

Purbuchok Hermitage (Phur bu lcog ri khrod)¹



Purbuchok Hermitage (Phur lcog ri khrod) as viewed from the mountain behind it.

Location and Layout

Purbuchok Hermitage (Phur bu lcog ri khrod), one of the most beautiful and best restored of the hermitages of Sera (*se ra'i ri khrod*), is located halfway up the northern mountains in the Lha sa suburb of Dog bde at the northeastern corner of the Lha sa Valley. It takes about two hours to walk to Phur lcog from Lha sa, and almost as long from Se ra, but most people today take a bus to Dog bde and then walk north (up the mountain) from there. Phur lcog is the last hermitage (*ri khrod*) that pilgrims visit on the “Sixth-Month Fourth-Day” (*drug pa tshe bzhi*) pilgrimage route. (To see images of this pilgrimage taken in 2002, please click [here](#).)

¹ There is a constitution (*bca' yig*) for Purbuchok Hermitage (Phur lcog ri khrod) written by Phur lcog blo bzang tshul khriims byams pa rgya mtsho (1825-1901), see [TBRC W2982](#), but this was not available to me at the time of the writing of this piece. In the account that follows I have relied chiefly on a short history published recently in Tibet: Phun tshogs rab rgyas, *Phur lcog rigs gsum byang chub gling gi byung ba mdo tsam brjod pa dad gsum 'dren pa'i lcags kyu* [*A Brief History of Purbuchok Riksum Jangchup Ling: A Hook to Draw in the Three Types of Faith; hereafter Phur byung*], *Bod ljongs nang bstan* [*Tibetan Buddhism*] 1 (2004), and on Bshes gnyen tshul khriims, *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), 79-81.

As with most of the hermitages of Sera, the surrounding landscape is considered blessed (*byin can*), and this blessedness or holiness is inscribed into the natural landscape around the monastery. Given its historical association with the so-called “Three Protectors (Rigs gsum mgon po)” – Avalokiteśvara, Mañjuśrī and Vajrapāṇi – it is not surprising that several aspects of the landscape surrounding Phur lcog are associated with these three deities. Here is a summary of one account of the mountains around the hermitage:

- To the west is a mountain in the shape of two auspicious golden fish (*bkra shis gser nya*)
- To the north, the Soul-Mountain of Mañjuśrī (*’Jam dpal dbyangs kyi bla ri*), known as *Rmog tho ’go*
- On the side of that mountain there is a rock-outcropping that resembles a drawing of a white conch
- The mountain to the east is associated with the palace of Avalokiteśvara
- Another mountain, that appears as if it had a flag on its pinnacle, is considered the mountain-abode (*gnas ri*) of Vajrapāṇi, who serves as watchman or “door-keeper” (*sgo srung*) for the entire area.



The Temple of the Three Protectors.

As for the actual site on which the hermitage was built, different meditators have had different visions of it. In what we have elsewhere called the “metaphysical rhetoric of sacred space,”¹ sometimes Phur lcog is claimed to be identical to the six-syllable *mantra* (*sngags*) (*om maṇi padme hūṃ*), sometimes it is seen as the Palace of Cakrasaṃvara (Bde mchog gi pho brang), and at other times as the paradise of the Three Protectors.

¹ See the [Pabongkha Hermitage \(Pha bong kha ri khod\) webpage](#).

The history of the different buildings at the site is described in the History section below. What follows here is a description of the hermitage as it existed in 2004. Purchok Hermitage has three basic sections:

- The **main compound** houses the **main temple** (*'du khang*) and the **Temple of the Three Protectors** (*Rigs gsum mgon po lha khang*)
- **Another compound** presently contains the new library building and the debate courtyard
- The **large open area** west and southwest of the library compound contains individual monastic dwellings/huts.

With the exception of a portion of the Temple of the Three Protectors – whose original walls remained intact up to the height of the top of the windows – the main compound has been rebuilt from the ground up. Informants report that there has been an attempt to maintain the original layout of the compound as a whole.



The main temple.

