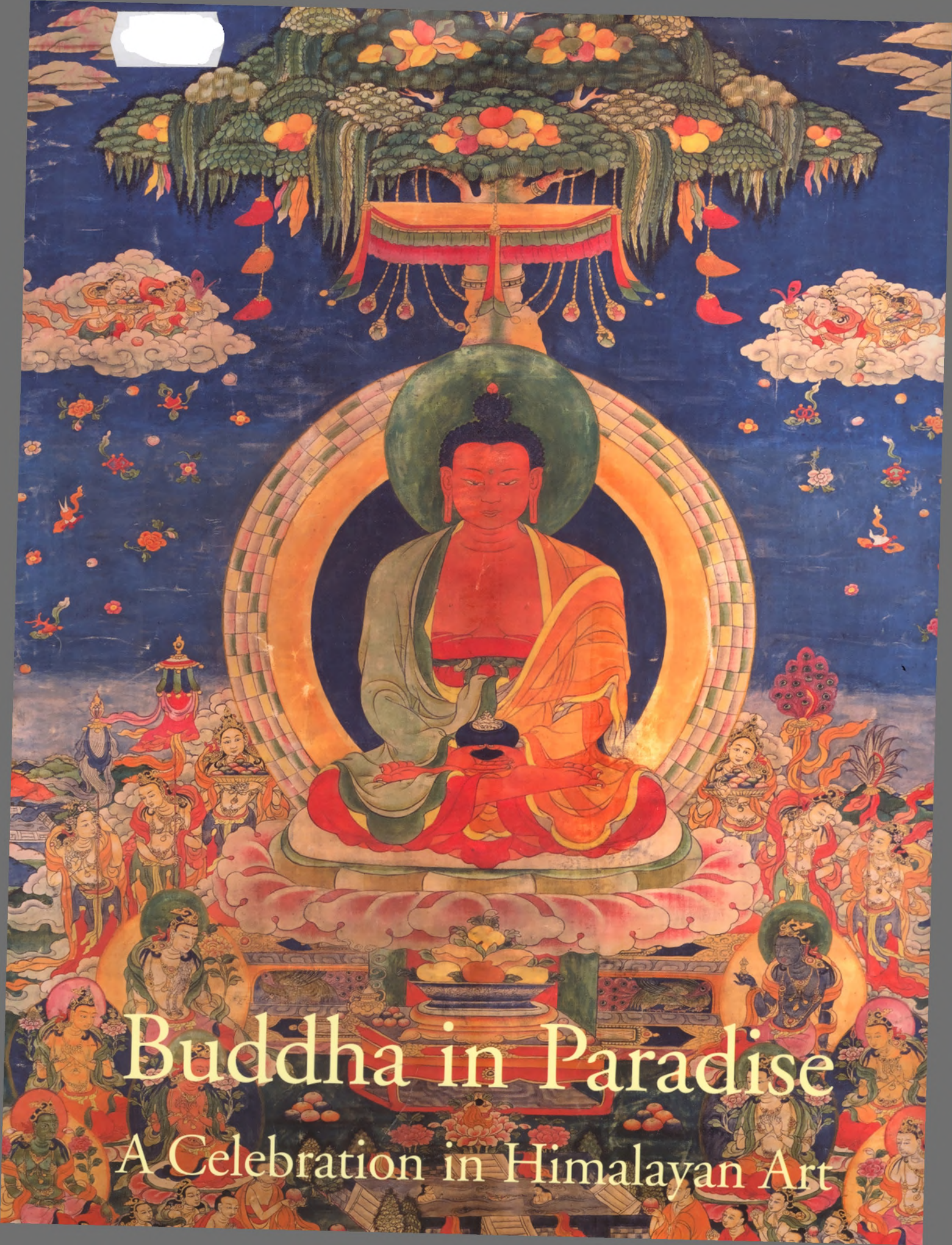
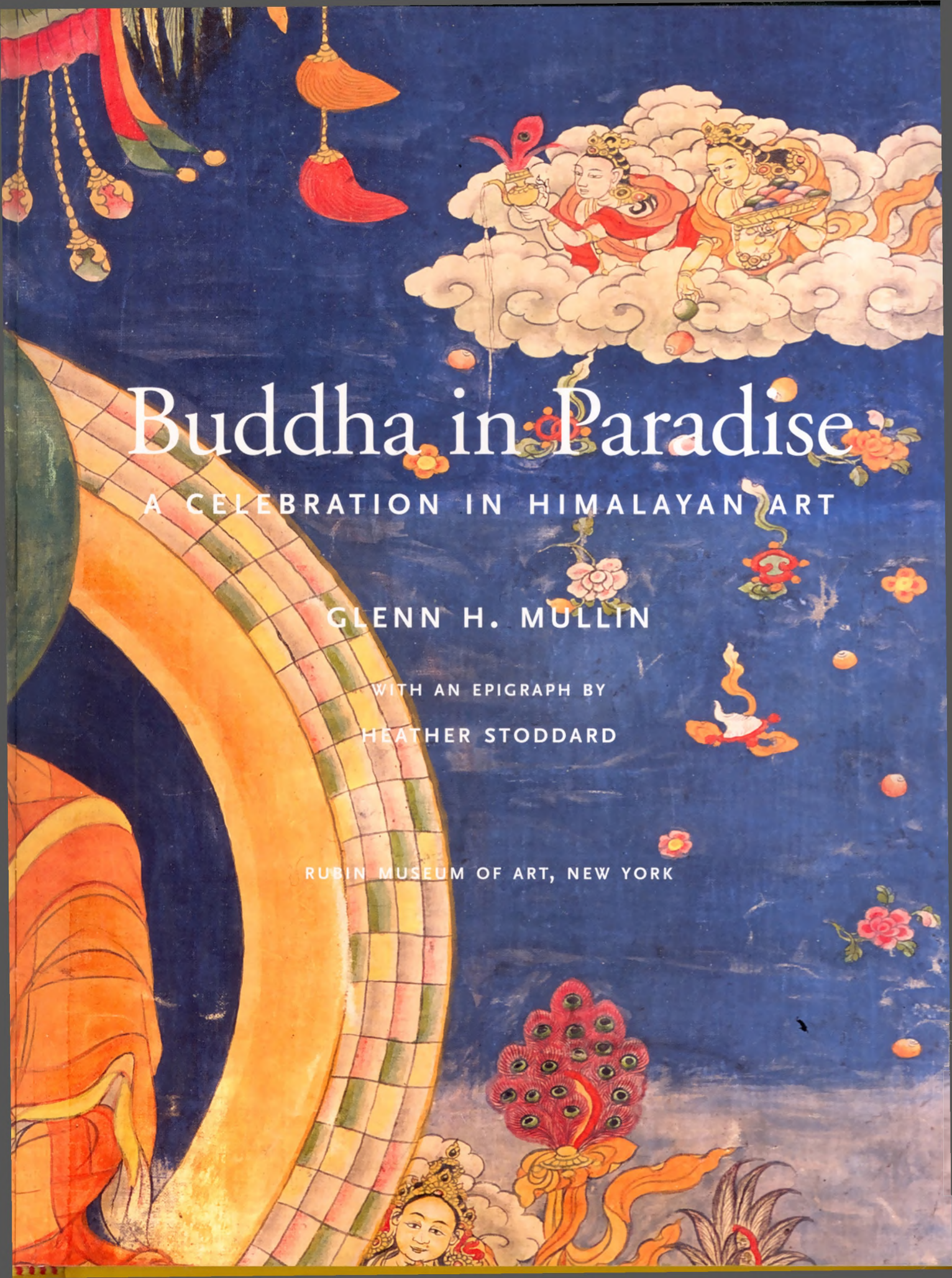


Buddha in Paradise

A Celebration in Himalayan Art



Buddha in Paradise

A CELEBRATION IN HIMALAYAN ART

GLENN H. MULLIN

WITH AN EPIGRAPH BY

HEATHER STODDARD

RUBIN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK

This catalogue is published in conjunction with an exhibition organized by the Rubin Museum of Art and presented at the Michael C. Carlos Museum, Emory University, Atlanta, October 13 through November 25, 2007, curated by Glenn H. Mullin.

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Foreword

Stories of glorious and terrible worlds that await us after death exist in many religious traditions. Philosophers, painters, and poets over the centuries have offered countless visions of these worlds: places of ultimate rest, of total satisfaction or happiness almost beyond imagining, and hell and all its myriad states.

While the works in the exhibition and catalogue *Buddha in Paradise* depict landscapes, animals, flowers, celebrations and processions, songs and dances, bliss and repose, the most prominent and powerful images are of buddhas and bodhisattvas. These guides and mentors can help us open the door to liberation from suffering, and, just as important, remind us about impermanence. In contrast to Christian and Muslim beliefs that Paradise is a final state, Paradise according to Buddhist teachings is only a way station in the endless cycle of death and rebirth (*samsara*). At its ultimate, it is a place where final enlightenment might be attained.

Strong yearnings for Paradise are evident in the artists' interest in the beyond: sketches of transference at the moment of death, a rainbow transmission of consciousness from the top of a believer's head, and a dramatic image of a goddess's vagina (*dakini's yoni*), which is a conduit to immediate rebirth in Paradise, a kind of return journey reminiscent of how we entered the present world (see pp. 141–4 and figure 66). A Buddhist Paradise, then, is a real place where suffering is nonexistent; it might be a heavenlike land (a "buddhafield"), where clothing grows on trees and food appears the moment one feels hunger, but the true marvel is the presence of a buddha there. Birth in a buddhafield is the last birth in Buddhism, and there, at the last death, one passes painlessly and fearlessly beyond all suffering.

The imagery in this exhibition reflects the beauty and the terror of our world but also the peace we might create here on earth, the harmony we might find now. Some gurus say that we are all buddhas, but we fail to recognize it. With attention turned to the next birth, people may misunderstand and strive for rebirth in Paradise. How much better it would be to realize one's own innate goodness and recognize that Paradise is already here, completely available to us at this very moment.

DONALD RUBIN
Co-founder, Rubin Museum of Art, New York
April 2007

Figure 1
Amitabha Buddha on a Crown Worn During an Initiation (or Self-Initiation) Ceremony
China or Eastern Tibet; 15th century
Pigment on paper
6.75 x 4.75 in. (17.1 x 12.1 cm)
Rubin Museum of Art
2005.37.6.3 (HAR 65550)

Note

The Michael C. Carlos Museum at Emory University is delighted to host *Buddha in Paradise* in honor of His Holiness the Dalai Lama's scheduled visit to Emory in October 2007. This exquisite exhibition of Tibetan masterpieces from the Rubin Museum of Art (RMA) in New York will premiere at the Carlos and then be shown at the RMA before traveling to other venues. The Carlos has borrowed from the RMA collections on the occasions of previous visits of the Dalai Lama to Atlanta, and this represents a continuation of that ongoing friendship.

Over the past decade Emory has become one of the foremost centers of the study of Tibetan philosophy, religion, and culture in the West. The emergence of the Emory-Tibet Partnership, which was inaugurated by the Dalai Lama during his 1998 visit, has made a great contribution to this program. Emory's extraordinary relationship with Tibetan Buddhist institutes of higher learning in India, especially Drepung Loseling Monastery, places it at the forefront of American universities offering Tibetan Buddhist studies. Through this program, Emory also assists the Tibetan community in the field of education, including a new and historic initiative to develop and implement a comprehensive science education program in Tibetan monastic institutions.

The timing of *Buddha in Paradise* at the Carlos is doubly auspicious. We originally planned for the exhibition to coincide with the visit by His Holiness, and a few months after this decision was made, the announcement came that His Holiness had accepted the invitation to be Presidential Distinguished Professor at Emory, the only appointment of this nature he has ever accepted.

We would like to thank Shelley and Donald Rubin and the staff of RMA for providing the art and expertise for this unique exhibition of Himalayan masterpieces. We are also grateful to Glenn H. Mullin for generously serving as curator for the exhibition and also for his guidance and assistance in the formative years of the Emory-Tibet Partnership.

BONNIE SPEED
Director
Michael C. Carlos Museum
Emory University

GESHE LOBSANG TENZIN NEGI, PHD
Director, Emory-Tibet Partnership
Senior Lecturer, Department of Religion
Emory University

Preface

A few years ago Donald Rubin, at the Rubin Museum of Art (RMA) in New York, asked me to put together a list of a dozen ideas for Himalayan art exhibitions that I thought would demonstrate the beauty and depth of Tibetan art, with an eye to serving the special needs of university museums across the country. As such, the exhibitions should be fun and enlightening for students as well as the general public. In addition, the themes should be relevant not only to students of art but should also offer avenues of appreciation to those involved in other disciplines, such as religious studies, Asian history, psychology, and sociology. And they should be sufficiently broad so as to have relevance to museums not affiliated with universities.

We began the project with *The Female Buddhas: Women of Enlightenment in Tibetan Mysticism*. The exhibition opened in Atlanta at Oglethorpe University Museum of Art in 2001. Later RMA presented a revised and expanded version of the exhibition.

This was followed by *The Flying Mystics of Tibetan Buddhism*, which was shown at the Oglethorpe University Museum from January through August 2004, and later RMA presented an edited version.

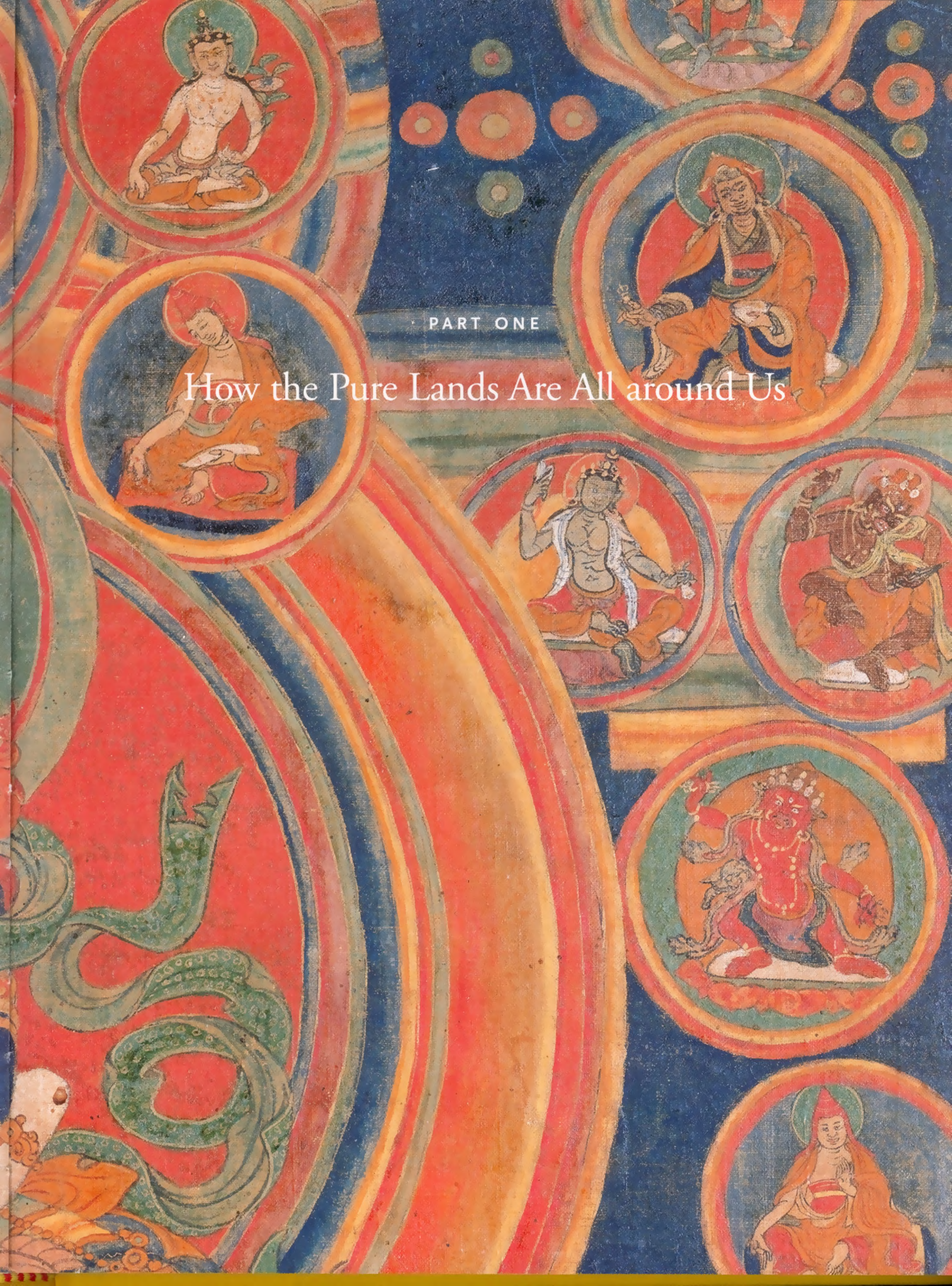
Buddha in Paradise, the third effort in our ongoing project, will premiere at the Michael C. Carlos Museum in Atlanta in honor of the Dalai Lama's October 2007 visit to Emory University. His Holiness is scheduled to be the first official viewer at the Carlos, and he will perform a brief blessing ceremony at that time.

The title *Buddha in Paradise* was originally coined by my old friend Professor Lloyd Nick of the Oglethorpe University Museum. I had worked with Lloyd and Geshey Lobzang Tenzin Negi of the Loseling Institute in 1996 to bring to Atlanta an exhibition of sacred art belonging to the Dalai Lama in honor of the Summer Olympics (www.museum.oglethorpe.edu/mystical.htm) and also worked with Lloyd on the two exhibitions mentioned above, *The Female Buddha* and *The Flying Mystics*. We worked together again on *Portals to Shangri-La: Masterpieces from Buddhist Mongolia*, which was shown at the Oglethorpe University Museum from February to August of 2006.

Portals to Shangri-La was in honor of the 800th anniversary of Mongolian statehood and was part of a multi-university program in the Greater Atlanta Area in celebration of Mongolian contributions to world civilization. The exhibition was originally planned as a loan from the Zanabazar National Fine Arts Museum in Mongolia, but the collapse of the Mongolian government in January 2006 complicated the export of the works. The exhibition was finally curated from the collections of eight American institutions and individuals, with Shelley and Donald Rubin in New York being the major lender.

It has been an honor and a pleasure to work with RMA on *Buddha in Paradise*. My deepest thanks to Don Rubin for his active participation; indeed, he was more of a co-curator than a distant witness to the project. And special thanks to Helen Abbott, who supervised the catalogue, and Jeff Watt, who generously acted as technical consultant.

GLENN H. MULLIN
Atlanta, December 31, 2006



PART ONE

How the Pure Lands Are All around Us

How the Pure Lands Are All around Us

In every atom there exists buddhafields,
As numerous as all the atoms in the world.
Each of these buddhafields is filled with uncountable buddhas,
And each buddha is surrounded by myriad bodhisattvas.
To all these dwellers in sublime ways, I turn my attention.

All atoms within all the directions
Abide within the space of a single hair.
An ocean of buddhas within an ocean of buddhafields
Performing enlightened activities for an ocean of eons.[1]

—From the *Bhadracharya Pranidana*

Figure 2
Padma Sambhava as Buddha Vajradhara, Male and Female in Union
Tibet; 17th century
Pigment on cloth
28 x 20 in. (71.1 x 50.8 cm)
Rubin Museum of Art
F1997.31.6 (HAR 403)

The all-pervasive nature of the enlightened beings and their pure energy fields are reflected in this sublime portrait of the eighth-century master Padma Sambhava, regarded universally as the forefather of the Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism. The primordial Buddha Samantabhadra sits naked in meditation at the top center, representing the *dharmakaya*, or formless aspect of enlightenment.

The upper section of the tangka depicts numerous mandala deities popular in seventeenth-century Tibet. The lower part depicts various Nyingma lineage masters who accomplished enlightenment in their lifetimes. All these masters taught the Pure Land doctrines as part of their spiritual legacies.

The most common Sanskrit name for Pure Land is *buddhaksetra*, which the Tibetans translate as *sangyey zhing kham*. These terms literally mean "buddhafield" or "buddhaworld." We also frequently encounter the term *dakpai zhing kham* in Tibetan literature, or Pure Lands.

In a general sense, a buddhafield is a type of higher paradise, where those born can work in a more user-friendly environment toward the goal of the attainment of enlightenment. Buddhafields are to be distinguished from ordinary worldly realms in that the latter are characterized by karma, delusion, and suffering. In a following chapter, we see how Buddhist artists depict the worldly realms, which include worldly paradises. These differ considerably from depictions of the Pure Lands.

However, as suggested by the above verses from the *Bhadracharya Pranidana*—found in the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, attributed to the Buddha himself and popular in all schools of Tibetan Buddhism—the Buddhist sense of the status of the physical world and, in particular, the Pure Lands ("In every atom there exists buddhafields / As numerous as all the atoms in the world.") is not as simplistic nor as linear as the common understanding of the doctrine of reincarnation might imply.

The above verse clearly states that the buddhafields are omnipresent, with millions of them on every atom of our body and in all the objects that we touch in our daily life; and yet the untrained person fails to perceive them.

When the eleventh-century master Khyunpo Naljor traveled to India to study with the famed female mystic Niguma, he took with him five hundred measures of gold dust, which he presented to her with great ceremony. She accepted the offering, and then, dancing naked as she went, tossed it into the forest. She then said:[2]

All the things in worldly existence
That are colored by attachment and aversion
Are to be seen as non-inherently existent.
Then all places are seen as a land of gold.

When we meditate upon the illusion-like nature
Of all the illusion-like phenomena,
We attain illusion-like buddhahood.
This is the result of the wisdom training.

The great Padma Sambhava once said:[3]

Everything in every direction is paradise—
Mountains, trees, time, space, and even living beings.
Yet when the mind of the perceiver is distorted
By the forces of karma and delusion,
All the world becomes accordingly distorted.
When the mind rests in the sphere of purity,
All the universe is spontaneously purified.

The fourteenth-century Nyingmapa master Longchen Rabjampa writes in *The Practice of Dzogchen*:[4]

For a totally realized person,
There is no meditation to be practiced.
When a person attains the totally realized state . . .
Because he has been liberated from attachment
To [the concept of] true [existence],
There will be no antidotes on which to meditate.

