues of the Nine Deities [related to] Amitāyus (Tshe dpag med lha dgu). There was also a Tārā Chapel (Sgrol ma lha khang).

Inside this courtyard there is also a [small chapel](#) to the protector deity Rdo rje g.yu sgron ma.

- The [reception room](#) and the [secondary \(Stone Buddha\) temple](#) – located south (downhill) from the dharma enclosure – share a courtyard. This temple contains the [stone image \(rdo sku\) of the Buddha](#) said to have been “discovered as treasure” (*gter nas ston pa*) by the Fifth Dalai Lama.

History

Phrin las rgya mtsho (d. 1667), considered the founder of Chu bzang,² was a student of the Fifth Dalai Lama Ngawang Lozang Gyatso (Da lai bla ma sku phreng lnga pa ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho). Phrin las rgya mtsho served as regent (*sde srid*) of Tibet from 1665 until his death in 1667, and he hailed from Nyang bran, the suburb of Lha sa to the west of Se ra where the hermitage is located. Phrin las rgya mtsho is arguably best known as the uncle of the Fifth Dalai Lama’s famous student (and the next regent of Tibet), Sde srid sangs rgyas rgya mtsho (1653-1705), who, like his uncle, was also born in Nyang bran.³



The Fifth Dalai Lama. Detail of a thangka in the Tibet House Collection, from an image (no. 71944) on the www.himalayanart.org website.

In the latter part of his life, Phrin las rgya mtsho decided to build a hermitage in the foothills above Nyang bran. He requested permission for this, and invited the Fifth Dalai Lama to perform a “site investigation” (*sa brtag*) to determine the most auspicious location on which to build. The Da lai bla ma chose the site that is presently Chu bzang. He is also the one who provided the institution with this name. It is perhaps at this time as well that the Fifth Dalai Lama made the treasure (*gter*) discovery of the self-arisen stone image of the Buddha that still resides in Chu bzang’s lower temple.

The site was originally founded as a monks’ hermitage with eight monks. Some sources say that later there developed a tradition of maintaining a group of sixteen fully-ordained monks in residence at the hermitage – eight from each of the Byes and Mé Colleges (Grwa tshang smad) of Se ra.⁴ This served as the ritual core of the monastic community. Today the nuns can still point to a set of ruins that they say is the original residence of those eight/sixteen monks.

² Bshes gnyen tshul khriims, *Lha sa’i dgon tho*, 74, gives Sde srid sangs rgyas rgya mtsho as the founder, and gives the date of the founding of the monastery as “around 1696.”

³ According to one source, the Fifth Dalai Lama wanted to appoint Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho as regent at this time, but realizing that there would be a public outcry because of his very young age, he appointed his uncle, Phrin las rgya mtsho, instead. This gave Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho a few years to mature before being officially appointed regent.

⁴ See Bshes gnyen tshul khriims, *Lha sa’i dgon tho*, 75, where it also mentions that each of the monks sent in this way to Chu bzang was entitled to 2.5 *khal* of *rtsam pa*, presumably per year.

Seven years after its founding, the hermitage passed into the hands of Chu bzang ye shes rgya mtsho (1789-1856), who built a four-pillar temple with rear chapel and porticos at the site.⁵ After that, the hermitage came under the aegis of the sixty-ninth throne-holder of Ganden (*dga' ldan khri pa*), Byang chub chos 'phel (1756-1838). Eventually, it seems, the hermitage became the property of Khri byang sku phreng gsum pa blo bzang ye shes, the junior tutor to the present Da lai bla ma.



The stone Buddha image discovered as “treasure” by the Fifth Dalai Lama.

Among contemporary Dge lugs pas, Chu bzang is perhaps best known as the place where, in 1921, Pha bong kha bde chen snying po (1878-1941) gave the “graded stages of the path” (*lam rim*) teachings that would eventually be compiled into his most famous work, *Liberation in Our Hands* (*Rnam grol lag bcangs*).⁶

Informants tell us that in the 1950s the site began to be used as a retreat by elderly Lhasans, who constructed small huts in which they could live out the final years of their lives in intensive Buddhist practice. The area around Chu bzang thus became a kind of religious retirement community. During the Cultural Revolution, Chu bzang was simply used by lay people as residences. Nuns began repair work at the site and started moving there in 1984. Today it is one of the largest nunneries in the Lha sa Valley.

Chu bzang, however, is not a typical nunnery, but rather something more like a communal living situation for nuns. Nuns get together for rituals only on special holy days (on the new and full moon, and on the eighth, tenth and twenty-fifth of the lunar month) *or* when there is a sponsor.⁷ The houses are owned individually by the nuns and are not the property of the nunnery itself. Despite this, Chu bzang has many of the traits of a standard monastic community. It has an administrative body, a site for communal gathering, and a well-defined group of deities that are worshipped and propitiated. The tutelary deities of the nunnery are Vajrabhairava

⁵ Bshes gnyen tshul khriims, *Lha sa'i dgon tho*, 75.

⁶ The text was compiled, on the basis of his lecture notes, by his student Khri byang rin po che (1901-1981); see Artemus B. Engle, tr., *Liberation in Our Hands* (Howell, New Jersey: Mahāyāna Sūtra and Tantra Press, 1999).

⁷ For a list of the various rituals performed on different holy days (before 1959), see Bshes gnyen tshul khriims, *Lha sa'i dgon tho*, 75.

and Vajrayoginī, and the two protector deities are Dpal ldan lha mo and Rdo rje g.yu sgron ma.

Originally, the hermitage portion of the site – the part that contained the monastic residence and the temple – appears to have been the property of Sera as a whole (Se ra spyi so). Given its historical ties to Pha bong kha rin po che, however, some sources count it as one of the hermitages that belongs to Se ra smad (Pha bong kha rin po che’s home college). Today Chu bzang is an autonomous institution with minimal ties to Se ra.



A statue of Vajrayoginī in the main temple at Chu bzang.