

Lotus Leaves

SOCIETY FOR ASIAN ART

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INFINITE VARIETY: FORM AND APPEARANCE IN TIBETAN BUDDHIST ART PART I

A Tibetan temple is crowded with figurative depictions of all types and forms (Fig.1). Sculptures occupy the altar or are placed along the walls; paintings cover the walls throughout; painted scrolls and textile banners cover pillars and hang from beams. Most are dedicated to an expressive and impressive variety of figures. Some, whether several floors high or tiny, express contemplation; others are engaged in angry pursuits.



Fig. 1 Lalung Serkhang, Spiti. Photo: C. Luczanits 2003.

Most of the depicted beings are manifestations of the Buddha and can be considered “gods” in the widest sense of the term. Both words, “Buddha” and “god,” however, refer to a number of beings of different origin and function. “Buddha” refers to the “awakened one,” the Buddha Śākyamuni, and the many forms he can manifest to serve sentient beings by opening them to the right (Buddhist) path. God lives beyond the earth, in a remote heaven or just a higher area of the earth, such as mountain tops. God-like beings also inhabit lakes, rivers, water sources, towering trees and many other remarkable spots of the landscape. All these beings are part of the extensive Tibetan Buddhist pantheon.

The variety in expression and form deities take in Tibetan Buddhism is the result of the long development of Buddhism in India before it came to Tibet. The native belief that almost every element of the landscape is inhabited by some type of being also contributes considerably to the pantheon. Most distinctively, however, the adopted divinities have

been actively transformed and adapted to local needs.

This essay attempts, in a systematic manner, to view the high number of divinities in Tibetan monuments, their relation to each other, and their purpose. It is guided by two perspectives: history and the Tibetans’ own classifications of their deities.¹ The historical perspective used to structure the presentation should not be understood as an attempt to present a historical develop-

ment for such an attempt would yield a much more complex picture.

Esoteric Buddhism (Skt. Vaj-rayāna; Tib. rDo-rje theg-pa) is that branch of the Great Vehicle (Skt. Mahāyāna; Tib. Theg-pa chen-po) that is practiced in Tibet. The relationship of the different historical phases of Buddhism within Tibetan Buddhism is best expressed in the form of layers. The historically more recent layer, such as the Great Vehicle, builds on its predecessor, the Vehicle of the Hearers (Skt. Śrāvakayāna; Tib.: Nyan-thos kyi theg-pa²) and transforms it on the way.³ Although the Tibetan systematic also includes historical aspects, this discussion does not strictly follow any Tibetan systematic. The presentation of the interrelationship of the different deities to each other, however, does follow the Tibetan viewpoint. Because of his special status within Tibetan Buddhism, most of the examples cited below refer to the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara or deities that are considered part of his family.

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THREE BODIES

Simply put, there are two main groups of gods in the Tibetan pantheon: the high Buddhist gods and the worldly gods. The latter include the great Indian gods such as Indra (also Śakra; Tib. rGya-spyin), Brahmā (Tib. Tshang-pa), Śiva, Visnu and many others. The difference between these two groups is that the high Buddhist gods do not die. Also, they are not gods in the usual sense, but emanations of the Buddha in his ultimate and undifferentiated state. This state is that of ultimate extinction (Skt. *nirvāṇa*). What is extinct in this case is not the Buddha nature but its differentiated, earthly appearance. This ultimate form of the Buddha, which can not be recognized in its true nature, is commonly called the dharma-body (Skt. *dharmakāya*, Tib. *chos-sku*).⁴

Without changing his ultimate state, this Buddha manifests worldly emanations, such as that of the Buddha Śākyamuni, who lived until approximately 380 years BCE.⁵ Such a vulnerable and temporal manifestation is compared with an illusion and is thus called the illusory or apparitional body (Skt. *nirmāṇakāya*; Tib. *sprul-pa'i sku*). This is the form in which the Buddha appears to those of minor faculties who have the luck to be born in an age when there is a worldly emanation of the Buddha.

The third form of the Buddha, representing a stage between the ones already discussed, is called the body of perfect rapture (Skt. *sambhogakāya*; Tib. *longs-spyod rdzogs-pa'i sku*). This appearance can only be recognized by advanced practitioners. In this form the Buddha appears in heaven, paradises and holy assemblies such as those of a mandala.

The sculpture of Maitreya in the Three-story Temple of Alchi is probably the most poetic rendering of the three bodies in art. There, the life of the Buddha is inscribed into the textile pattern of his clothing, a simple loincloth.⁶ What could better signify the fragile and temporal nature of the worldly manifestation? The life of the Buddha dresses the supernatural form of the Bodhisattva Maitreya, who becomes the next Buddha in our world (Fig. 2). This life represents not only the events in the life of the historical Buddha Śākyamuni, but the same events are also manifested by all Buddhas. Maitreya, too, will manifest them when he is reborn on earth to reach Buddhahood. The supernatural form of the Bodhisattva is expressed by his physical size (c. 4.5 m) and by his four arms. This form of Maitreya, in turn, is an emanation of the Buddha Vairocana shown in the central point of his crown. Thus, the Alchi sculpture shows all three bodies. Of course, the *dharmakāya* can be neither grasped nor depicted, but the composition nevertheless succeeds in referring to that form.⁷

PARADISE

The notion of an absolute body of the Buddha and his ability to manifest everywhere, at all times and over and over again is documented with the development of the Mahāyāna. Different Buddhas reside at the same time in parallel worlds. In early Mahāyāna all these Buddhas are of the same form and appearance, dressed in monk's robes. Although it is doubtful that the Buddha bodies were strictly differentiated at first, it can be said that in early Mahāyāna both the Body of Perfect Rapture and the Illusory Body had the same appearance. The Buddha teaches according to the capacities of his listeners, a quality referred to by the term "Skillful Means" (Skt. *upayakauśalya*).

The idea of different Buddhas existing at the same time in different worlds is expressed by such groups as the Buddhas of the Ten Directions. The ten directions are the four cardinal directions, four intermediary directions plus the zenith and the

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nadir. The repeated appearance of different Buddhas in the same world leads to groups such as the Seven Buddhas, the Buddhas of the Three Times, and the 1000 Buddhas. The oldest of these is the Seven Buddhas, which includes the Buddha Śākyamuni and his six predecessors beginning with the Buddha Vipāśin.

The Buddhas of the Three Times are the Buddha of the past, Dīpaṅkara (Tib. Mar-me-mdzad), the Buddha of our age, Śākyamuni (Tib. Shākya-thub-pa) and the Buddha of the future, Maitreya (Tib. Byams-pa). These three Buddhas not only signify the continuous presence of the Buddhas, and thus of Buddhism, but also the uninterrupted transmission of the Buddhist teaching from one Buddha to the next. This transmission is expressed in the form of oaths and prophe-



Fig. 2 Bodhisattva Maitreya, Alchi Sumtsek. Photo: J. Poncar.

cies. In a remote past Buddha Śākyamuni expressed his wish to become Buddha in the form of an oath in front of Buddha Dīpaṅkara who, in turn, prophesied his future Buddhahood. Śākyamuni, in turn, prophesied Bodhisattva Maitreya his future Buddhahood. The thousand Buddhas are an extension of this succession into the remote future.⁸

As already mentioned, Buddhas also reside in paradises and heavens where they teach the Buddhist doctrine to gods, Bodhisattvas and, occasionally, especially accomplished humans. In the Tibetan understanding these Buddhas, too, are illusory bodies.⁹ In contrast to the historical Buddhas, the Buddhas in paradises and heavens are contemporaneous and, ideally, immediately accessible.¹⁰ Such a paradise differs from our world only in having better conditions for Buddhist practice. Although considered especially fortunate, rebirth in such a paradise can only be an intermediate stage on the path towards release from the woes of the cycle of rebirth.

