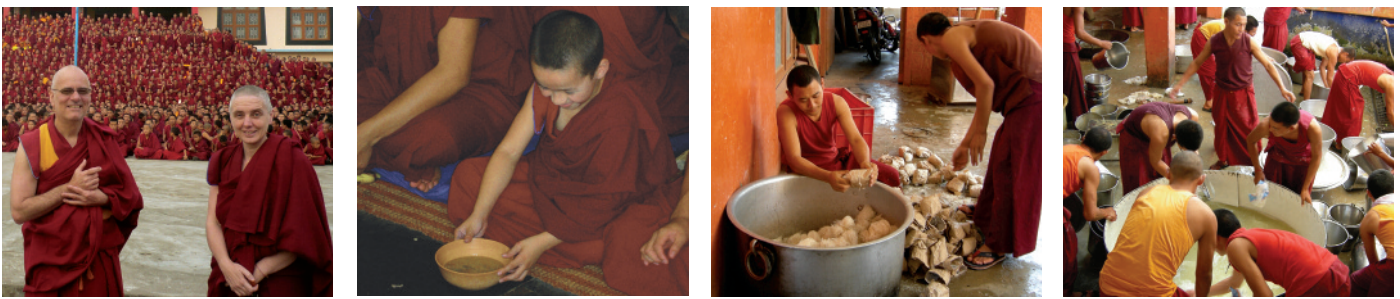


# A Turning Point for Sera

By Ven. Sarah Thresher

*Mandala* recognizes Sera Je Food Fund as the featured FPMT project for this issue. The food fund provides three meals a day to all of the monks at Sera Je Monastery.



From left: IMI Director Ven. Monlam and Ven. Sarah in front of Sera Je Monastery; A lunch prayer at Sera Je; Preparing tugpa – a traditional Tibetan soup; Clean up after a meal; Photos courtesy of Ven. Losang Monlam

As I entered the courtyard I found myself dodging quickly to avoid a small truck piled full of bananas speeding toward me in the opposite direction. No, I am not on a plantation in Fiji or even in my local supermarket. This is the debate courtyard of Sera Je Monastic University where the daily banana delivery is being dropped off. As part of their three simple, yet nutritious vegetarian meals a day, the monks of Sera Je receive one banana every day for lunch. And that adds up to some 2,400-2,600 bananas a day!

Many FPMT students and disciples of Lama Zopa Rinpoche are aware of the extraordinary commitment made by Rinpoche when the six-year-old Lama Osel, reincarnation of Lama Thubten Yeshe, formally entered Sera Monastery as a monk and tulku in 1991. It's customary on such occasions for an offering to be made to the monastery and food to be distributed to the monks on that day – but Rinpoche took the matter to a whole new level, making a personal commitment to offer food to all the Sera Je monks from that point onward.

That one decision was a major turning point both for Sera Je and the FPMT. Up to then, finding enough food to fill their stomachs was a constant struggle for the monks of

Sera. When the monastery was first built in the 1970s on land given by the Indian Government, there was enough revenue from the fields that belonged to the monastery to provide meager sustenance for the small number of monks who worked them. But as the number of monks swelled with a huge influx of Tibetan refugees, and laborers replaced them in the fields, the burden of providing food was given back to the monks themselves and to their teachers or guardians. As a refugee community, even the little cost to provide barely sufficient food for each monk was beyond reach. Though some monks were fortunate to have sponsors, many simply went hungry or left to find work, while others were put off from joining the monastery because they knew they could not manage the conditions – malnutrition, sickness and disease were common. Even those who did find enough money lost precious study time due to the need to shop for and prepare food.

In 1991 Lama Zopa Rinpoche began the Sera Je Food Fund, which initially simply gave money to each monk for food but gradually began to fund the kitchen to make meals. Over time, the Fund was able to provide not just lunch but also breakfast and dinner for all the monks; and more

recently efforts have been made to monitor the quality and taste of the food as well as the budgeting to ensure the food is nutritious, a good value and delicious.

Sera has only seven full-time cooks. Most of the work is done by the monks themselves. Those enrolled in the geshe-study program help to peel, cook, wash and serve on a two-day rotation basis. At lunch and dinner an army of monks serve the food: steaming buckets of delicious dahl and baskets piled high with huge chapatis. The menu is simple, the ingredients sparse, but the food is hot, tasty, nourishing and plentiful – cooked by monks for monks.

Why did Rinpoche's commitment help Sera so much? Finally the monks were free to focus on their studies single-pointedly without need to shop for, cook and prepare food, and the teachers were free to focus on their teaching single-pointedly without needing to raise money to provide for the students. The monks were well-nourished and healthier. Money previously channeled into survival rations for the monks was freed up to be spent in other ways that would develop the monastery: construction, housing, health care, study and infrastructure. Monks and refugees who survived the long journey from Tibet would no longer be put off from entering the monastery due to fear of the conditions if they could not support themselves. Everyone was now free to study.