So the realized state is meditationless.
Having remained in the continuity
Of the absence of attachment to the true [existence],
It is a [meditative] play of indefinite [character] with no intervals,
Transcending dimensions,
And it is enjoyment of the buddhafield
Of self-liberated Samantabhadra.

To understand the manner in which a Pure Land becomes seen as an ordinary world and, vice versa, how an ordinary being transforms himself into an enlightened being and his world into a buddhafield, we must look at two basic Buddhist ideas: (A) what the Buddha described as the two levels of reality; and (B) the nature of the bodhisattva paths and the stages leading to enlightenment through navigation between these two levels, or rather, by retaining a perfectly balanced grip on the two.

A: THE TWO LEVELS OF REALITY

All Tibetan schools educate their trainees in the philosophy of the two levels of reality (or truth): ultimate and conventional. Although an in-depth study of the subject takes several years, it can in general be said that the ultimate level refers to the manner in which all things lack any inherent or objective existence and have pure *shunyata* (emptiness; voidness) as their pure nature. The conventional level refers to how, in ordinary experience, the things we perceive acquire their status solely on the basis of the names and labels we give to them.

The Tibetans refer to the ultimate level as *dondam denpa* (highest aspect of reality) and to the conventional level as *kunzob denpa* (deceptive aspect of reality). The conventional level is deceptive, because anyone whose mind is distorted by a sense of duality becomes deceived by it, that is, misapprehends it. The conditionings of karma (the law of cause and effect) and delusion that are created by the duality syndrome cause the perceiver to color the objects of perception with a distorted subjectivity.

The Buddha said in the *Lankavatara Sutra*:[5]

Mind distorted by stains and predispositions
Gives status to all the objects that appear to the mind.
Thus these [ostensibly external objects] do not exist independently
And are only mind.
Seeing them otherwise is an error.

And in the *Avatamsaka Sutra* we read:[6]

It is like [how] a painter
Spreads the various colors;
Delusion grasps at different forms,
But the elements have no distinction.

In the elements there are no forms,
And no elements in the forms that appear;
And yet apart from the elements,
No forms can be found.

In the mind there is no painting,
In the painting there is no mind.
Yet apart from mind,
No painting can be found. . . .

Mind is like an artist
Able to paint the whole world;
The five clusters are all born therein.
There is nothing it does not create.

The second-century Indian master Nagarjuna, writing in his *Madhyamaka-karika-shastra (A Guide to a Centered View)* gives the example of a rope seen in the dark that is erroneously mistaken to be a snake. No matter how deeply or how long one searches in the rope, no snake can be found. Similarly, a rock outcropping on a mountain can be mistaken for a bandit lying in wait to rob a traveler. No bandit can be found in the rock, no matter how closely one looks.[7]

Several centuries later, Chandrakirti, commenting on Nagarjuna's thought, described the manner in which personal conditioning creates the sense acquired from what we see. Personal conditioning is defined here as the context created by karmic instincts, mental/emotional distortion, and erroneously understanding the nature of the self.

Chandrakirti uses the metaphor of a glass of water. According to Indian belief, a god will not perceive the water but instead will see only ambrosial nectars from the heavens. Similarly, a ghost will not perceive the water but will see a glass filled with pus and blood. Only a human sees it as water. In the metaphor, the status of the object is solely determined by the conditioning of the perceptual apparatus of the individual doing the perceiving.[8]

The Seventh Dalai Lama (1708–1757) describes the situation in verse:[9]

An image reflected in a mirror,
A rainbow in the sky and a painting on a canvas
Make their impressions upon the mind,
But, in true nature [these] are other than what they seem.
Look deeply at this world, and see
An illusion, a magician's creation.

And elsewhere he writes:[10]

The autumn sky so sparklingly clear
Was not by any man polished so fair;
When from transient shadows it is free,
Indeed, it is a delight to the eye.

Similarly the rootless, ultimate nature of things
Is not the creation of a recent thinker;
When at last highest truth is known,
False essence fades into itself and is gone.

The rainbow with its radiance and play
Has no solid basis on which to rely;
From conditions and the workings of lights
Magically spring forth five colors so bright.

Similarly the things that appear inside and out
Have no self-nature to reveal.
From the fantasies of an untrained mind,
We know a reality with false images entwined.

This emphasis by Buddhist masters over the centuries on the empty, void nature of all things and on how everything only has an existence ascribed to it by the mind of the perceiver has occasionally brought down the criticism of nihilism. The charge is that, if all the things we experience are only our own creations, then surely nothing has any meaning. Talk of practices such as observing karma, living by ethical principles, engaging in meditation, and in fact any spiritual effort whatsoever, becomes futile, for good and bad alike lack any true nature.

The First Dalai Lama (1391–1475) addresses this issue in his commentary to Nagarjuna's *Madhyamaka-karika-shastra*:[11]

The master [Nagarjuna] opens [the chapter "An Analysis of Truth"] with a presentation of the arguments thrown against him by those who disagree with his view that nothing—including the four noble truths—has true existence. He quotes them as saying:

> It follows that you negate the existence of the creation and dissolution [of impermanent phenomena], as well as the four noble truths themselves; for you say that these are all empty [of true existence].
>
> Therefore there is no knowledge [of the truth of suffering], no abandonment [of the true cause of suffering], no meditation [upon the true path leading to the cessation of suffering], and no attainment [of the state of true cessation]; for the four noble truths are themselves without true existence.
>
> This means that there are no four goals [i.e., stream enterer, once returner, never returner, and arhat]; for knowledge [of suffering], abandonment [of its causes], meditation [on the path], and attainment [of a state of cessation of suffering] do not exist."

The First Dalai Lama then goes on to explain how Nagarjuna turns the argument around, demonstrating how the ostensible flaws of the *shunyata* doctrine are, in reality, flaws of any doctrine that does not appreciate the void nature of the objects of perception. He writes:

While not understanding the meaning of emptiness,
they seek to criticize the emptiness doctrine.

Who are they?
The very people who do not correctly differentiate
The two levels of truth. . . .
Thus, these are the very people
For whom the doctrine of the two levels of truth was expounded.

The Dharma taught by the Buddha
Rests upon the doctrine of the two levels of truth;
For it is composed of doctrines dealing with the illusory, conventional level of truth
And the doctrines dealing with shunyata,
The truth of ultimate significance. . . .

Oh exponents of inherent existence,
You try to turn the faults of your personal misunderstanding
Into faults of the central view of shunyata. . . .
You are like the man riding a horse
Who forgets he is sitting on a horse.

The Seventh Dalai Lama describes, somewhat more poetically, the manner in which the wisdom of *shunyata* reinforces rather than obstructs one's understanding of the conventional level of truth, and therefore the manner in which one lives a spiritual life on the conventional level of truth, as follows:[12]

Joy and misery are dances within a dream;
Forms and sights are a town projected by a magician;
Sounds are like one's own voice echoed in a cave;
Those who grasp at these things are mindless children.

Just as a reflected image distinctly appears
When a man holds his face to a mirror,
All things are both radiantly manifest and empty.
For that very reason is cause and effect unfailing.
Thus, by abandoning the negative and increasing the good,
By keeping one's mind tethered with the three bonds
And by following a lifestyle unstained by even minor faults,
Ultimate aims are easily and quickly attained.

Similarly the great Fifth Dalai Lama (1617–1682) points out in verse how a correct perception of the wisdom of emptiness supports rather than hinders a spiritual lifestyle, as follows:[13]

Meypa! The cataracts of dense darkness of confusion
Obscure knowledge of the nature of the self;
We mistakenly place "I" somewhere in body and mind
Like a snake seen in the dark is mistaken for a rope.
All misery and suffering that exists
Arises on the basis of this colossal error.

Misapprehending the nature of the self,
The magician's creations are mistaken as real,
Like the pleasures and pains experienced in a dream.
Thus, one chases after the illusions of the mind
And distorts experience of everything in the world.
Ah, the problems that arise when ignorance prevails!

No matter how much we search, we never will find
Even a hint of this much-cherished "I,"
Just as a bird in flight leaves no trace.
In the end, the search leads to the void,
Giving rise to the wisdom that directly perceives
The emptiness nature that was there from the beginning.

It also gives rise to knowledge of how
Even though all things lack true self-nature,
On the conventional level, all things nonetheless
Operate as illusions and magical creations
In accordance with the infallible laws of cause and effect;
Both the pain of the fires of the deepest hells
And the pleasures experienced by humans and gods
Manifest in reliance on their individual karmic causes.

From the beginning, everything is mere emptiness;
The conventional status of things is created
Simply by the process of labels and names.
This is the crux of the central view,
And, realizing it, one gives rise to a wisdom
Cutting like a sharp sword through the chains of misapprehension
Of the nature of self, as well as its offspring,
The delusions and afflicted emotions,
And the karma they support.

B: THE DOCTRINE OF THE BODHISATTVA PATHS AND STAGES LEADING TO ENLIGHTENMENT, BY NAVIGATING BETWEEN THESE TWO LEVELS, OR RATHER, BY RETAINING A PERFECTLY BALANCED GRIP ON THE TWO.

Tibetans usually study the bodhisattva path to enlightenment by relying on the *Abhisamaya-alamkara* (*Ornament of Clear Realizations*), which is said to extract the meaning of the *Prajna-paramita Sutra* in 100,000 verses. Penned by the fourth-century Indian master Asanga from his visions of Buddha Maitreya, the *Ornament of Clear Realizations* speaks in detail about the mysterious manner in which the person training in the bodhisattva way goes through five stages (or paths) of development and ten levels of *arya* (sainthood). The process is placed in the context of how the trainee penetrates the two levels of reality through the cultivation of discipline, meditation, and wisdom, and by embodying the six bodhisattva *paramitas* (perfections) in daily life: generosity, ethics, forgiveness, joyous energy, meditative absorption, and wisdom-awareness. Alternately, they might use Asanga's *Uttara Tantra* (*Peerless Thread*), which similarly extracts the essence of the *Prajna-paramita* literature, although this latter work places a stronger emphasis on the development of buddha nature.

The eleventh-century Kargyupa forefather Gampopa outlines the nature of the five stages and ten *arya* stages in chapter 19 of his magnum opus, *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation*.[14] He quotes from the *Dasabhumika Sutra* (*Discourse on the Ten Stages Sutra*) as the source of his commentary to describe the powers achieved by the bodhisattva on the first of the ten *arya* stages:[15]

The bodhisattva on the first stage . . .
Experiences in a fraction of a moment
A hundred meditative absorptions,
Sees a hundred buddhas,
And recognizes their powers.
He shakes a hundred world systems,
Travels through a hundred buddhafields,
And illuminates a hundred world systems.
He brings a hundred beings to spiritual maturity . . .
And can simultaneously send out
One hundred manifestations of himself.

On each of the subsequent *arya* stages, these powers are multiplied tenfold. Thus, on the sixth *arya* level, the bodhisattva can simultaneously travel through a hundred-million buddhafields and send forth a hundred-million incarnations of himself.

Gampopa concludes his discussion of the ten *arya* stages with this statement on the powers of the tenth stage:

From the pores of their skin in any single moment
They can emanate countless Buddha forms,
Each surrounded by innumerable bodhisattvas,
As well as gods, men, and guardian spirits.

Then in chapter 20, he describes how the manifestations of those who achieve full enlightenment are even more competent in emanation of the Buddha forms and buddhafields. He quotes from the *Uttara Tantra*:

Just as the sun without premeditation
By the direct spreading of its rays
Opens the lotus flower
And ripens others,
So, too, do the rays of the sunlike Dharma
Of the tathagatas enter without premeditation
The minds of those to be trained.

He quotes another passage from the *Uttara Tantra*:

Thus, just like the sun
Is reflected in all water vessels,
The presence of the enlightened being
Constantly is reflected
In the mindstreams of those to be trained.

The concept brings us back to the sphere of thought expressed in the verse with which we opened this chapter: "In every atom there exists buddhafields / As numerous as all the atoms in the world."

Longchen Rabjam puts it this way in *The Practice of Dzogchen*:[16]

If whatever arises does so free from conceptualization,
It is the real primordial wisdom.
By liberating acceptance and rejection in its own state,
Happiness will be achieved.
By liberating acceptance and rejection in its own state,
The object of thought is transcended.

For the buddhahood which is totally and naturally pure,
Do not search anywhere but in your own mind.
Other than [in] the searcher,
There is no separate place to search.
There are no people in phantom forms, nor water in a mirage.
There is no duality of samsara and nirvana,
As apprehension of duality
Has ceased in the unadulterated,
Self-arisen intrinsic awareness.

He who sees the meaning of the equality of all phenomena
And realizes the mind as unborn like the sky
Is perfecting [realizing] the phenomena of the world and beings
As the naturally pure buddhafield,
The state of equanimity of unborn spontaneous accomplishment.

The essence of appearances and mind is emptiness,
And that is the meaning of Dharmakaya;
Their nature is unceasing,
And that is the manifestations of Sambhoghakaya;
Their characteristics are various,
And that is the Nirmanakaya.
By knowing this,
Everything becomes seen as the three kayas,
Primordial wisdom, and buddhafield.

Figure 3
Buddha Amitabha in His Pure Land
Central Tibet: 19th century
Pigment on cloth
38.5 x 25.5 in. (97.8 x 64.8 cm)
Rubin Museum of Art
F1997.6 3 (HAR 85)

Here Amitabha, Buddha of Boundless Light, is shown seated in his Pure Land, surrounded by the eight great *arya* (a term of high respect) bodhisattvas, as well as by other beings of good fortune. The two great bodhisattvas Avalokiteshvara and Vajrapani stand below.

The Short Sukhavati Sutra states (adapted by the author from the Charles Patton translation):

Furthermore, Sariputra, constantly in the realm of bliss, that pure buddha land, day and night throughout the six periods, there rains down various sorts of wondrous heavenly flowers which are in light blessed, in smell sweet, in feel delicate and pliable, and variously hued. Although they lead the viewer's body and mind to be pleased and joyful, there is no craving or attachment. . . . In the time of taking a single meal, they fly off in all directions into other infinite realms to give offerings to the hundreds of thousands of buddhas in those buddhafields.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

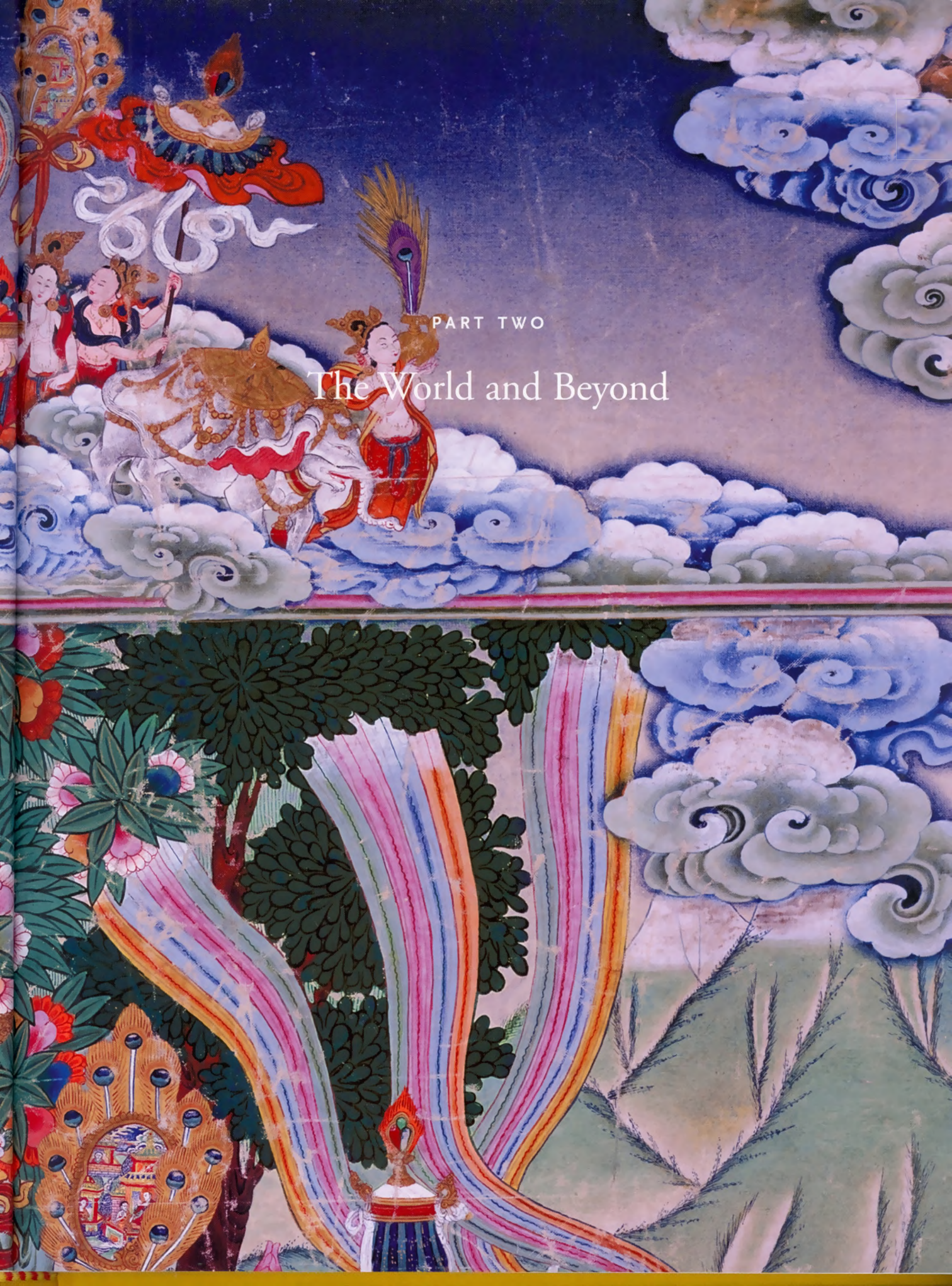
Historical evidence suggests that the Pure Land elements have existed in one form or another from the very beginning of Buddhist history, and they have continued throughout Buddhist history to contribute significantly to Buddhist civilization.[17] Moreover, many of the greatest meditators and yogic practitioners in Asian history have endorsed and taught various aspects of these elements.

Indeed, the Pure Land traditions that developed in Buddhist India went on to inspire some of the greatest art and literature in Asia for well over one thousand years. And they continue with unabated popularity today. The works of art in this publication, as well as textual references to traditional Buddhist masters, writers, and literature, demonstrate this basic reality.

It should be pointed out, however, that Tibet never gave birth to Pure Land Schools as distinct entities in the sense that China or Japan did. For example, there is no Tibetan equivalent of the Jodo Shinshu sect of Japan.

Instead, the Tibetans emulated the Indians, from whom they had directly inherited their Buddhism. Like the Indians of the fifth to twelfth century CE—the period during which the Tibetans had imported Buddhism from India—they absorbed elements of the Pure Land doctrines as part of a much larger training system that incorporated practices and teachings from all three Buddhist *yanas* (teachings): Hinayana, Mahayana, and Vajrayana.[18] All Tibetan schools saw (and still see) themselves as a synthesis of these three *yanas*. The Pure Land elements of Buddhist philosophy became absorbed within this context.

This combined approach of the three *yanas* in Tibetan Buddhism has come to America, as exemplified by the Karma Triyana Dharmachakra Monastery in Woodstock, New York. This center is the official North American seat of the Gyalwa Karmapa, who is the head of the Karma Kargyu School, one of the twelve Kargyu sub-sects. The name of the center translates as "Hermitage of the Three Yana Teachings of the Karma Kargyu School." The Pure Land doctrines have been taught there on a number of occasions and always within the context of the three *yana* training system.



PART TWO

The World and Beyond

The World and Beyond

The Second Dalai Lama wrote in a prayer requested by a female disciple:[1]

When circling on the Wheel of Becoming,
The Lord of Death indiscriminately devours
Living beings of strong, weak, and medium constitutions.
Yet we are somehow deceived by the sense
That we ourselves enjoy immortality.
I send forth this pure aspiration:
May I live with a constant awareness of death
And in knowledge that I could die at any moment,
So that I might transcend the materialistic mind
And pass my days and nights in spiritual ways.

The nature of the Buddhist Pure Lands should be understood in the context of the overall Buddhist world view.

This is portrayed artistically in a painting known in Tibetan as *Sipai Khorlo* (or "The Wheel of Becoming"), a term sometimes translated as "The Wheel of Life."

In old Tibet, the walls near the entryways to most Tibetan temples had a fresco of this famous image. It was also a popular theme in tangkas (Tibetan painting on cloth or paper).

The image of the *Wheel of Becoming* painting is complex, with many different elements in it. The first to attract one's attention is a terrifying demonlike figure, who holds a large globe (or wheel) in his fangs and seems to be chewing on it. This is Yama, the terrible Lord of Death, who kills all living beings one by one, high and low alike. He is a symbol of the very force of impermanence and change and the pain that change brings to those unable to adapt to it.

As one looks closer, one notices that the globe has a series of rings, each of which in turn depicts its own images.

At the very center are three animals: a pig, a rooster, and a snake. These symbolize what Buddhists call the three *klesha* (root delusions or mental afflictions): ignorance, attachment, and aversion. These three are the deepest source of all human unhappiness and suffering.

The next ring shows numerous human figures. Those on the right side of the ring are being led down in darkness, while those on the left are being led up in radiance and light. The idea is that people who follow the directives of ignorance, attachment, and aversion will squander the precious opportunities of human life and fall from the high perch of human existence, while those who practice meditation and the ways of enlightenment will go from high to higher, from light to greater light.

The third and largest ring depicts the six realms of worldly existence: hells, ghost realms, animal realms, world of human beings, titans (or fighting gods), and, at the top, the realms of various kinds of *devas* (gods). Different *Sipai Khorlo* paintings show these six realms in different ways, but the general idea of them is consistent.

Most Tibetans think of these six realms as being actual places of rebirth. People who die are driven by the powers of their karma and delusions and find themselves in one or another of these six realms.

The individual realms can be depicted in various ways. In the image here, the hells are at the bottom,

Figure 4
The Wheel of Becoming
Tibet; 19th century
Mineral pigment on cotton
Courtesy of the Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture
Catalogue number 8.6E241 (HAR 86002)

Yama, the Lord of Death, holds all existence in his mouth and continuously devours living beings. In the upper-right corner, the Buddha stands with his hand outstretched and pointing to a Pure Land (upper-left corner), as though encouraging living beings to transcend worldly ways and instead turn to practice of the spiritual path.