Most prominent among the paradises is the western paradise of Buddha Amitābha (Skt. Sukhāvātī, Tib. bDe-ba-chen). This paradise is described in comparatively early Mahāyāna texts and in East Asia led to a special cult and school of Buddhism.¹¹ This paradise is also venerated and depicted in Tibet. In late Indian and Tibetan depictions, Buddha Amitābha (Tib. 'Od-dpag-med; 'Boundless Light') is red and sits in meditation. He is dressed in monk's robes and holds a begging bowl.¹²

BODHISATTVA

Even in the earliest depictions the Buddha is often flanked by Bodhisattvas. Bodhisattvas have vowed to attain release from rebirth not only for themselves but for all beings. Their practically infinite development is expressed in stages. In early depictions Bodhisattvas wear the dress and jewelry of idealized representatives of the Kushana dynasty. After some degree of deification, Bodhisattvas attain distinctive attributes that make individual identification possible.

The principal attendant Bodhisattva of the Western Paradise of Buddha Amitābha is Avalokiteśvara (Tib. sPyan-ras-gzigs; 'the lord that looks down [upon us]'), who soon became the subject of an independent cult. Avalokiteśvara is the personification of compassion, and many Buddhists ascribe special power to him. As his identifying attribute the original two-armed form of this Bodhisattva holds a lotus, commonly at its stalk, in the left hand. Descriptively this form is also named Padmapāṇi (Tib. Lag-na-padma; 'lotus in the hand'). The lotus is a symbol for Buddhahood.¹³ The right hand usually shows the gesture of giving (Skt. varadamudrā; Tib. mchog-sbyin-gyi phyag-rgya), with the

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Fig. 3 Two-armed Avalokiteśvara with attendants and donors, Nalanda.
Photo: C. Luczanits 1999.

flat palm of the hand directed towards the viewer and pointing towards the ground (Fig. 3).

Bodhisattvas develop from archetypes for the Buddhist practitioner to omnipotent and wonder-working helpers that can be called in case of danger. The supernatural abilities of the Bodhisattvas are expressed by their multiple heads and limbs. Fig. 4 shows a beautiful six-armed form of Avalokiteśvara made either in the wider region of Kashmir or west Tibet. As in the two-armed form the Bodhisattva has a small effigy of the Buddha Amitābha in front of his high hair-knot. The hand gestures and attributes symbolize qualities and methods of the Bodhisattva: the rosary (Skt. *mālā*; Tib. *phreng-ba*) symbolizes repeated recitation; the hand raised towards the shoulder is a gesture of deference;¹⁴ the lost flask signifies the consecration ritual as well as the nectar of immortality; and the stick with three small hooks (Skt. *tridaṇḍa*) refers to the ascetic nature of the Bodhisattva.¹⁵

A Bodhisattva of the highest stage is regarded as having

practically the same potential as the Buddha himself. This is most clearly apparent in the iconography of the thousand-armed form of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara (Fig. 5). In the most common depiction, this manifestation has eleven heads, the uppermost of which is that of the Buddha Amitābha, that stand for efficacy in all (ten) directions. The Bodhisattva has eight principal arms in front of a circle made of his other arms. Each palm bears an eye, representing inexhaustible and inescapable attention and the protective potential of the Bodhisattva. The tradition differentiates 108 forms of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, but if the historical and compositional context of these forms are also considered, there are many more.



Fig. 4 Six-armed Avalokiteśvara, Potala Palace, Lhasa. After: Hang Kan.
"Treasures from snow mountains: Buddhist images from Tibet."
Orientations 32, no. 5 (2001): 74–78.

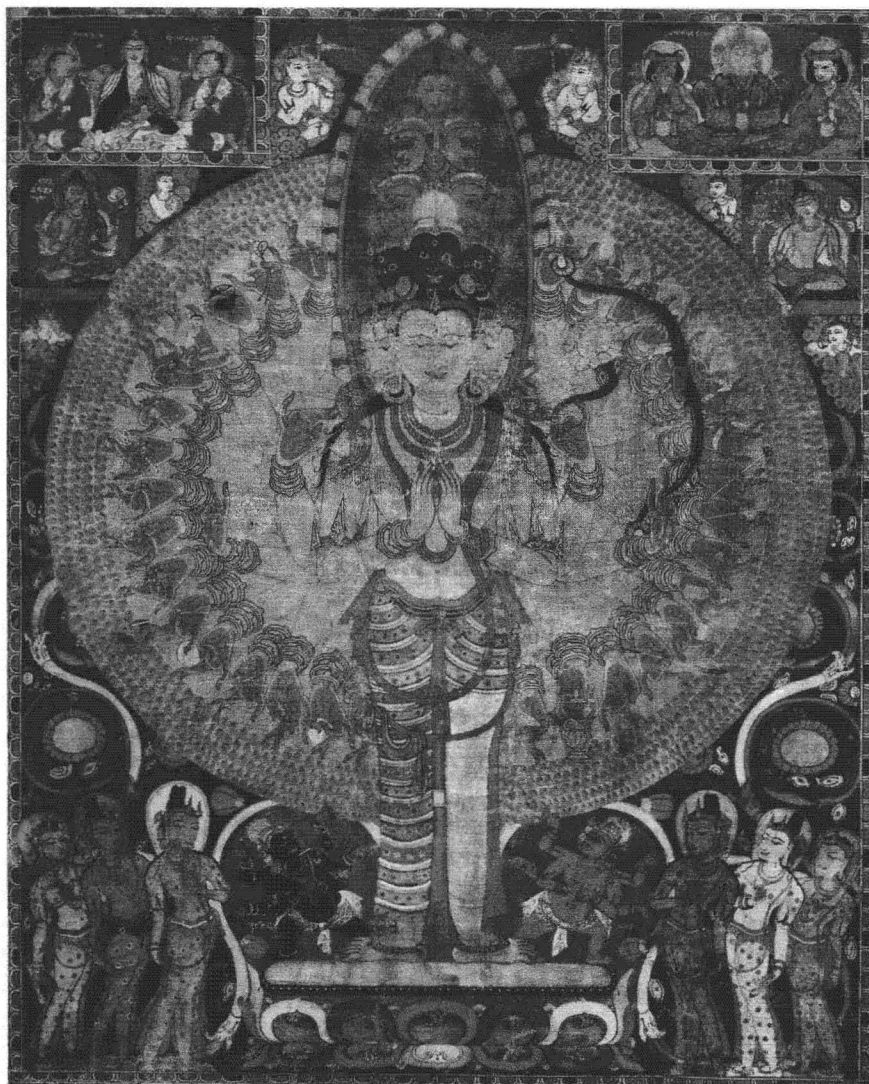


Fig. 5 Thousand-armed Avalokiteśvara, private collection.

After Kossak, Steven M., and Jane Casey Singer. *Sacred Visions. Early Paintings from Central Tibet*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1998: no. 12.

Female Bodhisattvas are prominent in later Mahāyāna Buddhism; in some cases their potential is practically identical to that of their male counterparts. In the Tibetan context the most prominent among these goddesses is Tārā (Tib. sGrol-ma). Like Avalokiteśvara she can rescue from the eight exemplary dangers.

THREE FAMILIES

Of the frequently depicted triads one has special significance, namely the triad of the Buddha flanked by the Bodhisattvas Padmapāṇi and Vajrapāṇi ('vajra in the hand'). In the earliest narrative depictions the Buddha is accompanied by a figure carrying a vajra who serves him as protector. The vajra (Skt.; Tib. rdo-rje) is a thunderbolt and the attribute of the king of gods, Indra. Indra's attribute is reminiscent of Zeus; early depictions of the vajra carrying protector of the Buddha are reminiscent of Heracles. The vajra is also a symbol of hardness and indestructibility, a quality it shares with the diamond, also called "vajra."

