

# Garu Nunnery (Ga ru dgon pa)<sup>1</sup>



*The front façade of Garu Nunnery (Ga ru dgon pa).*

## ***Location and Layout***

Garu Nunnery (Ga ru dgon pa), one of the oldest nunneries in the Lha sa area, is located northwest of Se ra at the western end of the Nyang bran Valley. It takes about two hours to walk to Ga ru from Se ra. The [Ga ru Gorge](#) is relatively remote and quite beautiful. The area below the nunnery is [pasture land](#), and is used by the nuns to graze their one hundred-plus head of [yaks](#).<sup>1</sup> These [pastures](#) gradually slope upward (north) to the hermitage (*ri khrod*), which is located at the base of a very rocky portion of the northern mountains next to a stream. The nunnery faces south towards Lha sa, and it affords one of the most beautiful long-distance [views of the city and of the Po ta la](#).

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<sup>1</sup> My treatment of this hermitage (*ri khrod*) derives in part from a short history of the nunnery published in a small booklet in Tibet: 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*] (lha sa: ?, 1997) [hereafter *Gar lo*]. I have also consulted Bshes gnyen tshul khrim, *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), 30-37 [hereafter *Lha sa'i dgon tho*].

<sup>1</sup> According to *Gar lo*, 27, before 1959 the nuns had no formal estate lands (*chos gzhis*) or serfs (*mi ser*). They did, however, have at their disposal the products (like butter) produced by a herd of about five-hundred animals that were kept in the northern Tibetan plateau. These dairy products were brought down to the monastery on a yearly basis in the spring by the nomads who were in charge of these flocks.

The word *ga ru* derives from *gar*, which means “dance.” The famed Indian master Pha dam pa sangs rgyas (b. eleventh century) saw *dākinīs* dancing at the spot where the monastery now stands, and gave it this name.

As is the case with most religious institutions in the Lha sa Valley, the natural landscape surrounding the site is imbued with religious significance. The resident nuns associate several of the mountains near the nunnery with different deities:

- The peak northwest of the hermitage is called the [Palace of Cakrasaṃvara \(Bde mchog gi pho brang\)](#)
- Three rock outcroppings just north of the nunnery are called the Three Protectors (Rigs gsum mgon po)
- A flat cliff-face on a mountain northwest of the site is called the [Mirror of Vajrabhairava \(’Jigs byed kyi me long\)](#)
- Another peak northeast of the nunnery is identified as the [Soul-Mountain of Mañjuśrī \(’Jam dpal dbyangs kyi bla ri\)](#)

A short history of the nunnery identifies the various sites around the nunnery more extensively (though somewhat differently) than the oral account:

The mountain in back [of the nunnery] is called “the Soul-Mountain of Tārā” (Tā rā’i bla ri). Near that a [rock outcropping] that has the shape of a right-turning white conch shell is clearly visible. The western mountain is called “the Soul-Mountain of Mañjuśrī” (’Jam dpal dbyangs kyi bla ri), and it has splendid pastures and rock-faces. At the foot of that mountain there is a “storehouse of *sindhura*”<sup>2</sup> that emits *sindhura* on some holy days. On some occasions the sound made by a white conch<sup>3</sup> can also be heard coming from the side of that mountain. To the right of that mountain is a rock-face that is considered to be a self-arisen image of Vajrabhairava because it resembles the body of the deity. To the left is an imposing mountain whose combination of meadows and rock-faces are considered to form a self-arisen image of Guhyasamāja. To the northeast is “the Soul-Mountain of the Arhats” (Gnas brtan bla ri) that has amazingly designed rock formations. To the east is a mountain known either as “the Parasol” (Gdugs pa’i bla ri) or as “Mañjuśrī Peak” (’Jam dpal bla ri).<sup>4</sup>

The entire area around the nunnery is said to be hospitable to a variety of wildlife. The various animals that live here, it is said, are unafraid of the human inhabitants of the site, occasionally even entering into the nuns’ rooms. The area is also filled with a variety of wild flowers and herbs. These are collected as the ingredients used in Tibetan medicine, and it is not uncommon for Lha sa physicians to bring their students to the area around Ga ru to teach them the art of identifying and collecting medicinal plants.

<sup>2</sup> A reddish powder used for ritual purposes.

<sup>3</sup> Conches are often used as musical instruments in Tibetan rituals. A hole is made at one end of the conch, and when blown through, it emits a sound not unlike that of a trombone.

<sup>4</sup> *Gar lo*, 11.