Buddhist scriptures list eight different hot hells, eight cold hells, and various surrounding and occasional other hells. Artists usually have a lot of fun portraying these realms and the somewhat uncomfortable nature of life within them. One takes rebirth here out of the forces of anger, hatred, and violence, and from the karmic deeds produced by these negative emotions.

Moving one rung up the ladder of spiritual evolution from the hell realms, we come to the world of the ghosts. The Buddhist scriptures describe fifty different ghostly realms. Living beings take rebirth here due to attachments and cravings and the karmic deeds produced from these afflicted mindsets. The ghosts are usually portrayed as having enormous bellies and tiny necks, symbolizing that they can never have, own, or consume enough to feel full and content but are constantly tortured by the sensation of needing more.

Next comes the world of animals. This realm includes fish, insects, reptiles, mammals, birds, and all the other visible living beings. Rebirth here is produced by small-mindedness, superstition, and instinctual patterns, as well as the karmic deeds resulting from these forces.

These three are often collectively referred to as "the three realms of misery," because all three are characterized by a predominance of physical suffering.

Figure 5
The Wheel of Becoming
Tibet; 19th century
Pigment on cloth
44.75 x 30 in. (113.7 x 76.2 cm)
Rubin Museum of Art
C2006.66 (HAR 78)

Worldly heavens, each of which is ruled over by its own god, are temporary respites. But life there eventually ends in death and a return to the lower worlds. In this sense they are completely different from the Pure Land paradises.

Buddhist scriptures speak of three sets of worldly heavens: a) six realms of sensual pleasures; b) four realms of pure form; and c) the four of formlessness. None of these three sets of worldly heavens are objects of aspiration for Buddhists. All are equally held in the jaws of Yama, the Lord of Death.

Three more realms can be seen above the three realms of misery. These are the worlds of humans, titans, and gods. They collectively are known as "the three happy realms," because there is less suffering and a greater degree of happiness in them. All are produced by the forces of good karma that is nonetheless distorted by a mistaken understanding of the self. The human realms are mainly distorted by the afflicted mindset of arrogance, the titan realms by envy and jealousy, and the god realms by an exaggerated sense of self-importance or pride.

As for the heavenly realms of the worldly gods, Buddhism here speaks of numerous levels, such as the six realms in the sphere of sensuality, four realms of aesthetic form, and four formless realms. However, even though existence in these samsaric (*samsara*: the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth) paradises is characterized by many excellent qualities, these realms nonetheless have many limitations. In the end, every kind of god dies, for he or she has not yet developed the full wisdom of egolessness and thus depends on the force of contaminated *skandhas* (psychophysical aggregates) for life. Eventually the good karma and mental clarity that produced the rebirth as a god is exhausted, and that god falls back into the lower realms like a falling star dropping to earth.

Gampopa writes in his *Jewel Ornament of Liberation*:[2]

Even if a human being has attained rebirth as a god in a worldly heaven such as that of Indra, and has the according wealth of the sensuous enjoyments, nonetheless in the end he has to die and, by being transformed, he falls from his high place. As has been said [in a sutra]:

> Even having become the praiseworthy Indra
> By the power of his karma he falls to the earth again.

Finally, even if he becomes free from the sensual realms, like Brahma (king of gods), and achieves rebirth in the higher form (or formless realms), he will again one day fall from this lofty height. As has been said (in a sutra):

> Even having attained the desireless bliss of Brahmahood
> He has again to experience the unending pain
> Of serving as fuel in the Hell without Respite.

As we saw earlier, the inner orb of the Wheel of Becoming depicts three animals that represent the three root delusions. These three can be expanded to six, and when this is done a direct link is made to the six delusions and six realms. As mentioned above, the hells then are associated with anger and violence; the ghost realms are associated with greed and attachment; the animal realms with unconscious and instinctual living; the human realm with arrogance and egotism; the realm of the titans with jealousy and envy; and the realms of the gods with pride and self-complacence. In this sense, the six realms are not so much external physical realms as they are emotional/perceptual states of mind.

In this context the great sixth-century Indian master Shantideva wrote:[3]

Who fashioned the torture instruments of the hells
And the terrible situations of the ghost realms?
Verily they are produced by one's own inner processes:
By one's inner energies and delusions.

Finally, the fourth ring of the wheel, which encompasses the other three, depicts the twelve links of dependent origination. These are the essence of the Buddha's first teaching: that all things in the world and beyond are born from their own causes and conditions. This principle is at the very root of the theory of spiritual liberation and enlightenment. All unhappiness and suffering come from their according causes; and similarly all liberation and enlightenment come from their causes.

This idea of interdependent origination—the doctrine that all events and experiences are based on concordant causes—sits at the very heart of the enlightenment teaching. Because of the truth of cause and effect, living beings can master the processes underlying their own destiny. They can systematically eliminate all faults, shortcomings and sufferings, and can gradually cultivate all inner excellences, spiritual realizations, and happiness. In brief, they can move step by step from inner bondage, limitation, and unhappiness to a state of mind characterized by liberation, fullness, and enlightenment.

For this reason the Buddha himself once said:[4]

You are your own condemner
Or you are your own savior.
If you take full responsibility for your life
And train accordingly in the three processes
Of discipline, meditation, and wisdom,
Then verily you will save yourself.
However, if you allow yourself to be driven
By the forces of negative karma and delusion,
Then indeed you shall condemn yourself to an unhappy fate.

Paintings of the Wheel of Becoming often depict a buddha or bodhisattva standing in the upper-right corner and pointing at an image in the upper-left corner (see details, Fig. 4, opposite). Usually this image is a Pure Land, although occasionally it will be a *Dharmachakra* (Wheel of the Law). Alternatively it might be a bodhisattva, or even a Tantric mandala (cosmic diagram). In any case, the symbolism is that the enlightenment masters encourage and advise us to turn away from circling on the Wheel of Becoming, and instead look to transcendence and the spiritual paths that produce higher being, nirvana (the state beyond all suffering), and enlightenment.

The idea of the six realms being held in the jaws of Yama is that everything within the six realms is equally under the power of death. Even though the hells and ghost realms have more obvious sufferings and misery and the upper realms have more subtle ones, in the end all realms are characterized by the three kinds of suffering: immediate physical or emotional pain; having to deal with changing circumstances; and the all-pervading suffering of having a psycho-physical base that is always linked to suffering, no matter how subtly. Those born in the heaven realms at the feet of any of the various gods might get some temporary respite, but in the end their karma and delusions bring their heavenly existence to an end, and again they fall down the ladder of becoming.

Only by stepping outside of the wheel into the spaciousness of liberation from karma and the delusions, which is characterized by the highest wisdom of enlightenment as symbolized by the Buddha or bodhisattva pointing to another world, does one leave behind all worldly sufferings and limitations. Buddhist art and literature flips between the harshness of images,

Figure 4 (details)
The Wheel of Becoming (details)
See Figure 4, page 24

such as the terrible sufferings of the hells and ghost realms on the one hand, and the softness of the teaching on emptiness and the insubstantiality of things on the other. The idea is that all phenomena seem very real, but when we search for the essence of their solidity, we fail to find one.

The second-century Indian master Nagarjuna, who is so important to all schools of Tibetan Buddhism, vastly popularized this approach in his magnum opus, the *Madhyamaka-karika-shastra*, (*A Guide to a Centered View*). He points out that happiness and suffering, pleasure and pain, and gods and devils all seem to exist as very real phenomena, and on the conventional level of reality do have some kind of conventional validity. Ultimately, however, the final nature is *shunyata*, an unfindable and indefinable infinity.[5]

The Seventh Dalai Lama treats the situation like this in a poem to his great Mongolian disciple Changkya Rolpai Dorje:

Have not the three doors stood open to negativity?
Then the inconceivable negativity of the lower realms
Certainly will fall upon you;
And if still weak,
You will not be able to bear them.

Reveling in objects of greed and attachment
Is like drinking poison mistaken for nectar.
The luxuries, securities, and comforts of the world
Are like dramas enjoyed in a dream.

The manifold things that appear to the mind
Are deceptive projections of deluded thought.
When we search for their ultimate essence,
Emptiness free of essence appears.

But the things that manifest also fade,
And only footprints of names remain.
The other side of this is called "dependent origination."
What else need be known?

The Second Dalai Lama (1475–1542) playfully experiments with the sentiment in a verse work. The piece is in a style known in Tibetan as *ka kha tsig chey* (alphabetical verse), in which each line of the text begins with a successive letter of the alphabet. The Tibetan alphabet is structured in much the same order as Sanskrit, with the first two letters being *ka* and *kha*; hence the name of the genre of poetry, *ka kha tsig chey*. The Tibetan alphabet only uses thirty consonants as compared to Sanskrit's fifty and only uses four vowels as compared to Sanskrit's sixteen. But in general, the former is a variation of the latter. As with Sanskrit, the vowels are never strung together with the consonants, but rather are used in conjunction with them, much like the style of phonetic pronunciation used in Montessori schools for kindergarten children.

To carry the *ka kha tsig chey* technique into English I have made each of the lines open with a successive letter of the English alphabet, rather than follow the Second Dalai Lama's use of the Tibetan alphabet, which would not convey the fun of the piece.

He claims to have captured the very essence of Buddha and Nagarjuna's teachings on the central view between "seemingly real" and "ultimately unreal" in his brief text. The reader can judge for himself.[6]

Ah, friends wandering in beginingless samsara,
Begin meditation practice now if wisdom is your aim;
Consider the I, this sense of self that we have, and
Dedicate your energy to observing how it appears.

Exchange worldly activities for solitary meditation;
Fashion a thought of subtle inquiry able to
Generate an image of this sense of "I" and
Hold to it like a fish on a hook.

Investigate, for example, a tree.
Just as "tree" is a mere mental label that is
Known as neither one with nor separate from its parts,
Like its leaves and branches, similarly, all things are
Mere imputations of names and mental labels.
Nagarjuna and his disciples taught in this way.

Open skies, forests, wooden carts, things big and small,
Parts or wholes: nothing has independent being.
Question everything that appears to the mind, and
Realize how the deluded living beings, gullible as oxen,
See everything through the distorted consciousness
That grasps at things as if standing alone

Uncountable beings appear in the six realms—
Various animals, hell beings tortured by heat and cold,
Worlds of ghosts afflicted by hunger, thirst, and
Xenophobia, and also men, gods, and demigods—
Yet they all lack any objective existence.
Zealously cultivate this extraordinary view

Oh hark! Instead of falling prey to the grasping mind
That is propelled by a false belief in a static reality,
It is better to rely upon the mind that is content
With a moderate sense of physical needs,
And strive instead in the practice of meditation
Upon profound emptiness, the ultimate nature of things

A donkey can have no horns on its head.
Similarly, how can anything have true existence?
From atoms to the omniscient wisdom of enlightenment,
All things utterly lack a final nature.
This is the essential message of the Buddha.

Ha ha! Without relying on elaborate reasonings,
One understands the meaning of undying Ah,
The essential sound of wisdom,
And knows things as being mere mental imputations.
Such is the song of Namkhai Naljor, the Yogi of Space
Voiced here in Tibet, land of healing herbs.

Figure 6
The Wheel of Becoming
Tibet; 19th century
Pigment on cloth
31.25 x 22.75 in. (79.4 x 57.8 cm)
Rubin Museum of Art
C2004.21.1 (HAR 65356)

In this alternate interpretation of the Wheel of Becoming, the buddhas manifest in six different forms and enter the six realms of the world in order to teach and benefit the six types of living beings. In each realm they turn the Dharma Wheel in accordance with the capacities and inclinations of the sentient beings there.

This painting depicts a buddha in the upper-right corner pointing to a Dharma Wheel in the upper-left. The Dharma Wheel symbolizes the path to freedom, with the eight spokes representing the noble eightfold paths and the three circles of the wheel (the hub, the spoke support, and the rim) representing the three higher trainings.

Figure 7
Meru and the Worldly Paradises
Tibet; 19th century
Pigment on cloth
38.75 x 25.5 in. (98.4 x 64.8 cm)
Rubin Museum of Art
C2006.66.558 (HAR 1038)

Mount Meru, the legendary center of the universe, has four faces, each a different color and each facing into a different direction. We humans live to the south of this mountain.

The mountain stands on a *vajra* firmament, with a golden base. Humans and animals live on the earth's surface, while hell beings live far below, and ghosts wander, as driven by their karma.

The various types of worldly gods live in realms above the mountain. The best of the worldly paradises within these god-realms is that known as "The Heaven of Thirty-Three," which sits at the very top of the six sensual god-realms. This god-realm is symbolized in this painting by the palace at the top of the mountain. The Buddha's mother is said to have gone there after her death, and the Buddha once visited her there in order to teach her how to practice, so that she could later experience a higher rebirth in the Buddhist paradises. The Buddha's return from this extraterrestrial sojourn is celebrated as a national holiday throughout Central Asia, known in Tibetan as *Lha Bap Duchen*, "The Great Festival of the Divine Descent."

The rims above the palace represent the seventeen realms of paradises of the form gods. These are the heavens in which those who have attained any of the seventeen levels of samadhi, or meditative absorption, take rebirth. Above these are realms of the formless gods: these realms, naturally, cannot be represented in paintings.

The Buddhist paradises lie above and outside of this plethora of worldly paradises. Nonetheless, they make their presence known throughout the world, for auspicious energies constantly emanate from them and fill the world with gladness and joy. This is symbolized by the many auspicious symbols falling from the heavens onto the earth below.

The palace at the lower center of the painting provides a map to the ways in which one can accomplish happiness in this life and higher rebirth in paradises in the next. The doors are partially opened, symbolizing that one can easily pass through them, if only one makes the efforts.

The seven qualifications required to pass beyond these doors are represented by "the seven royal possessions," seen in the courtyard of the palace: the precious wheel; the precious wish-fulfilling jewel; the precious queen; the precious minister; the precious general; the precious elephant; and the precious horse. These seven are possessed by every *chakravartin*, or universal emperor, which is the highest position in worldly existence.

These seven royal possessions also symbolize the spiritual values that bring happiness and enlightenment to those who possess them. These values are described in a song by Tibet's eleventh-century yogi Milarepa, who was renowned for living in meditation caves and gathering his food by begging or from the wild.

A king who had heard of Milarepa's extraordinary spiritual powers requested him to move into town and accept the role of head lama, or teacher, at an important temple, with the high social status of royal tutor. Milarepa declined the offer, stating that he was already lord of the universe, and was already equal to a *chakravartin*. The king was insulted. "The *chakravartins* possess the seven royal jewels," he exclaimed. "Please explain how you, an impoverished lama beggar, could possibly compare your situation with such abundance."

Milarepa replied:

The first of the seven royal possessions is the precious wheel, which can take an emperor anywhere swiftly and easily. I possess the precious wheel of spiritual enthusiasm. It takes me from samsara to nirvana. With spiritual enthusiasm I can enter any virtuous activity easily, so that I am swiftly taken to nirvana.

The second royal possession is the precious wish-fulfilling jewel, which spontaneously fulfills one's own wishes and the wishes of others. My second royal possession is wisdom, the wisdom of ultimate and relative truth, which brings the attainment of the state of buddhahood. By knowing the individual capabilities and aspirations of beings, I turn the wheel of the Dharma for them fulfilling the hopes of all. . . .

The third royal possession is the precious queen, who is very beautiful and adorned by a variety of jewelry. My third royal possession is a perfect lifestyle. The Dharma practitioner who maintains perfect lifestyle is beautiful, because he or she is free of the stains of faults. Perfect lifestyle brings all good qualities, like being adorned by jewelry.

The fourth royal possession is the precious minister, who maintains and improves the kingdom's wealth. I have the royal possession of meditation, through which I gather the accumulations of merit and wisdom.

The fifth royal possession is the precious elephant, which can carry the great burden of the emperor's wealth. I have my conscience, so that if someone benefits me I know that I must not ignore them, but repay their kindness. All beings have shown me kindness and so I must help them all. If I give them the enlightenment teachings they will eventually reach enlightenment. Therefore, I take upon myself the burden, the responsibility, of giving the enlightenment teachings to all beings.

The sixth royal possession is the precious horse, the emperor's mount, which takes him easily to any land he wishes to go. I have the royal possession of joyful effort, which takes me from self-attachment and defilements to selflessness and wisdom.

The seventh royal possession is the precious general, whose army destroys the enemies of the emperor. I have the royal possession of wisdom due to listening and contemplation. I have the wisdom gained from hearing the Buddhist instructions and commentaries, and the wisdom gained from analyzing the teachings.

These seven precious royal possessions—wheel of spiritual enthusiasm; wish-fulfilling jewel of wisdom; queen of perfect lifestyle; minister of meditation; elephant of conscientiousness; horse of joyous effort; general of acquired knowledge through listening, contemplation, and integration—are depicted standing in the courtyard of the palace. Those possessing the seven qualities can pass by them and enter into the palace of higher being, liberation, and enlightenment.

Tushita Pure Land and the Theater of the 1,000 Buddhas

Although there are as many buddhafields as there are enlightened beings of the past, present, and future, Tushita is the most famous in all schools of Buddhism around the world, for it is the buddhafield from which all 1,000 universal teacher-buddhas of this auspicious aeon emanate.

Although millions of beings achieve enlightenment every day somewhere in the universe, these 1,000 buddhas are special among equals, as far as we humans are concerned, because each has the destiny to create a world tradition that will endure for five thousand years on our own planet Earth. Buddha Shakyamuni was the fourth of this hallowed legacy, and Maitreya will be the fifth.

The Tibetans acquired their understanding of the life of the Buddha from two Indian sources. One is the *Vinaya* literature,[1] in which the Buddha is presented simply as a man who has achieved enlightenment and then goes on to teach, in order to share the benefits of his realization.

The other source is the Indian text known as the *Lalitavistara Sutra*, or *Legend of Playful Theater*, and it is this source that serves as inspiration for the First Dalai Lama's poem.[2]

The *Lalitavistara* is lengthy and presents the Buddha's life from a mystical perspective. In his foreword to the Gwendolyn Bays translation, Tartang Tulku writes:[3]

When I was a child in Tibet, I read and heard many different accounts of the life of the Buddha. Not until years later did I realize that all these accounts were based on the Lalitavistara Sutra, *an epic of grand proportions. . . . In reading the* Lalitavistara, *it soon becomes evident that the Buddha is being described on several levels at once, and although the second and third turnings of the Wheel of the Law are not described in the* sutra *(Indian Buddhist text), the sutra itself offers insight into all three turnings. The Buddha is an individual human being, but the many miraculous displays recounted in the* Lalitavistara *demonstrate that the Buddha moves in a realm not normally accessible to ordinary vision and understanding.*

Written some two thousand years ago, the *Lalitavistara* immediately became a popular source of inspiration for artists throughout the Buddhist world. Among the finest presentations are the stone reliefs of the great stupa complex of Borobodur in Central Java. This amazing temple, probably built during the eighth century CE, presents the *Lalitavistara* in 120 stone reliefs. Each relief is several meters wide and more than a meter tall and tells the story of a phase in the Buddha's life as related in the *Lalitavistara*.

Figure 8
Buddha Manifests from Tushita Pure Land
Tibet; 19th century
Pigment on cloth
30.5 x 21 in. (77.5 x 53.3 cm)
Rubin Museum of Art
C2002.30.3 (HAR 65196)

The vignette in the upper-left corner depicts Buddha Shakyamuni in the Tushita buddhafield in his previous life as Buddha Shvetaketu. He is in the act of passing his crown as Lord of Tushita to Buddha Maitreya, to signal that he will soon leave Tushita and take birth in the human realm. Below, Queen Mayadevi dreams that a white elephant comes to her and enters her womb (lower-right corner). Nine months later, the future Buddha is born miraculously from her right side (large central image). At birth, the Buddha takes seven steps into each of the four directions.

These are the first three of the twelve miraculous deeds of each of the 1,000 Universal Teachers of this auspicious aeon.

Figure 9
Stone Relief (Borobodur, Java)
Indonesia; ca. 8th century
Kern Institute, Leiden University, Series I a. Plate III, 6

This is one of the 120 stone reliefs at Borobodur, Java, in which the story from the *Lalitavistara Sutra* is depicted. On this relief, Queen Mayadevi dreams that a white elephant enters her womb. When she awakens, she knows she is pregnant with a holy child.

Several centuries after the appearance of the *Lalitavistara*, an Indian master by the name of Aryasura condensed this large work into a shorter text known as the *Buddhacharita* (*Deeds of the Buddha*). Tibetans know the work in translation by the title *Dzepa Chu Nyi* (*Twelve Miraculous Deeds*). These "twelve deeds" became popular as themes in paintings, and many temples throughout Central Asia possess a set of twelve tangkas, one for each deed. In addition, the twelve deeds are also commonly presented as frescoes on Tibetan temple walls.

The extraordinary perspective of both the *Lalitavistara* and the *Buddhacharita* is that the events of the Buddha's life are presented as mere theatrical displays. His birth, studies, training, and accomplishment of enlightenment are all mere show, performed for the sake of convention and in order to fulfill prophecy. In reality, the Buddha had achieved enlightenment many ages earlier and had thereafter taken rebirth in Tushita Pure Land, where he reigned as Lord of Tushita until the time for his theatrical display as Buddha Shakyamuni eventually unfolded.

The First Dalai Lama writes in his famous epic poem on the life of the Buddha, entitled *Crushing the Forces of Evil to Dust*:[4]

First, the noble Shakyamuni gave birth to the precious enlightenment aspiration[5]

Figure 10
Stone Relief (Borobodur, Java)
Indonesia; ca. 8th century
Kern Institute, Leiden University, Series I.a. Plate III. 6

In this eighth-century Borobodur relief, the Buddha is shown in Tushita Pure Land, passing his crown to Maitreya, who will become the Buddha in the future. This is one of the twelve miraculous deeds performed by all 1,000 Universal Teachers of this auspicious aeon.

And then for three countless eons trained under myriad
buddhas.
Gradually he transcended the paths and stages
And gained enlightenment in this age of conflict.
O Buddha, Lord of Men, I sing your praise.