Like many of the mountain hermitages, this main temple compound is built in a tiered fashion that conforms to the landscape. Beginning from the highest (and easternmost) point, we find a large yellow building that towers over the rest of the monastery. This temple was built under the direction of Sgrub khang pa, the founder of the hermitage.² It is the **Temple of the Three Protectors**. All of the original images on its **main altar** were destroyed, but they have been replaced with new images of the **Three Protectors** – Avalokiteśvara, Mañjuśrī, and Vajrapāṇi – as well as other minor images. Adjacent to the temple is a **room for the temple caretaker**, with an adjoining **kitchen**.

² 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), 739, in the biographical entry on Sgrub khang pa.



The interior of one of the monks' rooms off of the middle courtyard in the main temple compound.

As one follows the steps down from the Temple of the Three Protectors, one arrives at the next major tier of the compound, which contains a [courtyard](#) with several doorways:

- On the northern side of the courtyard are two [monks' rooms](#) that have ornamental yellow windows. In former times these may have been the quarters of high-ranking members of the Purchok Lama's estate (Phur lcog bla brang). Today ordinary monks live there.
- On the southern side are the [private rooms of Phur lcog bla ma](#) (easternmost), and a [reception room](#) (westernmost).

If one proceeds towards the west past the monks' rooms, one passes through an entryway that leads to a much [smaller courtyard](#) with two doorways: to the right (north) is the doorway to [Scripture Chapel \(Bka' 'gyur lha khang\)](#), a room that houses the portion of the canon that is considered the Buddha's actual word. Across from this is a [doorway](#) that leads to residential rooms atop the main temple. These rooms are presently being used by an elder teacher who is responsible for providing instruction to the junior monks of the hermitage.

Below this level where the residential and reception rooms are found, there is a small [area where firewood is kept](#). Here there also hangs [the gong](#) used to call the monks for prayers and meals.

The lowest level of the main temple compound contains (from west to east):

- The [main temple](#)
- The monastery's [main kitchen](#)
- [Storage rooms](#)
- The [cave temple](#) of Phur lcog rin po che
- The [protector deity chapel \(mgon khang\)](#)
- A [mani \[wheel\] temple \(ma Ni lha khang\)](#), where there is a large manual mani wheel (*ma ni 'khor lo*).



The interior of the main temple

Proceeding west out the principal door of the main temple compound, one comes immediately to the **entrance** of the compound that contains the **Dharma enclosure** (*chos rwa*) and the **new library**. That library, which in 2004 was just being completed, is being built so as to house a collection of the *Bstan 'gyur*. The vast open space that is the Dharma enclosure once housed the famous “Dharma Enclosure Assembly Hall” which we know was much bigger than the other temple at Phur lcog. This temple, however, was destroyed and has not been rebuilt. Today only a few of the murals along the base of one of the walls in the Dharma enclosure remind us of the existence of such a building.

Exiting from the Dharma enclosure compound and proceeding west once again, we come to the area of the **individual monks' huts**. It seems that before 1959 most of the administrators and workers of the Purchok Lama's estate lived in the main temple compound. Many other monks, however, lived in these individual huts. In the early history of the hermitage, these huts were most likely the residences of meditators, and even today oral lore has it that some of the greatest masters of the Dge lugs school lived in one or another of these various buildings.

History

According to tradition, the site where Phur lcog was built was originally a place where Padmasambhava (Padma 'byung gnas) meditated. The Thirteenth Dalai Lama (Da lai bla ma sku phreng bcu gsum pa), in the biography of his teacher, the third Purchok incarnation Yongdzin Jampa Gyatso (Phur lcog sku phreng gsum pa yongs 'dzin byams pa rgya mtsho), says that the main cave at Phur lcog was the practice-place of Padmasambhava known as the Cavern of Dochung Chongzhi (Rdo cung cong zhi'i phug pa).³ Later, the founder of the Tshal pa bka' brgyud school, Zhang 'gro ba'i mgon po g.yu brag pa (1123-1193), founded a practice center here in the twelfth century, and it is from this time that the site came to be

³ *Phur byung*, 56.

known as *phur lcog* (literally, “a dagger at its pinnacle”⁴ because the top of the mountain behind the hermitage resembles a dagger).⁵ At the time that Sgrub khang pa (see [Introduction to the Hermitages](#)) built the Temple of the Three Protectors at the site (more than five centuries after Bla ma zhang [1123-1193]) there could still be seen vestiges of the original Bka’ brgyud institution, like the so-called “Little White Stūpa” (Mchod rten dkar chung).

