

VISUAL DHARMA: THE BUDDHIST ART OF TIBET

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BACKGROUND AND HISTORY

The art of Tibet is entirely based on the spirituality of Buddhism. The pure native Tibetan art of the Pön (Tt.: bon)* tradition was lost with the coming of Buddhism to Tibet from India in the ninth century. The main source of the Tibetan art that has flourished since then is the iconographical art of India with strong influences from China and Persia.

One of the first examples of Buddhist art in Tibet was produced in the time of King Songtsen Gampo (Tt.: srong btsan sgam po; reigned 608–649 A.D.), well before Buddhism was generally known in the country. Songtsen Gampo married Nepalese and Chinese princesses, both Buddhists. They each brought their family shrines with them to Lhasa, the seat of the monarchy, and the king built temples there to house them. These first landmarks of Buddhist art survive until the present day. It was King Trisong Detsen (Tt.: khri srong lde btsan), the great-grandson of Songtsen Gampo, who invited to Tibet Padmasambhava (better known as Guru Rinpoche, "precious guru") and Śāntaraṣita, the great spiritual masters who converted the Tibetan people, learned and ordinary, and established Buddhism as the national religion. These two also, with King Trisong Detsen, founded Samyê (Tt.: bsam yas) monastery (plate 52), Tibet's first, which was to become the fundamental monument of Buddhism in that country.

In the process of expanding his kingdom in the direction of Persia, Trisong Detsen visited and sacked a religious establishment there at a place called Batra. From there he brought back Persian art and ritual objects as well as Persian master craftsmen. Along with the objects came Pehar, the guardian spirit of the temple at Batra. Pehar (plate 47) was tamed and converted by Guru Rinpoche and became then the guardian deity of Samyê.

Chinese influence also entered Tibet during this period, especially in the form of Ch'an Buddhism, the Chinese precursor of Zen. Eighty Ch'an masters came to teach in central Tibet and attracted many Tibetan disciples. This strongly implanted the influence of Chinese Buddhist ritual and generally provided inspiration in the newly converted country.

The monasteries which began to be built were modeled on the palaces of Tibetan royalty. Even the interior designs and seating arrangements were copied from the audience halls of Tibetan kings. Iconographical subjects were painted on the walls as frescoes and three-dimensional shrines were built and sculptured images of deities placed upon them.

* The text and Catalogue of the Exhibition will use the following abbreviations: Tt.: Tibetan transliteration; T.: Tibetan pronunciation; S.: Sanskrit.

Thangkas or scrollpaintings were, from the first, religious in nature. The first thangkas originated in India and depicted the Wheel of Life (plate 53), a sort of diagram showing the world of samsara and how to get out of it. Pilgrims carried them on their backs and unrolled them in village squares along their way for use in illustrating their talks on the basic truths of Buddhism.

Thangkas developed much wider use in Tibet, a country where for a long time a large portion of the population was nomadic. In nomadic Tibet, it was the practice of local rulers to travel about their regions setting up their princely camps in various places and holding court in great, richly appointed tents. The Tibetan religious orders adopted this pattern from them. Groups of monks moved over the country, pitching camp in the highlands in summer and in the lowlands in winter. The abbots, as they rode in the caravans, went like kings, wearing high gold hats of office and surrounded by attendants carrying banners. The monks were great in numbers and carried with them everything necessary for a full-scale religious establishment. According to the *Book of the Crystal Rosary*, when the seventh Karmapa, Chötrag Gyamtso (Tt.: chos grags rgyamtso, 1454–1506) traveled, it required five hundred mules to carry the Kanjur (Tt.: bka' 'gyur; S.: Tripiṭaka) and other religious books. He was accompanied by ten thousand monks with fifteen hundred tents. Portable shrines were brought and full ritual paraphernalia, so that what amounted to complete monasteries could be set up in the tents. Thangkas, being portable, were used instead of frescoes. This nomadic monasticism was a fundamental part of Tibetan spiritual life; one of the Tibetan words for monastery, *gar*, in use to this day, means “camp.”

As the traveling monasteries were offered land and forts by local kings and landowners, they hung their thangkas in the shrine rooms of the permanent buildings. Ceilings and columns were painted with decorative work. Manuscripts were illuminated. Large mandalas (plates 48, 49, 50) were painted to place under the shrines. There were also small card paintings to be used in rituals.

