

SHER GOMPA

THE RETREAT FACILITY FOR THRANGU TARA ABBEY NUNS
IN THE MANANG DISTRICT OF GANDAKI, NEPAL



SHER GOMPA AND THE NUNS OF THRANGU TARA ABBEY

Venerable Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche founded Thrangu Tara Abbey in 1991 and five years later Sher Gumpa was established as a permanent retreat center for Tara Abbey nuns. Located in the Manang District of Gandaki Province, Sher Gumpa lies 150 miles to the west and north of Kathmandu, within the Annapurna Conservation Area. Having the driest climate in Nepal, this region is a broad valley along the Marshyangdi River with twenty-six villages and an elevation which varies between 10,000 and 11,545 feet.

The Gumpa itself sits high up on a hillside overlooking the village of Mungje. Directly to the west is a well-known Milarepa Cave and close by to the north are the villages of Bhraka and Manang. More than 600 years old, the monastery in Bhraka has hosted many generations of great lamas including the 16th Gyalwang Karmapa and Thrangu Rinpoche. In 2019 the Milarepa Park, a commemorative center in the village of Manang, was inaugurated by Chöje Lama Phuntsok Rinpoche of Karma Leksheyling. The entire area has many meditation caves and a great history of highly developed and venerated Buddhist practitioners.

HISTORY OF SHER GOMPA

First, there was a house ~ which for many generations was the family home of Bhraka Lama, the village Lama. Currently, Sonam Tsering, or Lama Ajo as he is fondly known, is the last remaining Lama in the Bhraka lineage. Two of his siblings are nuns at Tara Abbey: Ani Chomo (head nun) and Ani Karma Dolma. Lama Ajo instructed his two sisters and guided their four-year retreat in 1986 along with Palsang Menkhu, a nun from a nearby village.

Sometime later, Lama Ajo's father, Babu Dawa invited Thrangu Rinpoche to give blessings in Mungje and Bhraka. During his visit, Rinpoche mentioned that he wanted to start a nunnery and requested that Ani Chomo and Ani Karma Dolma come to Kathmandu and help create Tara Abbey. Since two nuns do not a nunnery make, they collected nine other nuns from the Manang area and Rinpoche rented a house for the women. Lama Ajo also served the monastery and became the Senior Retreat Master for the nuns beginning in 1996.

The family then offered the 'Lama House' in Mungje to Thrangu Rinpoche and later, when Ani Chomo began teaching in Taiwan, she met an architect and donors and thus the old 'Lama House' was renovated and expanded. Work began in 2001 and in 2005 the Gumpa was completed allowing the third group of nuns to begin retreat. The main house remains as the shrine hall in the center of the Gumpa and there are private rooms for eight or nine retreat nuns. Staff and visitor rooms are on another level and there is a separate kitchen and a cabin above for the senior retreat master.

Seven nuns entered the first retreat at Sher Gumpa in 1996. The second group, in 1999 had six nuns (including Karma Dolma for her second time); seven nuns in group three, 2006; six nuns in group four, 2009; eight nuns in group five, 2013; eight nuns in group six, 2017. The seventh group with eight nuns began in 2021, finished in late 2024 and remains in retreat for more practice until spring 2025.

The length of retreat does not usually adhere to the well known, 3 year, 3 month, 3 day schedule. It is often much longer. The time varies according to when individuals complete practices, when the lama is available to visit the retreat, weather, and other variables, even a pandemic. During the recent pandemic the nuns had to stay in retreat much longer.

