

Trashi Chöling Hermitage (Bkra shis chos gling ri khrod)

Location and Layout

Bkra shis chos gling¹ – literally “The Place of Auspicious Dharma” – is located about three kilometers from Se ra in the [mountains northwest of the monastery](#). It takes about one hour to walk from Se ra to Bkra shis chos gling. The hermitage (*ri khrod*) also lies approximately halfway between two other important hermitages – [Pha bong kha](#), which is about half a kilometer to the west and downhill, and [Rtags bstan sgrub phug](#), which is slightly less than half a kilometer to the east, across a gorge, and then uphill. Bkra shis chos gling is, together with these latter two sites, one of the main stops on the famous Sera Mountain Circumambulation Circuit (*se ra ri 'khor*), a pilgrimage route that thousands of people from Lha sa and the surrounding area traverse as a merit-making activity on the “Sixth-Month Fourth-Day” (*drug pa tshe bzhi*) religious festival. To see images of this event taken in 2002, click [here](#).



Two pictures of the hermitage showing the way that buildings have been erected in tiers, conforming to the landscape. The two top tiers of the hermitage are now in ruins.

The hermitage faces south. As is typical of many mountain monasteries, Bkra shis chos gling is built in a tiered fashion on terraces that conform to the landscape. At the lowest level there is a large open courtyard surrounded by a perimeter wall. Proceeding north (uphill), one enters the main compound where one finds, from south to north (downhill to uphill), the following buildings at different levels:

- [Monks' quarters](#) (presently two floors), and a [kitchen](#), located just beneath the main temple and across from the monks living quarters
- The [main temple](#) (today only two floors, but previously four)

¹ The institution corresponds to [TBRC G2482](#).

- The former [residence of Pha bong kha rin po che](#), with its ancillary chapels
- The [temple of Rdo rje shugs ldan](#)

The first two tiers of the hermitage – the monks’ quarters and the main temple – still exist today, although we know from old photos and informants’ accounts that they are only a fraction of their former size. The last two tiers – the private residence of the *bla ma* and the Rdo rje shugs ldan temple – are in ruins, and have not been rebuilt. This is perhaps due to the fact that Rdo rje shugs ldan is a controversial deity whose propitiation has been banned by the present Da lai bla ma.²



An old photo of Bkra shis chos gling taken before 1959. It shows the original temple with all four of its floors intact. The set of three windows in the lowest portion of the picture belong to the second floor of the monks’ living quarters.



Trashi Chöling Hermitage (Bkra shis chos gling ri khrod) as viewed from the front.

Prior to 1959 the main image on the altar of Bkra shis chos gling was a statue of Maitreya (Byams pa) called the Maitreya as Lord of Men (Mi dbang byams pa).³ There was also an important set of images of the Sixteen Arhats (Gnas brtan bcu drug), and of Cakrasaṃvara (Bde mchog). All of these have been destroyed or are missing. All of the images in the temple today are new, with the exception of one [old statue of Cakrasaṃvara](#) found on the altar in the northwestern corner of the temple, and this, in fact, may not have originally belonged to the hermitage. The central figures on the main altar are [Tsong kha pa \(1357-1419\) and his two disciples](#). To the left of these large (one-story) statues are two smaller statues of the Buddha. To the right of the Tsong kha pa triad are life-size statues of [Khri byang rin po che \(1901-1981\)](#),⁴ [Pha bong kha bde chen snying po \(1878-1941\)](#),

² On the history of this controversy, see Georges Dreyfus, “The Shuk-Den Affair: Origins of a Controversy,” at <http://www.tibet.com/dholgyal/shugden-origins.html>. To see a *thang ka* painting of the deity in question, see <http://www.tibetart.com/image.cfm/90554.html>.

³ The main images that existed at Bkra shis chos gling before 1959 are mentioned in 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), 24.

⁴ Blo bzang ye shes bstan ’dzin rgya mtsho (1901-1981), junior tutor to the Fourteenth Dalai Lama (Da lai bla ma sku phreng bcu bzhi pa), and one of the chief Dharma-heirs of Pha bong kha pa

and Rje btsun bla ma ngag dbang rnam sgröl, purportedly founder of the hermitage. To the right of these, along the eastern wall of the temple, are three funerary stūpas (*gdung rten*) of these same three figures.



