

Heart felt Appreciation from the Abbot, Board, Management Committee and all the Sangha in Sera Je Monastery

Your Respectful Lama Zopa Rinpoche la,

We with all respect and humility forward Statement of account for the food fund at Sera Je monastery for the two year period- 1 August 2007 to 31 July 2009, after being read and explained in details at the General body meeting of Sera je Monastery attended by the Abbot and Board members on the 28 October 2009.

The Abbot and Board members on behalf of the monastery expressed at the General body meeting and once again reiterate in this letter of the considerable benefits by the FPMT's food fund to sera Je Monastery – in providing good and nutritious food to each and every member of monk of the monastery throughout the year.

We – The Abbot, Board members and the administration on behalf of the monastery's entire member of monks, collectively express our profound gratitude and respect to his eminent Venerable Lama Zopa Rinpoche, The FPMT and to each and every sponsor who have contributed to make possible this Food Fund.

We also acknowledge with highest appreciation that the Food Fund has subsequently benefited the Health and Education of the monastery's students and member of monks in great measure.

We offer our most sincere respect, gratitude and prayers to all benefactors with our folded palms

Khen Rinpoche Acharay Geshe Lobsang Palden
Abbot and Chairman
Geshe Yeshe Gaytso Secretary

Life in Sera Je Monastery

Introduction

Monks in Sera range in age from 7 to 90. Anyone who wishes to join Sera Je Monastery is accepted only after investigating their background according to the Vinaya, such as whether they have their parents' permission to be ordained, have reached at least the age of 7 and so on. Having met those requirements, the Monastery accepts anyone regardless of their race, or social or family background; nobody is turned away. Therefore it is easy to see why the number of monks is increasing by hundreds every year. Each year, at least a few hundred come from Tibet and others from all over the world. At the moment, Sera Je has slightly more than three thousands monks.

The Sera Je Food Fund

The living conditions of the monks have improved tremendously after the Food Fund was set up nineteen years ago by Lama Zopa Rinpoche. The Food Fund enables the Monastery now to provide simple lunch and dinner for all the monks and they can finally focus their energy on their studies.

Studies In the Monastery

Within Sera Je Monastery there are two divisions for study. For young monks of age of 7 to 18, they attend the Sera Je School which provides general modern education with subjects such as English, Mathematics, Science and Arts in addition to Tibetan Grammar, Buddhist Philosophy etc. At the moment there are around five to six hundred students in the school from grade 1-12.

Once they have graduated from the school, they proceed to join the Monastery's main University to study Buddhist Philosophy in more detail. The system of study in Sera Je is similar to that of Nalanda Monastery in ancient India. Nalanda was the largest Monastery and university in India for the study of Buddhism during its peak. The Monastery produced many great masters and practitioners such as Nagarjuna, Shantideva and Dharmakirti, to mention just a few. This system involves debating in order to understand the texts correctly, to dispel any misconceptions or misunderstanding of the subject and particularly to help to understand their essential points.

The Five Great Scriptures studied in the Monastic University

Five Great Scriptures or texts are studied in the Monastery. They are :(1) Abhidharma Kosha by Basubandu, (2) Parmanavartika by Dharmakriti, (3) Abhisamaya Alamkara by Maitreya Buddha, (4) Madhyamika by Chandrakridi, (5) Vinaya (Root Sutra) by Buddha Shakyamuni and also commentaries by other Indian and Tibetan masters.

"**Abhidharma Kosha**" has eight chapters. The first chapter explains about the elements; the Second chapter is about the faculties; the Third chapter is on the Universe and sentient beings dwelling in it; the Fourth chapter is on Karma; the Fifth is about afflictive emotions; the Sixth is on the Buddhist paths and persons engaging in those paths; the Seventh talks about Exalted Wisdom and Buddha's qualities; the final Eighth chapter explains about the concentrations and so on. All these explanations are according to the Vaibashika system (one of the four main schools of Buddhist Philosophy).

"**Parmanavartika**" has four chapters. It explains mainly about mind and its functions, past and future lives, valid and invalid cognitions/persons, direct and inferential cognitions, the Four Noble Truths, love, compassion, the basis, the path and its results according to the Sautrantika (Sutra school) and Cittamatra (Mind only school), but mainly according to the Cittamatra School.

"**Abhisamaya Alamkara**" has eight chapters. It explains about Mind and its functions, valid and invalid cognitions, direct and inferential cognitions, the Four Noble Truths, love, compassion, Bodhicitta, the Six Perfections, Five paths, Ten Bhumis (grounds), qualities of the Buddhas and spiritual teachers etc. In brief it is about the Basis which is the "two truths", Path which is the "method and wisdom", Result which is the "two kayas", emphasizing more on the method side. This scripture explains mainly according to the Svatantrika Madhyamika (Autonomous Middle way school).