The word *thangka* comes from the Tibetan *thang yig*, which means “annal” or “written record.” The ending *yig*, which means “letter” and carries the sense of “written,” is replaced by the ordinary substantive ending *ka*. Thus the word *thangka* has the sense of a record.

There are three predominant schools of Tibetan *thangka* painting. The Kadam (Tt.: bka' gdams), the early classical school (plate 3), shows simplicity, spaciousness and basic richness. Menri (Tt.: sman ris) the later classical school (plate 30) originated in the fifteenth century with an artist known as Menla Töndrup (Tt.: sman bla don grub) from a family of great physicians. Its style maintains the simplicity and spaciousness with a greater emphasis on richness of detail, there being more Persian influence. New Menri (Tt.: Mensa; Tt.: sman gsar), a later development of the Menri School in the late seventeenth century, is quite, one might say, baroque and overwhelmingly colorful, perhaps intimidatingly rich (plate 17). There is a great emphasis on curves at the expense of straight lines and very little open space. The third main school, the Karma Gardri (Tt.: karma sgar bris) School (plate 29) was developed in the sixteenth century, mainly by the eighth Karmapa, Mikyö Dorjê (Tt.: mi bskyod rdo rje, 1507-1554). This style was further elaborated by the renowned master Chökyi Jungnê (Tt.: chos kyi 'byung gnas, 1700–1774), the eighth Dai Situ (Tt.: Ta'i Situ) and founder of Pepung (Tt.: dpal' spung) monastery, at a time when there was a general renaissance in Tibetan Buddhist art, particularly in the area of *rūpas* (sculptured images). The Karma Gardri style is clear and precise, spacious and, in places, rich. It shows marked Chinese influence, evidenced by the use of pastel colors and prominent stylized features of landscape.

The art of thangka painting was a family trade, passed on from father to son in a long apprenticeship. When a thangka, a fresco or the embellishment of a monastery was commissioned, the master was accompanied in the work by a group of students, including his sons. The master long as it took to complete the work. They were presented with gifts at various times, usually cheese, grain, jewelry, or clothes.

The traditional support for a thangka is white linen. Silk was used on rare occasions. This cloth, the *rê shi* (Tt.: ras gzhi, "cloth background"), is stretched on a wooden frame. It is then prepared with a base of chalk mixed with gum arabic. The first step is a freehand charcoal sketch by the master. The charcoal is made by baking wood of tamarisk in a metal tube. The master then goes over the sketch in black ink and marks the various areas according to the colors that are to be put in by the apprentices.

Traditionally, blue is made from ground lapis lazuli, red is vermilion from cinnabar; yellow is made from sulphur, green from tailor's greenstone. Pink is made from flower petals and, more recently, also from cosmetics imported from China or India.

To make a brush, the tip of a stick, usually tamarisk or bamboo, is dipped in glue. The artist carefully places the hairs, one by one. Best is the hair of the sable or of a small Himalayan wildcat called *sa* (Tt.: gsa'). Ideally, the hair should be pulled from the tail of a live animal, since thus it remains more resilient. The hairs having been placed on the stick, they are bound by a silk thread, also dipped in glue.

When the basic colors are filled in by the apprentices, the master goes over the work, shading with lighter colors derived from flowers and vegetables. Finally he retouches with gold. An apprentice burnishes the gold with a roundpointed instrument made from an agate.

Traditionally, the eyes of the deities were left for last so they could be painted in at a special celebration called "opening the eyes."

When the painting is completed it is mounted on cloth. Originally there were two borders, one of red brocade, one of blue. Later yellow brocade also became acceptable and the modern style has three brocade borders, yellow, red and blue. In the center of the borders below the painting is placed a square of particularly elaborate brocade, which is known as the "door." In some sense the brocade borders represent an edifice which houses the world of the painting. The "door" provides an entrance into that world.

The thangkas are covered for protection with red and yellow silk veils, red and yellow being the colors used for the clothing of the sangha (community of the dharma). Two red ribbons hang over the veils. These are known as *lung nön* (Tt.: rlung gnon), "wind holders." These ribbons hark back to the time when thangkas were hung in tents and wind required them to be tied against the wall. The rolling sticks at the bottom of the brocade are finished with gold or silver knobs.