LOGISTICS OF RETREAT

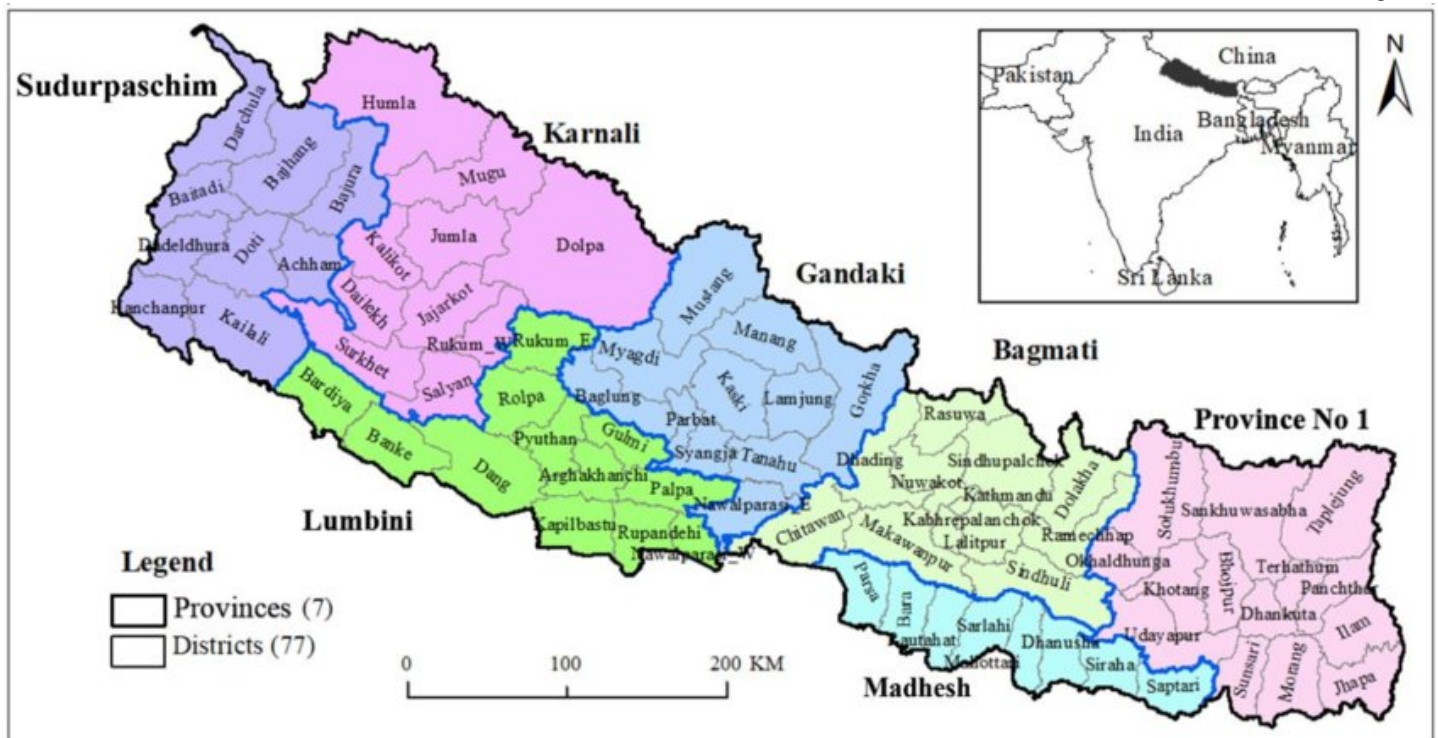
In addition to the Senior Retreat Master, there is a nun who also serves as retreat master and spends time at Sher Gomba to help guide and support the practice. In 2021, Ani Palkey Tsomo took over the position from Ani Pema Drolma. There are two cooks, a married couple with children, who stay on the grounds and manage the meals and garden. There are two Nyerpas (food managers) who see to the provisions needed and organize the delivery from Tara Abbey. One nyerpa always stays at Tara Abbey when the other travels to Manang to deliver supplies to the retreat center. Managing this is a somewhat easier task these days since a road, albeit a very rough and at times dangerous road, now makes its way all the way through Manang. It is a two-day, overnight, jeep trip that jostles one relentlessly. Before the road, which is still under construction, the nuns would walk five or six days, carrying their provisions themselves.

Ani Palkye Tsomo is also an Amchi—Doctor of Tibetan Medicine—and is therefore able to tend to the health of the nuns and staff when needed. This is very fortunate because the retreat master is the only person who is permitted inside the Gomba besides those doing retreat.