How did the offering affect FPMT? Lama Zopa Rinpoche has commented in the past that the huge merit of sponsoring these monks who are devoted to the study and practice of the five great treatises is immense and has raised up the organization. This is the monastery from which most of our teachers and their teachers have come, including our founding lamas, Lama Yeshe and Rinpoche and many of their teachers. What more practical way is there of helping them, repaying the kindness of our teachers and ensuring the in-depth study and propagation of Dharma be maintained for future generations than to provide the nourishment that sustains these monks over long years and full days of study and practice? What better contribution can we make to the world?

Taking care of these monks is ultimately the best way of taking care of ourselves. As His Holiness the Dalai Lama has indicated: Monks and nuns don't need much, but they *do* need good, nourishing food so they can stay well enough to study and practice. By contributing in even a small way to offering such essential support, how could we ever regret it? ☸

*Text by Ven. Sarah with additional editorial help from Ven. Lobsang Monlam, Ven. Gyalten Rabten and Ven. Sonam Wangpo.*

*Ven. Sarah is an English nun who attended her first Kopan course in 1982. She was ordained by His Holiness the Dalai Lama 23 years ago, and as a member of the International Mahayana Institute (IMI), is a touring teacher based in USA.*

## recipe

### CURRY RECIPE FOR 2,400-2,600 MONKS

100kg (220 lbs) lentils	1kg (2.2 lbs) seasoning
50kg (110 lbs) onion	1kg (2.2 lbs) coconut powder
50kg (110 lbs) tomatoes	3kg (6.6 lbs) salt

Wash and boil lentils. Fry it with the onions and tomatoes. Season it with mixed spices, coconut powder and salt. Mix properly and add palak (boiled greens).

## Menu

### SAMPLE MENU FOR THE MONKS OF SERA JE



Breakfast bread Dahl for 2,400+

#### Breakfast

Bread and Tibetan tea

#### Lunch

Dahl and Chapati or Rice with Banana

#### Dinner

Rice and Vegetables

or

Noodle Soup

or

Curd and Tingmo (a big vegetarian momo)

or

Vegetable biryani (Indian fried rice)

## Lunch at Sera Je



In 2008 FPMT sent US \$264,396.61 to the Sera Je Food Fund. This money covered the cost of food for all 2,400-2,600 monks studying

at Sera Je Monastery for the entire year.

For more details, updates, to see a short video or if you would like to make an offering to the food fund, please visit: [www.fpmt.org/projects/seraje/default.asp](http://www.fpmt.org/projects/seraje/default.asp)

# Sera Je Monastery:

## AN INTIMATE LINK TO FPMT

By Ven. Sarah Thresher

Being at Sera Je Monastery is, in itself, an immense experience. Even though I have spent time at other monasteries over the years, nothing quite prepares you for being at one of these great seats of Gelug learning – Sera, Drepung, Ganden. At times, one feels transported back to medieval Tibet: Here is a city of *only* monks, thousands of them, a great sea of red robes from morning to night and the constant vibration of Dharma, pujas, memorizing, debating, in time-honored fashion. Even the cooks, the shopkeepers, the telephone booth and internet café staff, the yoghurt sellers, the taxi drivers, the tailors are monks.

At times one feels like a tourist in Los Angeles sightseeing the *khamtsen* and houses of the great lamas and geshe we hear so much about and know so well – like house-spotting in Hollywood!

At other times one feels like one is living in a nuclear power station – a human-being-refinery – where all impurities are slowly but surely being extracted and the very purest essence of humanity is being exposed. For those who can endure the rigors and pace of monastic life with a pure motivation, there is no doubt that with every debate session, puja and memorization, Buddhahood is coming ever closer. Enlightenment here is a guaranteed product, unavoidable when all the outer and inner conditions are perfectly assembled. The outstanding qualities of our gurus are simply the trademark of Sera Je and the pure teachings of Lama Tsongkhapa.

In 2007 I was fortunate to be amongst a handful of non-Sera IMI monks and nuns who were permitted to join the annual Hayagriva retreat at Sera Je Monastery, South India.

Sera Je<sup>1</sup> is the mother monastery of our founding lamas, Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche, along with many of their great teachers – in fact most of our resident geshe and lamas come from Sera Je.

<sup>1</sup> Sera is composed of two colleges, Sera Je and Sera Me; throughout this article I am referring to Je. Although the two colleges were located at the same place in Tibet and also now in exile in India, they are not to be confused! Each has its own separate founder, abbot, text books, schedule, temple, etc.