Occasionally thangkas were done in silk appliqué (plates 16, 36) or embroidered on silk (plates 31, 34).

Sculptured images in the traditional manner are first modeled in sealing wax (T.: be; Tt.: 'bes). Clay is molded onto a wax image and the wax melted away. The metal cast in the clay molds is usually pure copper. Very old images are found to have been cast in bell metal, a mixture of copper, silver and pewterlike alloys. Once cast, the images are gilded. Then they are often highlighted with painted colors. Ornaments are sometimes inlaid with jewels and, quite frequently, the hair, lips and eyes are touched with color. There is a special "opening of the eyes" ceremony, just as with thangkas, when the eyes are painted in. The images are hollow and after the "eye-opening" they are consecrated in a ceremony which involves filling them with relics and mantras. Before the bottom is sealed, as the very last thing, grains of precious stones are put into the image to add a sense of basic richness. It is on account of this practice that images have frequently been broken into by those hoping to find valuable gems.

As a social phenomenon, making images was much the same as thangka painting. The art and lore was passed down in families and through apprenticeship. A sculptor and his apprentices having come to a monastery to provide it with a new treasure, were feted, given gifts and paid just as were the thangka painters.

It is widely thought that thangka painting is a form of meditation. This is not true. Though all the thangkas have religious subjects, most of the artists were and are lay people. As has been said, the art is passed down in families. It is true that a master thangka painter has a knowledge of iconographical detail that might easily awe a novice monk. Naturally, also, artists have a sense of reverence for the sacredness of their work. Nevertheless, the painting of thangkas is primarily a craft rather than a religious exercise. One exception is the *nyin thang* ("one-day thangka") practice in which, as part of a particular *sādhana*, while repeating the appropriate mantra, uninterruptedly, without sleeping, a monk paints a thangka in one twenty-four hour period.

Thangkas were painted on commission for noteworthy social occasions; for the welfare of a newly born infant, for the liberation of one just dead, at the commencement of some new project. Often artistically inclined gurus or abbots painted thangkas to glorify their lineages or convey the richness or inspiration of their tradition.

Thangkas are used as objects of adoration, but mainly as a means to refine a meditative visualization. They are displayed over shrines which are bedecked with butter lamps, incense and offerings and ritual objects of many kinds. Thangkas of the lives of saints are displayed for the celebrations of holidays associated with them. Special thangkas painted by great teachers of particular lineages are also hung for yearly ceremonies. Practitioners hang the thangkas of their yidams or gurus over the shrines in their rooms as constant reminders of their presence. Formal rooms were hung with thangkas in Tibet to receive important guests such as kings, government officials or eminent spiritual teachers. Sometimes thangkas hung in the audience halls of local rulers.

Thangkas were never bought or sold, but changed hands only as gifts.

ELEMENTS OF ICONOGRAPHY

Thangkas and other forms of Tibetan art express the vision of tantric Buddhism. The subjects they depict are definite elements in that view of the world.

Thangkas and sculptured images fall into six general categories according to their subject matter: 1) enlightened beings, 2) yidams, 3) dharmapālas, 4) mandalas and stūpas, 5) illustrations of the teaching, 6) yantras.

The iconography of tantric Buddhism, as all other aspects of it, is inspired by the teaching of the five buddha principles: vajra, ratna, padma, karma, buddha. These are the five basic energies present everywhere. They are often known as the buddha families. Each is particularly associated with a certain ordinary emotion which can be transmuted into a certain definite wisdom or aspect of the awakened state of mind. The buddha families are also associated with colors, elements, directions, seasons, landscapes—with any aspect of the phenomenal world.

As has been said, thangkas are mainly for the purpose of refining visualization, which is a tantric or vajrayāna meditation technique. The vajrayāna is the third and most advanced level of Buddhist spiritual training. To arrive at this stage, students are expected first to undergo intellectual and meditative training on the hīnayāna and mahāyāna levels. In hīnayāna they must understand the basic truths of egolessness, impermanence and suffering as well as practice śamatha and vipaśyanā meditation. In mahāyāna, a competent master must show them a different way of seeing reality, from the perspective of śūnyatā, or emptiness.