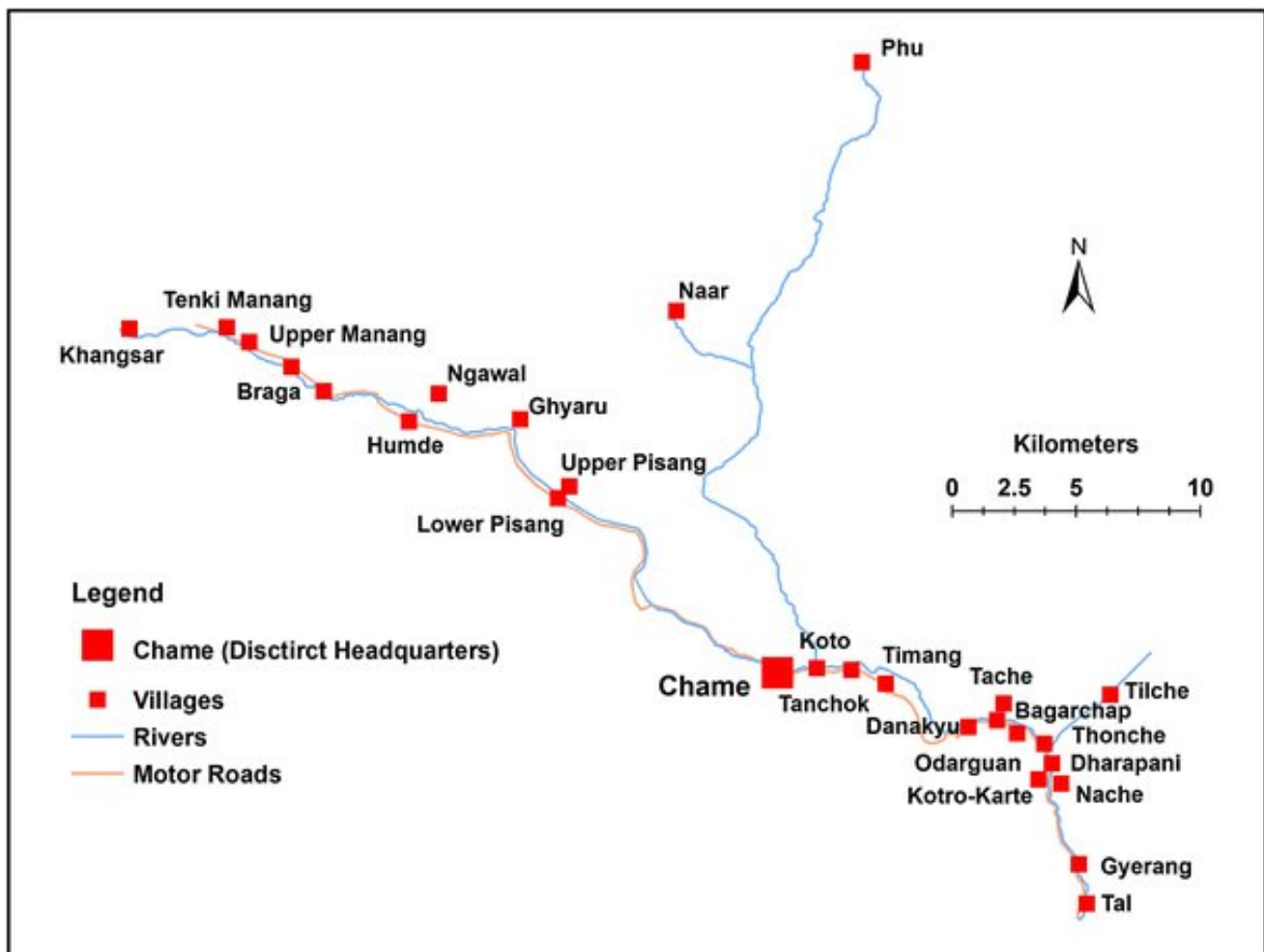
While Lama Ajo has been overseeing the women's retreats from the beginning, he is no longer physically able to make the difficult journey to and from Sher Gomba. Lama Yonten, who is the Ngondro retreat master in Nammo Buddha, was recently appointed as Senior Retreat Master for the nuns. In December of 2023, the transition was marked by a ceremony at Tara Abbey honoring Lama Ajo for nearly four decades of teaching and welcoming Lama Yonten. (See photos on page 9.)