In early esoteric Buddhism the triad of Avalo-kiteśvara–Buddha–Vajrapāṇi



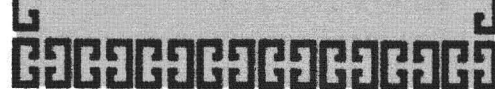
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TABLE: THE FIVE BUDDHAS

Direction	Name	Color	Gesture (<i>mudrā</i>)	Vehicle	Symbol
Center	Vairocana	white (golden or yellow)	bodhyagrīmudrā or dharmacakramudrā	lion (dragon)	wheel
East	Akṣobhya	blue	bhūmisparśamudrā	elephant	vajra
South	Ratnasambhava	yellow	varadamudrā	horse	jewel
West	Amitābha	red	dhyānamudrā	peacock	lotus
North	Amoghasiddhi	green	abhayamudrā	eagle	viśva-vajra

counters the three poisons of passion, ignorance and hatred. These poisons are thought to be responsible for keeping us in the cycle of rebirth. The Buddha's wisdom overcomes ignorance; the infinite compassion of the Bodhisattvas Avalokiteśvara channels the passions; and Vajrapāṇi's power transforms hatred to the benefit of all beings. Buddhist deities come to be classified according their preferred range of action and in this way are associated with one of the three groups. These extended groups are termed families and are named by their primary symbol, the lotus, the Buddha and the vajra.¹⁶

This concept of three families already rules much of the decoration in the later Buddhist caves of Ellora in central India,¹⁷ and also underlies the iconographic program of early Tibetan temples. A prominent example is the configuration in the Cella of the Lhasa Jokhang where the eight Bodhisattvas of the Fortunate Aeon accompany the Buddha that is called Jowo Rinpoche (Tib. Jo-bo).¹⁸ The eight Bodhisattvas represent an extension of the original triad and are also found in Indian Buddhist monuments such as the later caves of Ellora.¹⁹ The three families occur in many variants and a depiction of them is in almost every Tibetan temple. Extremely popular is the triad of the Protectors of the Three Families (Tib. *rigs-gsum mgon-po*), a group in which the Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī, the Bodhisattva of Wisdom, represents the Buddha family. Three stūpa (Skt.; Tib. chörten – mchod-rten) at the edge of a village or above the entrance to a house refer to this particular group. Often they are also painted in colors referring to the three Bodhisattvas, white for Avalokiteśvara, orange for Mañjuśrī and blue for Vajrapāṇi.

There are also female and wrathful aspects for each of the families. For the lotus-family it is the goddess Tārā in its different forms that is most prominent. The primary wrathful manifestation is the horse-headed Hayagrīva (Tib. rTa-mgrin) who is the wrathful manifestation of Avalokiteśvara and represents his activity aspect.²⁰

FIVE BUDDHAS

In the further development of esoteric Buddhism both the number and forms of Buddhas multiplied. In the major concepts of Mahāyāna Buddhism, among them the three bodies introduced above, the Buddha is imagined in manifestations that differ considerably from earlier depictions. The decisive principle is that every being bears within itself the seed of its own release from rebirth. However, this "inner Buddha" commonly remains unrecognized. Using a combination of ritual and meditation esoteric practice tries to awaken this Buddha nature by helping the practitioner to identify with one of its manifestations that conforms to the character of the practitioner and counteracts the quality that binds him to the wheel of rebirth. In contrast to previous paths, esoteric practice enables the practitioner to attain awakening within this very life.

As the name suggests, esoteric Buddhism emphasizes the role of the teacher (Skt. *guru*; Tib. *bla-ma*). It is the teacher who decides which deity is needed by the pupil in his practice, provides the oral instructions associated with the practice, and initiates the pupil into the practice in an act of consecration (Skt. *abhiṣeka*; Tib. *dbang*). Using the three families as an example, a teacher would ask the pupil to practice a deity that fits his personality. If the pupil is passionate, he would be given a deity of the lotus-family and so on.

The three families system developed into five Buddha families by the 8th century. Pride and jealousy have joined the "three poisons." In this system the families are headed by five Buddhas frequently termed Jinas (Tib. rGyal-ba; 'Victor' or Tathāgatas (Tib. De-bzhin gshegs-pa; Thus-gone / Thus-come').²¹ The Buddhas counteract these negative qualities with the help of specific kinds of knowledge or wisdom. Together, the five Buddhas represent a psychogram that covers the characters of all beings.

The five Buddhas are regarded as forms of absolute

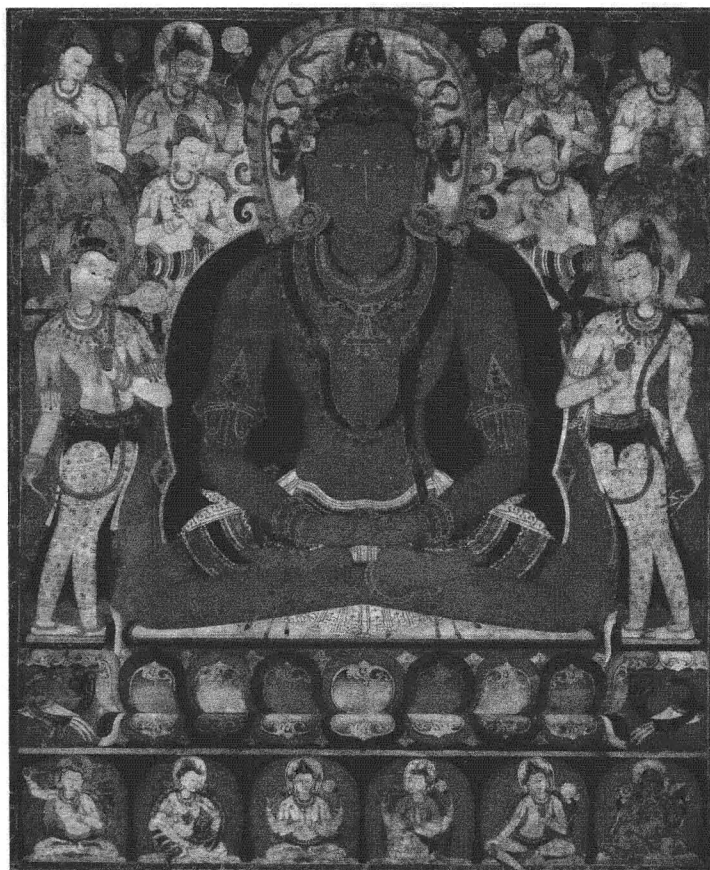


Fig. 6 The Jina Amitābha flanked by the Bodhisattvas Avalokiteśvara and Maitreya, private collection. After: Kossak, Steven M., and Jane Casey Singer. *Sacred Visions. Early Paintings from Central Tibet*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1998: no. 23b.

Buddhahood, namely bodies of perfect rapture.²² They are dressed in a simple loincloth and bejeweled as Bodhisattvas and gods. In iconographic terms each of the Buddhas is associated with a symbol, a gesture, a color, a vehicle and a direction (See **Table**, page 7).

Among the five Buddhas Amitābha occupies the West and heads the western family. In **Fig. 6** he is flanked by the Bodhisattvas Avalokiteśvara and Maitreya while the Bodhisattvas in the upper registers mirror each other and refer to the paradise nature of the Jina's domain. The bottom deities mainly belong to the lotus family. From left to right, Mañjuśrī is followed by the triad of Manidhara, Ṣaḍakṣaralokeśvara, and Ṣaḍakṣarī-Mahāvidyā and representations of Avalokiteśvara and Green Tārā. The presence of Manjushri is puzzling, for he is not commonly associated with this Buddha or his family.²³ ■

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NOTE TO READERS:

Part II of *Infinite Variety*

will appear in the fall, 2005 issue of *Lotus Leaves*.