At this point, tantric practice begins with the four foundation practices: one hundred thousand prostrations, one hundred thousand repetitions of the refuge formula, one hundred thousand repetitions of the one-hundred-syllable Vajrasattva mantra, one hundred thousand presentations of mandala offerings. Some schools also add one hundred thousand repetitions of the bodhisattva vow. All of these tantric practices are accompanied by a visualization.

Visualization is not a magical practice nor worship of an external deity. It is a process of identification with a particular principle of inspiration and energy, with conviction in its presence. The visualization is preceded and terminated by the śūnyatā experience, which dissolves the ego's tendency to hang onto something solid. It has been said that visualizing without śūnyatā is dangerous; it accumulates fixed ground for ego and leads to the achievement of ego-hood.

There is a progress of sophistication in the practice of visualization as the practitioner develops through the tantric levels of teaching. It begins with regarding what is visualized as an object of devotion; the process then becomes the acknowledgment of a transcendental presence; finally visualization means unifying with the wisdom-body of a deity.

Enlightened Beings

Thangkas of buddhas, gurus and bodhisattvas all fall into this category. Such figures are visualized in order to identify with the lineage of spiritual transmission from teacher to disciple, to surrender and to take refuge.

Taking refuge is a process of freeing oneself from the notion of an external refuge. It is often said in the Buddhist scriptures that one should not take refuge in an external god or in external protectors, material or psychological, such as parents, relatives or wealth. Instead one should take refuge in the guru-buddha, the embodiment of the dharma, which is the nature of reality itself. Surrendering means becoming an empty vessel, becoming emotionally ready to receive the teaching.

Buddhas. There are three types of buddhas: *nirmāṇakāya* buddhas, *sambhogakāya* buddhas, *dharmakāya* buddhas. The main *nirmāṇakāya* buddhas are the “buddhas of the three times” (plate 2), that is, the buddha of the past age, *Dīpaṅkara*; the buddha of the present age, *Śākyamuni*; and the buddha of the future age *Maitreya*. The *nirmāṇakāya* buddhas are those having human bodies and generally sharing the human condition. They wear the three robes of a monk, signifying the complete attainment of discipline, meditation and wisdom. Their hair is surmounted by an unadorned topknot.

Sambhogakāya buddhas are the *yidams* (see below). There are two *dharmakāya* buddhas to be found in the iconography. *Samantabhadra* (T.: *Küntu Zangpo*; Tt.: *kun tu bzang po*) not to be confused with the *bodhisattva* of the same name, is the *dharmakāya* buddha according to the Old Translation School. He is depicted naked, symbolizing the formlessness and simplicity of the *dharmakāya*. He wears the topknot, is dark in color and holds his hands in the meditation *mudrā*. *Vajradhara* (T.: *Dorje Chang*; Tt.: *rdorje chang*, plate 6) is the *dharmakāya* buddha according to the New Translation School. He appears wearing *sambhogakāya* garments and ornaments, the same as those of the peaceful *yidams*. *Samantabhadra* and *Vajradhara* are the primordial buddhas, who represent the totally unconditioned quality of enlightened mind. According to the New Translation School, *Śākyamuni* took the form of *Vajradhara* to teach the tantras.

Bodhisattvas. The *bodhisattvas* depicted in the iconography are the *bodhisattva mahāsattvas*, the “great *bodhisattvas*.” They are disciples of the Buddha *Śākyamuni* on the *sambhogakāya* level, ideal figures who are the complete expression of *bodhisattvahood*. Each according to his nature works ceaselessly to bring enlightenment to all sentient beings. They also act as spokesmen for sentient beings to the *nirmāṇakāya* buddhas. Often, it is said, sentient beings are too confused even to seek the teachings; therefore the *bodhisattvas* approach the buddhas, asking that they turn the wheel of *dharma*. They also wear the garments and ornaments of the peaceful *yidams*, but in the manner of princes rather than kings. Examples are *Avalokiteśvara* (plates 13-16), *Mañjuśrī*, the *Tārās* (plates 11, 12, 17).