Garu Nunnery is one very large compound enclosed by a perimeter wall. This larger compound contains within it several sub-compounds or complexes of buildings. At the very center of the nunnery is the largest and most important complex that contains the [main temple](#), the [kitchen](#), and several small chapels – a Scripture Temple (Bka’ ’gyur lha khang), a [butter-lamp offering house](#) (*chos me khang*), and a [building](#) where the nuns take turns keeping watch at night. These various structures, together with [two wings of nuns’ rooms](#), form the central courtyard of the hermitage. These buildings also appear to be the oldest in the hermitage, and the nuns themselves state that most of the additional wings of living quarters located at the four corners of the larger compound were added later as the nunnery grew.



*The front of the main temple.*

To the north of – that is, just behind – the main temple there is a very [long wing of nuns’ rooms](#). There are also different complexes of nuns’ rooms built around central courtyards at the [northeast](#), [southeast](#), and [southwest](#) corners of the monastery. The buildings at the [northwest](#) corner of the monastery, the nuns say, were used for visiting dignitaries; some of these may have also served as residences of senior nuns.

There are other important sites and minor structures outside of the walls of the main compound:

- East. Along the eastern edge of the nunnery there is a small [park](#) that contains a public performance space. Lay people bring picnics and spend the day here when they come for worship (*mchod mjal*). On special occasions the raised concrete [dais](#) in the center of the park is used as a stage for folk opera or other performances. At the northern edge of that park are a [stūpa](#) and a [guest house](#). In 2004, the latter had just recently been built.
- West. A [stream](#) runs along the western edge of the nunnery. The sound of the rushing water is said to resemble the sound of the “Three-*Om* *dhāraṇī* of the Queen Rdo rje btsun mo.” Near the place along the stream where

the nuns come to collect the water, one can clearly see a self-arisen image of the letter “ba” on the side of a boulder. This is the seed syllable of Rdo rje btsun mo.<sup>5</sup> **Two mani wheels** (*ma ṅi 'khor lo*) have been built over the stream; they are made to turn by the power of the rushing water.

- South. Several small **shrines** are found just outside the southern perimeter wall of the nunnery. One of these, called the Dā ma la nyag, marks the spot where Pha dam pa sangs rgyas heard the word “*dā ma*.” Another is said to mark the spot where he received an offering of milk from a magical white cow that was a Buddha-emanation, and near to this is the boulder with the self-arisen letters “*a ma*” into which the cow dissolved. (See below for more detailed accounts of the narratives related to these various sites.)
- North. At the northern edge of the nunnery there is relatively little – only one **small shrine** to a *bstan ma* deity, and a few boulders with self-arisen images.



*The park and performance area in the foreground, with the guest house and stūpa behind it.*

About one kilometer south of the monastery, just off the main road, is a small shrine that contains a self-arisen image of **one of the eyes of Cakrasaṃvara (Bde mchog)**.<sup>6</sup>

Almost all of the statuary and art inside the temple is new, but Ga ru is unusual insofar as we have some idea of the images that existed inside the main temple prior to 1959. That **main temple** was a “twelve pillar” temple,<sup>7</sup> and the central image on its main altar was a Thousand-Armed Avalokiteśvara, one-story tall. To

<sup>5</sup> *Gar lo*, 12.

<sup>6</sup> Cakrasaṃvara has three eyes. The other two are located at **Pha bong kha** and **Rtags brten** hermitages.

<sup>7</sup> The number of pillars used to support the roof of a building was a standard way of measuring the interior size of buildings. The Ga ru temple is today an eight-pillar temple, although today it also has a two-pillar rear chapel, which is where the statuary is kept (see *Gar lo*, 33). It appears that before 1959 the temple was not subdivided in this way (into an altar portion and an assembly-hall portion) but was instead one large room with the altar being located in the northern portion where the back chapel exists today. The account of the images in the temple that follows is based on *Gar lo*, chapter 3, 20-24.

the left was a smaller Thousand-Armed Avalokiteśvara figure and to the right was a statue of Pha dam pa sangs rgyas when he was an eight-year-old child.<sup>8</sup> On his lap was kept a manuscript text of a prayer (about ten folios in length) said to have been written by Pha dam pa sangs rgyas in his own hand.<sup>9</sup> This statue and Pha dam pa's own manuscript text were together considered the "main inner image(s)" (*nang rten gtso bo*) of the nunnery. On the interior walls of the temple there hung a series of fifteen extremely well-executed *thang kas* of the "Eighty Deeds of Tsongkhapa" (*tsong kha brgyad bcu*), donated to the monastery by "a Mongolian queen."<sup>10</sup> Apparently the Thirteenth Dalai Lama (Da lai bla ma sku phreng bcu gsum pa) asked for these to be brought to the Nor bu gling kha, the Da lai bla mas' summer palace, and told the nuns to ask for anything they wanted in return. The elder nuns, however, declined, refusing to part with the *thang kas*, and so the paintings remained in the nunnery until 1959. Their whereabouts today are unknown.