Later he took birth in the Tushita Pure Land.
Manifest as Shvetaketu, a Supreme Lord.
I bow to he who joyously satiated
Even the gods with the nectar of Dharma.

At that time, inspired by a verse,
And knowing where, when and how he should manifest,
He proclaimed "I shall descend to the earth,"
And reminded the gods to rely on awareness.

In order not to leave them without a protector,
He then passed his crown to Lord Maitreya.
"You after me will manifest mahabodhi on earth,"
He prophesied and empowered Maitreya as his regent.

A billion world systems filled with light
As he left Tushita; taking the form of a white elephant,
He entered the womb of She Greater Than a Goddess,
Queen Mayadevi, a great spiritual practitioner.

This is what the First Dalai Lama means by the passage, "Later he took birth in the Tushita Pure Land, manifest as Shvetaketu, a Supreme Lord." The Buddha's name during this phase was, as the First Dalai Lama states, Shvetaketu.

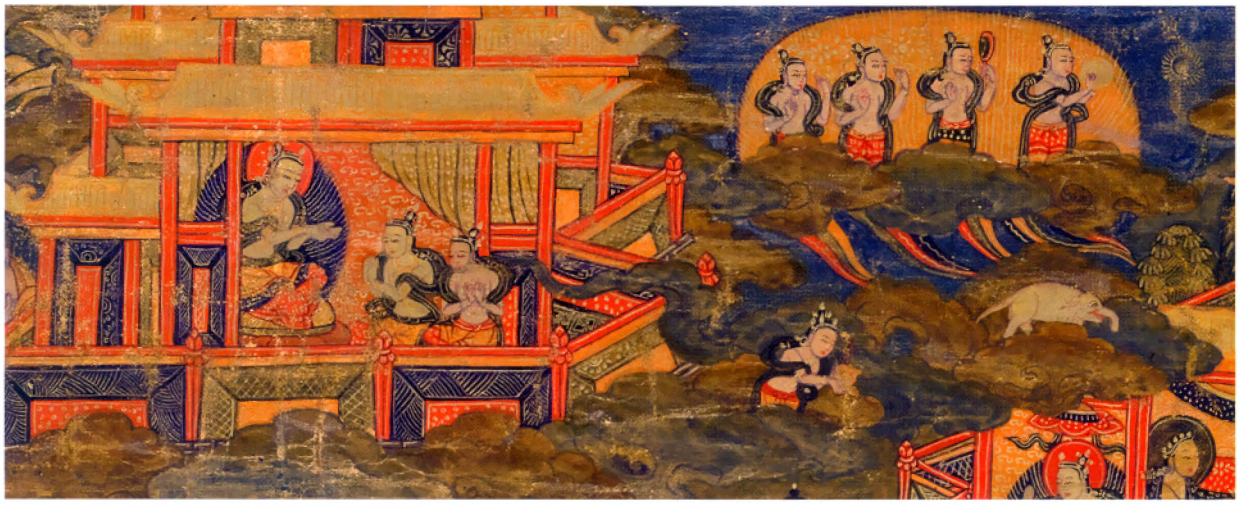


Figure 12, upper-right detail

Figure 11
Buddha Shakyamuni
Tibet; 19th century
Pigment on cloth
55 x 31.5 in. (139.7 x 80 cm)
Rubin Museum of Art
F1996.27.5 (HAR 501)

Buddha Shakyamuni is depicted in the center, with Mahakashyapa in the top-left corner and Maitreya in the top-right. The Tantric Buddha Vajradhara is shown in the top center, with the Indian masters Tilopa and Naropa below him.

The second-century Indian master Nagarjuna puts it like this in his *Praise of the Deeds*:[6]

Homage to you who dwelled in Tushita as guardian of celestials
Until the time came for you to bring Dharma to living beings.
Then, seeing that the appropriate time and conditions had come,
You descended like a great elephant and entered the womb of Mayadevi.

As noted earlier, when Buddha's life story is told in this way, we see him not merely as a teacher acting alone but rather as part of a special group of 1,000 (some texts say 1,002) buddhas of this auspicious aeon, each of whom has the destiny to serve as a universal teacher, that is, to initiate a legacy that will become a world tradition and will last for thousands of years.

In this context, Buddha Shakyamuni is the fourth of the 1,000. Many thousands of years ago Buddha Mahakashyapa served as the third in the lineage. Buddha Maitreya, who now resides as guardian of Tushita, will serve as the fourth when his prophesied moment comes. Buddhists await his advent with much enthusiastic anticipation.

Similarly, these three—Mahakashyapa, Buddha Shakyamuni, and Maitreya—are often depicted together in tangkas, respectively representing the buddhas of the past, present, and future.

Of course, many other beings will achieve enlightenment during the eras of these three historic figures, and the buddhahood of these other beings will not be any less in terms of the qualities of compassion, wisdom, and power, that is, from the personal realization perspective. The only difference is that all the buddhas in the list of 1,000 have the prophesied destiny to manifest from Tushita as a universal teacher.

According to this tradition, all 1,000 of these Universal Teachers perform the twelve miraculous deeds. These deeds take place over three lifetimes: the lifetime in which enlightenment is achieved; the lifetime in which the Buddha takes up residence in Tushita Pure Land and waits his turn to manifest as a universal teacher; and the lifetime in which he incarnates and creates a world legacy.

The Twelve Miraculous Deeds are:

1. The theater of descent from Tushita Pure Land.
2. The theater of conception in a womb.
3. The theater of miraculous birth.
4. The theater of childhood training.
5. The theater of indulgence in worldly pleasures.
6. The theater of renunciation of worldly life.
7. The theater of intense spiritual practice.
8. The theater of taking a final seat in meditation under a sacred tree.
9. The theater of challenges by and victory over the maras.
10. The theater of the attainment of final enlightenment (achieved while meditating under the tree).
11. The theater of teaching the Way to Enlightenment.
12. The theater of passing into parinirvana.

Sometimes all twelve of these miraculous theatrical deeds (or appearances) are represented in a single tangka painting, and sometimes each deed is given its own canvas. Alternately, the first three, five, or seven deeds are sometimes placed on one canvas, with the remainder of the twelve deeds each having its own canvas or being divided among a number of canvases. Thus, sets of various sizes exist.

It is also common to see the twelve deeds painted as frescoes on temple walls. Most Tibetan Buddhist monasteries will have a fresco presentation in one of their temple complexes, probably the temple used for large gatherings.

Figure 12
The Twelve Miraculous Deeds of Buddha Shakyamuni
Tibet; 19th century
Pigment on cloth
30.5 x 21 in. (77.5 x 53.3 cm)
Rubin Museum of Art
C2006.66.164 (HAR 157)

The twelve miraculous deeds of the Buddha can be depicted on several canvases, or all twelve can be brought onto a single canvas. The latter is the case with this painting.

The Buddha sits at the center in the "earth-touching" mudra, a hand gesture of calling all the earth to bear witness to his enlightenment. Symbolically this represents how enlightenment is the full realization of what is true (i.e., not an invention or fabrication).

The twelve deeds are shown in vignettes all around him: (1) the vignette in the top center of the canvas depicts the theater of the Buddha passing his crown, as Lord of Tushita, to Maitreya, in preparation for departure from Tushita and the fulfillment of his prophesied destiny as the fourth of the 1,000 Universal Teachers of this aeon (top left); (2) the vignette in the upper-right corner depicts the Buddha's descent from Tushita in the form of a white elephant and the subsequent conception in Queen Mayadevi's womb; (3) the vignette portrayed below (2) depicts the theater of miraculous birth, with the new-born child taking seven steps into each of the directions; (4) the vignettes below the birth scenes depict scenes from the Buddha's childhood training, in which he is shown studying and practicing archery; (5) the vignettes to the right of (4) and in the lower-right corner depict indulgence in worldly pleasures; (6) the vignette at the lower center depicts renunciation of worldly life, in which the Buddha is shown cutting off his long hair; (7) the vignette in the lower-left corner depicts the Buddha's intense spiritual practice; (8) the vignette above (7) depicts the theater of the Buddha taking a seat in meditation under a sacred tree with the oath of not rising before enlightenment is attained; (9) the vignette above (8) depicts the Buddha's challenges by and victory over the Maras, with their weapons being turned into flowers; (10) the central image depicts the Buddha's attainment of final enlightenment; (11) the vignette above the Buddha's left shoulder (central image) depicts the theater of teaching the Way of Enlightenment; (12) the vignette in the top-left corner depicts the theater of the Buddha's passing into *parinirvana*, together with his cremation and the entombment of the relics from his funeral pyre in a stupa.

The First Dalai Lama describes the encounter with Mara and his armies as follows in *Crushing the Forces of Evil to Dust*:[7]

He made a pledge, [as] firm as Mount Meru:

My body may parch and fall to dust,
But I will not release this posture and arise
Before perfect and supreme buddhahood is attained.

Lights went out from the point between his eyebrows,
And shook the mandala of Mara himself.
The lights flashed in ten billion world systems,
And the realm of the demons trembled and turned dark. . . .

At that time in a dream the king of the maras
Saw his realm sink in darkness and confusion.
Thirty-two nightmares and bad omens came to haunt him,
And he saw his followers panic and flee.

He cried out to the four branches of his armies,

Go out now and attack that solitary mendicant
Seated under the bodhi tree,
And destroy him quickly, you who see me as king. . . .

The forces of darkness exploded with anger and spite,
And emanated in every terrible form.
They took up in every type of evil weapon,
And gathered before our fearless hero.

Yet when the master beheld these horrific emanations,
He perceived them to be without an essence,
Like a dream, a mirage, and an illusion,
And not a hair on his gracious body stirred.
Every bristle on the demons' bodies transformed
Into an arm holding a hundred weapons.
They tossed these violently at the compassionate sage,
But he turned them all into delightful flowers.

The image of the Buddha meditating while being attacked by violent beings, with the Buddha remaining unperturbed by the attack and instead transforming their weapons of violence and destruction into flowers, captured the Western imagination during the years of the Vietnam War; it is this image that gave rise to the expression "flower power."

When this does not work, Mara offers Buddha wealth and power. This is depicted in the bottom left,

Figure 13
Miraculous Deed Number Nine: The Theater of Victory Over the Maras
Mongolia; 18th century
Pigment on cloth
28.75 x 19.5 in. (73 x 49.5 cm)
Rubin Museum of Art
Purchased from the Collection of Navin Kumar
C2004.28.5 (HAR 65367)

In the ninth of the twelve magical deeds, the Buddha takes up his seat under the tree of enlightenment and vows not to rise until enlightenment is achieved. Half way through the night, however, he is challenged by the threats and temptations of Mara and his daughters. This is the theme of the painting shown here.

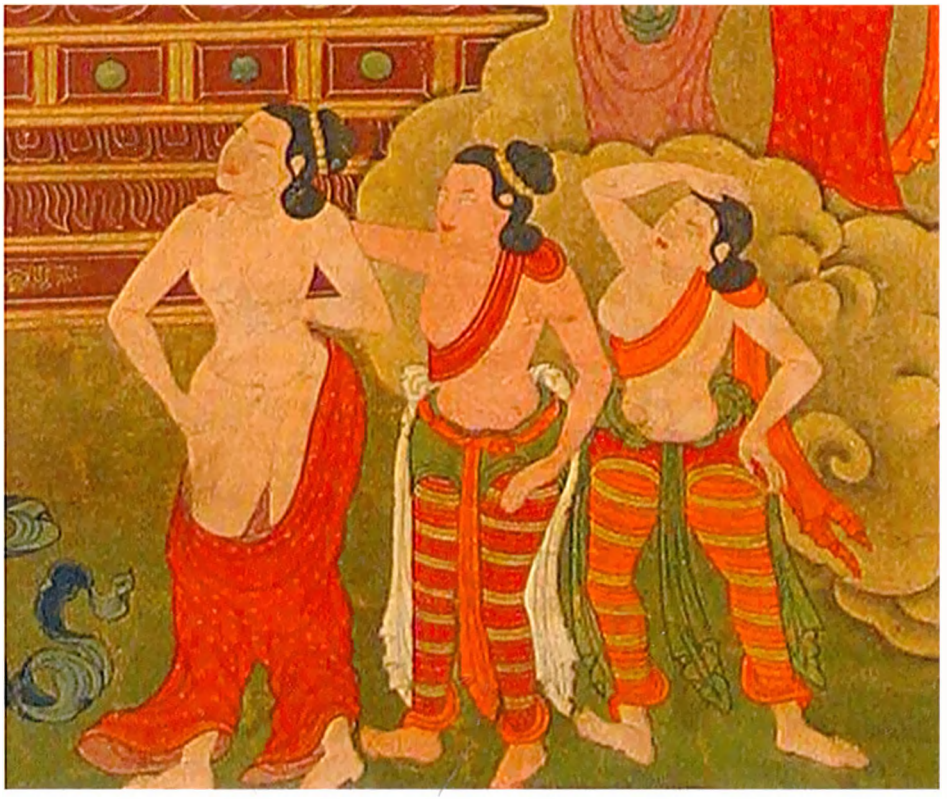
The attacks from Mara are connected with power, aggression, violence, and fear, all of which in Tantric Buddhism are related to the negative pole of male energies. Those of the daughters are connected with sensuality, desire, and sexuality, qualities of the feminine. In the Tantric sense, this is the Buddha's ultimate challenge to uniting the male and female energies within himself and transcending the negative poles of both.

Freud would have had a blast with translating the theme into his personal psychological linguistics. Buddhist artists over the centuries have delighted in the theme, and thousands of interpretations have emerged.

Figure 14
Stone Relief (Borobodur, Java)
Indonesia; ca. 8th century
Kern Institute, Leiden University, Series I.a. Plate XLVII, 94

An eighth-century stone relief at Borobodur shows the armies of Mara throwing every kind of weapon at the Buddha. He remains unperturbed, and when the weapons enter the force field of his aura, they spontaneously transform into flowers.

Figure 13, lower-right detail
This vignette depicts the temptations of Mara's three daughters.



in the vignette of a young prince carrying a bow and arrow, symbols of the warrior king. Unsuccessful here, Mara then offers sensual delights, symbolized by the vignette at the bottom right. The First Dalai Lama writes:

Then the enticing daughters of Mara appeared,
And [they] tried with thirty-two seductive ways to seduce him.
But they could not beguile him even slightly,
And he remained focused and undisturbed.

This tangka depicts the temptation of the sensual pleasures in the form of the three daughters of Mara. One showing off her vagina, thereby calling to the lover within him; another showing her breast, thereby appealing to his need to be mothered; and one acting shy and coy, like a little sister appealing to his brotherly instinct. Again, Freud would have had a feast with these images.

The First Dalai Lama concludes his account of the ninth miraculous deed with verses of awe and introduces the tenth miracle, as follows:

Thus, through love he conquered darkness,
And by perfecting meditation, he gained realization.
At the break of dawn, with the vajra-like samadhi
He transcended all limits and gained peerless enlightenment.

Without an army or weapons, he defeated the real enemy, delusion.
And with no material agent, cleansed himself of all karmic stains.
Unasked, he accepted personal responsibility for the world,
And manifested as an unprecedented universal teacher.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, this was all mere theater. For Shakyamuni had attained enlightenment in a previous life, and then dwelled patiently in Tushita Pure Land until the time for his manifestation as a universal teacher unfolded.

After his re-enactment of the attainment of enlightenment, the Buddha hesitated to emerge back into the world to teach. As the First Dalai Lama put it, drawing from the *Lalitavistara Sutra*:

Although he had gained full enlightenment, nonetheless, for seven times [on] seven days the master remained near the Tarayana tree. . . . For a time, he remained unspeaking, for he wished to generate respect for Dharma in this world. He wished to generate awareness of the rarity of the enlightenment teaching, and he wanted beings to collect merit through requesting many times.

Eventually, however, after being requested many times, he agreed to teach. He went on to do this, his twelve miraculous deeds, for forty-five years, before eventually passing into *parinirvana*. The sutras and tantras (Buddhist religious literature associated with Tantric Hinduism and Buddhism) accredited to him fill the 108 volumes of the Tibetan *Kangyur*, with more than a thousand titles.

As the First Dalai Lama put it:[8]

The Master then arose and walked to Varanasi,
Where all universal teachers of the past had taught. . . .

Here he sat on a lion throne made of the seven gems
And for the five excellent monks and innumerable gods
Turned the wheel of the four noble truths.
Countless listeners gained spiritual realization
And achieved the path to liberation. . . .

Teacher of living beings, light of truth . . .
In wisdom, love, and spiritual power you are complete.

Figure 15, lower-center detail

After receiving instruction on highest wisdom, a monk gazes into a flowing river, with something of a baffled expression on his face.

The First Dalai Lama concludes his account of the twelve miraculous deeds with a verse:

Through the integration of both wisdom and compassion
You rest in neither samsara nor nirvana,
Yet with wise and skillful means you demonstrated
parinirvana
And manifested sacred relics to benefit the world.

In a subsequent chapter, we will see how the myths and spiritual legends associated with Tushita and the 1,000 Universal Teachers inspired what Robert Thurman so elegantly refers to as "The Ganden Renaissance."

The First Dalai Lama writes:[9]

The qualities of a buddha are as vast as the sky;
Who could possibly describe them all?
Ah, but how fortunate I am to have the karma
To speak of the few of which I know.

Figure 15
Buddha Shakyamuni Teaching Wisdom on Vulture's Mountain
Tibet; 18th century
Pigment on cloth
30.5 x 20.25 in. (77.5 x 51.4 cm)
Rubin Museum of Art
C2006.66.128 (HAR 75)

The Buddha holds up a lotus flower, symbolizing inexpressible wisdom.

Once when asked to teach on wisdom, the Buddha simply held up a lotus flower and remained silent. The act came to symbolize the essence of his teaching on the two levels of reality: although seemingly real and solid, the flower seed absorbed earth nutrient from a pool of mud collected from the dusts blown from distant lands, water from clouds formed over the most remote oceans, fire from the most distant star, and air from the four directions. No "flowerness" can be found in any of the individual elements from which the flower formed, nor is there a flower separate from the elements. Delicate and beautiful, all the universe is reflected in it, and yet it remains insubstantial and has the great void as its final nature.

In this painting the female Buddha Prajnaparamita is shown sitting at the top center of the canvas, representing the essence of the wisdom teachings that the Buddha is giving. The buddhas of the ten directions sit around her, for all who attain enlightenment must do so by means of perfecting the universal wisdom that she embodies. For this reason she is often called the "Mother of All Buddhas." White Tara, source of life and success, sits at the bottom center of the canvas, for the attainment of wisdom enhances both life and success.

Figure 17
Kadam Stupa
Tibet; 18th century
Bronze alloy
8.75 x 4.375 in. (22.2 x 11.1 cm)
Rubin Museum of Art
C2006.66.635 (HAR 700057)

Figure 16
The Theater of Passing into Parinirvana
Mongolia; 18th century
Pigment on cloth
Collection of Robert and Lois Baylis
(HAR 90320)

When the Buddha was in his eighty-third year, he announced that he would pass away after three month's time; he invited his principal disciples and patrons to meet with him in Kushinagar to be with him in his final moments. The story is wonderfully told in *The Parinirvana Sutra*.[2]

On the day of his passing, he gave a final discourse (shown in the center of this painting) and then stretched out on his right side in the posture often erroneously termed "The Sleeping Buddha" in Western literature. This event is depicted just below the central figure.

In accordance with Indian tradition, his holy body was cremated. A scene below him depicts this ceremony. As is the case with all great beings, numerous gemlike relics appeared from the ashes. These were divided between the eight main groups of his followers, which gave rise to the tradition of the eight great stupas. Many Tibetan temple complexes today have replicas of these within their compounds, and monks place sacred relics from their own deceased masters as sources of blessings.

A celestial being can be seen in the sky above, carrying a portion of the relics to highest heaven as an offering to bless the gods.

Padma Sambhava and the Five Pure Lands of Bliss

The Nyingma prayer *Sampa Lhundrubma* (*Spontaneously Fulfilling Aspirations*) begins with the verse:[1]

In the Western Pure Land of Sukhavati
The compassion of Buddha Amitabha stirs.
The blessings of his nirmanakaya emanation Padma Sambhava
Flows forth and brings vast benefits to living beings.

The doctrine of the three Buddhist *kayas*[2] (bodies) had become widespread in early eighth-century Buddhist India, the time when Padma Sambhava took birth in the far northwestern Indian kingdom of Uddiyana (present-day Swatt Valley of Pakistan). In fact, the name of the kingdom, Uddiyana, was borrowed from Pure Land literature, for Uddiyana is one of the five Sukhavati pure abodes. All five are associated, in one way or another, with Buddha Amitabha. We will discuss these five later in this chapter.

The doctrines of Amitabha and Sukhavati had come to Tibet long before Padma Sambhava arrived on the scene (at the invitation of King Drisong Deutsan). This is amply demonstrated by the iconography associated with King Drisong Deutsan's ancestor of a century earlier, King Songtsen Gampo, who had made Buddhism the official national religion of his newly formed empire. Tibetans believe Songtsen Gampo was an emanation of Avalokiteshvara, the Buddha of Compassion, a bodhisattva in the Lotus Family of Amitabha.

Figure 18
King Songtsen Gampo with Buddha Amitabha as Crown Protrusion (detail)
Tibet; 18th century
Pigment on cloth
26 x 16.50 in.
Rubin Museum of Art
F1996.29.3 (HAR 506)

The meaning of the extraordinary manifestation above Songtsen Gampo's head is explained by another prayer to Padma Sambhava from a liturgy known as *Barchey Kunselma*:[3]

Om ah hum vajra guru padma siddhi hum!
I call to Amitabha, who is the dharmakaya.
I call to Avalokiteshvara, his samboghakaya emanation.
And I call to Padma Sambhava, his nirmanakaya embodiment.

This second verse identifies Amitabha as the formless *dharmakaya*, (transcendental body) with Avalokiteshvara as his *samboghakaya* (bliss body) aspect and Padma Sambhava as his *nirmanakaya* (phenomenal body) emanation. In the painting, we see these three in the three levels of the celestial mansion, with Amitabha on the top level.

Although for convenience's sake the *dharmakaya* manifestation of Amitabha is sometimes given form in paintings and statuary, his name itself implies that he is beyond ordinary concepts of form and is pure formless radiance. "Amitabha" means "boundless light," thereby connoting being without the boundaries that define a form.

