

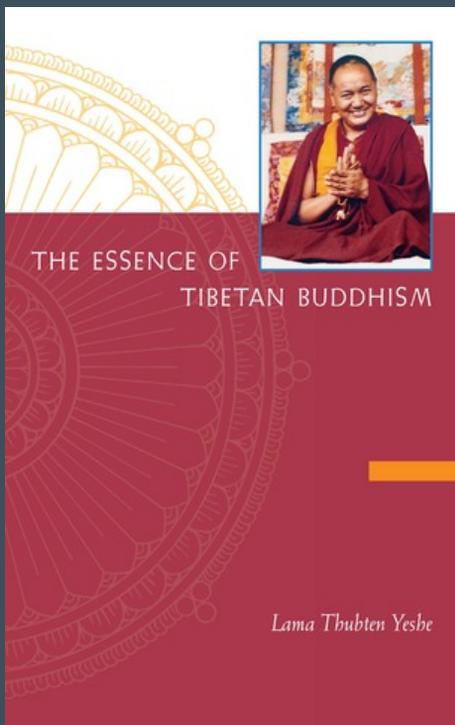


*Tibetan Tantra
Vajrayāna Buddhism*

What is Tantra?

The aim of Tantra is to bring about a dramatic transformation of the practitioner—through ritual, visualization, and symbols—to attain the state of Buddhahood in order to benefit others.

As Lama Thubten Yeshe puts it:



Speaking generally we can say that all the many practices of tantra involve the principle of transformation. . . . Through the practice of tantra all our energies, including the subtle yet very powerful energies we are not ordinarily aware of, are harnessed to accomplish the greatest of all transformations. This is our evolution from an ordinary, limited and deluded person trapped within the shell of a petty ego into a fully evolved, totally conscious being of unlimited compassion and insight.

Powers, John. 1995. *Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism*. Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion Publications, p. 222

Motivation

What sort of people are suitable receptacles for tantric teachings? According to the Dalai Lama, only people with unusually strong compassion and an overpowering urge to attain buddhahood in order to benefit others should undertake the training of tantra (also commonly referred to as the "mantra vehicle"):



A person who has practised the stages of sūtra and wishes to attain quickly the state of a blessed Buddha should enter into the Secret Mantra Vehicle that can easily bestow realisation of Buddhahood. However, you cannot seek Buddhahood for yourself, engaging in Mantra in order to become unusual. . . . You must develop great compassion from the very orb of your heart for all sentient beings traveling in cyclic existence. . . . You need to have a very strong mind wishing to free all sentient beings from suffering and its causes.

(Powers 1995, 223)

Desire

While most exoteric Buddhist texts advise practitioners to reduce desire in order to attain liberation, tantric texts actually propose to incorporate the energy of desire into the path. The problem lies not in desire per se, but rather in a misdirection of the energy of desire toward objects that lead to suffering and bondage.

As Lama Thubten Yeshe puts it:

Instead of viewing pleasure and desire as something to be avoided at all costs, tantra recognizes the powerful energy aroused by our desires to be an indispensable resource for the spiritual path. Because the goal is nothing less than the realization of our highest human potential, tantra seeks to transform every experience—no matter how 'unreligious' it may appear—into the path of fulfillment. It is precisely because our present life is so inseparably linked with desire that we must make use of desire's tremendous energy if we wish to transform our life into something transcendental.

(Powers 1995, 224)

Maṇḍalas

The Sanskrit term maṇḍala literally means "circle," both in the sense of a circular diagram and a surrounding retinue. In Buddhist usage the term encompasses both senses, because it refers to circular diagrams that often contain images of deities and their surroundings. The maṇḍala represents a sacred realm, often the celestial palace of a buddha, and it contains symbols and images that depict aspects of the enlightened psycho-physical personality of the buddha and that indicate Buddhist themes and concepts. The Dalai Lama explains that the image of the maṇḍala "is said to be extremely profound because meditation on it serves as an antidote, quickly eradicating the obstructions to liberation and the obstructions to omniscience as well as their latent predispositions." The obstructions to liberation and the obstructions to omniscience are the two main types of mental afflictions that obstruct one's attainment of buddhahood. The maṇḍala serves as a representation of an enlightened mind that is liberated from all such obstacles, and in the context of tantric practice it is a powerful symbol of the state that meditators are trying to attain.

(Powers 1995, 227)



Hevajra Maṇḍala

Tibet, 15th century, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Hevajra Maṇḍala

Hevajra appears here in his three-headed and four-armed form. This manifestation is drawn from the Hevajra Tantra, a text revered by the Sakya School of Tibetan Buddhism, possibly the patrons of this painting. Hevajra and his consort Nairatmya dance at the intersection of four vajra gateways, indicating their position at the center of the cosmos. Hevajra's name is composed of two syllables, "he," compassion, representing the male aspect, and "Vajra," wisdom, the female aspect, which together offer the path beyond the illusory world. The repeating skull symbolism references death and the impermanence of all phenomena. Beyond the celestial palace are the eight great charnel grounds, each presided over by a yogic master, or mahasiddha. On the reverse are inscriptions in an ornate Tibetan lantsa script of the Sanskrit mantra OH AH HUM and of mantra syllables configured in a stupa silhouette. This painting is likely the work of a Newari artist from Nepal working for a Tibetan patron.



Kapaladhara Hevajra Maṇḍala

Central Tibet, Sakya order, 16th century, Rubin Museum of Art



Mañjuvajra Guhyasamāja Maṇḍala

Central Tibet, Jonang order, 16th to early 17th century, Rubin Museum of Art



Maṇḍala of the Forms of Mañjuśrī

Tibet, late 14th c., The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Maṇḍala of the Forms of Mañjuśrī

Mandala of the Forms of Mañjuśrī, the Bodhisattva of Transcendent Wisdom, Tibet. At center sits Mañjuśrī, the peaceful form of Mañjuvajra, a bodhisattva who cuts through ignorance. He is golden, has three faces, and embraces his consort Prajñā—iconography as prescribed in the Vajrayāna text the Nishpanna Yogavali (Garland of Perfection Yoga). In the four directions are towers with floral motifs spewing from the mouths of makaras that together take the form of crossed vajras, denoting the stable axis upon which Mañjuśrī sits. Rings of lotus petals, vajras, and fire mark the sacred space of the central palace. In the corners are images of Manjushri. Below are Taras and ferocious protectors, including Mahakala and Palden Lhamo as well as a monk who performs the consecration ritual for the mandala. The figural style and ornamental rendering suggest that a Nepalese artist painted this work for a Tibetan patron.