In addition, the following statues were to be found in the temple:

1. A life-size figure of Vajrayoginī (Rdo rje mal 'byor ma)
2. A series of statues of the various incarnations of the Da lai bla mas<sup>11</sup>
3. Four metal-alloy statues of the Drakri incarnations (Brag ri sprul sku)<sup>12</sup> that were said to be simulacra (*'dra sku*) – that is, actually resembling these various figures
4. Two sets of statues of the Eight Medicine Buddhas (Sman bla bde gshegs brgyad), one made of clay (and life-size), another of metal (and smaller)
5. A life-size statue of Pha bong kha rin po che

In addition to these various statues, as representatives of the Buddha's speech there were:

- A volume of the *Eight Thousand Line Perfection of Wisdom Sūtra* (*'Phags pa shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa brgyad stong pa'i mdo*, *Āryāṣṭasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitā Sūtra*) written in gold
- A complete set of the *Bka' 'gyur*
- Complete sets of the short, middling, and extensive *Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras* (*Shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa'i mdo*, *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*).

<sup>8</sup> *Lha sa'i dgon tho*, 32, states that it was a statue of Pha dam pa sangs rgyas when he was two years old, and claims that it was this statue that was the chief object of worship of the nunnery.

<sup>9</sup> The text was been reproduced in *Gar lo*, 36-39. The author of *Gar lo*, 40, claims that Thu'u bkwan (1737-1802) believes that this short text is the basis for the biography of Pha dam pa sangs rgyas written by Chos kyi seng ge.

<sup>10</sup> *Lha sa'i dgon tho*, 32, states that the *thang kas* were of the former lives of Tsong kha pa (1357-1419), and that they came from A mdo rdo rje sku 'bum.

<sup>11</sup> *Lha sa'i dgon tho*, 32, mentions only a statue of the Fifth Dalai Lama (Da lai bla ma sku phreng lnga pa).

<sup>12</sup> *Lha sa'i dgon tho*, 32, mentions only a statue of the first Brag ri rin po che.

As representations of the Buddha’s mind, there were replicas of the “eight *shāli sūpas* of India.”

In the altar of Brag ri rin po che’s rooms, located on top of the main temple, there used to be very fine statues of the Sixteen Arhats (Gnas brtan bcu drug), the Hwa shang, and the four direction protectors.

In the **protector deity chapel** (*mgon khang*) there were statues of:

1. Six-Armed Mahākāla (Mgon po phyag drug)
2. Hayagrīva in his “Secret Accomplishment” form (Rta mgrin gsang sgrub)<sup>13</sup>
3. Dharmarāja (Dam chen chos rgyal)
4. Dpal ldan lha mo
5. Vaiśravaṇa (Rnam sras)
6. Mgon po a gho. It appears that only the head of this deity survives. In 2004, the body of the image had yet to be created.
7. Rgyal chen karma ’phrin las

On the topmost floor there was a Tārā chapel (Sgrol ma lha khang) with statues of the twenty-one Tārās. There was also a statue of Maitreya (Byams pa) in this chapel.

In addition to these various images, there were also two self-arisen footprints (*zhabs rjes*) – one made by Pha dam pa sangs rgyas, and the other by the horse of the second Drakri incarnation Gyatso Chönjor (Brag ri sku phreng gnyis pa rgya mtsho chos ’byor).<sup>14</sup> With one or two exceptions, none of the various images and religious artifacts mentioned above survived the Cultural Revolution, though many have been replaced by replicas.



*The head or face-mask of Mgon po a gho in the protector deity chapel.*

<sup>13</sup> According to *Lha sa’i dgon tho*, 33, this deity was the chief protector deity of the monastery. This deity is not mentioned in *Garu lo*.

<sup>14</sup> For a more detailed treatment of the “footprint collection” at Ga ru see *Lha sa’i dgon tho*, 36.

## History<sup>15</sup>

Tradition has it that the famous Indian master and founder of the “Pacification” (Zhi byed) school, Pha dam pa sangs rgyas, came upon the site at one point in his peregrinations throughout Tibet.<sup>16</sup> Stopping to rest on a boulder, he was approached by a white cow who offered him her milk. After drinking, Pha dam pa sangs rgyas continued on his way, but the cow would not stop following him, so he turned to her and said, “Mother (*a ma*), please stay here!” No sooner had he said these words than the cow dissolved into a nearby boulder, and at that moment the letters *a ma* emerged as self-arisen letters on the boulder’s surface. This boulder with the self-arisen letters – called the “*a ma* boulder” – can be seen at Ga ru to this day. Pha dam pa sangs rgyas then realized that this was a sign that a monastic institution should be founded at this site. There only remained the question of whether he should found a nunnery or a monastery for male monks there. As he



A statue of Pha dam pa sangs rgyas at Garu Nunnery.

was contemplating this, he heard the enchanted sound of goddesses from atop a nearby pass called Rta ma do nyag.<sup>17</sup> Looking up, he saw goddesses dancing there. Because he had seen *female* deities, he took this as a sign of the fact that he was to found a nunnery at the site, and he gave it the name “Dance Gompa: Place of Meditative Equipose” (Gar dgon bsam gtan gling). Before 1959, there was a square stone throne that was reputed to be the place where Pha dam pa sat as he performed the so-called “site investigations” (*sa dpyad*) to determine the exact place on which to build the nunnery, but this throne apparently has been destroyed.