FOOTNOTES

1. One such systematic is presented in *Loden Sherab Dagyab. Tibetan Religious Art. Part I: Texts; Part II: Plates*. Edited by Walther Heissig. 2 vols, Asiatische Forschungen 52. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1977.
2. Although Tibetan historical literature uses the term Lesser Vehicle (Skt. Hinayana, Tib.: Theg-pa dman-pa), this term should be avoided because of its pejorative nature.
3. The concept of the layers has been formulated by Georges B. J. Dreyfus, 2003. *The sound of two hands clapping. The education of a Tibetan Buddhist monk*. Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press: 17–20.
4. In the original concept of the dharmakaya it may be that the Buddha's body was imagined as consisting of the diverse dharma. In this instance dharma signifies both the basic elements that make up the world as well as the teaching and characteristics of the Buddha (see Paul Harrison. 1992. *Is the Dharma-kaya the Real "Phantom Body" of the Buddha?* *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 15 (1): 44–94).
5. The date of Buddha Sakyamuni's life can only be estimated. The date quoted here follows the so called short chronology. On the date of the Buddha see especially: Bechert, Heinz, ed. 1991. *The Dating of the Historical Buddha. Die Datierung des historischen Buddha. Part 1, Symposium zur Buddhismusforschung IV* (1). Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht. ———, ed. 1992. *The Dating of the Historical Buddha. Die Datierung des historischen Buddha. Part 2, Symposium zur Buddhismusforschung IV,2*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht. ———, ed. 1997. *The Dating of the Historical Buddha. Die Datierung des historischen Buddha. Part 2, Symposium zur Buddhismusforschung IV,3*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
6. Conventionally, the loincloth is called a dhoti although, strictly speaking, this is a misuse of a modern Hindi term.
7. Most commonly the stupa is understood as representing the dharmakaya.
8. Obviously this is somewhat simplified since the different groups only partly overlap.

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9. In the Tibetan systematic all Buddhas shown in monastic dress are understood as *nirmānakaya* representations. The original understanding appears to have been considerably different.
10. There are numerous legends of Buddhist saints, and even craftsmen, visiting these paradises and heavens to attain the teachings of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas residing there.
11. According to this cult it is possible to attain release from rebirth directly from Sukhavati.
12. If the hands hold a vase instead of the begging bowl, the depicted Buddha is Amitayus (Tshe-dpag-med, 'Boundless Life').
13. As the pure lotus grows out of swampy water the Buddha appears in an age of delusion.
14. Both the gesture towards the shoulder as well as the flask attribute have been taken from the iconography of Bodhisattva Maitreya. The gesture is rare and its interpretations consequently difficult, as demonstrated in Taddei, Maurizio. "Harpocrates-Brahma-Maitreya: A Tentative Interpretation of a Gandharan Relief from Swat." *Dialoghi di Archeologia* III (1969): 364–90. The methodology and conclusions in Huntington, John C. "Avalokiteśvara and the Namaskāramudrā in Gandhara." *Studies in Indo-Asian Art and Culture* 1 (1972): 91–99, are highly problematic and a misunderstanding of the description of the gesture.
15. I have used the most generic interpretation of the attributes; in detail interpretations vary from text to text.
16. On these three families cf. Snellgrove, David L. *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism. Indian Buddhists and their Tibetan successors*. London: Serindia, 1987: 189–195.
17. On the caves of Ellora see for example Geri Hockfield Malandra. *Unfolding a Mandala. The Buddhist Cave Temples at Ellora*. New York: State University of New York Press, 1993.
18. It needs to be noted, that the Jowo is not the only main image in the Cella since immediately behind him is another Buddha image. Independent of this interesting configuration it is clear that both represent the Buddha family.
19. On the Indian depictions of the Eight Bodhisattvas of the Fortunate Aeon cf. especially Motohiro Yoritomi. "An Iconographic Study of the Eight Bodhisattvas in Tibet." In *Indo-Tibetan Studies. Papers in honour and appreciation of Professor David L. Snellgrove's contribution to Indo-Tibetan Studies*, edited by Tadeusz Skorupski, 323–32, pls. 22, 23. Tring, U.K.: The Institute of Buddhist Studies, 1990 and Claudine Bautze-Picron. "Le groupe des huit grands Bodhisattva en Inde: genèse et développement." In *Living a life in accord with the Dhamma: papers in honor of Professor Jean Boisselier on his eightieth birthday*, edited by Natasha Eilenberg, M.C. Subhadradis Diskul and Robert L. Brown, 1–55. Bangkok: Silpakorn University, 1997.
20. The vajra-family may be represented by a number of wrathful deities, most frequently among them the wrathful Vajrapāni, a wrathful Vajrasattva and Acala. The high number of variations within this family can in part be explained by the fact that Vajrapāni can represent both the peaceful and the wrathful aspect of the family. Variations may occur to avoid a double representation of the same deity (see the examples in Christian Luczanits. *Buddhist Sculpture in Clay: Early Western Himalayan Art, late 10th to early 13th centuries*. Chicago: Serindia, 2004: 218–20).
21. In secondary literature the five buddhas are also referred to as Dyani-Buddhas, a term that is not found in primary literature and should be avoided.
22. It is very likely that Buddha Vairocana was originally considered the primordial Buddha who emanated the other four. In the earliest depictions of the Vajradhatumandalas the central Buddha is accompanied by four 'mothers of the families' which represent the four families around him. For examples cf. Luczanits, *Buddhist Sculpture in Clay*: 204–209.
23. In the Vajradhatumandala a form of Mañjusri, Vajratiksna, is part of the western retinue.

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INFINITE VARIETY: FORM AND APPEARANCE IN TIBETAN BUDDHIST ART PART II

This article is a continuation of Part I, published in *Lotus Leaves* Volume 7 Number 2, Spring 2005

MANDALA

In esoteric ritual the five Buddhas are invited into a sphere that is protected by a fire and vajra circle, the sacred circle or mandala (Tib.: *dkyil-'khor*). In the mandala one imagines the Buddhas and their retinue inside a palace with four doors facing in the cardinal directions. Such a mandala is both a sacred area into which divinities can be invited and a reflection of the universe, whose differentiation is depicted in the form of gods. On a microcosmic level the mandala is compared with the idealized, subtle body of the practitioner. A mandala used in ritual, if it is made of colored sand, is made only for use in the ritual

and then destroyed. Rituals may also use other forms of mandalas such as those printed on cloth or painted on ritual tables. The mandalas that are painted on Tibetan scrolls or *thangkas* may be used as support at the beginning of the visualization practice, but commonly have no ritual function.²⁴ All the deities of a mandala are considered emanations representing aspects of the central deity that commonly also gives the mandala its name.

Without considering the depiction of the five Buddhas and their symbolism in detail, it should be mentioned that Vairocana is the central Buddha representing the Buddha family. Vairocana is white; his symbol is the wheel. Akṣobhya is blue, has a vajra as his attribute and sits in the east. Since the main deity faces east and the rising sun, it is the bottom



Figure 7. An unidentified mandala of a four-armed Avalokiteśvara, Alchi Small Chorten, early 13th cent.
Photo: C. Luczanits 2003

eastern quarter is either blue or white. If the eastern quarter is blue, an aspect of Vairocana is in the center; if the bottom quarter is white, the central deity is associated with Akṣobhya's family.