During Sgrub khang dge legs rgya mtsho’s (1641-1713)⁶ peregrinations throughout Tibet in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, he decided to visit Zangs ri, the place where, several centuries earlier, the great female saint Ma cig lab sgron (twelfth century) had founded her famous center of Zangs ri mkhar dmar. On the night before he was to visit Zangs ri, Sgrub khang pa had a dream in which a man wearing a black hat communicated to him that in a place called Dog bde there was a white *stūpa*. The man told him that a house was to be built there, and then a great light filled the area around the *stūpa*. The next day, when he visited the temple at Zangs ri mkhar dmar, he saw that the man in his dreams was depicted in a statue on the main altar, and he learned that it was none other than Ma cig lab sgron’s son, Thod smyon bsam grub (twelfth century). Later, after Sgrub khang pa moved back to Se ra – to the hermitage that he made his permanent home, Se ra dbu rtse – he began to search for the exact site in Dog bde where the white *stūpa* of his dreams was to be found. After a long search, he finally identified it as Phur lcog. He blessed the site with the necessary preparatory rituals and prayers. The sources disagree as to the precise date, but it seems that these events took place sometime between 1701 and 1706.



A detail of an eighteenth century painting in the collection of the Rubin Museum of Art (Image no. 105 on the www.himalayanart.org website) identified as Sgrub khang pa.

The first Purchok incarnation Ngawang Jampa (Phur lcog sku phreng dang po ngag dbang byams pa, 1682-1762), one of Sgrub khang pa’s chief students, made a cave at the site his home. Building apparently started after Phur lcog rin po che was able to garner the support of various sponsors. The first structure built at Phur lcog was a residence (*gzim khang*), perhaps as an extension of Ngag dbang byams pa’s cave. Monks came from Sgrub khang pa’s hermitage of Se ra dbu rtse to

⁴ *Phur byung*, 56-57, gives a slightly different etymology.

⁵ See *Phur byung*, 57, for the sources of this tradition. The author of the *Phur byung* also considers (and rejects) the tradition that sees Phur lcog as the place where the famed Sera dagger (*se ra phur pa*) supposedly fell from the sky (see *Phur byung*, 58).

⁶ On this important figure, see the “History” section of the “[Introduction to the Hermitages](#).”

celebrate the completion of the first building, and Ngag dbang byams pa himself gave an extensive teaching on *bodhicitta* at this time.

Shortly after the first building went up at Phur lcog, several sponsors committed to providing the funds necessary to build the Temple of the Three Protectors. Sgrub khang pa once again took to the road to garner further financial support for the project. Meanwhile, construction on the temple began. In the spring of 1705, with the temple just about completed, the construction of the statues began, and Sgrub khang pa entered into retreat. When the statues were finished, extensive offerings were made and elaborate rituals were performed in order to consecrate them. At several times during these events it rained flowers (*me tog char babs*), a sign of the power of the prayers, and of the efficacy of the rituals. While the consecration was taking place, Sgrub khang pa had many auspicious dreams, including one in which he saw the site of



An old statue of Phur lcog ngag dbang byams pa preserved in the Cave Temple at Purchok Hermitage.