"**Madhyamika**" has ten chapters. It explains about love, compassion, Bodhicitta, Two and Four Truths, Five paths, Ten bhumis, Six perfections and the qualities of Bodhisattavas and Buddhas in great detail. Particularly about Emptiness, Interdependence as well as the wisdom realizing emptiness in every detail. In summary, it is about the Basis which is the "two truths", Path which is the "method and wisdom" and Result which is the "two kayas", emphasizing more on the wisdom side. This scripture explains mainly according to the Prasangika Madhyamik (Consequences Middle way School).

"**Vinaya**" explains about all the eight Pratimoksha vows, Yarne (monk's summer retreat) Gaye (break after the retreat) and Sojong (restoring and purifying ceremony). All the things that ordained ones should avoid and things that one should practice.

Number of years to complete the studies

It takes at least 16 years of intensive studies to complete these five great scriptures. There are 13 grades within the University. The first seven grades require a year of study in each grade. 2 to 3 years for the eighth grade, 3 to 4 years for the ninth grade, 2 to 4 years for the tenth grade and eleventh grades and several years for the final twelfth and thirteenth grades.

During the first seven grades, the monks study various preparation texts for the major scriptures such as the three collected topics: "Lorig", "Tarig" and parts of the "Abhisamaya Alamkara" and "Parmanavartika". During the eighth grade, the monks study the complete "Abhisamaya Alamkara" in detail. During the ninth grade, they study "Madhyamika". During the tenth grade, they study "Vinaya". During the eleventh grade, they study "Abhidharmakosha". During the twelfth and thirteenth grades, they review all the scriptures and particularly "Vinaya" and "Abhidharmakosha" again and again. The studying of the "Parmanavirtika" is from grade 3 till 13 for two months every year.

Once the monks have completed their studies and pass the various examinations, they receive their "Geshe" degree, which is the equivalent of a PHD in Buddhist Philosophy.

Daily Schedule

A typical daily schedule of a monk in Sera Je:

0500	Wake up and wash.
0530	Morning prayers. Breakfast will be served during prayer session if there is any sponsor.
0730-0900	Memorizing prayers and scriptures.
0900-1000	Debating class.
1000-1030	Chanting Sutras and reciting prayers as preliminary practices as well as to eliminate obstacles

	toward one's study and practices.
1030-1130	Debating class.
1130-1230	Lunch with prayers and dedications for sponsors and all sentient beings.
1230-1300	Break time.
1300-1400	Receiving teachings from teachers.
1400-1600	Homework. Reading, reflecting and discussing on the subjects, covered particularly by the teacher on that day.
1600-1700	Receiving teaching from teachers.
1700-1730	Dinner with prayers.
1730-1800	Break time.
1800-1900	Evening debating class.
1900-2030/2100	Prayers and meditation. Reciting Heart Sutra, 21 Tara praises many times and reciting many other prayers as preliminary practices and to eliminate obstacles toward one's study and practices.
2100-2200/2300	Debating class (Some of the monks will continue until midnight or 1 am).
2200/2300-0000	Reciting the prayers and scriptures which have been memorized so that one does not forget.
00	Bed time but many monks will study till 1 or 2 am.

The schedule changes a little during different times of year. For example, in December, there will be a week of prayers and meditation which start at 2.30 in the morning and go till 9.30 in the evening. There will be short debating classes within that period and many monks will be studying after 9.30pm. The schedule also changes during the Monlam Chenmo (The Great Prayers Festival) or during the Geshe graduation ceremonies etc.

The Geshes

Four levels of Geshe Degree are awarded after a monk has completed his studies in the Monastery: Lharampa, Tsogrampa, Rigrampa and Lingse. There are some monks who, even though they have the knowledge and qualifications to become a Lharampa Geshe (the highest level), choose to get one of the lower level Geshe degrees or even sometimes decide not to get a Geshe degree for various reasons. After obtaining a Geshe Degree, a monk will be called a Geshe.

Nowadays, Sera Jhe produces around 10 Lharampas, 6 to 8 Tsogrampas, Rigrampas and Lingses, a total of around 34 Geshes every year.

Most of the Geshes will then join either the Gyume or Gyutho Tantric College for at least one year. At these Tantric Colleges, they study different texts on Vajrayana or Tantra such as the Tantric Grounds and Paths, commentaries on the generation and completion stages on various Tantric Buddha practices, focusing mainly on the Guyasamaja, Chakrasamvara and Yamantaka. They also learn about all the rituals, including the drawing of Mandalas and so on. The schedule there is very tight and long, practices or pujas will sometimes last for 12 to 16 hours a day. Sometimes, the pujas start around 2.30 in early morning and last until 6 or 8 in the evening with only half an hour break for lunch and dinner and about 10 minutes break in between sessions.

After completing their studies in one of the Tantric Colleges, some Geshes will return to Sera Monastery to become teachers there. The teachers teach the monks for 5 to 8 hours a day, 6 days a week. No salary or pocket money is provided to these teachers. Occasionally some students who get extra money would make an offering to their teachers. But as most of the monks are poor, it is usually the teachers who help the students instead. Therefore it is clear that the teachers teach purely out of compassion without any expectations from their students.