PERSONAL BUDDHA

In the Fig. 7 mandala, a four-armed form of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara is the manifestation of absolute Buddhahood relevant to a practitioner, the deity that has been assigned to him by his teacher (Skt. Guru; Tib. Lama – bLa-ma). The teacher has also introduced him to a practice with this deity through oral instructions and an obligatory initiation. In this case, Avalokiteśvara is the personal Buddha or chosen divinity (Skt. *iṣṭadevatā*; Tib. *yi-dam*) of this practitioner. If we apply

of the mandala that represents the eastern direction. Buddha Amitābha and his lotus family are located in the west; the color of his upper quarter is red. In Tibetan mandalas either Vairocana or Akṣobhya can occupy the center. (For more details about the depiction of the Buddhas see Part I of this article in *Lotus Leaves*, Spring 2005.)

The concept of the five Buddhas underlies most mandalas in the Tibetan tradition, even those occupied by completely different deities. This can be seen in the colors of the mandala quarters representing the Buddhas of the four directions.²⁵ Since either Vairocana or Akṣobhya occupies the center, the

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the system of the five Buddhas to this mandala representation, this form of Avalokiteśvara is associated with the family of the Buddha Vairocana.²⁶

Since together the five Buddhas cover all possible emotional qualities of a person, a personal form of the Buddha that fits the character of the person can be found for everybody. As with the three family deities, the quality of the Buddha manifestation is expressed by its appearance. Esoteric Buddhism thus fosters a considerable number of divinities that cover a wide emotional spectrum. Within the broad emotional category associated with each deity, the same Buddha can take many different forms, forms which emphasize different aspects of the broader emotional category. Deities may be peaceful, semi-wrathful or wrathful manifestations of Buddhahood. Guhyasamāja (gSang-'dus), for example, is peaceful. The different manifestations of Cakrasaṃvara (bDe-mchog), Vajrayoginī (rDo-rje-rnal-'byor-ma) and Hevajra (Kye-rdo-rje) are considered semi-wrathful. Vajrabhairava (rDo-rje-'jigs-byed) and Hayagrīva (Fig. 8) are wrathful.

Many of the chosen divinities are depicted in sexual embrace with a consort (Fig. 8), symbolizing the non-duality of ultimate reality and the unification of wisdom (female aspect) and compassionate method or means (male aspect). The Tibetans call this image yab-yum, meaning 'father-mother'. It needs to be emphasized that such depictions are based on the experiences in ascetic and meditative practices that generate a passionless state of beatitude or bliss. In this state the mind is considered particularly receptive for a revelation. In a figurative sense this state of bliss is compared with the state shortly before ejaculation. In fact, on some depictions of Vajrabhairava as solitary hero, that is, without a partner, a drop of sperm is visible on the tip of his

erect penis.²⁷ The goal of practice is to be able to control this state and continue to develop it to create the ideal conditions for recognizing ultimate reality.

Personal Buddhas, those chosen by the guru for the practitioner, are the central deities of mandalas. In the case of wrathful deities the jewelry is made of bone and the crown-points are skulls (Fig. 8). Semi-wrathful deities can have both types of jewelry, golden as well as of bone. The jewelry of bone not only expresses the perishable nature of all things and the dangerous character of the deity wearing the jewelry, but also indicates that the meditative and ritual practice associated with this deity should be done in a charnel ground.

There are also manifestations that refer directly to ultimate Buddha nature. These are called Ādibuddha—ultimate Buddha. In the so-called Old School (Nyingmapa, Tib.: rNying-ma-pa) the Ādibuddha is Samantabhadra and in the New Schools, among them the Kagyüpa (Tib.: bKa'-brgyud-pa) and the Gelugpa, it is the Buddha Vajradhara (Fig. 9). In the iconography of Vajradhara his ultimate nature is expressed in two ways: his blue color refers to the all-encompassing space, and the hands crossed in front of the breast holding vajra and bell refer to the non-duality of the Buddha nature and

the unification of wisdom and compassionate means. If an Ādibuddha is asserted, then all other manifestations including the five Jinas and all chosen divinities used in the respective tradition are considered emanations of this highest form of the Buddha.

Since the appearance of a certain chosen divinity is geared toward the ritual and meditative practice, its iconography and symbolism are subject to change. Continuous reinterpretation and alteration also have roots in the nature of the tantric



Figure 8. Hayagrīva thangka, collection Navin Kumar.
After: Linrote, Robert N., and Jeff Watt. Eds. *Demonic divine: Himalayan art and beyond*.
New York, Chicago: Rubin Museum of Art, Serindia, 2004: no. 51

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source texts which usually require explanation by an initiated teacher to be fully understood and suitable for practice. These explanations can vary with teachers. And, through visions, inspirations and recoveries, the practice itself is a source for reinterpretation and development of new manifestations of Buddha nature.

TEACHING LINEAGE

A considerable portion of the Tibetan Buddhist canon is dedicated to the scriptures of esoteric Buddhism, the tantras. These texts deal with the ritual practice associated with a certain chosen divinity, its world, its mandala and its interpretation. The tantras are regarded as representations of the teachings of the ultimate Buddha that have been conveyed to a practitioner in the form of a vision. That practitioner, in turn, conveys the teaching to a pupil and thus establishes a teaching lineage. From the 12th century on the origin of a teaching and its transmission from person to person becomes a major subject in literature and art. At that time the Tibetans felt a need to prove an authoritative Indian origin for their practices and the tantras on which they were based.²⁹

The lineage is usually shown at the top of a painting and may also continue on the sides. In early examples the lineage is represented in its totality while later examples focus on the main representative teachers of the lineage. A lineage always begins with the deity responsible for revealing the teaching to a siddha (Tib.: *grub-thob*). Siddhas are ideal practitioners of tantric Buddhism who have attained supernatural powers (Skt. *siddhi*) through special meditative practices. Eventually, through other siddhas or Indian or Nepalese scholars, the transmission reaches Tibet and is continued there.³⁰ For example, in the Hayagrīva thangka (Fig. 8), a teaching lineage of mainly secular personages is depicted in the uppermost row representing the

Nyingmapa discoverer of the text on which this teaching is based along with his successors.

The adoption of the esoteric traditions took place primarily during the later spread of Buddhism when there was no centralized political or religious power, and many parallel teaching traditions developed. Already in the 13th century the practice of a single deity can be traced back to India through numerous lineages that, later, were even further split up.³¹

GODS, GHOSTS AND DEMONS

When Tibet began to adopt Buddhism during the time of the Tibetan Empire (ca. 600–842) esoteric Buddhism was under development. At the time of the later spread of Buddhism from the middle of the 10th century, esoteric teachings had not only been fully developed, but were also beginning to be integrated into the decoration of a temple or monastery. In Tibet the rich pantheon of Buddhist deities inherited from India was regarded as superior to the local deities.

In addition to the Buddhist gods, Tibet also adopted the Indian Buddhist conception of the cosmos with its many heavens and deities. These deities, among them the highest gods of Hinduism—Indra, Brahmā, Śiva and Viṣṇu—are not living for eternity but have a restricted lifespan. In the Buddhist pantheon they are integrated as protectors of Buddhism and are frequently

found in the outer regions of a mandala or on the entry walls. Some of them are also depicted under the feet of high Buddhist gods. In this case, they symbolize qualities that can be overcome with the practice of the depicted deity. In the hierarchy of deities, the imported high Indian gods are also considered higher than the native gods.