Gurus. The *guru* *thangkas* show the accomplishments, powers and attributes of the great teachers. For example, *Guru Rinpoche* (plate 19) appears wearing several different layers of clothing. He wears the white underrobe of *vajrayāna*; over that he wears the three robes of a *hīnayāna* monk. Outside these he wears a blue kimono-type gown (T.: *per*; Tt.: *ber*), a vermilion cloak and lotus hat. The gown, cloak and hat are the costume of a king representing the universal monarch of *mahāyāna*. These garments signify that he has accomplished all three *yānas* and can manifest to his students on whichever of these levels is appropriate.

Other *gurus* are depicted wearing the robes appropriate to their lifestyle of *yogi*, monk or *pandit*. They hold in their hands the appropriate attributes: a gold wheel for power, sword and book for *pandit*, begging bowl for monk, skullcup for *yogi*, etc. The richness of the lineage and the teaching is symbolized by highly ornamented robes and richness of detail.

Yidams

Yidam (S.: *iṣṭa devatā*) means personal deity. *Yidams* are *sambhogakāya* buddhas, particular forms of which are visualized in accordance with the individual psychological make-up of the practitioner. A practitioner's *yidam* represents his particular characteristic expression of buddha-nature. Identifying with his *yidam*, therefore, means identifying with his own basic nature, free from its distorted aspects. Through seeing his basic nature in this impersonal and

universalized way, all aspects of it are transmuted into the wisdom of the spiritual path. This leads directly to the service of all sentient beings, because in this way the practitioner becomes fearless. His hesitation gone, his action automatically becomes skillful and lucid; he is able to subdue what needs to be subdued and care for whatever needs his care.

The student first develops intense devotion towards his guru. This relationship with the guru makes it possible for the student to experience an intuitive kinship with the guru's lineage and then with his own yidam.

Yidams belong to particular buddha families. For example Cakrasamvara (plates 31, 32, 33) belongs to the padma family, Vajrabhairava (plates 35, 36) to the ratna, the Vajrakīlaya form of Vajrakumāra (plate 50) to the karma family. Yidams are not to be equated with the patron saints or guardian angels found in the Jewish, Christian and Muslim traditions. They are not regarded as protectors from danger or saviors. They are simply acknowledgments of the student's basic energy. The student visualizes the outstanding characteristics of the yidam until he achieves complete union with him.

There are different kinds of yidams. There are wrathful yidams, peaceful yidams and some semiwrathful yidams. The three mentioned above are examples of wrathful yidams. Wrathful yidams are always associated with what is known in tantric terms as "vajra anger." Vajra anger is without hatred, a dynamic energy which, no matter which of the five wisdoms it belongs to, is invincible. It is completely indestructible, imperturbable, because it was not created but discovered as an original quality. Wrathful and warlike, it devastates the tendency towards idiot compassion and cuts through the hesitations that come from disbelieving in one's buddha-nature. Doubt is destroyed and confusion is chopped into pieces. Thus the wrathful yidams are portrayed treading on the corpse of ego, wearing ornaments of human bones and skulls, drinking blood, holding lethal weapons of all kinds.

In general the wrathful figures wear the five-skull crown, the garland of fifty-two heads, the six bone ornaments, the six jewel ornaments, the five ornaments of the nāga castes. The five-skull crown exhibits the five kleśas (emotional hindrances) as ornaments of the dharma. These are anger, pride, passion, jealousy, stupidity. The garland of fifty-two heads symbolizes triumph over the fifty-two kinds of neurotic concepts. The six bone ornaments are necklace, garland, armlets, bracelets, anklets, crossed bands across the torso. The jewel ornaments double the bone ones. The nāgas, snakelike water spirits, represent passion. The nāga ornaments represent the five levels of the Hindu caste system in the nāga world, thus the five levels of passion. The ornaments are a ribbon in the hair, armlets, bracelets, body garlands, anklets. They signify that the passions have been transmuted into attributes of dharmic action. Many of the wrathful yidams also wear the tigerskin (male) or leopardskin (female) skirt representing fearlessness, the elephantskin shawl representing strength, the humanskin shawl representing compassion.

The peaceful yidams inspire the student's non-aggression and gentleness. Rather than destroying the dullness and hesitation of ego, identification with the peaceful yidams awakens it into openness. The peaceful yidams wear the raiment of archaic Aryan kings. They wear crowns and hold scepters and attributes such as the vajra, a golden wheel, wish-fulfilling gems, a bowl of amṛta (the elixir of immortality), etc.