The front façade of the present temple.

The top floor of the main temple contains, along its southern wing, (to the east) a reception room, where guests are received, and (to the west of the reception room) the private living quarters of Pha bong kha rin po che. It also contains a kitchen and monks' quarters.

The only portion of the monks' dormitory that remains is that found in front (south) of the main temple, where two floors of rooms have been preserved.

Dung dkar rin po che tells us that there were twenty-one monks living at Bkra shis chos gling in 1959,⁵ though it seems clear from the number of monks' rooms at the hermitage that this number does not include supporting staff. If one includes the entire staff of the Pabongkha Lama's estate (Pha bong kha bla brang), there could have easily been three times that many men living at the hermitage.

Affiliation

Bkra shis chos gling has had a long and complex relationship to Se ra. The hermitage did not become the property of Se ra until the early eighteenth century, when it passed into the hands of the Sera Tantric College (Se ra sngags pa grwa tshang) (see below). In the 1920s or 1930s, the Tantric College (Sngags pa grwa tshang) donated the hermitage to Pha bong kha bde chen snying po. From 1930 until 1959, then, the hermitage belonged to the Pabongkha Lama's estate. Since

(1878-1941). It was Khri byang rin po che, for example, who was responsible for compiling Pha bong kha rin po che's teachings on the graded stages of the path (*lam rim*) into the classic text known as *Liberation in Our Hands* (*Rnam grol lag bcangs*). That work has been translated twice into English. See Artemus B. Engle, tr., *Liberation in Our Hands* (New Jersey: Mahāyāna Sūtra and Tantra Press, 1999).

⁵ *Lha sa'i dgon tho*, 24, gives the number of fully ordained monks as twenty-five.

that time it has therefore *not* belonged to Se ra, although it has had informal ties both to the Mé College (Grwa tshang smad), and to the Sera Tantric College, the two loci of Pha bong kha rin po che's affiliations to Se ra. From the 1990s, when the hermitage was rebuilt, up to the present time, Bkra shis chos gling has functioned as an autonomous institution with only minimal ties to Se ra.⁶ The hermitage reverted to the Pabongkha Lama's estate after the present incarnation's recent return to Tibet.



The remaining wing of monks' rooms on the left, and the kitchen on the right.

History

One contemporary Tibetan author states that according to oral tradition Bkra shis chos gling may date to the time of the Buddhist king (of Tibet) Songtsen Gampo (Chos rgyal srong btsan sgam po), that is, to the seventh century, being known at that time not under its present name, but rather as Gdugs yur dgon.⁷ The first real evidence we have of a monastic institution existing at the site, however, is much later. According to one contemporary Tibetan historian,⁸ Bkra shis chos gling is

⁶ The author of *Lha sa'i dgon tho* reports, however, that at the time of the writing of his book there were four monks of the Sera Tantric College living at the hermitage.

⁷ *Lha sa'i dgon tho*, 23.

⁸ Ser smad spom ra dge bshes ye shes dbang phyug, *Ser smad thos bsam nor gling grwa tshang gi chos 'byung lo rgyus nor bu'i phreng ba* [*A History of the Sermé Tösam Norling College: A Garland of Jewels*] (Bylakuppe: Sermey Printing Press, 1984), 140, states: "On that [same] mountain [as Pabongkha Hermitage] is the hermitage of Bkra shis chos gling. In the past, it was the assembly place of King Lhazang Khan's (Lha bzang khāng) ritual college (*sku rim grwa tshang*). Later, the ritual college was moved to Se ra's old assembly hall (*'du khang*) and Bkra shis chos gling became a hermitage. Bkra shis chos gling was [then] offered by the Tantric College to the Pha bong kha incarnation – Byams pa bstan 'dzin 'phrin las rgya mtsho (1878-1941) – of Sera Mé College (Se ra smad) [Gyelrong Regional House](#) (Rgyal rong khang tshan). This holy person completely redid the shrines and offerings. [At this hermitage] there is an assembly hall, personal residence, protector deity chapel (*mgon khang*), gold-plated statue of the protector Maitreya (Byams pa), unlimited numbers of representations of the Buddha's body, speech and mind, as well as many monks' quarters."

the place where the Mongolian ruler of Tibet, Lhazang Khan (Lha bzang khāng), housed the monks of his private ritual college during the winter months. We know from different historical sources that Lha bzang's ritual college – the monks who were responsible for performing all of the necessary merit-making and protection rituals for the king – met in Northern Tibet (Byang) during the summer months, and then moved to a site just north of Lha sa for the winter. Bkra shis chos gling, it seems, was that site.