In the Tibetan imagination nearly every element of nature is somehow inhabited. It would take too long to enumerate all these beings, but a simplified classification can be based on the

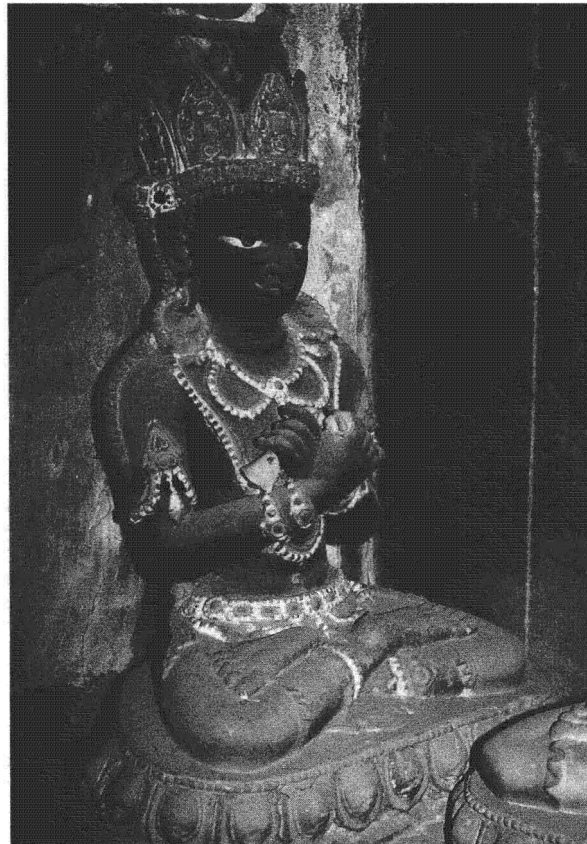


Figure 9. Buddha Vajradhara, Wanla, Ladakh.
Photo: C. Luczanits 1998.

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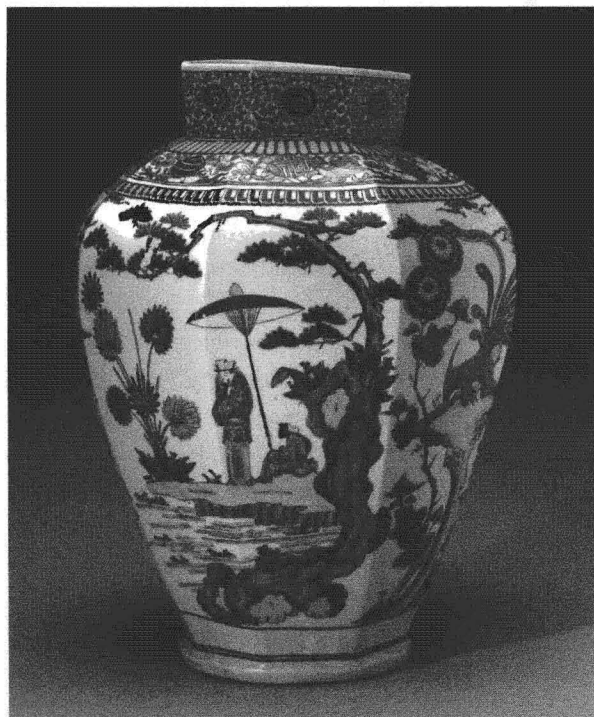
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attitude of these beings toward humans, and they can be divided into gods, ghosts and demons. The gods (Tib. lHa), mainly mountain gods (lHa and rGyal-po) and gods of wealth and fertility (Yakṣa; Tib. gNod-sbyin), are not against humans, but occasionally need attention. Ghosts are the neutral but sensitive beings that inhabit the earth (*sa-bdag*), the water (*klu*), the forest (*gnyan*), the rocks (*btsan*) and other parts of the environment. Since all these are places of human activity ghosts can be easily annoyed. Demons, such as the Dū (Tib. *bdud*), do not like humans at all.³² All these beings need the attention of humans and can be pacified by offerings. On a mythological level these native gods, ghosts and demons must be “tamed.” Thus, one legend recounts that the first Buddhist temples were erected above the body of a huge demoness with the Jokhang in Lhasa placed above her heart. In this way the country has been tamed for Buddhism.³³ Conversion or “taming” takes on extreme importance in the story of Padmasambhava, to whom the conversion of practically all local deities along the Himalayan range is ascribed (Fig. 10).³⁴ The converted native gods are included in the Tibetan pantheon as protectors of Buddhism and its places of worship.

Protectors of Buddhism of local origin are commonly placed along the bottom border of a painting or composition. On the Hayagrīva painting (Fig. 8) all deities in the bottom two rows are protectors. Of these the upper row is occupied by deities of wealth, and the lower row represents a variety of Buddhist protectors. On the Padmasambhava thangka (Fig. 10) the local god Pehar is included among the three protectors at the bottom.

SPECIAL SPHERE OF ACTION

The subordination and adaptation of native beliefs goes hand in hand with an adjustment of Buddhist beliefs to the circumstances in Tibet; the results of this combination are the most characteristic elements of Tibetan Buddhism. Thus, Tibet is considered the special sphere of action for the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara and, from approximately the 12th century onward, all key events of Tibetan mythology and history, such as the genesis of the first Tibetans, are connected with this Bodhisattva.³⁵ From the perspective of the three families, Tibet is the special field of the lotus family. The introduction of Buddhism at the time of the first great emperor of Tibet, Songtsen Gampo (Srong-btsan-sgam-po; c. 617–649/650), is attributed to the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara. Songtsen Gampo is understood as an emanation of Avalokiteśvara and, by extension, of the Buddha Amitābha. In the depiction of Songtsen Gampo, this is indi-

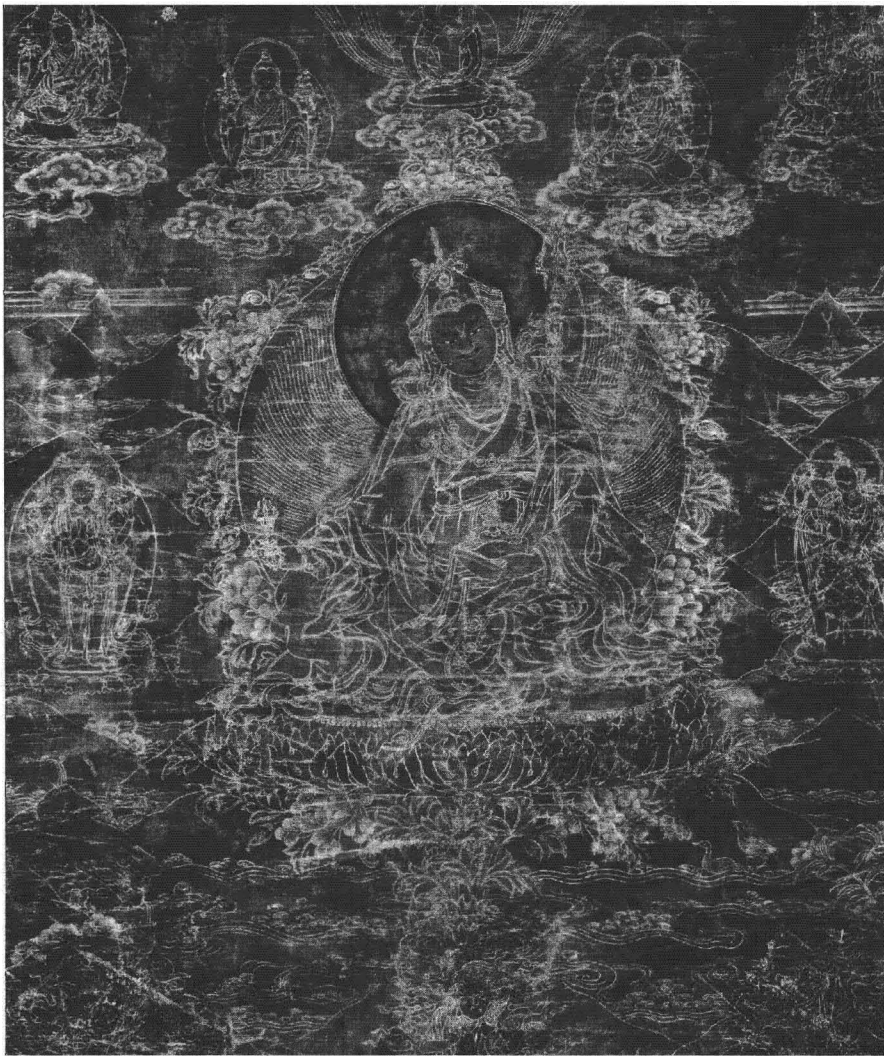


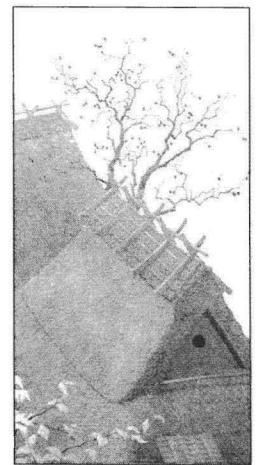
Figure 10. Padmasambhava, drawing in gold on red. After: Rhie, Marilyn M. and Robert A.F. Thurman. *Worlds of Transformation. Tibetan Art of Wisdom and Compassion. New York: Tibet House, New York, 1999: no. 59* (www.himalyanart.org no. 285)