To work in the world of form, he sends out countless emanations from his formless essence. One of the most important of these is the *samboghakaya* aspect of Avalokiteshvara, the Buddha of Compassion, who dwells on higher planes and can appear in dreams and visions to peoples of high merit. Amitabha further manifests in ordinary human forms, such as the *nirmanakaya* Padma Sambhava, in order to bring benefit to ordinary beings.

King Songtsen Gampo was one such human emanation of Avalokiteshvara, and because in the *Kriya Tantras* Amitabha is the lord of the family to which the Avalokiteshvara mandalas belong, Amitabha rises as a jewel above his crown. Thus, from the time of Songtsen Gampo in the early seventh century CE, the

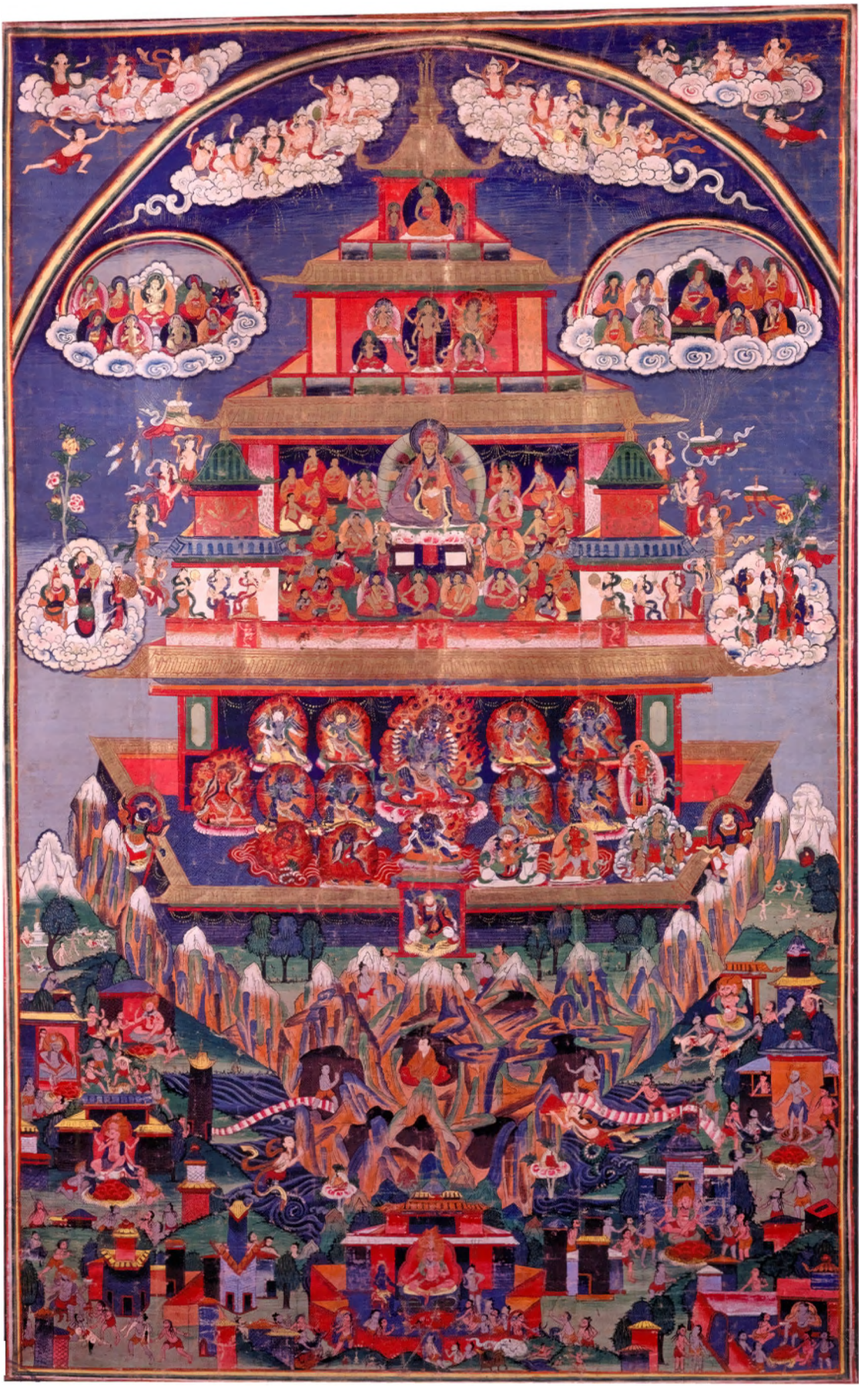


Figure 19
Padma Sambhava in the Sukhavati Pure Land of Uddiyana
Tibet; 18th century
Pigment on cloth
40.25 x 25.75 in. (102.2 x 65.4 cm)
Rubin Museum of Art
C2002.30.7 (HAR 65200)

Padma Sambhava sits in a chapel on the ground floor of a Pure Land celestial mansion; he is flanked by Yeshey Tsogyal and Mandharava, his Tibetan and Indian disciples, respectively. His twenty-five principal Tibetan disciples, known as "the twenty-five adepts of Mount Chimpu," are seated around him. Avalokiteshvara, the Buddha of Compassion, stands in the storey above him, and Amitabha can be seen in the top storey of the mansion. These three—Padma Sambhava, Avalokiteshvara, and Amitabha, respectively—represent the three *kayas*: Nirmanakaya, Samboghakaya, and Dharmakaya.[3]

There are two principal Pure Lands associated with Padma Sambhava. One of these, Uddiyana, is linked to his birth and is thought of as the Pure Land to which one mystically travels in order to receive teachings and initiations. The second one, Zangpo Palri, or Glorious Copper Mountain, is associated with the place of his death in Sri Lanka. We will see more on this second Pure Land in a later chapter.

This painting combines elements of both of these Pure Lands. The snow mountains in the background, for example, suggest Uddiyana, which is located in the Hindu Kush range of the Himalayas. The caves along the bottom of the mountain suggest Glorious Copper Mountain in Sri Lanka.

The wrathful deities below indicate that the painting celebrates the Jang Ter (or Northern Treasure) tradition of the post-renaissance movements in the Nyingma School.

Tibetan people had already become firmly rooted in the Amitabha and Sukhavati traditions. Of note is that the line of Dalai Lamas, who are also regarded as emanations of Avalokiteshvara, claim Songtsen Gampo as one of their early incarnations, and he appears as such in many long life prayers to the present Dalai Lama (b. 1935).

The sutras and tantras speak of numerous buddhafields, and we have already looked at Tushita. In addition, the Abhirati Pure Land of Akshobya is given considerable attention, as is the Eastern Pure Land of Bhaisajyaguru, the Medicine Buddha. The *Manjushri-buddha-ksetra-guna-vyuha* speaks in detail on the special Pure Land of Manjushri. The *Chakrasamvara Tantra* outlines the magical and mysterious qualities of Khechari, the Pure Lands of the Dakinis; the *Kalachakra Tantra* enthusiastically discusses the mystical land of Shambhala. We will take a look at some of the art associated with these Pure Lands in a subsequent chapter.

The Sukhavati Pure Land of Amitabha, however, has achieved unmatched popularity with all schools of Tibetan Buddhism. One of the reasons is its special association with Padma Sambhava, the most important figure in early Tibetan Buddhism and the forefather of Tibetan monasticism.[4]

There may have been other considerations for why Tibetans turned to Amitabha rather than the other buddhas for their paradisiacal ideas. One is the color red. Tibetans refer to themselves as "red-faced people." They love the prophecy from the Buddha in the *Lankavatara Sutra*: "Twenty-five hundred years after my passing, my Dharma will go to the land of the Red Man." Although the numbers do not add up in terms of historical dates, Tibetans always thought that this prophecy refers to them.[5]

A second point is the Tantric equation. All mandala systems in the highest yoga tantra class teach a mandala that is made of five major components: the four directions of the mandala, together with the center. Each of these five directions is associated with one of the five *tathagata* (an epithet for buddhas) families, one of the five *jnanas* (primordial wisdoms), one of the five psychophysical aggregates and one of the five delusions. In general, it can be said that the five psychophysical aggregates are transformed into one of the

five *tathagatas* by means of the Tantric application, and the five delusions are transformed into the five primordial wisdom factors.

Amitabha sits in the western quarter of the mandala and is associated with the psychophysical factor of distinguishing awareness. The delusion associated with this quarter is attachment, and the most dramatic case of attachment is sexual addiction. This force becomes transformed into the all-discriminating primordial wisdom. Moreover, the Sanskrit name of the Amitabha Pure Land is Sukhavati, which was translated into Tibetan as Dewachen. The term "*dewa*" in Tibetan is also used in Tantric literature in connection with sexual orgasm. Thus, the "western quarter" immediately became the favorite quarter in the mandala for every Tibetan.

A third reason for the Tibetan enthusiasm for Amitabha might be historical. Tonpa Shenrab, the founder of Tibet's so-called pre-Buddhist religion called Bon[6] came from the western land of Tazig (or Persia). Tibetans therefore have a long and illustrious connection with Persia and its ancient wisdom traditions. Each of the five Buddha families is symbolized by an animal, and Amitabha is symbolized by the peacock—the traditional symbol of the Persian kings. It is very possible that this historical factor contributed to the enthusiasm with which Tibetans embraced the Amitabha tradition.[7]

Finally, Amitabha's role as a symbol of meditation contributes to his appeal. Of the five *tathagatas*, it is only Amitabha who is depicted as seated in meditation, with both hands resting in his lap in the meditation posture. Three of the other four *tathagatas* have their left hand in the meditation posture, but the right hand of each is in a different posture, thus indicating a different symbolism: Akshobya in the earth-touching mudra; Ratnasmabhava in the mudra of supreme generosity; and Amoghasiddhi in the mudra of fearless activity. As for the fifth *tathagata*, Vairochana, his two hands are in the mudra of turning the Wheel of the Law. The image of Amitabha sitting in meditation rests well with the Tibetan love for meditation.

Moreover, Padma Sambhava was born in Uddiyana, an Indo-Buddhist kingdom in the far eastern reaches of the Persian Empire. Because he was a *nirmanakaya* emanation of Amitabha and seems to have widely taught the Amitabha spiritual traditions when he was in Tibet, and because he is the forefather of all schools of Tibetan monasticism, Amitabha has received a front row seat in the Tibetan mind from the early days of their Buddhist experience.

The two main texts attributed directly to the Buddha that are associated with Amitabha are the long and short *Sukhavati Sutras*. Both of these are readily available in a number of English translations. *The Land of Bliss: The Paradise of the Buddha of Measureless Light* by Louis Gomez is one of the more accessible.[8] Several versions are available online for free download.[9] There is even a Pure Land Virtual Library site that posts links to sites carrying Pure Land literature.[10]

As noted earlier, the doctoral dissertation presented by Georgios Halkias at Oxford, *Transferring to the Land of Bliss: Among Texts and Practices of Sukhavati in Tibet*, is the first in-depth study of the Tibetan tradition of Pure Land devotion to appear in English.

As Georgios points out, both the long and short *Sukhavati Sutras* have the same name in Sanskrit. The Chinese name for the short sutra translates as *Amitabha Sutra* and for the long one as *Amitayus Sutra*. (Amitabha means "Boundless Light" and Amitayus means "Boundless Life.") The Tibetan name for the former is *Dewachen gyi Kodpai Do* (*Sutra Establishing the Land of Bliss*) and *Opakmey gyi Kodpai Do* (*Sutra Establishing Boundless Life*) for the latter, because, as Georgios explains, the former "extols the Buddhafield Sukhavati" and the latter "features, in addition to a detailed description of the qualities of the buddhafield, a hagiography of Buddha Amitabha."[11]

Figure 20
Padma Sambhava with the Pure Land of Sukhavati
Tibet; 19th century
Pigment on cloth
33.25 x 22 in. (84.5 x 55.9 cm)
Rubin Museum of Art
F1998.11.4 (HAR 644)

The great guru Padma Sambhava appears in the center of this painting. Amitabha, flanked by two standing bodhisattvas, appears in the rainbow sphere directly above him. The buddhas of the three times and ten directions fill the upper corners, with various mandala deities and *dakinis* below them along the sides. Below are famous scenes from Padma's life and deeds.

All schools of Tibetan Buddhism have written liturgies and commentaries associated with the Amitabha and Sukhavati traditions. Georgios Halkias provides an extensive list in his PhD dissertation. In addition, the website The Pure Land WWW Virtual Library (www.pitaka.ch/shindocu.htm#sutra) provides links to English translations of central texts from the many world traditions, including the Tibetan.

A famous Amitabha prayer, *The Garland of Lotus Flowers*, written in Tibetan by the illustrious seventeenth-century sage Karma Chakmey, states in its foreword:[12]

Considering how great the benefit would be for many beings, I make the effort to write [this commentary], although my hand is weak. In the case that someone wishes to copy [study and practice] this text and does not have it himself, please lend it to him. Nothing has greater benefit. There is no Dharma teaching more profound than this. It is the root of all Dharma. Do not fall into indifference, but take up its practice diligently.

Many scholars in the East and the West like to think of the Pure Lands as a metaphor for the enlightenment experience itself. For example, a verse written on a tangka included in the publication *The Circle of Bliss, Buddhist Meditational Art*, reads as follows:[13]

On the tenth day, the great king [Buddha] received a respectful request, "Great person, how may one achieve the empowerment of the summit of existence, the world of radiant light, and Vairochana himself?"

[The Buddha answered] "Through understanding the heavens, you will see the world of radiant light that is Vairochana."

In other words, the vision of the Pure Lands that is generated by means of meditation and spiritual application arouses the wisdom that is the light of buddhahood itself.

Be this as it may, the language of the *Sukhavati Sutra* is indeed beautiful and can easily be seen as metaphor, with elements like flowers, jewels, lakes, birds, and so forth becoming a code for spiritual qualities. Most Tibetan commentaries take this approach.

For example in the short *Sukhavati Sutra* we read:[14]

Thus have I heard. One time, the Master was residing at the Anathapindada Retreat in the Jetavana Grove near Shravasti, with a great congregation of 1,250 monks. . . . The venerables Shariputra, Mahamaudgalyayana, Mahakasyapa, and Aniruddha were all there. . . .

At that time the Master addressed Shariputra:

> You should know that to the far west of this realm there is a buddha realm named Sukhavati. In that realm there is a World Honored One whose names are Boundless Life and Boundless Light. . . .
>
> Oh Shariputra, everywhere in the blissful realm, that pure buddha land, there are seven kinds of paths lined with wondrous and precious hand railings, seven kinds of paths lined with rows of precious tala trees, and there are seven kinds of precious nettings. Everywhere, there are gardens encircled with four treasured adornments: golden treasures, silver treasures, emerald treasures, and crystalline treasures, all being wondrously ornate and beautiful. Shariputra, in that Buddha land, such are the myriad finely ornate and beautiful meritorious adornments, which are very lovely and delightful. This is why it is called the realm of bliss.
>
> Furthermore, Shariputra, everywhere in the blissful realm, that pure buddha land, there are seven wondrous treasure lakes and eight meritorious waters which fill them. . . . The lakes have all around them wondrously jeweled trees and among them are ornamented pathways with perfumed airs of a sweet aroma. Seven treasures adorn the trees. . . . This is why it is called the realm of bliss.
>
> Furthermore, Shariputra, spontaneously in this blissful realm, that pure buddha land, there are . . . voices singing harmoniously, being lovely and delightful. The sentient beings who hear these wondrous voices have their emotional and perceptual distortions entirely and completely pacified. Their inner spiritual qualities of goodness and wisdom increase, and speed them along to the realization of the supreme and perfect enlightenment. . . . This is why it is called the realm of bliss. . . .
>
> Furthermore, Shariputra, constantly in this realm of bliss, that pure buddha land various sorts of wondrous heavenly flowers day and night rain down constantly throughout the six periods, flowers that are in light blessed, in smell sweet, in feel delicate and pliable, and variously hued. Although they lead the viewer's body and mind to be pleased and joyful, there is no craving or attachment. . . . Those sentient beings . . . each morning collect these heav-

enly flowers, and in the time of taking a single meal they fly off in all directions into other infinite realms to give offerings to the hundreds of thousands of buddhas in those lands.

Furthermore, Shariputra, constantly in this realm of bliss, that pure buddha land, there are various sorts of extraordinarily fine and lovely myriads of variously colored birds: geese, hawks, herons, swans, cranes, peacocks, sparrows, parrots, and *kalavinkas*. These myriad birds, day and night throughout the six periods, always are gathering together in flocks to produce peaceful bird song. According to the species they each teach in their own ways, their voices giving birth to the subtle wisdom of truth in those who hear, and to deep, profound thought that rests in the proper detachment. According to their spiritual capacity, the strength of the roots of goodness and branches of enlightenment increase within those who hear. . . .

Furthermore, Shariputra, always in this realm of bliss, that pure buddha land, there are wondrous winds blowing through the treasure trees and the treasure nettings, producing a fine and wondrous sound, like hundreds of thousands of heavenly musical instruments playing simultaneously. They produce minutely fine sounds which are very lovely and delightful. Such are the constant and wondrous winds that are in that land.

In most paintings of Amitabha and his Pure Land of Sukhavati, the eight great bodhisattvas are seen seated in a circle below and around him. Known in Tibetan as *Gyalsey Nyey Gyey* ("Eight Close Sons"); they are the equivalent of Buddhist archangels. All eight of them have achieved enlightenment millions of eons ago, and ever since then have been hanging around planet Earth (and elsewhere in the cosmos) in order to help out the other buddhas in their auspicious work. They appear in numerous sutras and tantras taught by the Buddha. In some sutras, they even serve as the principal orators, with the Buddha taking a back seat in the discussion. *The Heart Sutra* is an example. Shariputra asks Buddha a question, and the Buddha invites Avalokiteshvara to reply. Avalokiteshvara, therefore, and not the Buddha, goes on to speak the actual body of the discourse. In general, it can be said that each of these eight bodhisattvas symbolizes one of the eight qualities of enlightenment: Avalokiteshvara symbolizes compassion; Maitreya, love; Manjushri, wisdom; Vajrapani, power, and so forth.

In the Amitabha tradition, the bodhisattvas Avalokiteshvara and Vajrapani are often seen either sitting or standing at the top of the circle of eight and, thus, are closest to Amitabha. These two, therefore, are special among equals. Tibetan literature sometimes refers to them as "the best of heart sons." In his online article "Instructions of the Amitabha Sadhana," the Karma Kargyu lama Tengu Tulku explains how the two are also more radiant or vivid than the other six.[15]

In Karma Chagmey's long Dewachen Prayer, *he describes (the three Buddha forms) Amitabha, Chenrezig, and Vajrapani as being very vivid. He uses three synonyms. Firstly, they are physically vivid (Tibetan,* lhang ngey*) because, among the entourage of buddhas and bodhisattvas, they stand out as exceptional, like three supreme mountains. This is due to the proportions and qualities of their major and minor marks of buddhahood. In terms of speech, they are also vivid, because Amitabha first teaches Dharma, followed by Chenrezig and Vajrapani, and at that time their speech permeates all the buddha realms. For the mind aspect, Amitabha is again described as vivid, because of his compassion.*

This formation of a triad—Amitabha, Avalokiteshvara, and Vajrapani—could be a reflection of the *Kriya Tantra* love for trinities. The *Kriya Tantras* are divided into three branches—*padma* (lotus), *ratna* (jewel), and *vajra* (diamond). These in a general sense represent the three principal qualities of enlightenment: compassion, wisdom, and power. One deity from each Kriya branch is often seen placed together with the other two to form a trinity, so as to complete the Kriya triad. Examples are the trinities of Avalokiteshvara, Manjushri, and Vajrapani, and of the female buddhas Tara, Marichi, and Ekajati. Although the triad of Amitabha does not have the same *Kriya Tantra* link, it is possible that Amitabha serves as wisdom, Avalokiteshvara as compassion, and Vajrapani as power; thus, together they form a three-dimensional portrait of the enlightenment dynamic.

All eight of these bodhisattvas have both sutra and tantra affiliations and, accordingly, there are both sutra and tantra practices associated with them. In the sutras they are portrayed as enlightened beings that manifest in the world in order to assist the buddhas in

their sublime works or in order to assist and benefit the living beings in whatever ways are most needed and appropriate. The Chinese tradition of Avalokiteshvara in the form of Kuan Yin is rich in stories of Kuan Yin saving people who have fallen off cliffs, are drowning at sea, and so forth. Tibetans are not as fond of bodhisattva rescue stories but instead have numerous tales of Avalokiteshvara and the other bodhisattvas manifesting in forms that guide and instruct or assist aspirants in finding their spiritual teachers.

Tantra differs from the sutra approach in that the practitioner practices the deity yogas in two stages. The meaning of deity yoga is that the practitioner drops his or her ordinary sense of self and the world and, instead, carefully cultivates the vision of the self as the mandala deity and the world as mandala. In terms of the eight great bodhisattvas, the practice in the sutra tradition would be to look to bodhisattvas for guidance and inspiration; the practice in tantra would be to take one of them as a meditational mandala deity. One would then adopt a daily meditational practice of dissolving the ordinary sense of self and world and the reciting of the mantras associated with the particular mandala, while performing the according meditations. The practice concludes with a similar dissolution of the world and sense of self into clear light. Between meditation sessions, one sees oneself and others as mandala deities, the world as a Pure Land, all activities as reflections of the primordial wisdom of bliss and light, and all sounds as mantra and *vajra* (ritual implement) song.

The second stage of tantra practice varies with the level of the tantra, as well as the qualification of the practitioner. In highest yoga tantra the meditator trains in the refinement of the subtle chemistry of the body by means of yogic application, and creates a subtle inner base known as the *vajra* body, which gives rise to a far more subtle level of consciousness, one much more appropriate to the deity yoga application. This is, of course, a simplification of the process, but it holds true for most Tantric systems.

Figure 21
The Eight Sons: A Nyingma Presentation
Tibet; 19th century
Pigment on cloth
21.5 x 16 in. (54.6 x 40.6 cm)
Rubin Museum of Art
C2006.66.293 (HAR 683)

Amitabha and the "eight sons" are represented here, with Avalokiteshvara and Vajrapani standing above the sons. A small red Amitayus, who is Amitabha's form as life energy rather than wisdom radiance, is seated below. *Dakinis* dance at the bottom.