Maṇḍala of Paramasukha Chakrasamvara

Central Tibet, Sakya order, 14th to early 15th century



Cakrasamvara Maṇḍala

Nepal, ca 1100, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

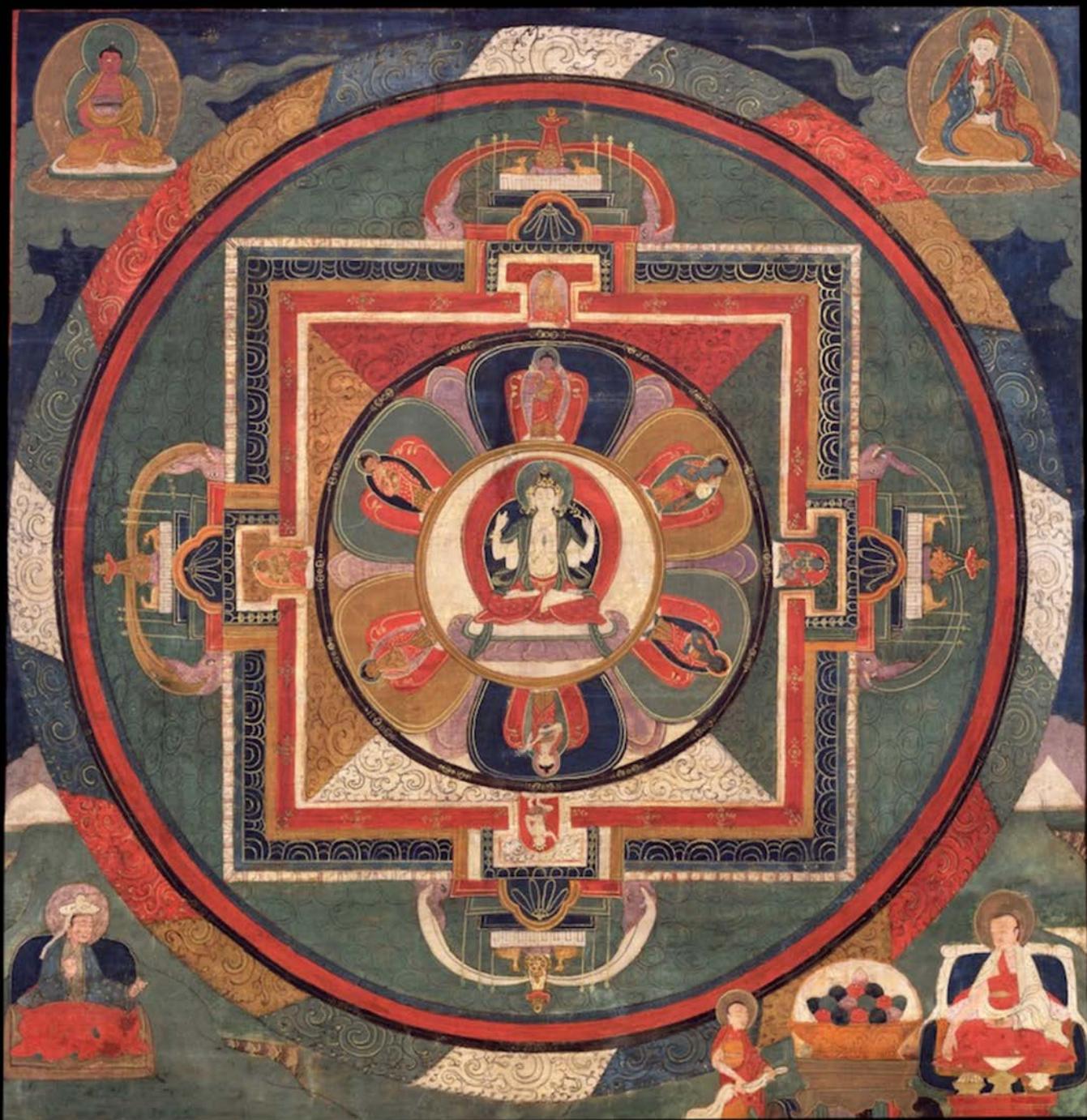
Chakrasamvara Maṇḍala

This ritual diagram (mandala) is conceived as the cosmic palace of the wrathful Chakrasamvara and his consort, Vajravaraḥi, seen at center. These deities embody the esoteric knowledge of the Yoga Tantras. Six goddesses on stylized lotus petals surround the divine couple. Framing the mandala are the eight great burial grounds of India, each presided over by a deity beneath a tree. The cemeteries are appropriate places for meditation on Chakrasamvara and are emblematic of the various realms of existence. The lower register contains five forms of the goddess Tara, a tantric adept at left, and two donors at right. This mandala is one of the earliest surviving large-scale paintings known from Nepal. Stylistic features relate it to Nepalese manuscript covers and to eastern Indian palm-leaf manuscript illustrations of the twelfth century.



Cakrasamvara Maṇḍala

Nepal, 1490, Los Angeles County Museum of Art



Maṇḍala of Avalokiteśvara

Tibet, 1700-1799, Rubin Museum of Art

Maṇḍala of Avalokiteśvara

Avalokiteśvara is surrounded by the Buddhas of the Six Realms of existence and the four female door guardians. Centrally located, peaceful in appearance, white in colour, with one face and four hands, the first pair are clasped at the heart holding a wishing jewel. The right hand upraised holds a white prayer bead mala and the left a lotus flower. Adorned with a crown of gold and jewels, necklaces, bracelets and anklets, he wears a green scarf across the shoulders and a red lower garment. The legs are folded together in vajra posture atop a moon disc and purple lotus flower surrounded by a blue-red nimbus and green aureola.

Surrounding the central figure, on the six petals of the lotus are the six Buddhas of the six realms of cyclic existence - Shakyamuni, Indra, Thag Zangri, Shakya Simha, Namka Dzo and Dharma Raja. In the general appearance of a buddha, they each hold their own objects, wear red and yellow robes and stand tall with the legs together. Outside of that is a ring of gold vajras on a blue background. The inner courtyard of the palace mandala is divided into 4 colours, white in the east, yellow for the south, red - west and north - green. The square enclosure represents the 4 walls and the 'T' shaped structures on each side the 4 doors. Above are 4 coloured steps, a Dharma wheel, two deer and a small canopy. Seated at the door entrances are the 4 female Door Guardians, Vajrankushi, Vajrapashi, Vajrasphota and Vajraghanta. A ring of pristine awareness fire in five colours surrounds the mandala.