cated by the red Buddha head in his turban (Fig. 11). Further, the Nepalese and Chinese consorts of Songtsen Gampo are considered emanations of Tārā and Bhṛkūtī (Tib.: Khro-gnyer-can-ma), who also frequently accompany the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara. This triad of Songtsen Gampo flanked by his two wives is represented in the top right corner of the thangka with the Thousand-armed Avalokiteśvara (Fig. 5–Part I). Both representations indicate that he is also a religious teacher.

The period of the first dissemination of Buddhism in Tibet during the Tibetan empire is the period of the so called ‘three religious kings’. These kings are identified as emanations of the protectors of the three families.³⁶ It is the lotus-family represented by Songtsen Gampo that is the center of the group.

As is apparent from his Sanskrit name, Padmasambhava, “lotus-born,” is also associated with the lotus family. He, too, is considered a manifestation of the Buddha Amitābha. As mentioned above, most of the conversions of native deities are ascribed to him. Padmasambhava is also called the second Buddha, and he can appear and act in numerous manifestations. Thus, Guru Rinpoche—‘Precious Teacher’, as he is called in Tibet—appears as a primordial Buddha, as a fierce deity

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Figure 11. Emperor Songtsen Gampo to the side of a Thousand-armed Avalokitesvara, Wanla, Ladakh. Photo: C. Luczanits 1998.

overcoming demons, as an ascetic, as a religious king, as a healing Buddha and as a deity of wealth.³⁷ His manifestations cover the whole range of Buddhist deities discussed.³⁸ Historically both the cult of Avalokitesvara and that of Padmasambhava developed during the 12th century,³⁹ an extremely innovative period in the development of Tibetan Buddhism. Also, other ideas characteristic of Tibetan Buddhism were established at that time.

DISCRETE EMANATION AND REINCARNATION

In addition to the identification of historical personages like Songtsen Gampo as emanations of high Buddhist gods, from the 11th century on, more and more Buddhist personalities were considered reincarnations of well-known Indian scholars or even of Buddha Śākyamuni himself. Toward the

end of the 12th century and within the newly established Kagyüpa schools, the idea developed that certain Tibetan scholars were fully awakened and thus almost identical to the Buddha. This is seen in the arts since ‘portraits’ of such scholars are depicted similarly to the Buddha himself. In addition to taking on iconographic characteristics of the Buddha, especially the gestures,⁴⁰ these hierarchs may also be flanked by Bodhisattvas.

Fig. 12 shows the founder of the Taklung School, Taklung Thangpa Chenpo (sTag-lung Thang-pa-chen-po bKra-shis-dpal, 1142–1210) teaching like a Buddha. His lineage teachings derived from the Buddha Vajradhara seated to the left of his immediate predecessor who is depicted in the center of the lineage at the top of the painting. From the idea that a Tibetan Buddhist hierarch is already fully enlightened and a reincarnation of an Indian scholar, it is only a small step to the idea of continuous reincarnation first manifested with the Karmapas in the 13th century. The Karmapas are essentially the result of this concept. What’s new is that this type of rein-

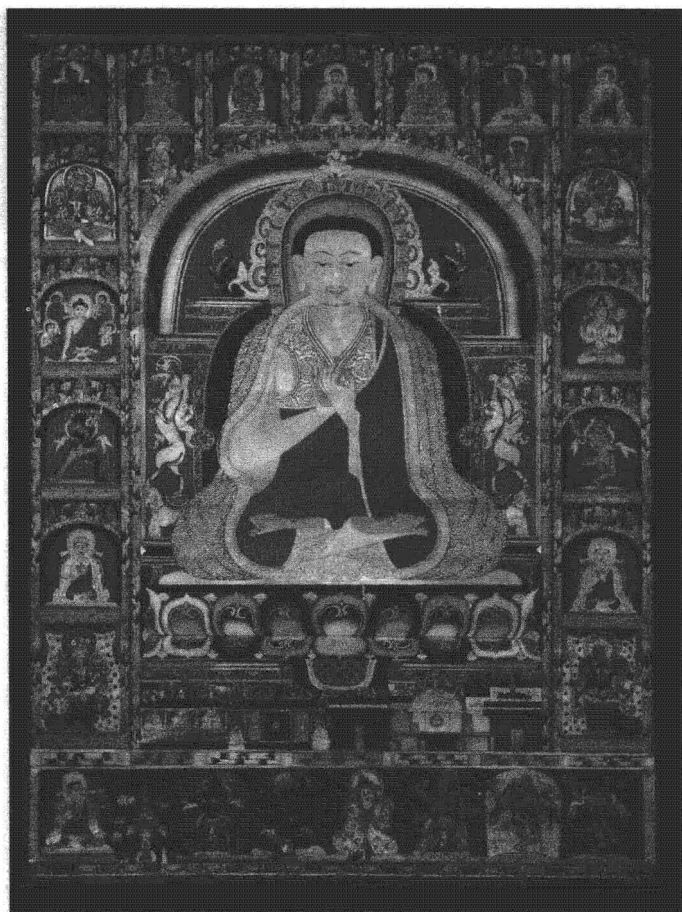


Figure 12. Taklung Thangpa Chenpo, Brooklyn Museum of Art. After: Amy G. Poster. *Journey through Asia: masterpieces in the Brooklyn Museum of Art*. Brooklyn, N.Y., and London: Brooklyn Museum of Art and Philip Wilson, 2003, no. 82 (www.himalayanart.org no. 86901)

carnation is identified with his immediate predecessor and inherits his religious, political and social position. This type of reincarnation was so successful in Tibet that it gradually replaced succession by kinship in cases when, during the 11th to the 15th century, a monastery was bequeathed from uncle to nephew. These reincarnations are called Tulku (*sprul-sku*), a term that also denotes the illusory body of a Buddha (Skt. *nirmāṇakāya*).

There was a remarkable boost in the number of such lineages in the 15th and 16th centuries. Of the many direct incarnation lineages, that of the Dalai Lamas was politically the most successful. Chiefly responsible is the genius of the 5th Dalai Lama, Ngawang Lobsang Gyamtso (Ngag-dbang blo-bzang rgya-mtsho; 1617–1682)⁴¹ who, with help from outside Tibet,⁴² succeeded in unifying the country politically and suppressing rival schools.⁴³ It was also the 'Great Fifth' who claimed that the incarnations of his lineage were emanations of Avalokiteśvara,⁴⁴ thus connecting his own political power with that of the first great rulers of Tibet.

As Buddhas of the present, Buddhist hierarchs and incarnations are also an important subject in the arts. From the 13th century onwards sculptures of the founders and major scholars of a tradition are found on the main altars of a monastery or temple. These scholars have not only become a focus of veneration, but through visions, rediscoveries and reinterpretations also continue to contribute to the Tibetan Buddhist pantheon.