Peaceful yidams wear a five-medallioned tiara with gems in the colors of the five buddha

families. They wear a triple topknot adorned with ornaments of gold, diamonds, lapis lazuli and ribbons. They wear three necklaces, earrings, armlets, bracelets and anklets, all of gold and lapis lazuli. They wear rainbowcolored, pantlike lower garments under a short brocade skirt. The upper body is naked except for a shortsleeved blouse coming just below the nipples and, over it, a short, draped mantle. A long scarf floats from the neck.

The semiwrathful (T.: *shimatro*; Tt.: *shi ma khro*) yidams are described as a union of passion and anger. They both attract and reject. In visualizing them, the practitioner feels his basic being enriched by a sense of resourcefulness and flexibility in that magnetization or destruction could both be expressions of the awakened state of mind.

Yidams have both male and female forms. The male wrathful yidam is known as *heruka* which means "blood drinker," he who drinks the blood of ego. The female wrathful yidam is called a *dākinī*. The *dākinīs* are tricky and playful. The male and female of the peaceful yidams are known as *bhagavat* and *bhagavatī* meaning "glorious one."

The male figures signify awakened energy, skillful means, bliss. The female aspect is compassion, emptiness and intellect (which, as the emptying of confusion, is passive rather than active). The emptiness signifies fundamental accommodation and also ultimate fertility in the sense that emptiness is the mother of form. Through union with the *heruka*, the *dākinī* can give birth to enlightenment. The *dākinīs* in general reinforce the nature of their consorts and the *bhagavatī* has the role of asking the *bhagavat* on behalf of all sentient beings to proclaim the teachings.

In general the union of the male and female aspects, known as the *yab-yum* ("father-mother") form, is a symbol that skillful action is impossible without compassion, that energy cannot be effective without intellect and that bliss is impossible without emptiness. This symbolism denotes the interaction of these elements as aspects of enlightenment, rather than on the ordinary confused level of indulgence in passion and aggression.

Dharmapālas

Dharmapāla means "guardian of the teaching." The function of the dharmapāla is to protect the practitioner from deceptions and sidetracks. If the practitioner ventures onto dangerous ground, unhealthy for his progress on the path, the dharmapāla principle pulls him back violently. As the practitioner becomes more closely identified with the teaching, the energy of the dharmapālas begins to fall under his control. A student cannot, however, come in contact with his dharmapāla principle until his guru has brought him into relationship with his yidam.

The two main types of dharmapālas are *mahākālas* (male) and *mahākālīs* (female), on the one hand, and *lokapālas* on the other. All dharmapālas, with the exception of most *lokapālas*, are wrathful. The *mahākālas* (plate 43) wear the ornaments and bear the attributes of *herukas*. *Mahā* means "great"; *kāla*, *kālī* means "black." Thus they are usually black or dark in color. The main role of the *mahākālas* is to fulfill the four karmas or enlightened actions. These are pacifying, enriching, magnetizing and destroying. Pacifying means causing psychological imbalance or physical sickness to subside. Enriching means imbuing experience with a sense of richness; also giving physical wealth and long life. Magnetizing means attracting power and powerful relationships which give control over situations. Destroying means annihilating confusion and obstacles.

The mahākālīs also wear the bone and jewel ornaments. They usually ride a horse or mule, from whose saddle hangs a goatskin bag of poison which kills the enemies of the teaching. They also carry a mirror of judgment, a snake lasso and a bow and arrows. They are fierce and swift in destroying whatever obstructs the dharma. They are also tricksters who deliberately lead one into trouble if one's attention lapses. They create hallucinations which can deceive even Yama, the lord of death. They are mistresses of the realm of passion and can seduce one into samsaric involvements. They can save one from confusion or drag one into the pain of the dark age—disorder, famine, plague. For the accomplished yogi, they act as maidservants, carrying messages and doing services.