Figure 22
Amitayus Mandala
Tibet; 19th century
Pigment on cloth
13 x 11.75 in. (33 x 29.8 cm)
Rubin Museum of Art
C2006.66.511 (HAR 979)

This Gyantse-style mandala of the Amitayus mandala shows the beauty and harmony of the Pure Land practice as translated into Tantric application. The painting probably belonged to one of the Zhalu Monasteries of the Shigatse/Gyantse area, and the yellow-hat lama in the upper-right corner is probably Buton Rinchen Drubpa, a thirteenth-century master who changed the color of the pandit hat from red to yellow and made it the official "knowledge holder" symbol of Zhalu Monastery.

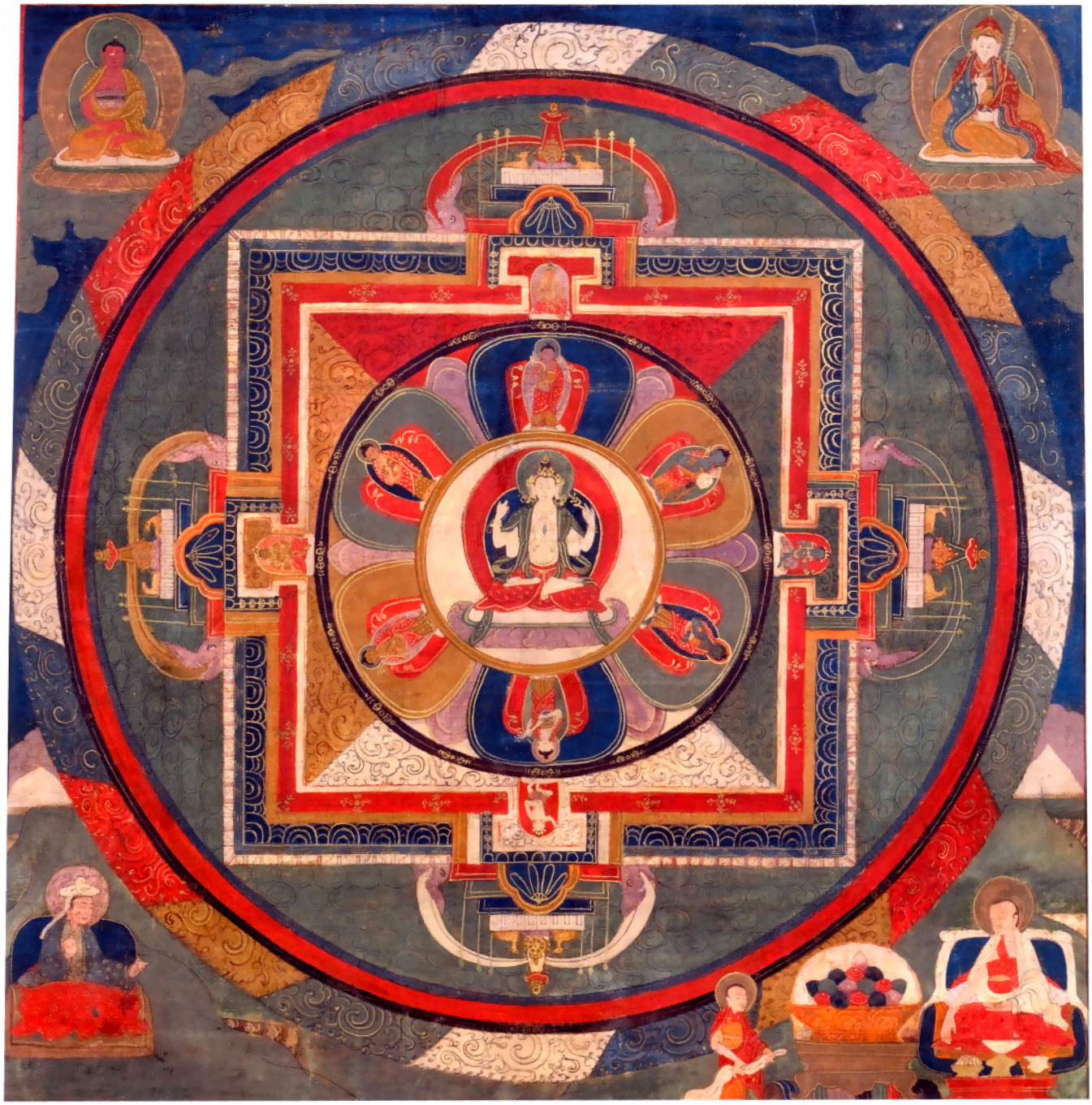


Figure 23
Mandala of Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion
Tebet; 18th century
Pigment on cloth
16 x 15.75 in. (40.6 x 40 cm)
Rubin Museum of Art
C2006.66.224 (HAR 279)

This Avalokiteshvara mandala shows the bodhisattva surrounded by the buddhas of the six realms. Avalokiteshvara emanates in these buddha forms in order to enter the six realms of the world (see figure 6) and bring enlightenment and benefits to the six types of living beings.

preceeding pages:

Figure 24
Vajrapani Mandala
Tibet; 15th century
Pigment on cloth
17.5 x 13.50 in. (44.5 x 34.3 cm)
Rubin Museum of Art
F1997.22.2 (HAR 335)

One of the many forms of Vajrapani is shown at the center of this mandala. Each of the four guardians (of the four directions) assumes one of four cardinal points. This represents Vajrapani's power over all worldly forces.

Figure 25
Sukhavati: A Nyingmapa Interpretation
Tibet; 9th century
Pigment on cloth
34.5 x 22.5 in. (87.6 x 57.2 cm)
Rubin Museum of Art
C2006.66.526 (HAR 999)

This somewhat primitive yet nonetheless charming presentation of Amitabha and the Sukhavati legacy brings a wide range of Pure Land iconography to the fore. Amitabha, Buddha of Boundless Light, sits in the center, with his alternate form of Amitayus, Buddha of Boundless Life, seated on an upper storey of the palace. These two names are used interchangeably in the *Short Sukhavati Sutra*, which states,"He is called "Boundless Light," because the light of his enlightenment pervades the entire universe. . . . And he is called "Boundless Life," because the beings of that realm enjoy an infinite lifespan without the slightest blemish of dissatisfaction or distortion." The eight bodhisattvas, as well numerous monks, stand below in the Sukhavati courtyard.

The Potala Pure Land, which is the buddhafield of Avalokiteshvara, the Buddha of Compassion, can be seen in a ring of light on the left of the canvas, just above Amitabha's right shoulder. On the opposite side of the canvas is the buddhafield of Tara, in a ring of light above Amitabha's left shoulder. Shakyamuni and the Medicine Buddha are just above Amitabha's right and left shoulders respectively.

Immediately below Sukhavati Padma Sambhava sits in his pure land of Uddiyana. Together with the Pure Lands of Amitayus, Avalokiteshvara, and Tara, this makes up four of the five different Sukhavati buddhafields commonly mentioned in Tibetan literature. The fifth is the Vajrapani Sukhavati, perhaps here represented by the paradise of Vajrasattva, pictured at the bottom center of the canvas.

Along the top and bottom of the painting are the five *tathagatas* and their buddhafields. All five of these buddhafields are mentioned in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, or *Bardo Todol*, a mainstream Nyingmapa scripture.

Figure 26
Amitabha and Sukhavati: A Kargyupa Interpretation
Eastern Tibet; 18th century
Pigment on cloth
31.5 x 19.75 in. (30 x 50.2 cm)
Rubin Museum of Art
C2006.66.130 (HAR 77)

This exquisite work from the Karma Khamtsen sub-sect of the Kargyupa School is painted in the Palpung / Situ style of art. The Buddhas of the Three Times—Kashyapa, Shakyamuni, and Maitreya—are seated immediately above Amitabha, and the Buddhas of the Ten Directions are in the upper corners, five on each side. The symbolism is that Amitabha and Sukhavati embody the wisdom of all buddhas of the past, present, and future of all directions of the world. Five bodhisattvas sit in a cluster at the top center of the canvas; all five of these are especially important in the Karma Kargyu School: Avalokiteshvara, Amitayus, Vajrapani, and the female buddhas White and Green Tara.

Amitabha is shown sitting at the center of the painting, and the eight great bodhisattvas are below in the courtyard of his palace, with Avalokiteshvara and Vajrapani at the heads of their respective rows.

At the outside center of the canvas (to the right and left of Amitabha's shoulders) are Hayagriva and Vajrayogini respectively. The former is generally regarded as the highest yoga tantra aspect of Amitabha in his form as a wrathful mandala deity; the latter is the main mandala deity used for meditation and yoga in the Karma Kargyu School. Important lamas of the school sit in rows on either side of Amitabha at the center of the canvas. The Karmapa and Sharmapa are among them, two of the highest lamas of the order. Below them are the Buddhas of the Six Realms, who emanate into the six realms of worldly existence in order to bring enlightenment and benefit to the six types of living beings (see chapter 2).

Amitabha practice is very important in all twelve Kargyupa sub-sects. The Karma Kargyupa's commentary to the practice is perhaps the most famous commentarial text in all schools. However, the Drigung Kargyu are especially famous for the practice because of their annual festival in celebration of the Amitabha *powa* or "consciousness transference" yogas.

upper-left detail
This vignette depicts Padma Sambhava performing a "Transference to Sukhavati Ritual" for an old man, who is walking toward a Pure Land as a result. This is a gesture of respect toward Padma Sambhava on the part of either the Karma Kargyupa who commissioned the work or the artist himself.

upper-right detail

Figure 27
Amitabha, Sukhavati, and the Guru of Chinggis Khan: A Sakya Interpretation
Tibet; 19th century
Pigment on cloth
25 x 19.5 in. (63.5 x 49.5 cm)
Rubin Museum of Art
C2006.66.451 (HAR 911)

This very playful interpretation of Sukhavati and the pure land tradition depicts a row of lamas sitting in the upper left corner. Dressed in white, they are three of the five great forefathers of the Sakya School. Known as Sakya Gongma Nga, or "Five Supreme Masters," the five are composed of "The Three Whites and the Two Reds." The three "whites" were laymen, not monks, and therefore wore white robes. The two "reds" were monks, and thus wore maroon robes. The three whites are in the upper left and the two reds are in the upper right corner. Actually, the upper right has three figures in red; presumably the third is the founder of the specific Sakya monastery with which either the artist or the patron of the painting was connected.

Drakpa Gyaltsen is perhaps the most famous of the Three Whites. Seated at the center of the three, he was something of an honorary guru of the great Mongolian emperor Ghengis Khan (spelled Chhingis Khaan by modern Mongols). Ghengis saw himself not as a man of war, but as a peacemaker and empire builder who only reverted to war when all else failed. According to legend, he would never decide on taking the path of war without consdieration. He would retreat to his sacred mountain in Mongolia for three days of prayer, fasting, meditation, and soul searching. Only when he felt that all other options were hopeless would he go to war.

Two of the five early patriarchs were monks: Sakya Pandita and Chogyal Pakpa. The latter is seated in the center of the group of monks in the upper right corner

Chogyal Pakpa was the first Tibetan lama to come to the attention of the West, for Marco Polo wrote of him in his famous journal of his travels in Mongolia and China. Chogyal Pakpa at the time had become the guru of Kublai Khan, the grandson of Genghis Khan.

Kublai had conquered all of China and made it a province of Mongolia, so Marco was very impressed by his intelligence and statesmanship. Kublai was probably the greatest patron of the Buddhist arts since the three great Tibetan religious kings of the seventh and eighth centuries—Songtsen Gampo, Trisong Deutsan and Tri Ralpachen—and his work made Tibetan Buddhism in general and the Sakya School in particular a staple of the aristocratic spiritual diet throughout the Mongolian world. It also set the stage for the "Patron / Teacher" relationship that characterized Tibet's relationship with the various Mongolian empires and kingdoms over the centuries to follow, (mid 13th century) and set the stage for the special relationship between the Dalai Lamas and the Manchu Mongols that was established in 1720. China had briefly won independence from the Central Mongols (the Yuan Empire) in the late 15th century, and was self-ruling during the brief period of the Ming Dynasty; but it was conquered again by the Manchu (Eastern) Mongols in 1644, and remained under their rule China in 1911. The Dalai Lama biographical literature claims Chogyal Pakpa as a previous incarnation of the soul destined to become the First Dalai Lama in 1391.

This is the most playful of the Sukhavati tangkas in this section, with gods and goddesses making music and dancing in, around and on top of Amitabha's celestial palace.

Figure 28
Amitabha, the Seventh Dalai Lama, and the Manchu Mongols
Manchu Mongolia; 18th century
Pigment on cloth
32 x 22 in. (23.8 x 55.9 cm)
Rubin Museum of Art
F1996.16.1 (HAR 458)

The Khalka Mongol nations had wholeheartedly embraced the Yellow School of Tibetan Buddhism when the Third Dalai Lama visited and taught to the court of Altan Khaan in 1578. Several years later the Third traveled even farther east, and taught to the assembled royal families of the Manchu Mongols. They too fully embraced the Yellow School, making it their official state religion. Half a century later, in 1644, the Manchu Mongols invaded and conquered China, creating what Chinese today refer to as the Ching Dynasty. They ruled China until their overthrow in 1911.

The Manchu Mongols followed a policy of tough love in their occupation of China, but nonetheless ushered in a golden age of art and culture. Two emperors in particular—Kangtsi and Chenlung, both of whom lived in the 18th century—are among the greatest patrons of the arts in Buddhist history. Both were profoundly committed to the Yellow School Buddhism of Tibet's Dalai Lamas.

This exquisite tangka celebrates that enthusiasm, with the upper section of the painting filled with Yellow School lamas in various groups. Buddha Shakyamuni is placed at the top center of the canvas, with the Seventh Dalai Lama immediately below and to his right (viewer's left), and Rolpai Dorje, the Third Changkya reincarnate lama, below and to Buddha's left. These two—the Seventh Dalai Lama and the Third Changkya—were both great gurus to the Manchu Mongol royal family, and as such both were objects of lavish patronage.

Amitabha Buddha sits at the center of the painting, with his Pure Land of Sukhavati all around him. Two groups of three Yellow School lamas can be seen above his shoulders. The trinity on the left is Tsongkhapa and his two chief disciples, the founders of the Yellow School. The trinity on the right depicts Yellow School reincarnate lamas favored by Emperor Chenlung. These perhaps are generic depictions of the Changkya Tulku, the Dalai Lama, and the Panchen Lama.

Emperor Chenlung was especially enthusiastic in his patronage of the Buddhist arts, building hundreds of monasteries, commissioning thousands of exquisite statues and paintings, and funding the translation and publication of the major Tibetan Buddhist scriptures into the Manchu Mongolian, Khalka Mongolian, and Chinese languages. A few years ago a Kalachakra statue from Chenlung's foundry sold at a New York auction for almost a million dollars, a testimony to the enduring appeal of the Tibetan and Mongolian artists whom he commissioned. The Altan Kangyur, or *Golden Translations of Buddha's Words*, can be seen today in the National Library of Mongolia in Ulaanbaatar, the cover of each of the 108 volumes inlaid with pure gold. A similar edition can be seen in the Seventh Dalai Lama's chamber in the Potala at Lhasa.

The Pure Lands of Amitayus and the Medicine Buddhas can be seen respectively in the upper-left and right corners of the canvas.

Figure 29
The Buddha of Compassion in the Potala Pure Land
Tibet; 19th century
Pigment on cloth
33.75 x 26.75 in. (86.7 x 67.9 cm), framed
Rubin Museum of Art
F1997.4.1 (HAR 80)

Tibetan literature speaks of five Sukhavati Pure Lands. One of these Pure Lands is Potala, the Pure Land of Avalokiteshvara. The legendary Mount Potala in South India borrowed the name from the legend because of the large number of Avalokiteshvara practitioners who attained enlightenment there. Similarly, Putaoshan Isle near Shanghai in China (Potala Island) has been also linked to Avalokiteshvara practice and borrows the name. Moreover, the Potala Palace of Lhasa, which was the primary home of the Dalai Lamas in Tibet, borrows its name from this Sukhavati, because the Dalai Lamas are regarded as Avalokiteshvara incarnations. In fact, any residence of Dalai Lama instantly becomes a Potala.

This painting is a variation on the Rigsum Gonpo theme, or "Three Protecting Families" of the Kriya Tantra divisions. Avalokiteshvara represents the Padma family; Manjushri (below and to his right) represents the Ratna family; and Vajrapani, standing below and to his left, represents the Vajra family. Together they symbolize compassion, wisdom, and power, the three quintessential qualities of enlightenment.

The healing and longevity trio—Amitayus, Ushnishavijaya, and White Tara—sit in the upper storey of Avalokiteshvara's celestial mansion, echoing the theme of how Sukhavati is not only boundless light but also boundless life.

Padma Sambhava sits in the lower-left corner, indicating that the painting was commissioned by an adherent of the Nyingma School.

At the lower center of the canvas, there is a vignette in which a practitioner is being led up a rainbow, guided by an emanation of Avalokiteshvara to the Potala Pure Land. He seems to emanate from the offering jewels below, indicating that his dedication and enthusiasm are the forces propelling him to this celestial abode.

Figure 30
Green Tara in "Rosewood Forest" Sukhavati
Tibet; 19th century
Pigment on cloth
23 x 15.5 in. (58.4 x 39.4 cm)
Rubin Museum of Art
C2006.66.207 (HAR 239)

Green Tara's "Rosewood Forest" Pure Land is another of the five Sukhavatis listed in Tibetan literature.

This painting presents Tara in her Pure Land, flanked by two other female buddhas: Marichi and Ekajati. The trinity represents the compassion, wisdom, and power of the three Kriya families of Tantras: Tara from the Padma family; Marichi from the Ratna family (below and to Tara's right); and Ekajati from the Vajra family (below and to Tara's left).

This trinity was popularized by the First Dalai Lama, who built Tashi Lhunpo Monastery at Shigatse in 1447. A great artist himself, the First Dalai Lama supported the painting and statuary schools at Tashi Lhunpo, which quickly transformed Shigatse into one of the foremost art centers in the country. The First Panchen Lama, Lobzang Chokyi Gyaltsen, a guru to both the Fourth and Fifth Dalai Lamas, became the head lama of Tashi Lhunpo in the early seventeenth century. Also a great artist and patron of the arts, he supported the art school that is the source of the style of this painting, the New Mentri style. Mongol lamas studying in Tashi Lhunpo with the First Panchen Lama carried the style back to Mongolia, and it became widespread there.

According to a Nepali transcription on the back of the painting, the piece was created in 1853 for a Nepali family on pilgrimage in Tibet two centuries after the First Panchen Lama passed away. The patron and his wife can be seen making offerings to Tara at the lower center of the canvas.

Palden Lhamo, the principal Dharmapala of the First Dalai Lama, is shown in both her peaceful and wrathful forms in the top corners of the tangka. Amitabha sits in meditation between them, in the second storey of Tara's celestial mansion.

The courtyard scene in front of the mansion shows four goddesses playing musical instruments, while another two sing sacred songs of liberation, their hands held by their ears in the singing mudra.

Figure 31
Amitayus Male/Female in Union
Tibet, 18th century
Pigment on cloth
Rubin Museum of Art
C2006.66.549 (HAR 1028)

Amitayus, Buddha of Boundless Life, sits in sexual union with his consort in the courtyard of his celestial mansion in Sukhavati, with four other buddha forms, also male/female in union, seated in the courtyard around him. The five *tathagatas* of the five families can be seen through the windows on the second story of the mansion. They too are seated in sexual union. Amitabha sits alone in meditation in the third storey. Wrathful deities guard the outer walls of the courtyard, looking as though painted onto the walls.

Lineage lamas from the line of transmission of this Tantric practice adorn the upper corners of the painting; they can also be seen seated on either side of the celestial mansion.

Another Amitayus, male/female in union, sits at the lower center of the canvas, and the wrathful Dharmapala Rahula stands in the lower-right corner. A monk sits in the lower-left corner, observing the scene with awe, while turning the beads of his mantra *mala*.

Some Tibetan tangkas of this nature bear inscriptions at the sides of the historical figures, but there are none on this painting. Moreover, nothing in their iconographic details leads to a positive identification.

That said, there are three principal lineages of the Amitayus male/female mandala. The first is from the visions of Padma Sambhava, and was brought by him to Tibet in the eighth century. The second is from the Indo-Nepali female mystic Siddharani, and was brought by Rechungpa to Tibet. This latter lineage became widespread in all schools of Tibetan Buddhism through the Drigung Kargyu masters. The third is the Sakya lineage from Bavi Lotsawa.

The Eighth Dalai Lama's Longevity Chapel in the Potala Palace of Lhasa contains several walls with lineage frescoes associated with Amitayus. A study of them might tell us more.

Figure 32

Avalokiteshvara in the Potala, in His Form as Simhanada, "The Lion's Roar"

Tibet; 19th century

Pigment on cloth

22 x 14.75 in. (55.9 x 37.5 cm)

Rubin Museum of Art

F1996.31.8

The Buddha of Compassion manifests in innumerable forms in order to lead beings to enlightenment and fulfill his vow of great compassion. One of the most popular of these is Simhanada, or "The Lion's Roar."

Avalokiteshvara Simhanada was one of the Sixth Dalai Lama's principal meditation deities, and the Sixth built an exquisite temple dedicated to the practice beside the small lake behind the Potala Palace of Lhasa. The temple still stands today. Simhanada's form is somewhat reminiscent of the Hindu god Shiva, with long hair half tied up on the upper section of his head and half falling over his shoulders, the trident at his side, and the snake figures wrapped around his trident.

The figures in the ocean in front of the celestial mansion—half human and half snake—are actually *nagas*, nature spirits that live in water, trees, clouds, and so forth. Thus, Simhanada represents the power to establish harmony with nature and to control the elements by means of invoking the assistance of the *nagas*.

In Tibet, every monastery places one monk in charge of the Simhanada rituals. The role is not especially desirable, because the rites can only be performed by someone who has been a vegetarian for at least one week, and most Tibetans eat large quantities of meat every day. For this reason, the position is often rotated on an annual basis, and whoever has the job is a vegetarian for the full year.