At the top left is the Buddha Amitabha, red, with the hands placed in the lap in the mudra of meditation. At the right side is Guru Rinpoche Padmasambhava holding a vajra and skullcup, richly attired and wearing the lotus hat. At the bottom left a seated male figure performs various gestures with the hands, regally attired with a white head covering, green and red robes, atop a cushion seat. At the right side a lama figure wears the white upper robe of a yogi, a red meditation belt and a lower robe. In front a small table supports a central teacup on a gold platform. At the side a table of offerings is prepared with heaped wishing jewels in a large golden bowl. On the ground below that lay various coloured bolts of cloth. A solitary monk stands at the side holding an unfurled white scarf.



Bhaiṣajyaguru Maṇḍala

Tibet, 1800-1899, Rubin Museum of Art

Bhaiṣajyaguru Maṇḍala

Bhaiṣajyaguru is the Medicine Buddha. At the center representing the goddess Prajñāpāramitā is the sūtra by the same name.

When painting tangkas of Medicine Buddha he switches places with Prajñāpāramitā and occupies one of the eight minor positions surrounding the center. Some paintings actually portray the Goddess herself rather than using the sūtra text.

The form and practice of Medicine Buddha is derived from the Bhaiṣajyaguru Sūtra taught by Lord Shakyamuni. In the Vajrayana Tradition this sutra is classified as a Kriya Tantra. Common to all schools of Tibetan Buddhism Medicine Buddha is particularly important to the medical traditions.



Maṇḍala of Vajrayogini

Tibet, 1700-1799, Rubin Museum of Art

Maṇḍala of Vajrayogini

Red in colour, with one face and two hands Vajrayogini stands with the body arched, left leg bent and the head thrown back, looking up to the pure buddha realm of Khecara. Held upraised to the sky in the left hand is a skullcup and in the right a curved knife extended downwards. Adorned with bone ornaments and a necklace of fifty skulls she supports on the left shoulder a katvanga staff decorated with silk streamers. With the two feet pressing down on the two gods red Kalaratri and black Bhairava she stands above an orange sun disc and lotus blossom completely surrounded by the ring of flames of pristine awareness.

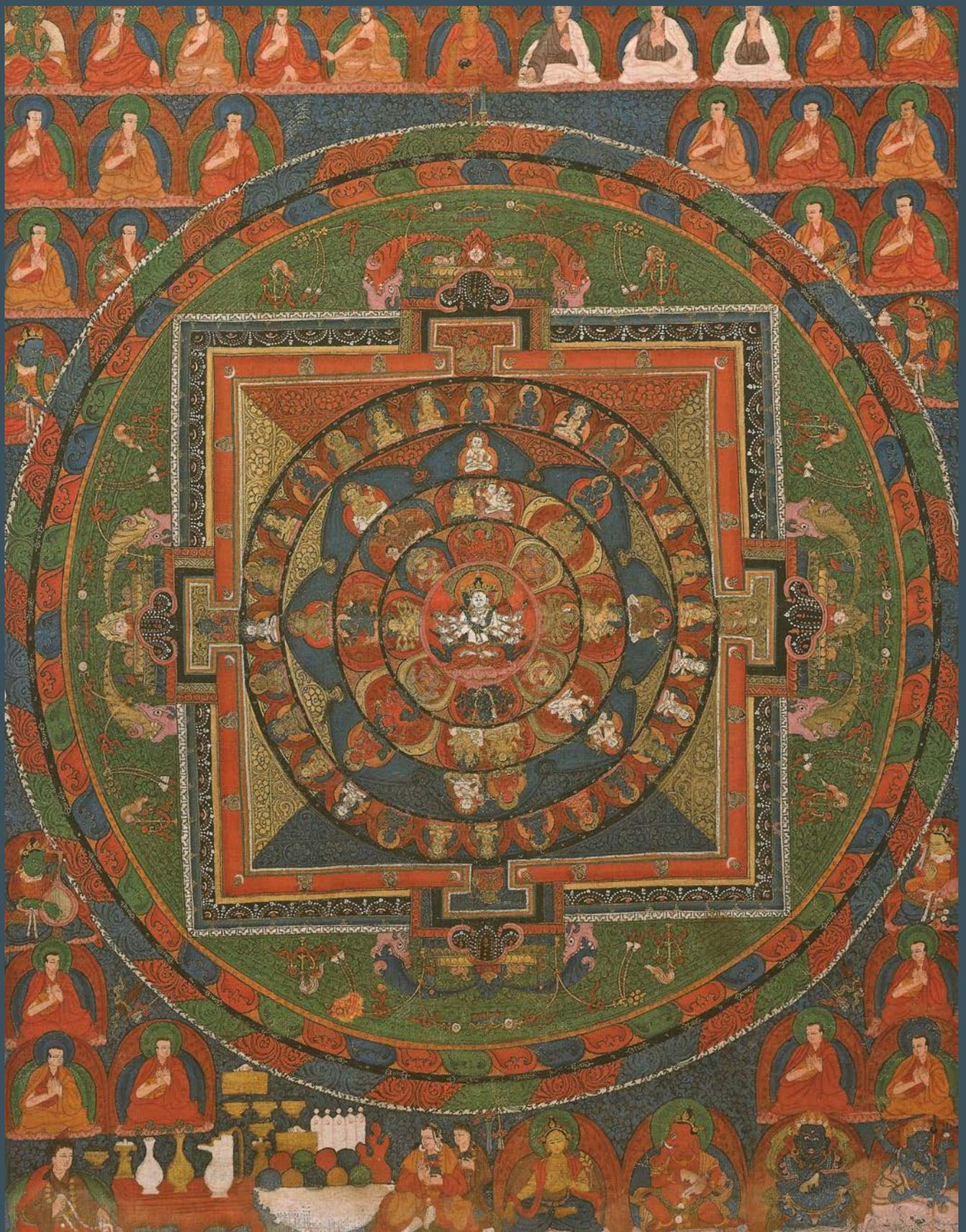
The two crossed red triangles serving as the foundation for Vajrayogini are each bordered with a yellow edge. The two protruding wings at each side contain small white circles. The red geometric form is placed in the middle of a green circle filled with small green and yellow flower motifs surrounded by an outer ring of multi-coloured lotus petals. Outside of that is the ring of the eight great charnel grounds with small figures, trees and stupas. Surrounding that is a small blue ring with alternating gold vajras and lines. The outermost ring is composed of the five coloured flames of the fires of pristine awareness

At the top left is the goddess of power, Kurukulla of the Hevajra Tantra, red, with one face and four hands holding a bow and arrow in the first pair and a hook and lasso in the second. She stands on the left leg in a dancing posture wreathed with orange fire. At the right is the power deity, Great Maha Rakta Ganapati, red in colour, emanation of Avalokiteshvara, with one elephant face and twelve hands holding various implements and standing on a blue-black rat; surrounded by flame. At the bottom left is the power deity Takkiraja of the Guhyasamaja Tantra, red, with one face and two hands holding a hook in the right and a lasso in the left - embracing the consort, standing in the middle of the flames of pristine awareness. These deities are known as the Three Great Red Ones of Sakya. At the bottom right is the Direction Guardian Vaishravana, white, with one face and two hands holding a victory banner and mongoose; riding atop a white snow lion.