A few years ago, Lama Zopa Rinpoche started a fund called the "Lama Tsongkhapa Fund" to support these kind teachers in the various monasteries of India and Nepal. The fund has been able to provide a small amount of money as an offering for their kindness in educating the young monks.

Many Geshes are invited to teach in Buddhist organizations around the world. Currently, in FPMT centers alone, there are over 30 resident Geshes and Lamas. There are also Geshes being requested to teach in monasteries, schools or universities in Tibetan settlements in countries such as Nepal, India, Bhutan, and Tibet.

Some Geshes may decide to remain in their monasteries such as Sera Jhe, to offer their services in different departments like the Health Care Committee, Education Committee, and Ritual Practice Committee etc. A few of them will eventually be appointed as the abbot of their monasteries or another Monastery. Then there are also some Geshes who do short or long retreats (such as the 3 year retreat or even for the rest of their life) in the Monastery or in the mountains.

Ganden Tripa

A qualified Geshe may also eventually become the Ganden Tripa (Head of the Gelug lineage in Tibetan Buddhism). To become the Ganden Tripa, one needs to have obtained the highest Lharampa Geshe degree, then one must enter into one of the 2 Tantric Colleges. After studying the tantric texts for at least one year, one needs to take the exams. Having completed the exams, one will at a later stage be appointed as the disciplinarian of the college. During that time, the disciplinarian has to recite from memory the whole commentary of the root tantra text, and at times serve as the ritual master as well. Having completed his term as the disciplinarian, one then naturally becomes a candidate for the Lama Utzse -the head lama of ritual ceremonies. The post is appointed by His Holiness the Dalai Lama from a list of candidates provided by the Monastery, which is the same procedure for the appointment of the abbots of Sera, Drepung, Ganden and various monasteries. The appointed Lama Utse will serve his 3-year term followed by 3 more years as the abbot of the Tantric College.

Every ex-abbot of Gyume & Gyuto Tantric colleges becomes in line to be appointed as the Jangtse or Shartse Choje respectively. The Jangtse and Shartse Choje alternate to finally become the Ganden Tripa. There is a saying in the monasteries, "If a mother's child has the knowledge/wisdom, then there is no ownership to the Ganden's throne" which means that any ordinary monk who has the intelligence and makes the effort could eventually become the Ganden Tripa. However, the need to have a great amount of merit is also emphasized in order to become a Ganden Tripa. Therefore, both merit and knowledge is required to accomplish this goal.

How the Lam Rim (Graduated Path to Enlightenment) is integrated in the Monastery

In terms of integrating Lam Rim in the studies and practices at Sera Je Monastery:

Preliminary Practices

When a monk first joins the Monastery, the rule is that one has to attend all the classes, pujas and all other practices without missing any of them for at least three years for purification and accumulating merits. Also the monks have to serve the Sangha (community of monks) by helping in the kitchen, the canteens, fields etc to accumulate merit all year round while they are studying, particularly during first three years.

When it's their turn to serve the meals or tea to the Sangha, they practice doing them very respectfully, with the motivation that one is making these offerings to the monks oneself.

When they clean the prayer halls and the Monastery's compounds, they do it with the motivation to purify and accumulate merits. The teachers, abbot and disciplinarian always remind the monks about the importance of purification and accumulating merits through services to the Monastery and Sangha as well as the recitation of prayers, great scriptures and sutras etc. There is a saying, "for one handful of study or practice, one needs two handfuls of prayers and recitation of scriptures and sutra as purification and accumulation of merits". That is why there are so many long sessions of prayers, scriptures and sutra recitations every day.

Each day, during the recitation sessions between the debating lessons, for about 2 hours, they recite the Heart Sutra more than 7 times, the first time very slowly to meditate on the meaning, faster for the second and third time and even faster for the last four times. Praises to 21 Taras are also recited more than 21 times for purification, White Umbrella, half a rosary of Snow Lion Face Dakini's mantra, Three Long Life Deity's mantras, as well as many other prayers and mantras for the accumulation of merits. The "Kangyur" and "Tengyur" texts are also read. In addition, there are prayers and pujas every morning and many other pujas and prayers requested by sponsors. By the time monks finish their studies, they would have recited the Heart Sutra more than 40 thousand times, 21 Taras Praises more than 11 hundred thousand times, the "Kangyur" and "Tengyur" many times plus a few hundred thousand of Snow Lion Face Dakini and Three Long Life Deities' mantras and thousands of other prayers and mantras. Not to mention those done individually at home or when requested by sponsors. Many monks also individually do the Vajrasattava retreat, 100 thousand prostrations, 100 thousand mandala offerings and many other preliminary practices.

So it is clear that studies at these Great Monasteries are not just intellectual like any ordinary school but rather they are a combination of intellectual and experiential studies through various meditations, purification and accumulation.