The Buddha sits in the upper-left corner of this painting in his form as Nagaraja, or "Naga King." The image comes from a time when the Buddha was meditating in the forest and it began to rain. A king cobra slithered up his body and stretched its head over him, thus forming an umbrella to protect him from the rain. Again, the symbol is one of harmony with nature.

The figure in the upper-right corner is Nagarjuna, the second-century Indian master who traveled to the land of *nagas* in order to retrieve the *Prajna Paramita Sutras*.

Figure 33
Amitabha as Wrathful Black Hayagriva
Tibet; 19th century
Pigment on cloth
26 x 14.75 in. (66 x 37.5 cm)
Collection of Shelley and Donald Rubin
(HAR 004)

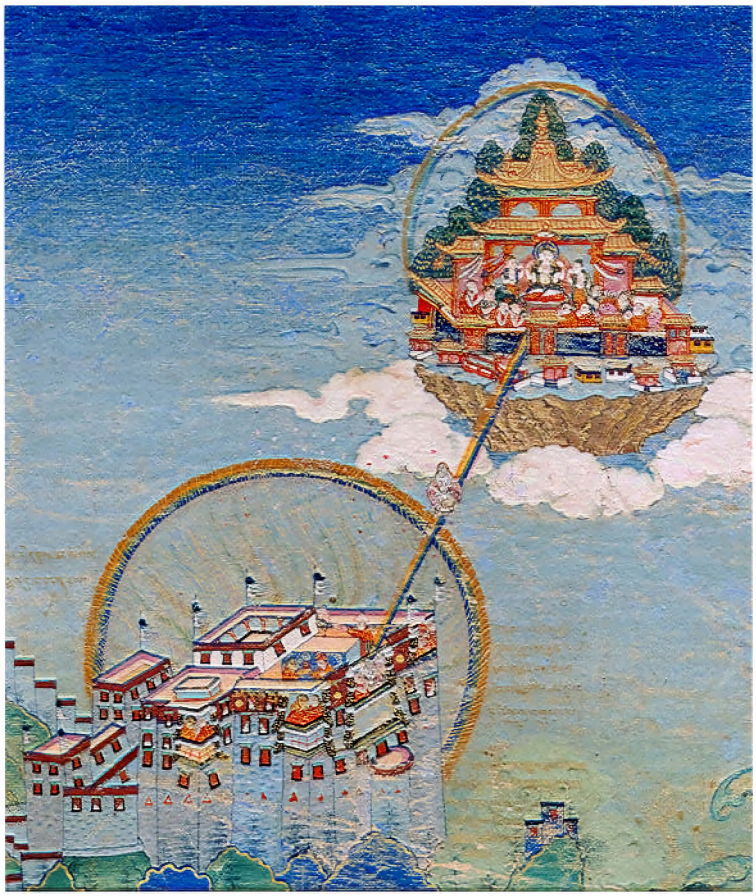
Amitabha, the Buddha of Boundless Light, manifests in numerous forms in order to bring enlightenment and happiness to living beings. These manifestations are associated with four classes, depending on which of the four enlightenment activities are to be accomplished: pacification, increase, subduing, or wrath. The fourth is the most intense and fierce.

This tangka depicts one such manifestation. Amitabha sits peacefully in meditation above, with Avalokiteshvara, the Buddha of Compassion, in the corner above his right shoulder and Padma Sambhava in the corner above his left shoulder.

The central image, Black Hayagriva, dances in flames of wisdom, holding the sword of wisdom that severs all ignorance. A green horse's head rises out of his crown aperture, and the mythic phoenix Garuda flies dramatically at the upper section of the flames. The horse represents the power and energy of enlightenment energy, and the Garuda represents the ability to destroy all evil spirits and malevolent beings. He is flanked by two wrathful attendants.

At the lower center of the canvas is a scorpion with nine eyes and nine mouths. The scorpion is a sacred animal in Tantric Buddhism and is frequently used as a symbol of the Tantric path. Padma Sambhava is sometimes shown with one hanging from his belt by a thread.

The male Dharmapala Rahula stands in the lower-left corner and the female guardian Ramati in the lower-right, with a skull cup filled with a wrathful offering of the five senses above her.



upper-left detail

Figure 34
The Fifth Dalai Lama's Descent from the Pure Lands
Tibet; 18th century
Pigment on cloth
73.75 x 45.5 in. (187.3 x 115.6 cm), framed
Rubin Museum of Art
C2003.9.2 (HAR 65275)

As mentioned earlier, the Dalai Lamas are considered to be emanations of Avalokiteshvara. Biographies of Dalai Lamas usually include brief accounts of their pre-Dalai Lama lives, going back in history thousands of years before the First Dalai Lama appeared in 1391.

This biographical tangka of the Fifth Dalai Lama (1617–1682) begins the Fifth's life story in a vignette in the upper-left-hand corner of the canvas. The Potala Pure Land of Avalokiteshvara can be seen with a rainbow emanating downward from it to Earth. The Fifth was born in Chongyey, near the famed Dechen Monastery. The storyline of his life moves counterclockwise around the canvas in the various vignettes, with his passing away in the Potala Palace in Lhasa depicted near the top-right corner of the canvas. Presumably, the Pure Land in the sky above the Potala Palace is placed there to indicate that after his passing he transmigrates back to it. Most Dalai Lamas go to Tushita Pure Land for a period after their passing, to discuss with Buddha Maitreya the next phase of their work in the world. However, this could also be Uddiyana, the Pure Land of Padma Sambhava, because of the Great Fifth's strong connections with his lineages.

Many Tibetan lamas are considered to be emanations of various buddhas and bodhisattvas. The Dalai Lamas are not unique in this. However, in 1642 the Fifth Dalai Lama became the spiritual and temporal head of a newly united Tibet, and thus immediately came to be hierarchically higher than all others in the country. His guru Lobzang Chokyi Gyaltsen, the First Panchen Lama, was considered to have been an emanation of Amitabha. From that time on, the two in subsequent lifetimes became known as Yab Sey, or "Father and Son," with whoever was the older becoming the teacher of the younger.

This painting is also a wonderful study in Tibetan architecture, with many of the important temples and monasteries in the Lhasa area being depicted. Of course, these resemble the form they had at the time the artist painted the tangka, rather than how they looked at the time of their actual construction.

Each of the vignettes carries an inscription in gold lettering to identify what phase of the Great Fifth's life is being portrayed. This is a common feature on biographical paintings of this nature.

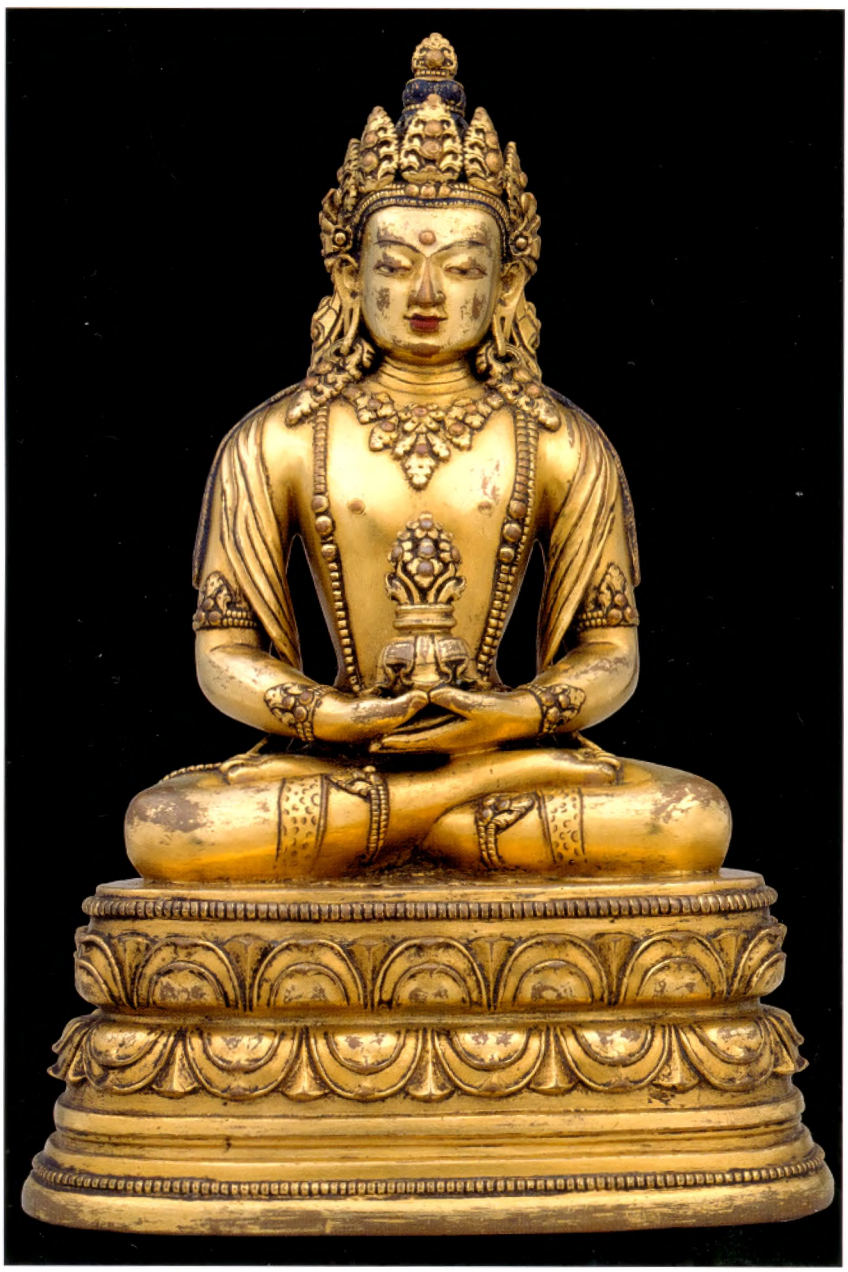


Figure 35
Buddha Amitayus
Mongolia; 17th century
Gilt copper alloy
10 x 6.5 x 4.25 in. (25.4 x 16.5 x 10.8 cm)
Rubin Museum of Art
C2005.18.1 (HAR 65421)

Figure 36
Padma Sambhava
Tibet; 17th century
Copper alloy with inlays of semiprecious stones
10.5 x 6.5 x 4 in. (26.7 x 16.5 x 10.2 cm)
Rubin Museum of Art
C2005.18.2 (HAR 65422)

The Tantric Pure Lands

In this age of short lifespan
Buddhahood is easily attained
By turning passion for sensual objects
Toward the friend who instills great bliss.

Think. By studying, contemplating and meditating upon
The flawless Vajrayana legacy, the highest of paths,
The secret way of all mahasiddhas of the past,
May I in this very short lifetime attain with ease
That stage most peerless and supreme.

But if in this lifetime highest enlightenment is not won,
May I be greeted at death by the dakas and dakinis
And be led to the rainbow palace of Vajrayogini,
The Pure Land known as Khechari.[1]

— The Seventh Dalai Lama (1708–1757)

Although Tibetans practice a union of sutra and tantra, their heart is more firmly rooted in the Tantric tradition. The sutra trainings are relegated to the position of practices to ripen and prepare the mind for the Tantric yogas.

The sutras speak of an uncountable number of buddhafields, but for Tibetans, the sutra Pure Lands of Tushita and Sukhavati are the most important. These two also play an important role in the Tantric tradition but take a back seat to several others that over the centuries took on more of a Tantric flavor.

Sutra literature describes Tushita and Sukhavati with language that is both pacific and nonsexual. The *Sukhavati Sutra*, for example, declares that all beings who are born therein are gender nonspecific from birth. Everyone is born from within lotus flowers, and, therefore, the tools for procreation by ordinary means become unnecessary.

Three buddhafields receive great attention from Tibetans, both in their literature and in their art. The

upper-right detail

Figure 37
The Tantric Deity Yogambara and the Akanistha Pure Land
Tibet; 17th century
Pigment on cloth
38.375 x 25.5 in. (97.5 x 64.8 cm)
Rubin Museum of Art
C2001.1.2 (HAR 65002)

The Tantric deity Yogambara can be seen in the center of this painting, with the Akanistha Pure Land in the upper-right corner. Yogambara is part of the female tantras in the highest yoga tantra class of mandalas and was brought to Tibet by the eleventh-century master Marpa Lotsawa.

The female tantras are famous for the practice of hosting a Tantric feast twice a month, on the tenth and twenty-fifth days of the lunar cycle. Yogis preparing for this feast can be seen in the vignette in the lower left of the canvas. Even romance is dedicated to enlightenment, as symbolized by the female lover lying face up on the feast table.

first is Akanistha, the realm from where Buddha in his form as Vajradhara taught many of the tantras. The second is Khechari, the Land of the Dakinis. Associated with the female tantras, it has a special link to the so-called "twenty-four powers" on earth. The third is Shambhala, the mystical land of the *Kalachakra Tantra*; this buddhafield inspired James Hilton's Shangri-La in his novel *Lost Horizons*.

Many other Pure Lands are mentioned in Tantric literature, but these three are the most celebrated. In this chapter, we will therefore look primarily at the art connected with them.

A: AKANISTHA: THE BUDDHAFIELD BENEATH NONE

The Tibetan name for Akanistha is *Ogmin*, which means "Beneath None." In the *abhidharma* literature Akanistha is a worldly realm at the top of the universe, but it shares this name with two important buddhafields.

In terms of the Wheel of Becoming (see pg. 22), Akanistha is the highest realm in samsara or, at least, within the realms of sensuality and form. The *abhidharma* literature describes it as being linked to the fourth and highest realm of form, that is, the fourth level of *dhyana* (meditation).

In Tibetan literature, we often see the phrase "from the deepest hell to Akanistha, the highest heaven." For example, in chapter two of the *Saddharma Pundakila Sutra* (*Lotus Sutra*)[2] we read the passage, "Buddha sent forth a light from his forehead, and illuminated everything in the world, from Avichi, the deepest hell, to Akanistha, the highest heaven."

Also, the Seventh Dalai Lama writes in a poem of advice to a disciple,[3]

From the deepest hell to Akanistha, the highest of the heavens,
The ordinary world is pervaded by suffering and delusion.
Give rise to spiritual detachment, the relaxed mind
That cherishes freedom from this bondage.

Akanistha is sometimes used as a metaphor for all things bright and beautiful. For example, when the young Second Dalai Lama visited the Yarlung for the first time in his life—the year was 1420—he spoke of the experience in a poem:

The Yarlung Valley, ornament of this world,
Is a piece of Akanistha fallen to earth.
The very symbol of our ancient ways.
Its arrow maiden carries tales of our glory
To that illustrious heaven at the peak of the world.

A few weeks later he gave his first public teaching to a large gathering of lamas, and later recounted the event in a poem:[4]

We successfully forded the Lohita River
And the night magically crept up around us.
The moon and stars a necklace in the sky
As we drew into Dvakpo Gongdegyey,
A celestial garden bathed in the light of jewels.

Here countless spiritual aspirants had gathered
With the intent of spiritual revelry,
Like a great swarm of bees at a honeycomb.
And mine was the task of serving them the taste
Of honey from the essential heart teachings,
A Dharma melody to blossom the force of their wisdom.
Talk of which should reach to Akanistha,
Realm at the top of the world.

Innumerable sages had appeared from everywhere,
Like flocks of ducks descending on a lake,
Wearing garlands of many years of meditation,
And radiant with knowledge of spiritual ways.

In both of these usages by the Second Dalai Lama, Akanistha is a worldly realm, not a Pure Land. Nonetheless, it is the most beautiful of all the worldly heavens.

The worldly Akanistha gods follow the enlightenment career of every bodhisattva and celebrate his every accomplishment. Thus, when the Buddha manifests the theater of enlightenment under the bodhi tree, the Akanistha gods appear and sing his praises. The First Dalai Lama writes in *Crushing the Forces of Evil to Dust*:[5]

The Akanistha gods appeared from a circle in the sky and sang:

> The earth and the greatest of its mountains could be burned to ash,
> But he with the diamond wisdom would remain indestructible;

The armies of Mara could shake the three worlds,
But would not stir one hair on a buddha's body.

This earth could be covered by poison
Potent enough to destroy a billion worlds:
But merely a glance from a buddha would counteract it.
For he has totally eradicated the three spiritual poisons.

In both the sutras and the tantras, this worldly Akanistha is often described as being the place where all beings achieve enlightenment, although the two vehicles speak very differently on what this means.

For example, the *Lankavatara Sutra* states:[6]

Not in the world of sensuality is buddhahood attained,
Nor in the ordinary realms of form or non-form;
But only in Akonistha, the Heaven Beneath None,
Is one awakened to the full enlightenment of buddhahood.

Thus, in the sutra literature there is an Akanistha that is described as a worldly heaven—the highest in the realm of form—where beings take birth in their final life before enlightenment. In the Hinayana, this is the place where initial-level saints (or "never returners") go until enlightenment is achieved.

However, another realm by this very same name is mentioned in numerous Mahayana sutras. The *Avatamsaka Sutra*, for example, presents Akanistha as the Pure Land of Buddha Vairochana. *The Avatamsaka* states:

Vairochana's body fills the cosmos,
Appearing before all living beings everywhere.
In each of his pores resides
Buddhas as numerous as all atoms in the world.
Sitting quietly in meditation without moving,
He reveals a complete buddhafield
On each hair of his body.

Every hair on his body does this,
And every buddhafield on every hair
Pervades the entirety of the cosmos.
In this way, Vairochana is present
In every world system,
And his Pure Land is equally omnipresent.

This ubiquitous quality of Akanistha became an important principle for the Tantric concept of the all-pervading nature of the primordial wisdom. For this reason, the fourteenth-century master Lama Tsongkhapa is said to have chanted the *Avatamsaka* for a period every day during his five-year retreat focusing on the *Guhyasamaja Tantra.*

Let us return to the sutra idea of the Akanistha where all beings take rebirth in their final incarnation before enlightenment. This is, of course, an Indian (Bon) idea inherited by Tibetans. The great modern Tibetan master Khenpo Tenzin Nyandak explains the concept as follows:[7]

The highest plane of existence found at the summit of the rupadhatu is known as Akanistha [Ogmin *in Tibetan*]. *At that level of existence, there reside the Akanistha gods. As we ascend upward through the celestial planes of the rupadhatu, we find that the bodies of light of the gods residing on each plane progressively become more subtle, clear, and pure. So, when we are ready to attain buddhahood after an existence as a human being on earth, we find ourselves reborn in the Akanistha heaven, because on that plane the manifest form which embodies the enlightenment experience of a buddha is the one most suitable. That is to say, we acquire a subtle and highly refined body of light by virtue of our rebirth in the Akanistha realm.*

Here in this Akanistha heaven we continue to practice, in order to purify our stream of consciousness of all obscurations, even the most subtle and unconscious of obscurations. Once purified of all shadows, we attain buddhahood in Akanistha as the sambhogakaya. That is to say, we now have realized the sambhogakaya form. This is how one attains buddhahood according to the sutra system of the Mahayana.

Khenpo goes on to explain the far more dramatic and esoteric Tantric perspective:

But in the tantra system we find a different method described. Here it is not necessary to first be reborn in the Akanistha in order to obtain a subtle body of light. The tantra method is known as mayadeha (illusion body; gyulu *in Tibetan). In this case, during our lifetime here on earth we do the practice of dzog rim, which is the second phase of Tantric transformation, and we create in our heart center a very refined illusion body by way of a union of subtle prana and mind. This gyulu provides a suitable base for the manifestation of the sambhogakaya and so it*

is not necessary to seek this base in any other dimension of existence. We have created this gyulu during our lifetime on earth through our practice.

Thus, as Khenpo explains, Akanistha in the sutras is a worldly realm where beings take rebirth after becoming sufficiently evolved through meditation in the human realm. There they attain a body sufficiently subtle for arousing the enlightenment experience. In the tantras, however, a physical base similar to the "body of light" that is the norm in Akanistha is generated in this very lifetime. The means of creating this illusory body is the Tantric yogas of the completion-stage applications.

The theory translates into practice on two levels. On the first stage of tantra, one visualizes oneself as an Akanistha-type deity with a body made of pure light and energy, living in a world that is similarly made of pure light and energy. When the mind has become stable in this practice, one then goes on to the second stage of Tantric application, in which one engages in the illusory body and clear light yogas and actually creates the desired body base.

Lama Tsongkhapa discusses the second of these two levels of the illusory body yoga (or, as Khenpo terms it, "illusion body") in his commentary to the Six Yogas of Naropa, wherein the illusory body yoga stands as the third in the list of six.

He quotes Nagarjuna's commentary known as *The Five Stages*, which explains the doctrine of the *Guhyasamaja Tantra* from which the illusory body yoga segment of the Six Yogas is taken:[8]

The body of the yogi is transformed
By means of the three spiritual applications
And the collecting together of the vital energies.
This is what is meant by "the illusory body."

When one accomplishes that transformative power,
One achieves synchronicity with buddhahood itself,
And without doubt will achieve in this very lifetime
The exalted state will accomplish full enlightenment.

He also quotes from the *Guhyasamaja Tantra*:[9]

The illusory body is adorned with every excellence
And blazes with a great vajra light
That pervades a hundred yojanas in every direction.

Tsongkhapa goes on to explain the tradition of the Six Yogas for arousing this illusory body that spreads light a hundred *yojanas* into every direction, and has many of the qualities of the beings born as gods in the Akanistha heavens. He outlines the dynamics of "blending" this illusory body with yogicly induced clear light experiences, so that the "impure" illusory body becomes purified and then transformed into the physical base of a buddha. Because of this approach, the Six Yogas tradition was alternatively known in early Tibet as *Sepa Gu*, or "Yoga of the Nine Blendings," because it accessed, by yogic means, the omnipresent enlightenment qualities that are present on the three occasions of the waking state, the sleep/dream state, and the out-of-body state, and blended each in three ways by means of Tantric application. The result is the creation of a pure illusory body having the qualities of an Akanistha god that can be used as a perfect vehicle for easy enlightenment.

This is what Khenpo Tenzin Nyandak meant earlier when he stated:

We create in our heart center a very refined illusion body by way of a union of subtle prana and mind. This gyulu . . . provides a suitable base for the manifestation of the sambhogakaya, and so it is not necessary to seek this base in any other dimension of existence.