Phur lcog as being of the same nature as the six-syllable *mantra* of Avalokiteśvara (*om maṇi padme hūm*), and another in which Padmasambhava arrived to bless the site. By 1706, there were eight⁷ fully ordained monks living at the site, fulfilling Sgrub khang pa's original plan for the hermitage. In that same year Sgrub khang pa ordered the building of the assembly hall (*'du khang*)⁸ and kitchen complex. In the summer, the Queen Tsering Trashi (Rgyal mo tse ring bkra shis) donated the funds for the statues inside the assembly hall. The next year, Sgrub khang pa himself filled the statues with the appropriate substances *gzungs 'bul*, and, together with his eight monks, spent many days performing the consecrations. Throughout all of this, Phur lcog rin po che, rather than assuming the privileged position of the great scholar that he was, took part in the actual construction work – hauling earth, stones and water, mixing mud, painting, and so forth – all of this so as to fulfill his teacher's vision of creating an institution at Phur lcog.⁹

⁷ *Phur byung*, 60, and *Lha sa'i dgon tho*, 79. Other accounts claim that his original plan was for a hermitage of one hundred fully ordained monks. The confusion is perhaps attributable to the fact that the words *brgyad* (eight) and *brgya* (one hundred) are very similar in Tibetan.

⁸ It is unclear why the Temple of the Three Protectors could not serve as an assembly hall, given that it is about the same size as the assembly hall of the hermitage.

⁹ See, for example, *Lha sa'i dgon tho*, 80.



The entrance to Phur lcog ngag dbang byams pa's cave.

The first monastic confession ritual (*gso sbyong*) was held in the new assembly hall in 1708. In that same year, Paṅ chen blo bzang ye shes (1663-1737), Ngag dbang byams pa's ordaining abbot, wrote the constitution (*bca' yig*) for the new monastery. With all of the work of founding the monastery having reached its conclusion, Sgrub khang pa called for Phur lcog rin po che, and revealed to him that Purchok Mountain (Phur lcog ri) was in actuality the Palace of Cakrasaṃvara. He advised Phur lcog rin po che to institute the practices of this deity at the hermitage, for, given the auspiciousness of the site, "accomplishments were within easy reach." He advised him to institute a system of examinations and of giving "public admonition" (*tshogs gtam*)¹⁰ to the monks, and, with these words, he handed the monastery over to him. Sgrub khang pa, in preparation for his impending death, had his personal library of over two hundred volumes moved to the Temple of the Three Protectors around this time. He died at Phur lcog on the seventh day of the first Tibetan month in the year 1713.

Phur lcog rin po che had been initiated into the practices of the deity Dpal ldan lha mo by Sgrub khang pa, and at this time he did a five month retreat on this deity. He had many visions during his retreat, and from this point forward, Dpal ldan lha mo has been considered the special protector deity of the hermitage. Her statue, found in the protector deity chapel in the hermitage, is considered extremely holy.

¹⁰ *Phur byung*, 62, states that from this time on, Phur lcog rin po che meticulously instructed the monks of Phur lcog on the constitution of the monastery and gave the public admonitions on a yearly basis on the fifteenth day of the sixth month. Such a tradition is, of course, reminiscent of the system of public admonitions practiced at Se ra. See José I. Cabezón, "The Regulations of a Monastery," in *Religions of Tibet in Practice*. ed. Donald S. Lopez, Jr. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 335-51.



The protector deity chapel at Phur lcog, the site of the famous statue of Dpal ldan lha mo.

Under Phur lcog rin po che's abbacy, the hermitage flourished. Tremendously devoted to the institution, he left it only when absolutely necessary. Otherwise, he was continuously in residence, maintaining an extremely active teaching schedule from the time he was thirty-six years of age until he died at the age of eighty. His lectures focused mainly on graded stages of the path (*lam rim*), and he was especially fond of two texts: the Fifth Dalai Lama's (Da lai bla ma sku phreng lnga pa) famous graded stages of the path, *The Revelations of Mañjuśrī: A Lamrim (Lam rim 'jam dpal zhal lung)*, and *The Easy Path: A Lamrim (Lam rim bde lam)*. These two texts he taught, respectively, every spring and autumn. Ngag dbang byams pa also gave tantric teachings at Phur lcog, but the emphasis clearly was on graded stages of the path.