Vajrayogini belongs to the 'wisdom class' of Anuttarayoga Tantra and arises specifically from the Chakrasamvara Cycle of Tantras.

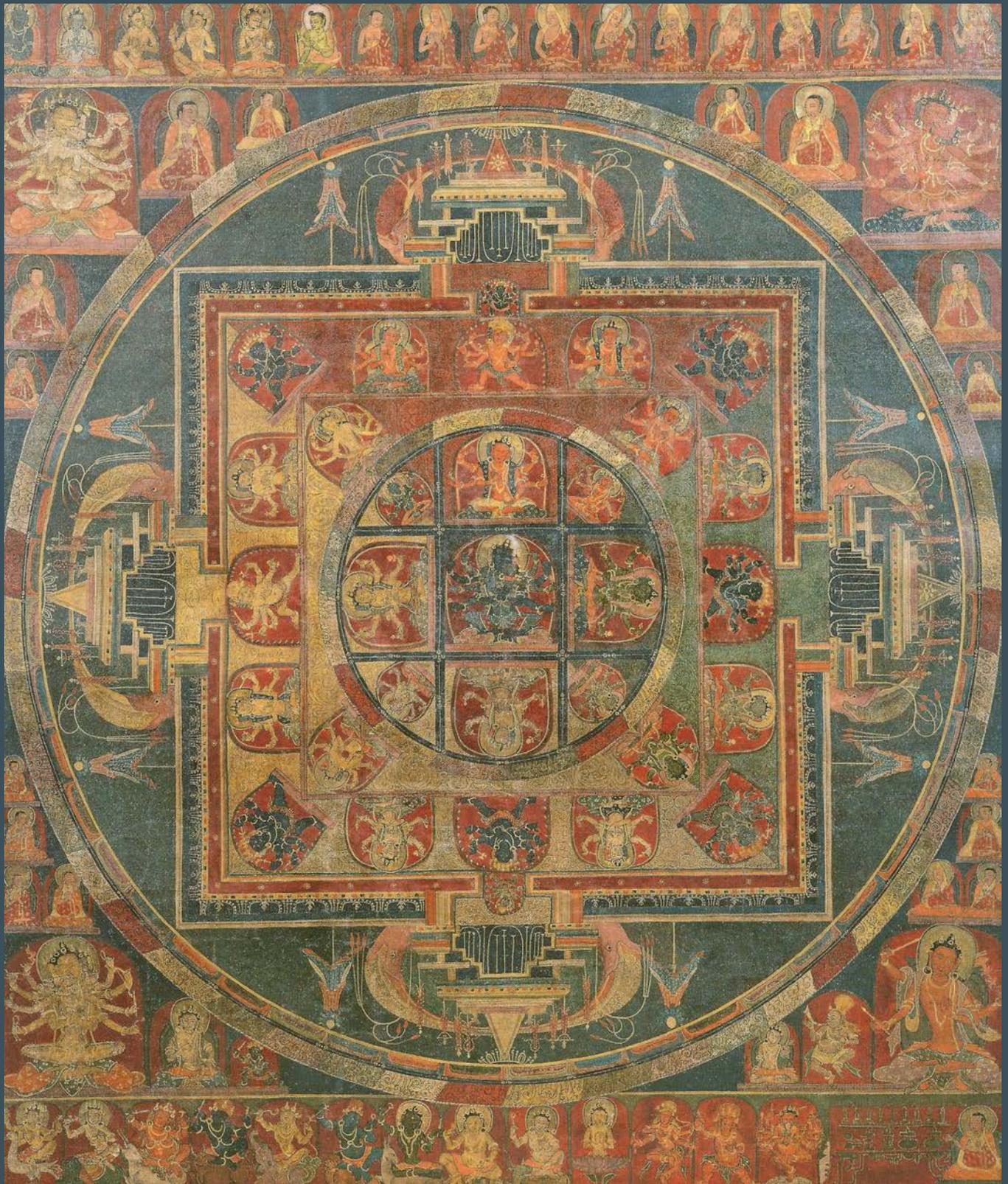


Naropa Vajrayogini in Her Oddiyana Paradise
Eastern Tibet, First half of the 19th century



Sarvavid Vairochana Maṇḍala

Central Tibet, Sakya order, 15th to early 16th century



Esoteric Communion Akṣobhyavajra Maṇḍala

Central Tibet, Sakya order, 15th to early 16th century



Maṇḍala of Naropa Ḍākinī

Central Tibet, Sakya order, 15th to early 16th century



Vajrapāṇi Maṇḍala

Tibet, 1400-1499, Rubin Museum of Art



Maṇḍala of Shri Devi

Tibet, 1600-1699, Rubin Museum of Art

Maṇḍala of Shri Devi

This unusual composition uses symbols to represent the deities and retinue figures inhabiting the mandala circle. The most striking feature about the mandala is the triangular shape. It is an architectural representation of a three-sided palace with three 'T' shaped doors on the three walls, further adorned with human heads, skins and looping intestines strung like garlands. Inside the triangle are four bluish grey weapon wheels, one inside the other. At the very center of the mandala is a curved knife above a skullcup representing Bernagchen Mahakala (Black Cloak), and a 'kila' peg, mirror, spear, and a snake lasso, representing the consort Shri Devi. Based on the symbolic attributes, the four wheels and the triangular palace in the middle of the mandala circle then a positive identification for this mandala is made. These symbols placed together in this combination are unique to Bernagchen and Shri Devi. Atop each of the spokes of the four weapon wheels are small coloured circles. These circles represent the retinue figures accompanying and surrounding the central deity couple.