Rje btsun bla ma ngag dbang rnam sgrol, seen by the monks who live here as the founder of the monastery.

Shortly after Lha bzang came to power in 1705, he came to an agreement with the monks of Se ra. Seeing that the Sera Assembly Hall – the place where all of the monks gathered for communal rituals – was too small to fit the entire monastic population, he offered to build the community a new assembly hall. The monks, from their side, had to surrender the old assembly hall to the king, who proposed to use it as the permanent home for his private ritual college. An agreement was reached, and the king built what is today the [Sera Great Assembly Hall](#). The old assembly hall then became the headquarters for the ruler's ritual college. After the death of Lha bzang in 1717, his ritual college became the Sera Tantric College,⁹ an institution that continues to flourish to the present day.

⁹ It is not clear whether this transition from the private ritual college to the [Sera Tantric College](#) took place immediately or over a period of years.



Lhazang Khan (Lha bzang khāng), from a mural in the Sera Great Assembly Hall (Se ra tshogs chen).

Although the monks of Lha bzang's ritual college moved to Se ra permanently, it seems clear that they did not give up their rights to their old winter residence at Bkra shis chos gling in the mountains northwest of Se ra. And when Lha bzang's ritual college became the Sera Tantric College, then, of course, ownership of Bkra shis chos gling passed on to the Sera Tantric College. For 200 years – from the early eighteenth century until the early twentieth century – we know little about Bkra shis chos gling except for the fact that it was (or so it seems) the property of the

Sera Tantric College. Dung dkar rin po che informs us that there was a tradition that the Sera Tantric College had to send twenty-one monks to Bkra shis chos gling to maintain the hermitage and to enact its ritual cycles, and this is certainly consistent with the facts as we know them.

In the early twentieth century, the Pha bong kha bde chen snying po did an extensive retreat in some caves close to Bkra shis chos gling at a site called [Rtags bstan sgrub phug](#). This established Pha bong kha pa's connection to this general area. Later, when Pha bong kha rin po che's fame and reputation grew, the Sera Tantric College offered the monastery of Bkra shis chos gling to him as his private hermitage or retreat.¹⁰ In return, Pha bong kha pa rin po che agreed to officially enter the Tantric College (an action that brought this institution a certain prestige, given the *bla ma's* reputation). From that point on, then, Pha bong kha had two affiliations at Se ra: the Tantric College, and the Mé College. Informants tell us that from then on Pha bong kha rin po che lived at Bkra shis chos gling during the summer months, and in private rooms in a section of the [Spo 'bo ra spyi khang](#) at Se ra during the winter months.

¹⁰ This coincided with Pha bong kha pa officially becoming part of the Sera Tantric College. And according to at least one informant, the offering of Bkra shis chos gling to Pha bong kha pa was in fact a way of inducing him to affiliate with the Sera Tantric College. This tradition is carried on today, and the present Pha bong kha pa rin po che, for example, has affiliations both to the Smad and Tantric College.

Under Pha bong kha bde chen snying po the hermitage was extensively refurbished and expanded. It was perhaps under him as well that a very large temple to the protector deity Rdo rje shugs ldan¹¹ was built on the topmost tier of the complex. Today, as had been mentioned, this lies in ruins.

After the events of 1959 Bkra shis chos gling suffered the fate of all of Se ra's hermitages. Over thirty years of neglect brought the site to the brink of complete collapse. Restoration did not begin until a monk – a student of Pha bong kha bde chen snying po – undertook the labor of renovating the hermitage as a personal project in the early 1990s. The hermitage is



A statue of Pha bong kha rin po che in the main temple at Bkra shis chos gling.

maintained today by two elder monks who serve as temple attendants and caretakers of the site. They also receive help from the nuns of Takten Hermitage (Rtags brten ri khrod), who live just up the hill.

¹¹ Pha bong kha pa rin po che was known as one of the strongest proponents of this controversial deity in the twentieth century.