As might be expected, under Phur lcog rin po che's tenure the number of monks grew. With the patronage of the Tibetan king Pho lha nas (1689-1747),¹¹ in 1733 work began on a "Dharma enclosure/courtyard"¹² and (next to it) a new and larger assembly hall. Within the span of a few years, however, the Dharma enclosure once again proved too small to hold the large numbers of monks and laypeople that came from all over Tibet to listen to graded stages of the path teachings at Phur lcog,¹³ and it had to be expanded once again.

¹¹ On this important figure, see the [History](#) section of the [Introduction to the Hermitages](#). Phur lcog enjoyed the patronage of the various rulers of the day – not only of Pho lha nas, but after him of the Seventh Dalai Lama Kelzang Gyatso (Da lai bla ma sku phreng bdun pa skal bzang rgya mtsho, 1708-1757). For example, it was the "government" who acted as patron (*sbyin bdag*) during the annual graded stages of the path teachings at Phur lcog, offering "seven teas and two soups" (*ja bdun dang thug pa gnyis*) daily to the one-thousand or so people in attendance.

¹² It appears that part of the function of the Dharma enclosure was to serve as the site of large public teachings. *Phur byung*, 63, says that the original enclosure could hold up to six-hundred monks.

¹³ The schedules for the annual spring and autumn teachings given by Ngag dbang byams pa at Phur lcog are given in extenso in *Phur byung*, 64, and *Lha sa'i dgon tho*, 80-81.



The Dharma enclosure, the site of Phur lcog rin po che's graded stages of the path teachings. There used to exist another large assembly hall here, but it was destroyed during the Cultural Revolution.

Other major renovations and additions to the hermitage continued to occur throughout the years of Ngag dbang byams pa's tenure. In 1735, with the patronage of a Lha sa family known as Dpa' grong shag pa, he ordered a major renovation of the Temple of the Three Protectors, and in 1742 he commissioned a set of scriptures written in gold for the monastery, which he housed in the new, larger assembly hall next to the "Dharma enclosure."¹⁴ One source¹⁵ states that toward the end of Ngag dbang byams pa's life there were about one thousand monks in residence at the hermitage, though this seems like a tremendous exaggeration.¹⁶

After Phur lcog rin po che's death, the monastery passed into the hands of the second Purchok incarnation Lozang Jampa (Phur lcog sku phreng gnyis pa blo bzang byams pa),¹⁷ and continued to flourish as an institution. However, without the charismatic leadership of Ngag dbang byams pa – who was a committed contemplative – the hermitage began to take a different path from this point in time, emphasizing tantric ritual cycles¹⁸ rather than graded stages of the path teachings and meditation.

The third Purchok incarnation Lozang Tsültrim Jampa Gyatso (Phur lcog sku phreng gsum pa blo bzang tshul khriims byams pa rgya mtsho) served as tutor to

¹⁴ According to *Phur byung*, 65, this set of texts is today housed in the Eastern Assembly Hall (*tshoms chen shar*) of the Potala.

¹⁵ *Lha sa'i dgon tho*, 80.

¹⁶ Se ra itself had only about fifteen-hundred monks around this time.

¹⁷ *Phur byung*, 66, mentions that it was this figure who was responsible for building the first structures at the [Purchok Lama's estate at Se ra](#).

¹⁸ *Phur byung*, 66, mentions that the following ritual cycles began to be practiced yearly during the tenure of the second Phur lcog rin po che: the self-initiation rituals (*bdag 'jug*) of Guhyasamāja (Gsang ba 'dus pa), Yamāntaka, and Cakrasaṃvara (Bde mchog), as well as various other ritual cycles related to Tārā (Sgrol ma), Dugs dkar, and the Lion-Headed Ḍākinī (Seng gdong ma).

both the Twelfth and the Thirteenth Dalai Lamas (Da lai bla ma sku phreng bcu gsum pa). Given his position as tutor to two Da lai bla mas, it is not surprising that during his tenure Purchok Hermitage received from the government the Dog sde lho smon estates for the support of the hermitage. Both the hermitage and the Purchok Lama's estate greatly increased in wealth during the last half of the nineteenth century, and the number of monks at the hermitage itself grew, reaching a total of eighty by the end of the nineteenth century. Beginning in 1882, major renovations were done to several of the buildings at the hermitage. Some buildings were rebuilt from scratch, others gained second stories, and at least one new major temple – dedicated to housing a large statue of Maitreya (Byams pa) – was constructed during this time.