Bernagchen Mahakala is the personal protector of the Karmapas and the special protector of the Karma Kagyu (Kamtsangpa) School of Tibetan Buddhism. The Karmapas are a line of successive teachers acknowledged as the first lineage of reincarnating lamas in Tibetan Buddhism. Mahakala is a classification of Buddhist protector deity originating in India. This specific form of Mahakala known as Bernagchen arises from the Nyingma 'Revealed Treasure' Tradition of Tibet and was later introduced into the Karma Kagyu School by the 2nd Karmapa, Karma Pakshi (1206-1283).

Deity Yoga

According to Tsong Khapa, deity yoga is the central practice of tantra and is the feature that most clearly differentiates it from the sutra path. As an indication of how important this practice is, the Dalai Lama even states that "without deity yoga the Mantra path is impossible; deity yoga is the essence of Mantra." He adds that all the distinctive practices of the tantra path are based on this technique, which is the supreme path to enlightenment.

Deity yoga involves creative visualization of oneself as a deity who is a fully enlightened buddha in order to achieve the state of buddhahood more quickly than is possible using sutra practices alone?

According to Khenpo Konchog Gyaltzen, in this practice one receives empowerment from tantric deities, which heightens one's sense of potential Buddhahood:

through the empowerment of the yidam deities we identify and become one with the yidam itself so that the ordinary vision of the mind is purified. The yidam is the individual's special deity or guide, inseparable from himself, and taking him to Enlightenment. So when we visualize certain Enlightenment deities, we are not simply imagining them or indulging in wishful thinking; rather we are realizing what already exists within. This is the method for fully awakening the mind and achieving complete Buddhahood.

(Powers 1995, 235-36)



Samantabhadra

Tibet, 1700-1799, Rubin Museum of Art

Samantabhadra

In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, particularly the Nyingma school, Dharmakaya Samantabhadra is considered the most primordial Buddha, akin in status to Vajradhara for the Sarma traditions. Samantabhadra appears in the Vajrayana tantric text the Kunjed Gyalpo Tantra, as the Primordial Buddha, the 'embodiment' or 'field' of 'timeless awareness, gnosis') awakened since before the very beginning. Therefore, in Tibetan Buddhism the Nyingma, or 'Old Translation' school, the Sakya and the Bön schools view Samantabhadra as the Primordial Buddha. In the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhist Vajrayana, Samantabhadra is considered a primordial Buddha in indivisible yab-yum union with his consort Samantabhadri. However, the Kagyu and Gelug schools use Vajradhara to represent the Primordial Buddha.



Vajradhāra with Adepts and Arhats

Western Tibet, 1500-1599, Rubin Museum of Art

Vajradhāra

Vajradhara is the primordial buddha, the dharmakaya buddha. Vajradhara, depicted as dark blue in color, expresses the quintessence of buddhahood itself. Vajradhara represents the essence of the historical Buddha's realization of enlightenment.

Historically, Prince Siddhartha attained enlightenment under the bodhi tree in Bodhgaya over 2500 years ago and then manifested as the Buddha. According to Buddhist cosmology, he was the Fourth Historic Buddha of this fortunate eon. Prince Siddhartha's achievement of enlightenment, the realization, or wisdom of enlightenment itself, is called the dharmakaya, the body of truth. When he expresses that realization through subtle symbols, his realization is called the sambhogakaya, the body of enjoyment. When such realization manifested in more accessible or physical form for all sentient beings as the historical Shakyamuni Buddha, it is called the nirmanakaya, the body of manifestation.

The dharmakaya, synonymous with Vajradhara Buddha, is the source of all the manifestations of enlightenment. Vajradhara is central to the Kagyu lineage because Tilopa received the vajrayana teachings directly from Vajradhara, the dharmakaya buddha. Thus, the Kagyu lineage originated from the very nature of buddhahood.

The Official Website of the 17th Karmapa

<https://kagyuoffice.org/kagyu-lineage/the-golden-rosary/vajradhara/>



White Vajradhāra

Central Tibet, Late 14th to early 15th century, Rubin Museum of Art



White Vajradhāra

Central Tibet, Late 14th to early 15th century, Rubin Museum of Art



White Vajradhāra and Queen of Vajra Space

Eastern Tibet, Late 16th to early 17th century, Rubin Museum of Art



White Vajradhāra and Queen of Vajra Space

Eastern Tibet, Late 16th to early 17th century, Rubin Museum of Art



Akṣobhya Buddha

Tibet, 12th century, Rubin Museum of Art

Akṣobhya Buddha

Occupying a central role in Vajrayana Buddhism, Akshobhya, by some accounts, is Lord of the 2nd of the Five Buddha Families of tantra and found throughout all 4 tantra classifications most notably in the anuttarayoga class. Akshobhya is also mentioned in several Mahayana sutras, the Vimalakirti Nirdeśa being the most famous. It was in Abhirati, the pureland of Akshobhya, attainable only by 8th level bodhisattvas, where the famous Tibetan yogi Milarepa and the scholar Sakya Pandita are said to have obtained complete buddhahood.

Akshobhya, meaning unshakeable, is one of many Buddhas found in Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism. He is described in the Mahayana Sutras of Northern Buddhism and in the Tantra literature. Although a relatively minor figure in the Sutras Akshobhya is of major importance in the Tantras occupying a central role in Vajrayana Buddhism at all levels. He is easily recognized in paintings by having a buddha-like form, blue body colour and the left hand supporting an upright vajra scepter. There are no other Buddhist figures that have this same iconographic appearance. Tantric depictions of Buddhas are commonly shown with jewel ornaments and a crown.



Amitābha Buddha

Tibet, 1300-1399, private collection

Amitābha Buddha

Amitabha is red in colour with one face, two hands folded in the lap, and the legs folded in vajra posture. He has the appearance of a Peaceful Deity with long hair, a crown, earrings, jewelry, and heavenly garments. At the proper left side of the Buddha is the standing figure of Avalokiteshvara, white in colour, holding a white lotus flower, wearing the same ornaments and garments. On the left side is Maitreya, yellow in colour, with a water flask on a flower blossom, otherwise is similar appearance. The throne below is supported by four peacocks

There are many different forms and types of Buddhas represented in Buddhist art. Following after the many images of the historical Buddha Shakyamuni the next most common Buddha form to appear in art is likely to be Amitabha (immeasurable light). His popularity is based in the Mahayana Sutra literature of which there are several Sutra texts devoted to him, along with numerous commentaries and meditation and ritual texts. In art depictions of Amitabha has two general appearances and two names that differentiate those appearances. When referred to as Amitabha he has the appearance of a standard buddha form called nirmanakaya appearance. In this form he is red in colour, wearing the traditional patchwork robes of a monk. In his other general appearance he has a different name, Amitayus (immeasurable life), and wears the clothing and jeweled adornments of a peaceful heavenly god according to the classical Indian system of divine aesthetics. This latter form is known as sambhogakaya appearance. The nirmanakaya form is the same as the classical Buddha Appearance. The nirmanakaya form is in Peaceful Deity Appearance, sometimes referred to as Bodhisattva Appearance. There are many additional forms of Amitabha/Amitayus contained in the Tantric literature.