The lokapālas are protectors of the teaching and also of the nation. They are, for the most part, deities from the pre-Buddhist Pön tradition of Tibet that have been transformed by the Buddhist outlook. Notable exceptions to this are the guardians for the four directions, preserved from Indian iconography. Dhṛtarāṣṭra (T.: Yukhorkhyong; Tt.: yul 'khor skyong) is the guardian of the east; he is usually white and plays a lute. Virūdhaka (T.: Phakyêpo; Tt.: 'phags skyes po), the guardian of the south, is usually blue and carries a sword. Virūpākṣa (T.: Chenmizang; Tt.: spyang mi bzang), the guardian of the west, is red and holds a small stūpa. Vaiśravaṇa (T.: Namtösê; Tt.: rnam thos sres) is the guardian of the north; he is yellow and carries a banner.

The adoption of existing national deities by Buddhism is not unique to Tibet but also took place in China and Japan, where Taoist and Shinto deities were incorporated into the buddhadharma. The lokapālas are usually depicted riding a horse, wearing a suit of armor and bearing suitable attributes such as various weapons, pennons and banners, wish-fulfilling gems in a gold dish, lassos, etc. They are regarded by Buddhism as aspects of the national ego transmuted into destroyers of frivolous activities, unacceptable to the teaching.

Mandalas and Stūpas

The basic form of a mandala is a palace with a center and four gates in the four directions. It should be understood that mandala representations are not used as objects of contemplation in an attempt to bring about certain states of mind. Mandalas are used by practitioners who have been introduced into the practice of particular sādhanas as a sort of shrine on which to place ritual objects. The ritual objects such as vajra, bell (S.: ghaṇṭā), skullcup, etc., are placed on certain parts of the mandala in order to magnetize to it the particular deity whose attributes the objects are.

There are four traditional ways of representing mandalas: with colored sand; with five heaps of grain for the center and the four directions; by painting; by casting a three-dimensional mandala in metal.

The four directions are called east, south, west and north, but in practice they have a more personal sense. The practitioner identifies himself with the deity whose dwelling place is at the center of the mandala and the directions become his front, his right, his back, his left, with east being the front. Two-dimensional representations of mandalas are aerial views (plates 48-50). One sees four gates in the four primary directions and messengers and subprinciples of various kinds emanating out from the central figure, usually in the eight directions. (The eight directions actually stand for ten directions, by including up and down.) The mandala is, in the case of wrathful yidams, surrounded by a charnel ground, the place of birth and death, recognizable often by depictions of corpses, innards and severed limbs. The charnel ground

is the basic earth on which the mandala is built. It represents the world as a rubbish pile of existence which has been consecrated. It also represents the all-pervasiveness of impermanence. Outside that is a further circle of flames in five colors signifying the five wisdoms. This demarcates and keeps safe the area of the mandala.

Stūpas (T.: Chöten, Tt.: mchod rten) are three-dimensional forms representing the body, speech and mind of Buddha. They vary in size from altarpieces to huge monumental structures that can be seen for miles. Probably the oldest form of Buddhist art, they are repositories of sacred relics and texts and objects of simple, straightforward veneration for the teachings of Buddha. Those of any size are venerated by circumambulation, which sometimes may go on for days.

There are many variations in the design of stūpas. The basic features common to most are, from the bottom: a square base; a domelike form; thirteen tapering, round steps; a lotus form; a sun held by the crescent moon. These features can be seen as representing the five elements—earth, water, fire, air, space—as well as various aspects of the Buddhist path (see description for plate 51).

Illustrations of the Teaching

The main example of this category is the wheel of life (S.: bhavacakra; T.: sipa khorlo; Tt.: srid pa 'khor lo; plate 53). The wheel of life is unique in that it portrays the totality of the Buddhist teaching concerning samsara. This is particularly essential in that understanding the psychological nature of samsara is the working basis of the path, the first step toward enlightenment. Other forms in this category are sets of symbols of various kinds. The heap of five sense-organs stands for the five sense-consciousnesses arranged as an offering. The "eight auspicious symbols" are emblematic of the basic nature of the Buddhist teaching. The ornament of the "triple gem" stands for the buddha, the dharma and the sangha (community of the teaching). There are many traditional ornaments considered as symbols of the auspicious and beneficial nature of some aspect of the buddhadharma.