The seventh retreat group receiving blessing and guidance from Thrangu Rinpoche before entering retreat in 2021. Nawang Sopa N218, Lobsang Khando N229, Tsultrim Sangmo N84, Sonam Wangmo N62, Karma Chonzom N175, Nawang Sangmo N202, Samten Chodron N156, Palkye Tsomo N42 (Retreat Master), Pema Chodron N230, and Karma Tseten N227.



There are 7 Provinces and 77 Districts in Nepal. Kathmandu and Tara Abbey are in the Kathmandu District of Bagmati Province and Sher Gompa is located in the Manang District of Gandaki Province. Below is a map of the 26 villages in the Manang area.

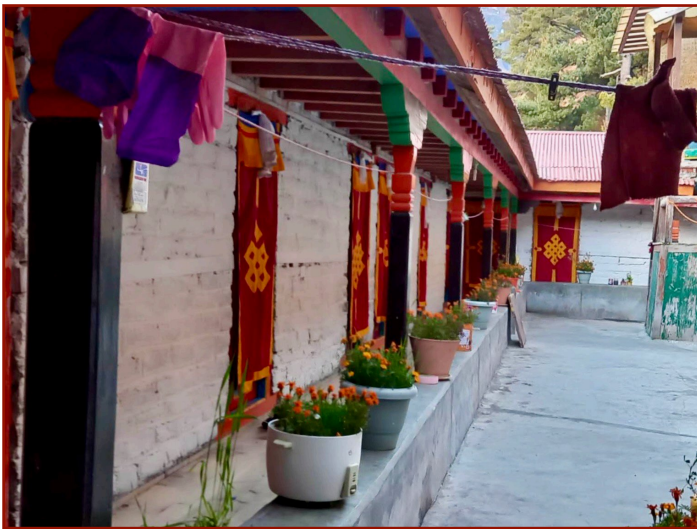




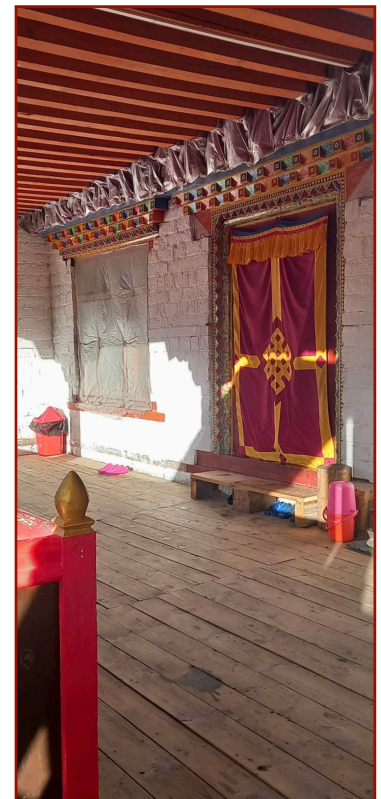
Sher Gumpa has several levels: above, in the foreground, is the garden area now cleared for winter; above the rock wall is the first row of rooms for staff and guests, on the next level (the windows) are the individual rooms for retreatants which face a courtyard and in the middle, the top of the shrine room is just visible.



Above: Sher Gumpa from the valley floor as the sun rises over the mountain tops.
Right: Main entrance, Gumpa on the right, the small building at the top is the kitchen.



Upper level courtyard and rooms for retreat nuns along with inner and outer views of the main shrine hall.





Above: Retreat Master cabin (sits above the Gompa) and meditation bench.

Below: Views around the Gompa and inside Ani Chomo's (head nun) room on the lower level.