Amitabha in Sukhavati

Eastern Tibet, Kham, 19th century



Amitabha in Sukhavati

Eastern Tibet, Kham, 19th century



Pure Land of Amitayus

Eastern Tibet, Nyingma order, 18th century



Pure Land of Amitayus
Eastern Tibet, Nyingma order, 18th century



Vairocana Buddha

Tibet, 1700-1799, Rubin Museum of Art

Vairocana Buddha

Vairocana Buddha is another of the great celestial Buddhas. His name means "Shining Out" like the sun.

The first mention of Vairocana is perhaps in the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra*. There, he is described as being at the center of the cosmos like a cosmic sun radiating the light of the Dharma to all worlds. The luminous rays of his light dispel the darkness of ignorance releasing sentient beings from all obstructions to Awakening. These rays are often represented in Buddhist art.

His Buddha-realm was born from the lotus and was purified by Vairocana for eons. Unlike the Buddha-realms of Akṣobhya and Amitābha, the Lotus Land of Vairocana is not inhabited by *arhats*, but only by bodhisattvas. Here we see a Mahāyāna development from the Buddha-realm of Akṣobhya where there are mainly arhats and a few bodhisattvas, to the Buddha-realm of Amitābha where there are mostly bodhisattvas and a few *arhats*, to the Buddha-realm of Vairocana where there are only bodhisattvas.

The *Avataṃsaka Sūtra* also considers Vairocana to be the same as Gautama Buddha, but just different bodies. In later sūtras, this relationship is described as Gautama Buddha being the *nirmāṇakāya* of Vairocana. (Mitchell & Jacoby, 145)



Ratnasambhava Buddha

Tibet, 14th c.

Ratnasambhava Buddha

The Jewel-Born Buddha

The name Ratnasambhava means “the Jewel-born One” or “Origin of Jewels.” The Three Jewels are the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. The Buddha is the Enlightened One, the Guru, the hub of the wheel of the Law. The Dharma is the Teaching, or the Law, and the Sangha is the Community.

Ratnasambhava transmutes the poison of spiritual, intellectual and human pride into the Wisdom of Equality.

Tibetan Buddhists teach that with the Wisdom of Equality one sees all things with divine impartiality and recognizes the divine equality of all beings. One sees all beings and the Buddha as having the same nature. This is a condition we need, says author Giuseppe Tucci, “to spur our spiritual ascension and to acquire the trust to realize in ourselves the status of a Buddha.”¹

Ratnasambhava is the Dhyani Buddha of the south. His color is yellow, the color of the sun in its zenith. He rules over the element of earth and embodies the skandha of feeling or sensation.



Amoghasiddhi Buddha
Tibet, 13th c.