The first nuns who lived at Ga ru were of course followers of Pha dam pa sangs rgyas, and therefore practiced the various meditational techniques of the Pacification school. Over the period of several centuries, however, the oral tradition of the Pacification system “deteriorated,” and the one contemporary written account of the nunnery available to us states that the nuns, of their own volition, approached the great eighteenth-century Dge lugs pa master (and abbot of Pabongkha Hermitage

<sup>15</sup> The account that follows is based largely on *Gar lo*, chapter 2, 17-19, although I have supplemented this with some additional information found in *Lha sa’i dgon tho*.

<sup>16</sup> *Lha sa’i dgon tho* gives the more precise date of 1113 for the events that are about to be recounted.

<sup>17</sup> *Lha sa’i dgon tho*, 31, calls this Mo barha nyag.

[Pha bong kha ri khrod]), Brag ri rgya mtsho mtha' yas.<sup>18</sup> They asked him to become their *bla ma*, and to take responsibility for the nunnery.<sup>19</sup> He agreed, and for the past two centuries the nunnery has been under the aegis of the Brag ri bla mas, who have acted as both patrons and as the spiritual leaders to the institution. It was a tradition for the Brag ri bla ma to come to the nunnery in the latter half of the fifth Tibetan month every year to conduct memorization exams, and this tradition was maintained up to 1959. Since the re-founding of the nunnery in the mid 1980s, the former administrative head (*phyag mdzod*) of the Drakri Lama's estate (Brag ri bla brang) has substituted for Brag ri rin po che, who today lives in exile in India. He comes to the nunnery at least once a year to administer these exams.



*Two nuns take a break from kitchen duties to pose for a picture.*

Before 1959, the nunnery was responsible for doing rituals for the Tibetan government – for example, accumulating repetitions of the “Prayer to the Twenty-One Tārās” at certain specific times throughout the year.<sup>20</sup> These ritual commissions on behalf of the Tibetan government were transacted through the intermediary of the Drakri Lama's estate. It was probably also because of its formal relationship to this lama's estate (*bla brang*) that the nunnery was considered a “state monastery” (*gzhung dgon*). Such a status brought with it not only economic but also social privilege; for example, the nuns were entitled to have an audience

<sup>18</sup> Of course, since history is always written “by the victors” – in this case the Dge lugs pas – we do not know whether in fact the nuns *asked* to be incorporated into the Dge lugs school or whether they were *forced* to do so. Whatever the case, it should be noted that Pha bong kha is the hermitage closest to Ga ru, and that simply from a geographical viewpoint it makes sense to administratively locate the nunnery under the aegis of Pha bong kha. Eventually the Brag ri bla mas moved their base of operations from Pha bong kha to Drakri Hermitage (Brag ri ri khrod), perhaps during the life of Rgya mtsho mtha' yas himself.

<sup>19</sup> *Lha sa'i dgon tho*, 31, states that this took place in 1792.

<sup>20</sup> For the complete ritual cycle of the nunnery, see *Lha sa'i dgon tho*, 33-34.

with the Da lai bla ma every year in the Nor bu gling kha, the Da lai bla ma's summer palace, during the eighth Tibetan month.

Before 1959, it was the elder nuns who were responsible for the day-to-day administration of the nunnery. Nuns occupied the position of:

- “senior teacher” (*slob dpon*): responsible for overseeing all internal work and external relations, and therefore the functional equivalent of an abbot
- chant leader (*dbu mdzad*): responsible for making preparations for (as well as for leading) ritual events, and
- two “representatives” (*spyi mi*): responsible for the financial affairs of the nunnery, for external relations (e.g., to patrons), and for fundraising; they were also the main conduits to the Drakri Lama's estate.

Nuns also occupied minor posts like temple attendant (*sgo gnyer*). Even today the nuns divide the administrative work of the nunnery among themselves according to seniority, holding each of the various offices for fixed terms.

Having been deprived of all sources of income after 1959, in order to survive, the nuns turned to growing and selling bamboo for a period of time. The Cultural Revolution, however, brought an end to this. The nunnery was forcibly depopulated and much of it was destroyed. Fundraising for reconstruction began in 1980. A group of fourteen former nuns asked for permission to rebuild, and were able to gather 390,000 ¥ from the Tibetan laity, and 20,000¥ from the local government authorities. The work of rebuilding the nunnery began in 1985, and was completed in a short time.