Yantras

A yantra is a design incorporating elements of iconography which is used as a charm or an amulet. Yantras are placed in houses, vehicles, on animals, carried personally. They are often accompanied by a container of consecrated ingredients such as sesame seeds, gems, minerals, herbs. Written mantras are usually included. Yantras are prepared and consecrated in special ceremonies conducted by lamas.

FIVE BUDDHA FAMILIES

Some impression concerning the nature of the five buddha-family principles is essential to an understanding of tantric Buddhist art. Direct relationships with those five energies is the basis of tantric Buddhist practice.

The five buddha principles constitute the basic mandala with vajra in the east, ratna in the south, padma in the west, karma in the north and buddha in the center.

Vajra is associated with anger, which is transmuted into mirrorlike wisdom. In the cloudiness, possessiveness and aggression of anger, there are qualities of brilliance, lucidity, great energy.

Seeing these qualities clearly in the vajra yidam, the essence of anger is spontaneously transmuted into openness and precision. Transmutation is not performed deliberately but automatically follows upon clear insight.

Vajra is associated with the element of water. Cloudy, turbulent water symbolizes the defensive and aggressive nature of anger. Clear water suggests the sharp, precise, clear reflectiveness of mirrorlike wisdom. The color white, also associated with vajra, expresses both the all-pervading ice storm of anger and the brilliant reflectiveness of mirrorlike wisdom. Vajra's direction is the east, which is connected with the dispassionate clarity of dawn. The symbol of the vajra family is the vajra (T.: dorje; Tt.: rdo rje), the thunderbolt scepter which betokens indestructibility and precision.

The energy of ratna, when expressed neurotically, is pride or arrogance, which can be transmuted into the wisdom of equanimity. Ratna is connected with the element earth and is alive to the quality of solidity or substantiality. Taking this from the neurotic angle of samsara or ego, there is the constant anxiety of not being substantial enough; so one tries to build a tower of pride that will obviate all challenge. In the enlightened energy of the ratna yidam, one comes in contact with the quality of inexhaustible richness. Seeing this, pride is spontaneously transmuted into the wisdom of equanimity. The wisdom of equanimity, imbued with generosity, sees all situations equally as ornaments of basic being.

Ratna is associated with the warmth, full sunshine and lushness of the south. Its color yellow can express either the putrescence of pride or the richness and well-being of gold. The ratna family symbol is the jewel which fulfills all wishes.

The energy of the padma family is associated with the element of fire. Distorted by ego, it expresses itself as passion. Passion can be transmuted into discriminating wisdom. A neurotic sense of insufficiency creates the ambition to possess particular aspects of the phenomenal world, to consume like flame their quality of otherness. Through experiencing a sense of total compassion in the padma yidam, passion is transmuted into an energy of enlightened relationship, which sees with warmth and clarity precisely what exists to be related to.

Padma is connected with the west and with the brilliant display of the colorful qualities of existence expressed in the sunset. Its color red evinces the seduction and heat of passion or the all-pervading warmth of compassion. The symbol of the padma family is the lotus of compassion, the purified form of passion.

Karma family energy manifests neurotically as jealousy and on the awakened level as all-accomplishing wisdom. It is the energy of the element of wind which is present everywhere, touching all corners of space. Therefore, in the neurotic manifestation, it is aware of all facets of situations as something it has to keep up with or that it is left out of. If, through relating with the karma yidam, ego's reference point is overwhelmed, the same energy becomes active in every area of situations, doing whatever needs to be done and destroying all obstacles to the fulfillment of enlightenment.

Karma is connected with the cold, stormy energetic quality of the north. Its color is green, expressing either envy or the energy of all-pervading action. The karma family symbol is either a sword or a double vajra, both of which denote the fulfillment of all actions.

The buddha energy is that which creates stupidity through the ability to play deaf, dumb and blind to anything that threatens the low-level stability created by ego. This same uncanny ability to be aware of everything in order to turn away from it can be stripped of the turning-away or ignoring function. Through the insight that comes from relating to the totally awakened form of the buddha yidam, ego's game is exposed and stupidity transmutes into the wisdom of fundamental all-pervading awareness.

The buddha family's color is the blue of its element space, which can either be just dull and blank or alive with the ubiquity of intelligence. A wheel is the symbol of the buddha family, indicating all-pervading rule.