Amoghasiddhi Buddha

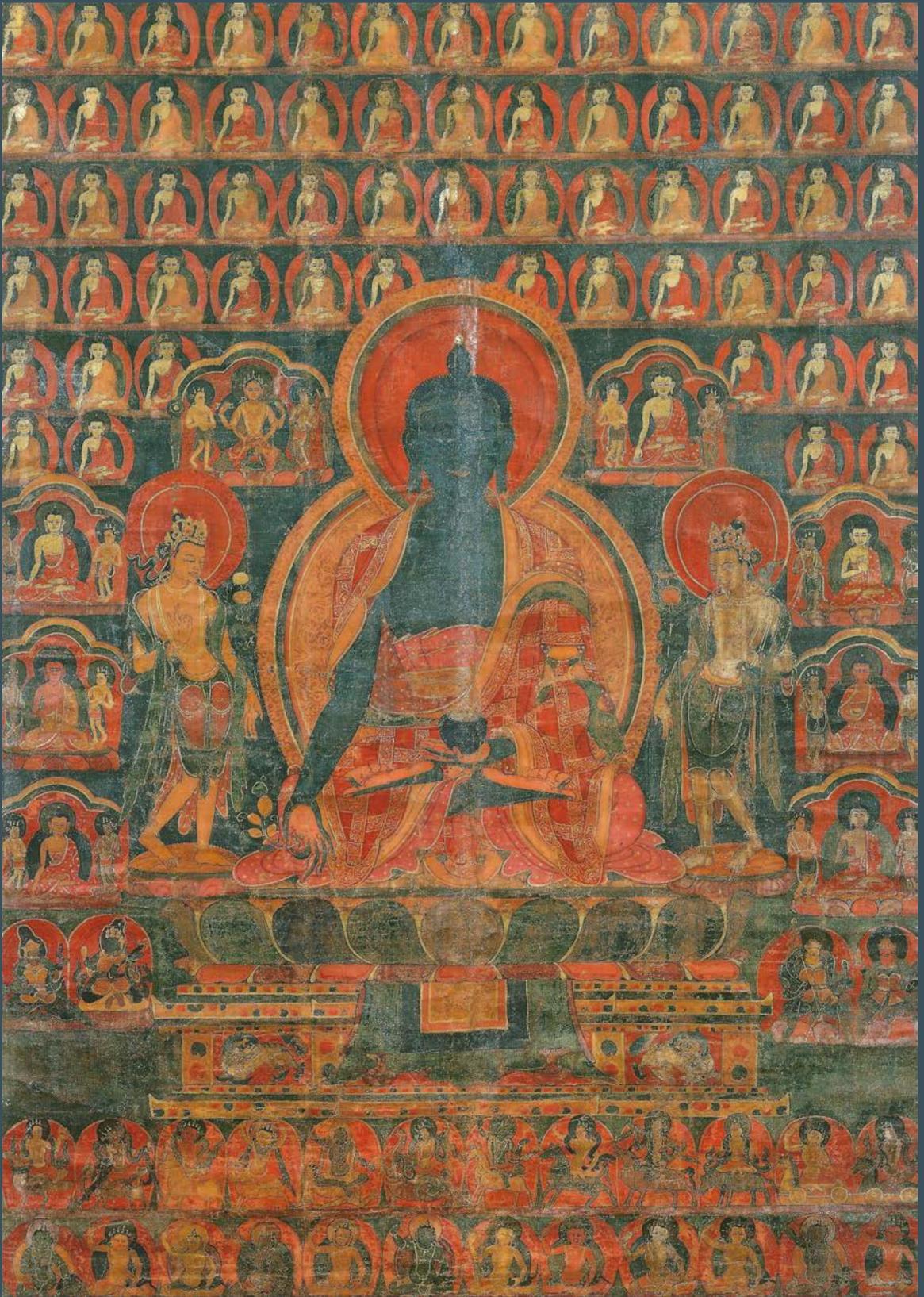
Buddha of Fearlessness

Amoghasiddhi is the last of the Five Dhyani or Five Wisdom Tathagatas. They are believed to have originated from Vajrasattva, the Buddha of purification. Of these five, Amoghasiddhi is the buddha of the north. He is associated with energy and known as the Lord of Karma and the Buddha of unfailing accomplishment. His name literally means infallible (amogha) success (siddhi). He holds his hands in the Abhaya, fearlessness mudra. Amoghasiddhi is the Buddha of all accomplishing wisdom. He is venerated not only for his wisdom of success but he is also known to defeat envy. As it says in Buddhist tradition, Devadatta, a very envious cousin of Amoghasiddhi once attempted to murder the Buddha by releasing a rampaging elephant into the Buddha's path to which Amoghasiddhi simply raised his mudra calming the beast, embodying both fearlessness and defeating envy.



Bhaiṣajyaguru (Medicine Buddha)

Tibet, 19th c., Art Gallery of New South Wales



Bhaiṣajyaguru (Medicine Buddha)

Central Tibet, Mid 15th century



Guhyasamāja Mañjuvajra

Tibet, Khyenri tradition, 16th to 17th century, Rubin Museum of Art



Thousand-Armed Avalokiteśvara

Central Tibet, 15th century, Rubin Museum of Art



Thousand-Armed Avalokiteśvara

Eastern Tibet, Kham, Late 18thth century, Rubin Museum of Art



Vajravidarana with the Five Guardian Goddesses

Central Tibet, Late 17thth century, Rubin Museum of Art



Vajravidarana

Central Tibet, Late 17th century, Rubin Museum of Art



Vajrayoginī

Tibet, 1800-1899, Rubin Museum of Art

Vajrayoginī

Red in colour with one face and two hands she holds a curved knife in the right and a skullcup upraised in the left. Resting on the left shoulder is a katvanga staff. Adorned with a tiara of skulls and gold, jewel and bone ornaments she wears a necklace of fifty dry skulls standing with the two feet placed on the bodies of red Kalaratri and black Bhairava above a sun disc and multi-coloured lotus seat. Completely surrounded by the flames of pristine awareness she looks up to the pure realm of Khechara and drinks from the skullcup in the left hand.

At the top center is Vira Vajradharma, a form of the primordial buddha Vajradhara, unique to the Vajrayogini system of practice. Red in colour, with one face and two hands he holds aloft a damaru drum in the right and a skullcup held to the heart in the left, with a katvanga staff leaning against the left shoulder, seated in vajra posture.

At the top right and left are two Sakya Lamas wearing monastic robes and the dark red Pandita hats typical of scholars. Both are seated on cushion thrones possibly indicating that the painting was sponsored during the lifetime of the two lamas. (Placed above a lotus seat is often an indication that the individual has passed on to the pure realms).

Vajrayogini, is a representation of complete buddhahood in female form. Classified as Wisdom or 'Mother' Anuttarayoga Tantra the practices originate with the Chakrasamvara Cycle of Tantras. Although found in a variety of forms, she is common to all schools of Tibetan Buddhism. In this particular form she is a special teaching passed down from the lineage of the Indian mahasiddha Naropa through to the Sakya School. This form is also popular within the Gelug Tradition.



Vajradākinī
Bhutan, early 19th century



White and Green Tārā

Tibet, 1450-1500, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Tārā

Tārā is a meditation deity worshiped by practitioners of the Tibetan branch of Vajrayana Buddhism to develop certain inner qualities and to understand outer, inner and secret teachings such as *karuṇā* (compassion), *mettā* (loving-kindness), and *śūnyatā* (emptiness). Tārā may more properly be understood as different aspects of the same quality, as bodhisattvas are often considered metaphors for Buddhist virtues.

According to Vajrayana Buddhism, Tara is a completely enlightened Buddha who made a promise in the distant past that after reaching complete enlightenment she would always appear in female form for the benefit of all beings. By iconographic category and hierarchy Tara is a meditational deity (*ishtadevata*, *yidam*) and her appearance is that of a peaceful deity, a *Devi* or “bodhisattva appearance.” All peaceful deities of the pantheon are characterized as having bodhisattva appearance, which is both an iconographic classification and an artistic one. This is actually one of the main reasons why Tara, because of her appearance, is commonly referred to in the West simply as a bodhisattva.

There are many different forms of Tara. The most common form is rendered in the color green, which is considered special for all types of activities. The white form of Tara represents longevity and the red form, power. Tara comes in all colors and degrees of wrathfulness, with varying numbers of faces, arms, and legs. There are simple meditational forms depicting a single figure as well as complex forms with sizable retinues filling large mandala configurations. In total, there are likely close to two hundred different meditational forms of the enlightened Buddha Tara. Observed in all schools of Tibetan Buddhism, Tara, among the other deities that constitute the pantheon, is likely second in popularity only to Avalokiteshvara.