CONCLUSION


Thus, there seems to be an infinite variety in Tibetan Buddhist art. But, since all these appearances, as strange as they may seem on first sight, are based on adopted and further developed Buddhist concepts, the variety of deities does have limits. Buddha Amitābha reigning in his Pure Land, represents one of the five Jinās and emanates Avalokiteśvara, Songtsen Gampo and the Dalai Lamas. All these forms share a principal symbolism that is reproduced in art in the form of colors, attributes, and interrelated appearances. As diverse and varied as the Tibetan Buddhist pantheon may be, its limits are recognizable. Limits result because new forms develop directly out of their predecessors and because of their orientation towards the practice. From the Tibetan perspective all these manifestations of their Buddhist pantheon have no more or less reality than humans and everything perceived by them. In Mahāyāna Buddhism the gods and their depictions are only means to an end—the release of all beings from the cycle of rebirth.

—Christian Luczanits

Visiting Assistant Professor,
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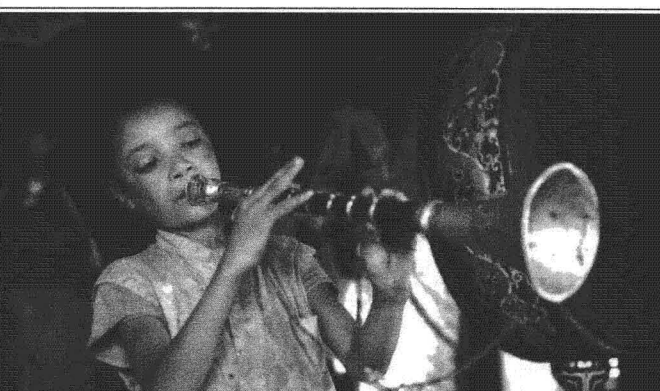
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FOOTNOTES

- 24 Compare in this respect the critical study of Robert H. Sharf, "Visualization and Mandala in Shingon Buddhism." In *Living Images: Japanese Buddhist Icons in Context*, edited by Robert H. Sharf and Elizabeth Horton Sharf, 151–97. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001.
- 25 Of the major mandalas only the Kalacakramaṇḍala uses a completely different color arrangement.
- 26 Of course, there are cases where the background colors of the quarters are simply mistaken.
- 27 It seems that this drop is visible only on earlier depictions of the deity, as for example the exceptionally beautiful 14th century Vajrabhairava in the Pritzker Collection (Kossak, Steven M., and Jane Casey Singer. *Sacred Visions. Early Paintings from Central Tibet*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1998: no. 44).
- 28 In the Nyingmapa School the recovery of hidden texts has a particularly innovative role in the reinterpretation of tradition. However, while there seem to be no restrictions for inventions with regard to the non-enlightened local protective deities, the reinterpretation of enlightened deities orients itself on known forms and vary these form relatively little. For example, attributes, the number of heads and limbs or so may change, but the principal characteristics of the deity remain.
- 29 That a Buddhist teaching ought to be deriving from India to be considered authentic and authoritative has already been established in the 8th century, when the Indian party won a public debate at the first Buddhist monastery in Tibet, Samye (bSam- yas). The bond to the Indian Buddhist traditions was later reinforced by invitations to famous Indian scholars to Tibet, the most noticeable example being the scholar Atisa, 956–1054, who visited Tibet in the mid 11th century.
- 30 Jackson offers an introduction on how to read teaching lineage in Tibetan paintings in the first volume of an online journal available at: <http://iris.lib.virginia.edu/tibet/collections/journal/JIATS.html>.
- 31 See the second example in Christian Luczanits. "Art-historical aspects of dating Tibetan art." In *Dating Tibetan Art. Essays on the Possibilities and Impossibilities of Chronology from the Lempertz Symposium*, Cologne, edited by Ingrid Kreide-Damani, 25–57. Wiesbaden: Ludwig Reichert Verlag, 2003.
- 32 In the course of history the native gods, ghost and demons have been reinterpreted from a Buddhist perspective. Some of these groups are now considered to represent rebirths of historical personages that have become ghosts because they were opposed to Buddhism or acted against it. Cf. for example the enumeration after Philippe Cornue in Geoffrey Samuel. *Civilized shamans: Buddhism in Tibetan societies*. Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993: 162–63.
- 33 See Gyatso, Janet. "Down with the demoness: reflections on a feminine ground in Tibet." In *Feminine ground: essays on women and Tibet*, edited by Janice Dean Willis, 33–51. Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion Publications, 1995.
- 34 In this case the historical Padmasambhava appears to have been an exorcist and magician who visited 8th century Tibet with relatively little success. This can be concluded from the fact that in the earliest historical sources, especially the 'Testament of the Ba-clan' (sBa-bzhed, Stein, Rolf A. *Une chronique ancienne de bSam- yas: sBa-bzhed*. Paris: Publications de l'Institut des Hautes Études Chinoises, 1961; dBa'-bzhed, Wangdu, Pasang, and Hildegard Diemberger. dBa' bzhad. *The Royal Narrative Concerning the Bringing of the Buddha's Doctrine to Tibet*. Translation and Facsimile Edition of the Tibetan Text, Beiträge zur Kultur und Geistesgeschichte Asiens Nr. 37. Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2000), his role is ambiguous and quite limited.
- 35 A good example is the narration of the early history of Tibet in *The Clear Mirror* (rGyal-rabs gsal-ba'i me-long) of Sakyapa Sönam Gyeltsen (Sa-skyapa-bSod-nams-rgyal-mthsan (1312–1375). *The Clear Mirror. A traditional account of Tibet's Golden Age. Sakyapa Sonam Gyeltsen's Clear Mirror on Royal Genealogy* (rGyal-rab gsal-ba'i me long). Translated by McComas Taylor and Lama Choedak Yuthok. Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion Publications, 1996).
- 36 A beautiful rather recent example of the three religious kings is in the collection of the Tibet House Museum, New Delhi (www.himalayanart.org, no. 72040).
- 37 The first four manifestations are part of the frequently depicted group of the eight main manifestations of Padmasambhava.
- 38 The different manifestations of Padmasambhava are most comprehensively discussed in Gerd-Wolfgang Essen and Tsering Tashi Thingo. *Padmasambhava. Leben und Wundertaten des grossen tantrischen Meisters aus Kaschmir im Spiegel der tibetischen Bildkunst*. Köln: DuMont, 1991.
- 39 The origin and parallels of the cults of Padmasambhava and Avalokiteśvara have mainly been explored in Kapstein, Matthew T. *The Tibetan Assimilation of Buddhism. Conversion, contestation, and memory*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- 40 More details on the teacher as Buddha are found in Christian Luczanits. "Art-historical aspects of dating Tibetan art." In *Dating Tibetan Art. Essays on the Possibilities and Impossibilities of Chronology from the Lempertz Symposium*, Cologne, edited by Ingrid Kreide-Damani, 25–57. Wiesbaden: Ludwig Reichert Verlag, 2003: Example One.
- 41 In 1578 the title Dalai Lama, 'Oceanlike Teacher', was bestowed upon the third incarnation of this lineage by the Mongol ruler Althan Khan.
- 42 In 1642 Gushri Khan, a Qoshot/Khoshot Mongol, provided the military power to 'unify' Tibet for the Gelugpa school.
- 43 Most significantly the teachings of the Jonangpa were forbidden and the Karmapa and other incarnations of this school came under severe political pressure.
- 44 See Smith, E. Gene. *Among Tibetan Texts. History & Literature of the Himalayan Plateau*. Edited by Kurtis R. Schaeffer, *Studies in Indian and Tibetan Buddhism*. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2001: 82.