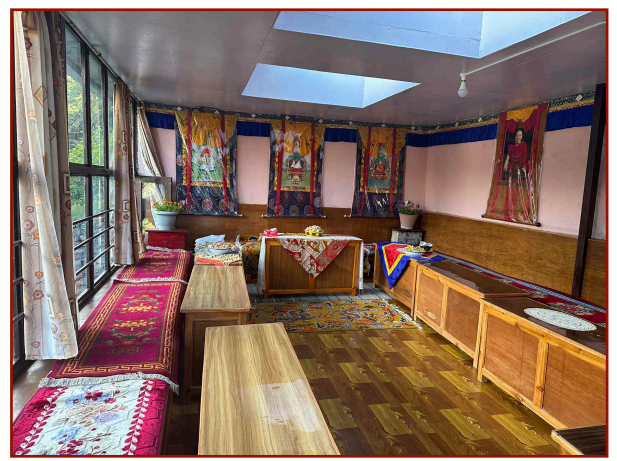




Clockwise from the top: Husband and wife cooking team; the Gompa kitchen (before recent repairs); Ani Chomo in the kitchen of the retreat master's cabin; Ani Chungda and Ani Sherab checking out the solar power system which needs some tweaking; the head nun, food manager, retreat master and office manager have a tea break after delivering provisions for the retreat. Annapurna 3 is the backdrop!



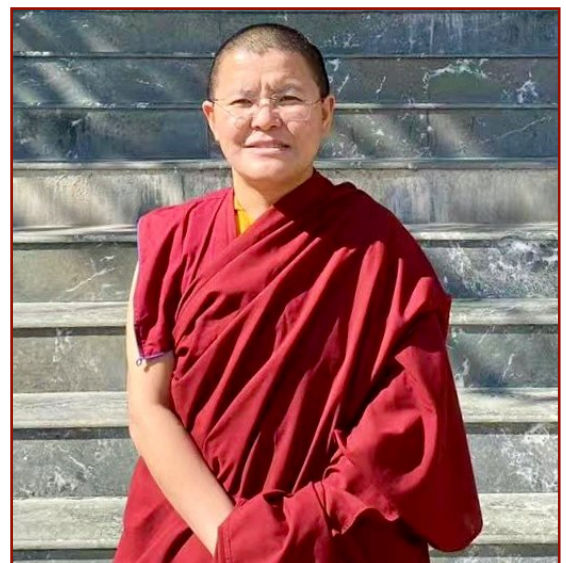
In 2024, new roofing, a meeting room for guests and sorely needed kitchen repair were among several renovations made possible by generous sponsorship.



Pema Dolma joined Tara Abbey in 1991, entered into the first three year retreat in 1994 and then served continuously as retreat master until 2021.



Palkye Tsomo joined Tara Abbey in 1996, completed Amchi training in 2007, entered three year retreat in 2017 and has been serving as retreat master since 2021.



Lama Ajo at Ice Lake in Bhraka and with Thrangu Rinpoche in Nammo Buddha.



Lama Yonten in Nammo Buddha and the transition ceremony at Tara Abbey.



Tara Abbey nuns upon completion of three year retreat.



1996 -1998 Ngawang Choden, Karma Chopel Drolma (Kunsang), Karma Chonyi Sangmo, Pema Drolma, Karma Tsundu Sangmo 'A', Karma Tsomo, Karma Kyezom



1999-2002 Karma Samten Drolma, Karma Sangmo Drime, Karma Drolma, Phuntsok Palmo, Karma Wangchuk Lhamo, Palsang Menkhu

Tara Abbey nuns upon completion of three year retreat.



2006-2009 Ngawang Sangmo, Kunchok Drolma, Karma Sangmo, Sherab Drolma, Kunsang



2009-2012 Pasang Chonzom, Metok Wangmo, Yeshe Drolma,
Karma Sonam Drolma, Rinchen Drolma, Karma Yangchen 'A'

Tara Abbey nuns upon completion of three year retreat.



2013-2016 Karsang Metok, Norsangmo, Sonam Sangmo, Karma Sherab Wangmo, Karma Tsondu Sangmo 'B' (Menkhu), Karma Chokyi, Tsultrim Wangmo



2017- 2020 Back row: Palkye Tsomo, Tashi Dolma, Sherab Sangmo, Karma Dolkar Lhamo, Tsering Palmo, Tashi Deke
Front row: Tsondu Sangmo 'C', Lama Ajo, Senior retreat master, Pema Drolma retreat master, Lhakpa Palgyi

Tara Abbey nuns upon completion of three year retreat.



2021-2024 Nawang Sopa, Karma Tseten, Karma Chonzom, Pema Chodron, Tsultrim Sangmo, Nawang Sangmo, Lobsang Khando, Sonam Wangmo.

Seated: Lama Yonten, Senior Retreat Master and Palkye Tsomo N42, Retreat Master