One Hundred and One White Tārās

Tibet, 17th century, Rubin Museum of Art



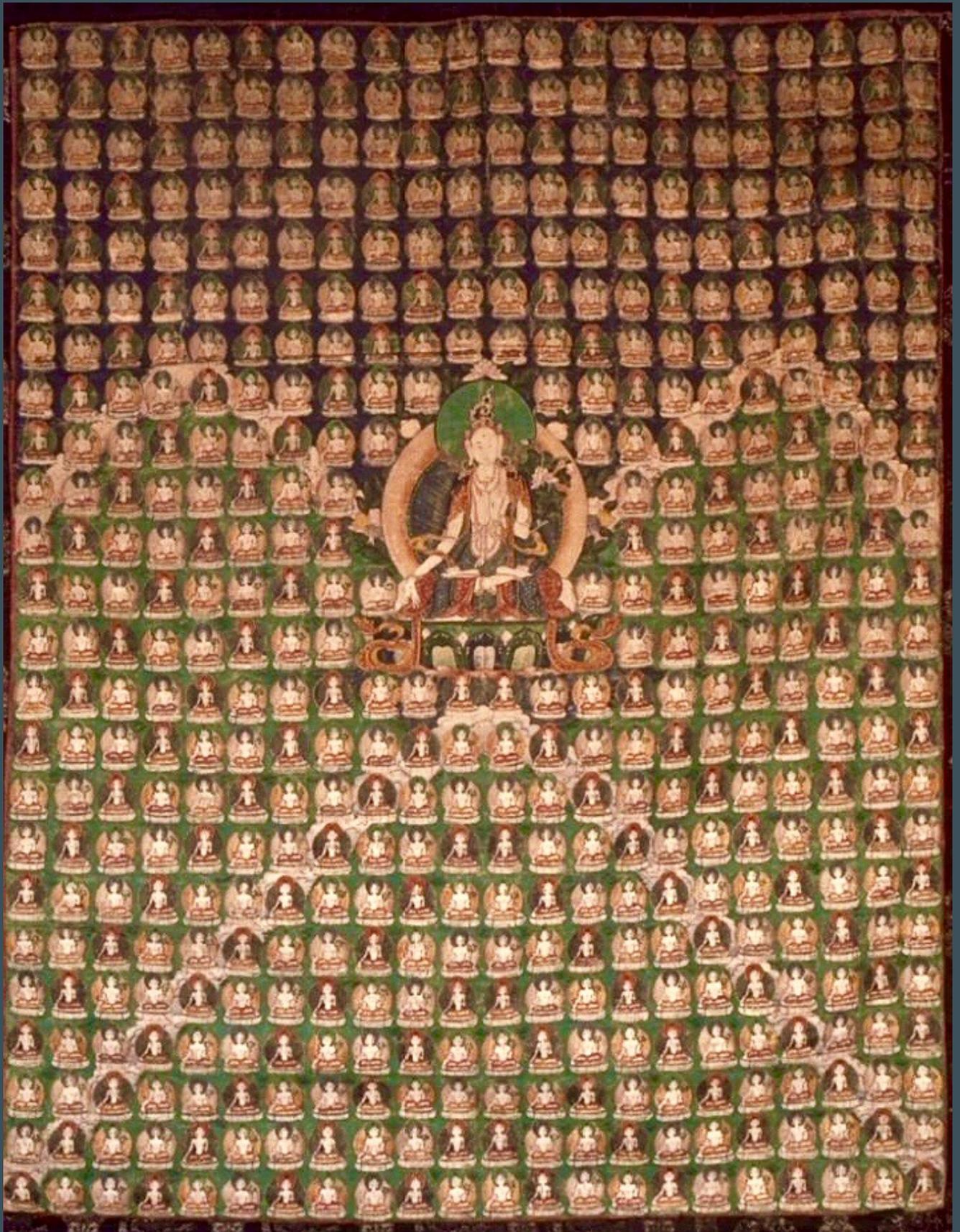
White Tārā

China, 19th century



White Tārā

Tibet, 17th c.



White Tārā

Tibet, 19th c.



Green Tārā and Emanations
Central Tibet, 17th to 18th century



Green Tārā and Emanations
Central Tibet, 17th to 18th century



Green Tārā

Tibet, 16th c.



Green Tārā

Tibet, 18th c.



Green Tārā

Tibet, 18th c.



Vajravārāhī

Tibet, 14th c.

Vajravārāhī

Vajravārāhī ("The Diamond Sow") is a wrathful form of Vajrayogini associated particularly with the Cakrasaṃvara Tantra, where she is paired in yab-yum with the Heruka Cakrasaṃvara. Judith Simmer-Brown writes that "Vajravārāhī's iconography is very similar to that of Vajrayoginī, but she often has more prominent fangs and a more wrathful expression, and she prominently displays a sow's head above her right ear."

Although there are practices of Vajravārāhī in all schools of Tibetan Buddhism, she is particularly associated with the Kagyu school and is one of the main yidam practices of that school. Her tulkus, the Samding Dorje Phagmo, are associated with the Bodongpa, a little-known school of Tibetan Buddhism.

Vajravārāhī is one of the most popular female Tantric deities in all traditions of Tibetan Buddhism. Although there are several forms, the basic iconography is that she has one face, (usually) two hands and two legs, is usually red in colour, and standing in a dancing posture on a human corpse. The distinguishing iconographic attribute is a sow head (varahi) placed either on the right side of her head or on the top of her head. Because of this sow's head, sometimes she is called the 'two-faced' Vajrayogini.



Vajravārāhī

Tibet, 14th c.



Vajravārāhī

Bhutan, 18th century



Vajravārāhī

Bhutan, 18th century



Kālachakra Buddha Father-Mother

Eastern Tibet, possibly Jonang order, 18th to early 19th century, Rubin Museum of Art

Kālacakra

Shri Kalachakra (the Wheel of Time): surrounded by various deities of the mandala, lineage teachers above and protectors below.

Slightly peaceful and slightly wrathful, predominantly blue in colour, he has four faces, twenty-four hands and two legs. The main face is blue, right red, left white and the back face is yellow, each has three eyes. The first set of eight hands (lower) are blue in colour, second (middle) red and third (upper) yellow. The first pair of hands embrace the consort - crossed at the heart holding a vajra and bell. The remaining right hands hold a sword, curved knife, trident, arrows, hook, damaru drum, hammer, wheel, spear, club and axe. The left hands hold a shield, katvanga staff, skullcup, bow, lasso, jewel, lotus, conch shell, mirror, chains and the head of Brahma. Wearing a long green scarf over the shoulders he is wrapped with a tiger skin as a lower garment. The consort, Vishvamata, is yellow, with four faces and eight hands. They are both adorned with crowns, necklaces, earrings, bracelets and various ornaments. The red right leg of the Lord is straight, standing atop the figure of red Kamadeva. The white left leg is bent, standing atop white Rudra. Above the layered discs of a dark blue Rahu (eclipse), red sun and white moon they stand on a multi-coloured lotus blossom seat surrounded by the five coloured lights of pristine awareness fire.

The Kalachakra Mandala belongs to the non-dual anuttarayoga tantra classification practiced to a greater or lesser degree by all schools of Tibetan Buddhism. The concept of 'time' is used as the special metaphor to symbolize the process of transformation from mundane existence to complete enlightenment. From amongst the numerous lineages to enter Tibet the Rwa and Dro are the most famous. The Sakya school maintains seven distinct lineages of transmission.



Kālacakra

Tibet, 17th century, Rubin Museum of Art



Kālacakra

Buryatia, 19th century