In the last few years of the third Purchok incarnation Yongdzin Jampa Gyatso's (Phur lcog sku phreng gsum pa yongs 'dzin byams pa rgya mtsho) life, the Thirteenth Dalai Lama visited Purchok Hermitage. This is seen as a major event in the history of the institution. After his teacher's death, it was the Da lai bla ma himself who took upon himself the responsibility of creating and consecrating the funerary *stūpa* and various memorial statues (including a statue of his teacher). All of these were placed inside the temple next to the Dharma enclosure.

Because of the extensive building and renovation done at Phur lcog by the third Phur lcog rin po che, very little had to be done at the hermitage by his successor. The fourth Phur lcog bla ma did do some renovation on one of the assembly halls and he refurbished some older portions of the *bla ma*'s residence that were in poor condition. He also built a building at the so-called Pond Park (Chab rdzing gling kha).

In 1959, the hermitage housed somewhere between eighty and one hundred monks. Between residential rooms, kitchens, meeting and storage rooms, etc., the *bla ma*'s household ended up utilizing about fifty rooms. All together the various temples occupied a space the equivalent of "150 pillars."¹⁹ There were about thirty huts in the vicinity of the main hermitage compound, and about ninety monks' rooms inside the compound itself.

After the Cultural Revolution, most of these buildings were in a state of near total collapse. Then came the period of liberalization. Permission to rebuild the hermitage was requested from the local authorities in 1984. The preparatory rituals to ensure the success of the project were enacted the following year on the fifteenth day of the fourth Tibetan month. With some funds from the Chinese government and with considerable monetary contributions and volunteer labor from local people, the hermitage has been restored to about seventy percent of its former state.²⁰ Several of the individual monks' huts that lay outside of the main compound were never rebuilt, and rather than rebuilding the assembly hall that used to be located next to the Dharma enclosure, the residents of Phur lcog chose instead to

¹⁹ Buildings in Tibet are often measured by the number of pillars they have.

²⁰ See the description of the present layout of the hermitage above.

build there a “library” to house a collection of scriptures (*Bstan ’gyur*). This library was still under construction in 2004.



Monks perform rituals during the Sixth-Month Fourth-Day pilgrimage day. Phur lcog is the last hermitage that laypeople visit when they make the Sera Mountain Circumambulation Circuit (se ra ’i ri ’khor) on this day.

Today, the monastery has about thirty-eight monks – thirty official and eight unofficial – and it is principally a ritual institution (just as it has been for most of the past two centuries). Its monthly ritual cycle includes the performance of the self-initiation (*bdag ’jug*) rituals of Vajrabhairava (Rdo rje ’jigs byed) and Sarvavid Vairocana (Kun rig rnam par snang mdzad), as well as the rituals of the Medicine Buddha (Sman bla), the Sixteen Arhats (Gnas brtan bcu drug), and the monastery’s protector deities. In the year 2000, a class for younger monks that focuses on the classical philosophical texts was inaugurated at Phur lcog, and from that time a senior textualist has resided permanently at the monastery in a teaching capacity. This represents a departure from tradition, given that Phur lcog monks who wanted to study philosophy would have traditionally matriculated at Se ra. However, it is consistent with the widespread shift in the ethos of contemporary Tibetan monasticism, where a basis in doctrinal studies is seen as necessary even for monks who are ritualists.²¹

²¹ For example, the Da lai bla ma, in exile, has inaugurated doctrinal/philosophical studies at his own ritual monastery of Rnam rgyal, and has encouraged similar undertakings at ritual institutions like the two tantric colleges (*sngags pa grwa tshang*) – Upper Tantric [College] (Rgyud stod) and Lower Tantric [College] (Rgyud smad).