Hayagriva is a wrathful aspect of the Buddha of Compassion, Chenrezig, with a close connection to the Dalai Lamas. It has a particular emphasis on controlling – bringing together all those conditions needed for successful practice – and dispelling obstacles. The lineage of the practice of Hayagriva comes from Buddha Amitabha and was introduced to Tibet by the great Indian master Padmasambhava, who was invited to Tibet by King Trisong Detsen to dispel the obstacles to the Dharma taking root in Tibet. It was the heart practice of Sera Je's founder, Kunkhen Lodrö Rinchen Senge, and hence became the very special protector deity of Sera Je.

In 2006 I was in South India while the monks were doing the annual Hayagriva retreat. His Holiness the Dalai Lama had just given the Hayagriva empowerment at Sera Je Temple and following that, special Hayagriva pujas were being performed in the Hayagriva shrine. Lama Zopa Rinpoche sponsors this puja monthly in Sera Je for the success for all the FPMT centers, projects, students and benefactors; and on this occasion FPMT was the main sponsor for a particularly elaborate series of rituals to the deity.

Hayagriva practice is particularly recommended by His Holiness for the people of Tibet, so each year there is a retreat at Sera and millions of mantras are recited for the long life of His Holiness and for Tibet. As I stood outside the temple, uplifted by the chanting and collective energy of 3,500 monks, I was inspired to circumambulate and try to merge my prayers with theirs.

My enthusiasm having been roused, I took the opportunity in 2007 with the support of IMI Director Ven. Monlam and three other Sangha to request the monastery if we could join the retreat and it was agreed. We were allowed to sit in the special Hayagriva shrine where the statues and mandala are housed, which was perhaps the most blessed seating arrangement we could have since we were literally staring at Hayagriva and entourage all day! It also allowed us more freedom with the discipline. We were also given permission to enjoy the Sera Je food.





Left: Lama Zopa Rinpoche praying in the Sera Je debate courtyard at the end of the Hayagriva fire puja. Right: Khensur Rinpoche Losang Tenzin, Sera Je Abbot Losang Palden, Lama Zopa Rinpoche and (missing from photo) Pari Rinpoche conducting a Hayagriva fire puja

The retreat lasted ten days. For those with Hayagriva retreat commitment, doing retreat this way in a group is very supportive. When you do retreat at Sera Je, there is no doubt that all the rituals are being done correctly: Sera Je has a special Hayagriva committee of monks who are trained in all the precise rituals and chanting involved with the practice – which are uncommon to Gelug since they are of Nyingma origin. My own experience was that, despite all the usual retreat obstacles, there was an overwhelming sense of appreciation to be there.

Sera Je and FPMT are very closely linked. At one point during the retreat the *gegu* made a long, long speech in Tibetan and money was distributed; it seemed to go on forever. “What was all *that* about?” I asked a monk afterward. “Oh,” he said, “the monastery gave money and asked us to pray for Lama Zopa Rinpoche. It was a long praise of his qualities and how important his activity is for Sera ...” Nothing unusual. Rinpoche himself has commented that “as the FPMT develops, it naturally benefits the monasteries of Lama Tsongkhapa’s tradition, particularly Sera Je Monastery. It is dependent arising.” And they, in turn, benefit all of us.

Being at Sera is an opportunity to really marvel at what a geshe is, what unimaginable qualities and endurance it takes to receive the title *lharampa*. As Lama Zopa Rinpoche often puts it: A geshe is like someone who knows every single part of an airplane. In this age of sound bites and specialization, can we imagine the vastness and depth of that knowledge – the result of twenty to thirty years of intensive daily study, debate and practice with some of the brightest, sharpest,

fittest, most wholesome minds, often complemented by great hardships? Sometimes when we see a foreign monk at our centers, we might take for granted the training they have undergone from a tender age; at Sera it is hard to do so. It is a sobering and humbling experience that puts into perspective our own efforts. While at Sera, it is also easier to appreciate the challenges these geshe face when they leave such a rarified heightened environment to come to the West and teach us. And remember, these monks live in a fragile, exile situation. Many have stories to tell of torture and facing death to escape Tibet to be here; many will make the hazardous journey back after their studies to uphold the Dharma in their still sadly oppressed country.

It is hard to spend time at Sera and not be deeply impressed by the extensiveness of Lama Zopa Rinpoche’s activity in the Tibetan community (and Rinpoche supports not just Sera but a long list of Tibetan monasteries, nunneries and tantric colleges of various traditions). At the same time, it is hard to spend time at Sera and not feel that all of us, in some way, are benefitting every day from the existence of this great monastery and those like it, in so many seen and unseen ways. And this benefit spreads through us to others, benefitting the world. Being at Sera certainly helped to enrich my understanding and appreciation of my teachers, the Sangha and Lama Tsongkhapa’s tradition – like a missing piece in the jigsaw puzzle of FPMT. ☸

*Text by Ven. Sarah, editorial help from Ven. Losang Monlam and Ven. Gyalten Rabten.*

*Photos courtesy of Sera Je.*