Figure 38
Vajradhara, Male and Female in Union
Tibet; 14th century
Bronze
9.875 x 8.5 x 6.25 (25.1 x 21.6 x 15.9 cm)
Rubin Museum of Art
C2005.16.19 (HAR 65442)

This special union of *prana* (breath power) and mind is one of the many levels of meaning of the male and female buddhas sitting in sexual union, which we see so frequently in Tibetan art.

Another explanation is that the subtle male and female drops of the body are brought into complete harmony and directed into the central channel running through the *chakras* (body's energy centers), where they are brought into and dissolved within the heart chakra. This gives rise to successively deeper experiences of the clear light mind, and induces the stages of body refinement (or isolation), energy refinement, and mind refinement. This third stage of application in turn induces an experience of separation of consciousness from the ordinary elements, and the primordial clear light mind arises just as at the time of death.

The illusory body formed from the most subtle energies of body and mind at first is termed "impure," for the mind riding on it still has a subtle sense of duality and ego-separateness. It nonetheless has many of the qualities of "a body of light" possessed by that of a god in Akanistha, the highest heaven.

So far, we have looked at three Akanisthas: the worldly realm, which is the highest of the *rupadhatu* heavens, but nonetheless is still within samsara and held in the jaws of the Lord of Death; the sutra Akanistha, which is the abode of Vairochana Buddha, hero of the *Avatamsaka Sutra*; and the Akanistha that is created within one's own body-mind complex by means of the illusory body yogas.

The fourth role of Akanistha—and perhaps this is the most important of all to the Tantric tradition—is its function as the pure abode of Buddha Vajradhara, expounder of many of the Buddhist tantras.

The late great Dujom Rinpoche states in his *The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism*:[10]

There are numerous names that describe him, including Vajradhara, who taught most tantras in the way of secret mantra.

Elsewhere in the same work he writes:[11]

Samantabhadra, who completely encompasses both samsara and nirvana, and who is the all-pervading lord embodying the sixth enlightened family, appears in the indestructible Akanistha realm, the utterly pure expanse that is manifest in and of itself, in the form of Vajradhara, perfectly endowed with the marks and signs of buddhahood. There his intention is the pristine cognition of just what is, the inconceivable abiding nature of reality. . . . in that special Akanistha realm, where extraneous objects of rapture are fully enjoyed, in the form of Vajradhara, lord of the sixth buddha family, [taught] the doctrinal wheel of the inexpressible vehicle of Anuttara Yoga Tantra, *in perpetual motion, by means of intentional symbols, on behalf of an assembly of great bodhisattvas who possessed extraordinary awareness, such as Vajrapani, Avalokiteshvara, and Manjushri.*

Here Dujom Rinpoche is writing in the linguistic framework of the Nyingma (Old Translation School). The Sarma (New Schools) would say much the same, although Samantabhadra would not be mentioned as the source of Vahradhara.[12]

Dujom Rinpoche concludes:

Similarly, in conventional places such as Tushita, Mount Sumeru [Meru], Oddiyana, and Shambhala [the Buddha] also taught the Kriya, Charya, and Yoga tantras.

In other words, not all of the tantras were taught by the Buddha in his manifestation as Vajradhara, lord of Akanistha. In addition he taught numerous tantras in other locations, assuming other guises.

Nonetheless, most of the highest yoga tantras were taught in Akanistha, with the Buddha manifest as Vajradhara.

Over the centuries to follow, many of the Indian *mahasiddhas* (great spiritual adepts) who practiced the Buddhist tantras maintained the link with Akanistha, often receiving visions of and transmission directly from Vajradhara.

For example, the biography of the tenth-century Indian Tilopa, who gathered together the Six Yogas from numerous Tantric systems, reports that he traveled in visions to Akanistha and received many transmissions directly from Vajradhara. Paintings from the various Kargyupa Schools therefore often depict Vajradhara in the top center. Usually he is flanked by Tilopa and Tilopa's disciple Naropa.

In this context, Akanistha is a most esoteric and mysterious sphere, from which much of the Tantric

Figure 39
Padma Sambhava in His Form as Vajradhara, Lord of Akanistha and the Sixth Buddha Family
Tibet; 19th century
Pigment on cloth
38 x 34.25 in. (96.5 x 87 cm)
Rubin Museum of Art
C2006.66.284 (HAR 656)

Padma Sambhava assumes the form of Buddha Vajradhara in the Akanistha state of enlightenment. Behind him the wisdom of Akanistha manifests as a stupa, with Padma's enlightenment expressed as three *kayas* on the three levels of the stupa.

Padma sits in sexual union with his consort, embodiment of all *dakinis*.

Figure 40
Buddha Vajradhara in Akanistha
Tibet; 18th century
Pigment on cloth
26 x 18.5 in. (66 x 47 cm)
Rubin Museum of Art
C2006.66.352 (HAR 781)

In this painting, Buddha Vajradhara sits in the Akanistha buddhafield, with the female Buddha Prajnaparamita above his halo. Another portrait of Vajradhara can be seen at the top center, flanked by the Indian *mahasiddhas* (great spiritually accomplished ones) Tilopa and Naropa. The early Kargyu forefathers Marpa, Milarepa, Pakmo Drupa, and Drikung Jigten Sumgon sit to the sides of them.

The presence of Drikung Jigten Sumgon indicates that the painting belongs to the Drikung School, which he founded. This soon became the largest of the twelve Kargyu subsects, and at its zenith was as large as all eleven other Kargyu Schools combined.

All of the Tantric deities below are important mandala practices in the Drikung lineage: Chakrasamvara, Hevajra, Vajravarahi, Avalokiteshvara, and the Drikung dharma protectors. Presumably, the lama at the lower center is the head of the Drigung School at the time the painting was made, or at least the head of the specific Drigung monastery with which the patron of the painting was associated.

Figure 41
Akanistha: The World and Beyond
Central Tibet; 19th century
Pigment on cloth
25.5 x 40 in. (64.8 x 101.6 cm)
Rubin Museum of Art
C2006.66.114 (HAR 53)

Looked at from the highest perspective, the Pure Lands are present every place in the universe. We saw this in an earlier quotation from the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, which stated, "In every atom there exists buddhafields. . . . As numerous as all the atoms in the world." The *Avatamsaka Sutra* expresses this extraordinary, divine vision from start to finish. The painting shown here celebrates this *Avatamsaka* perspective.

The central figure in the painting is none other than Buddha Vairochana, the lord of Akanistha, as portrayed in the *Avatamsaka*. The buddhas and bodhisattvas of the ten directions radiate in the sky above his celestial mansion; other enlightened beings peek out from every corner of the canvas.

The artist carries his work beyond the sutra's vision, however, and brings in the Tantric legacy of Akanistha as described in both the Old and New Tantras. In the upper-left corner, there are the Buddhas Samantabhadra and Vajradhara, both of whom are the primordial buddhas of the Old Tantra Schools (Nyingma), and both of whom are linked to Akanistha. In the upper-right corner, there is Lama Tsongkhapa, founder of the Yellow School, which was a synthesis of the New Tantra Schools (Sarma), with Buddha Vajradhara, the primordial buddha of the New Tantras, seated in sexual union in his Akanistha palace.

Various other buddhas and buddhafields are depicted along the lower section of the painting. For example, there is Amitabha in the lower-left corner, with flowers falling from the skies into his halo.

The *Avatamsaka* views the buddhafields as being reflected everywhere in the world. The ordinary world of birth, sickness, old age, and death is merely an illusion manifesting in the minds of unenlightened beings. This "ordinary world" is depicted in the upper-right side of the painting.

Mount Meru, the legendary center of the universe, can also be seen in this painting. The sun and moon are off to the left and right, respectively, each being pulled on chariots by auspicious animals. Auspicious symbols and substances adorn the oceans below, a symbol of how the enlightenment energies of the buddhafields are ubiquitous.

The various worldly heavens can be seen in the skies above Meru, with buddhas, bodhisattvas, and their buddhafields above them. The worlds of humans and animals are depicted in the vignettes below.

Men come and go from a palace, seemingly unaware of the dangerous predicament of their situation. The danger is apparent in the image of the man lying on his deathbed, his skin green and ghostly, and his face distorted with fear. Below and to his side are the terrible lower realms. Hungry ghosts sit on a parched hill, their stomachs as big as mountains and their throats narrow and constricted, symbolic of the way in which greedy beings are never satisfied. They are surrounded by wish-fulfilling jewels but have no means to access the abundance because of the spell that greed holds over their minds.

Another vignette shows hell denizens being tortured in a pot of boiling oil, while hellish demons further torture them with weapons. Others freeze in the cold hells.

The painting as a whole is presented in the traditional form of a stylized landscape, with mountains, rivers, and seas below a dazzling sky.

lore has emanated. It is an eternal repository of Tantric teachings, which those on high stages can visit at will.[13]

But for Tibetans, it is not limited to those on the highest stages. Even beginners can enjoy it, at least in their meditations and visualizations. In *The Words of My Perfect Teacher on the Great Perfection*, the great Paltul Rinpoche describes how someone attending even the most basic of religious discourses should think:[14]

Do not consider the place where the Dharma is being taught, or the teacher, or the teachings as ordinary and impure. As you listen, keep the five perfections clearly in mind. The perfect place is the citadel of the absolute expanse, called Akanistha, "The Unexcelled." The perfect teacher is Samantabhadra, the dharmakaya. The perfect assembly consists of the male and female bodhisattvas and deities of the mind lineage of the buddhas, and of the symbol lineage of the vidyadharas.

(B) KHECHARI: PURE LAND OF THE DAKINIS

Akanistha Pure Land, as discussed earlier, is a principal focus of attention in many of the Tantric treatises coming from India to Tibet, because of its role as the sphere from within which Buddha Vajradhara first taught so many of the tantras. However, Tibetans give at least as much attention to Khechari, the mystical and mysterious Land of the Dakinis.

One of the reasons for the Tibetan reverence for *dakinis* (female spirits) and their Pure Land of Khechari could well be due to the Tibetan sense of the sacred quality of the earth and its special power places, which they inherited from their ancient shamanic traditions. *Chakrasamvara* and the other *dakini* tantras incorporate a type of sacred geography that found fertile soil in the Tibetan mind.[15]

Many learned articles and books have been written in the West about the term "*dakini*" and about the role that the *dakinis* played in the Tantric Buddhism of India.[16] Tibetans translated the word as *khadroma* (sky traveler) and generally use it in reference to mystical females, human and otherwise, who inspire and guide humanity to higher planes. It is also an honorific term used for the wife or partner of a high lama.

According to legend, the Buddha originally taught the *dakini* tantras to a group of disciples on the summit of Mount Kailash. Here he manifested the Chakrasamvara (Wheel of Bliss) mandala, as well as the mandalas of other related *dakini* tantras, and set forth the doctrines whereby enlightenment is easily won through using the path of the senses. Tibetans call the approach *du lam* (the way of desire), because the objects of the senses are experienced by beings living in *kamadhatu* (desire realm). Most Indian traditions at the time, including the exoteric forms of Buddhism, taught paths of meditation that advocated sensory withdrawal (or at least sensory minimalism) as the key to spiritual success. The *dakini* tantras, with their emphasis on the objects of the senses themselves being used as subjects of meditation, was a radical departure from the mainstream Indian trend. Moreover, the overt incorporation of love, sex, and the romantic instinct was again a radical departure, for the practice of leaving home and becoming a celibate and ascetic wanderer was the common approach.

When the Buddha manifested the Wheel of Bliss mandala on the summit of Mount Kailash and pressed down on the earth so as to subdue the earthly energies and transform them into a base suitable for the prophesied golden age—and Asia did enter into a golden age for the next one thousand years—he also simultaneously emanated innumerable other mandalas and pressed

Figure 42
Chakrasamvara, "The Circle of Bliss"
Eastern Tibet; 19th century
Pigment on cloth
33.25 x 23.25 (84.5 x 59.1 cm)
Rubin Museum of Art
F1997.7.2 (HAR 99)

This painting shows Chakrasamvara in sexual union with Vajrayogini, which is the principal symbol of the "Wheel of Bliss" cycle of *dakini* tantras. Practice of this tantra is the primary method for achieving rebirth in Khechari, Land of the Dakinis.

Buddha Akshobya sits at the upper section of the painting, with Milarepa, the great eleventh- century Tibetan yogi and practitioner of Chakrasamvara, seated below him. As always, Milarepa's right hand is in the mudra of singing; he is one of the greatest poets and songwriters in Tibet's long and illustrious history. The lineage lamas in the upper corners of the canvas are unidentified.

The three deities at the lower section of the painting are important dharma protectors of the Kargyupa tradition. Tsering Lhamo, riding a snow lion in the lower-right corner, is associated with Mount Everest.

on various other mystical sites on the earth, paying special attention to the twenty-four power sites of the Himalayan regions associated with feminine energy. These twenty-four Tantric sites became known as *dakini* centers and were quickly adopted as favorite places of meditation and pilgrimage for Buddhist tantrics. Many of these sites are located on the fringes of Tibet, and so Tibetans had immediate access to them.

These twenty-four places are called *pita* in Sanskrit, a name meaning something like "seat." The idea is that they serve as earthly reflections of the brilliance of Khechari and as portals through which the *dakinis* come and go between Khechari and our planet Earth.

The exact location of several of the twenty-four sites has long been lost in the obscurity of myth and legend, although many are still known. This did not distract Tibetans, however, and they quickly took the idea of the *dakini* portal and transferred it to any location they liked. Thus, one could take any piece of land and quickly identify twenty-four places within it that could serve as substitutes for the original twenty-four established by the Buddha.

Tibetan literature is rich in references to these *dakini* sites and in stories of yogis and yoginis who achieved their realization by practicing Tantric yoga in them. All twenty-four became important places of pilgrimage for the Tibetans.

Uddiyana, the birthplace of Padma Sambhava, whom we saw in an earlier chapter, has long been a favorite among the twenty-four.[17] For example, when the Third Dalai Lama (1543–1588) visited and made retreat at Gyal near the Lhamo Latso (Oracle Lake) in the Olkha Mountains (circa 1560), he wrote a poem describing the place:

Oh yogis who strive with diligence
In the meaningful wisdom yogas,
To you I offer this melodious song
Meant to sooth the ear that is irritated
By the mundane humdrum of worldly life.

This site at which we have gathered,
Blessed by the meditations
Of accomplished masters of the past,
And beautified by a lake of lotus flowers,
Is a dwelling place for the mystical dakas
And dakinis of the three abodes.
Like clouds forming in the sky,
The dakas and dakinis assemble here,
Where the snows lie like a shawl on the mountains
That stretch upward and touch the heavens.
As I sit in witness to this splendor,
I cannot help but give voice to this song.

With these words the Third Dalai Lama defines the Oracle Lake in the Olkha Mountains as a sacred site blessed by the *dakinis*, and as one of the places on Earth pressed by the Wheel of Bliss mandalas emanated by Buddha in his form as Heruka so many centuries ago.

The *dakini* tantras are special not only for their Pure Land of Khechari as a final destination but also for having transformed numerous places on the earth into *dakini* portals.

Although Khechari is portrayed as a great place to go after death, it is also viewed as a metaphor for a special state of Tantric realization. Geshey Kelzang Gyatso writes in *A Guide to Dakini Land*:[18]

Outer Pure Dakini Land is beyond the world of ordinary experience. It is the Pure Land of Buddha Vajrayogini and Buddha Heruka. . . .

Pure Dakini Land is similar to the Pure Lands of Tushita and Sukhavati, except that Heruka and Vajrayogini's Pure Land is the only one in which beings can receive teachings on highest yoga tantra and put them into practice.

Figure 43
Mandala of Chakrasamvara and Vajrayogini
Tibet; 16th century
Pigment on cloth
21.5 x 17.5 in. (54.6 x 44.5 cm)
Rubin Museum of Art
C2001.9.1 (HAR 65020)

This mandala shows Chakrasamvara and Vajrayogini, Queen of the Dakinis, of the Sakya School of Tibetan Buddhism. Painted in the old Gyantsey style with a predominance of deep red to symbolize great bliss, the mandala is encircled with lineage masters from both India and Tibet. A row of buddhas, bodhisattvas, and Tantric protective deities are placed in a line along the base of the painting.

When through Vajrayogini's guidance those who are very old and infirm reach her Pure Land, they will no longer experience the sufferings of old age and sickness. All signs of their old age will disappear and they will be transformed into sixteen-year-olds of great beauty and vitality, enjoying an endless life span. . . .

Outer Pure Dakini Land can also be explained in terms of an individual practitioner's personal experience. From this point of view, we attain outer Pure Dakini Land by completing the practices of the generation stage of Vajrayogini.

During training in generation stage meditation, we visualize our body as the pure body of Buddha Vajrayogini, our immediate surroundings as the mandala of Vajrayogini, and our world as Pure Dakini Land. If we engage in generation stage practice continuously, the ordinary, impure appearances to our mind will gradually diminish and finally cease altogether. Once we have gained a firm realization of generation stage, we shall experience only pure appearances and our world will be transformed into Pure Dakini Land. The great Teacher Tenpa Rabgyä said that Pure Dakini Land is not some faraway place, nor is it necessary to disappear from this world to reach it.

Thus, Geshey Kelzang Gyatso explains how the practice of the *dakini* tantras not only facilitates transmigration to the Khechari Pure Land but in great practitioners transforms personal vision to the extent that the ordinary world itself becomes seen as Khechari.

Many of Tibet's greatest mystics choose Khechari as their final destination, even after having achieved enlightenment. An example is Tibet's greatest female mystic, the illustrious yogini Machik Labdron (1055–1153), who had meditated in and taught from a cave in Lab for some sixty-two years and achieved full enlightenment there. Her biography concludes with an account of her death and in particular with the final words she spoke to her disciples on the occasion of her passing. She called her disciples to her and said:[19]

For ninety-nine years, I have worked for the benefit of beings.
Now this work is almost complete.
I will not take birth again in this human realm in a physical form,
Nor will I leave behind any remains or relics.
But my emanations in the world will be innumerable,
And many will recognize them. . . .

As the heart of the sun
Cannot be veiled by an eternity of darkness
So, too, the realization of the ultimate nature of the mind
Cannot be veiled by an eternity of samsara. . . .

Discursive thoughts become transcended;
Dharmakaya is none other than that.
The five poisons are totally transcended;
The five wisdoms are none other than that.

The three poisons become totally eliminated;
The three kayas are none other than that.
Conventional mind is totally transformed;
Buddhahood is none other than that. . . .

Ah, fortunate sons and disciples gathered here,
This body of ours is impermanent, like a feather on a mountain pass,
This mind of ours is empty and clear, like the depth of space.
Relax in that natural state, free of fabrication.
When mind is without any support, that is mahamudra.
Becoming familiar with this, blend your mind with it.
That itself is buddhahood. . . .

Figure 44
Mandala of Hevajra and Dakini Nairatmya
Tibet; 17th century
Pigment on cloth
16.50 x 13.75 in. (41.9 x 34.9 cm)
Rubin Museum of Art
F1996.1.8 (HAR 444)

This mandala from the Sakya School of Tibetan Buddhism depicts the Hevajra Mandala, which is associated with one of the most important Dakini Tantras. It is in the lineage of the tenth-century Indian *mahasiddha* Dombipa, shown with his *dakini* consort riding on a tiger (upper-left corner). The lama in the upper-right corner is Kunga Nyingpo, a Sakya lama considered to be a pre-incarnation of the soul destined to become one of the Dalai Lamas. Two Sakya dharma protectors adorn the lower corners.

Figure 45
Mandala of Vajrayogini
Tibet; 18th century
Pigment on cloth
11.75 x 11.75 in. (29.8 x 29.8 cm)
Rubin Museum of Art
C2006.66.283 (HAR 654)

The Vajrayogini *chojung*, or "reality source," superficially resembles the Star of David. However, the former is actually two three-dimensional pyramids, each with three sides, one right-side up and the other upside down. The reality source, and thus the emanated supporting and supported mandalas, occur at the center of both.

Human life is wasted in the thought, "I will practice Dharma later."
What would happen if you were to die today in an accident?
If you don't meditate with perseverance now,
When will you find authentic Dharma?

If you don't cultivate meditation within yourself,
What good will a Dharma by another do for you?
It is like a beggar's sleep, in which he dreams
Of being rich in splendor, food, and wealth.
Everything disappears without a trace when he awakens,
Like the passing of a bird in the sky. . . .

Supreme view is beyond all duality of subject and object.
Supreme meditation is without distraction.
Supreme activity is action without effort.
Supreme fruition is without hope and fear.

When you carry this knowledge to inner realization,
Enlightenment is instantly attained.
Follow this path and discover your own essential nature.
This old woman has no instruction more profound than this for you.

Thus she spoke. And then, on the morning of the fifteenth day in the sixth month of the Fire-Monkey year, just as the sun rose glittering on the mountain top, Machik spoke: "All of my disciples, gather here. Prepare an excellent Tantric feast to please all the dakas and dakinis. For ninety-nine years, I have done vast amounts of work for the benefit of beings. Now I am going to the realm of Khechari."

Her body shone with a blaze of pink light that emanated like sun rays. Three times with a thundering voice, she intoned the syllable peh. Then without moving away from the essence of reality, her mind left her body.

This touching story of the *parinirvana* (the death of Buddha Shakyamuni) of Machik Labdron very eloquently expresses the Tibetan sentiment.

Following pages:

Figure 46
The Eleventh-Century Female Mystic Machik Labdron
Tibet; 19th century
Pigment on cloth
Rubin Museum of Art
C2006.66.563 (HAR 1045)

This portrait of Tibet's great female mystic Machik Labdron depicts her in the form of a dancing *dakini*, naked except for her jewelry. The *dakinis* of the five buddha families similarly dance naked beside her left shoulder. The female Buddha Prajnaparamita sits at the center of the circle above, with buddhas and bodhisattvas around her. A yogi off to her right practices while blowing on a human thighbone trumpet. A wrathful black *dakini* dances at the lower section of the canvas.

Although born as an ordinary human being, Machik is considered an incarnation of the *dakinis*. By the age of eight, she had memorized the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutra* in 8,000 verses, and from then on chanted it daily from memory. All schools of Tibetan Buddhism practice lineages descending from her.

Figure 47
Vajrayogini Looks to Khechari Pure Land
Tibet; 19th century
Pigment on cloth
25.5 x 17.25 in. (64.8 x 43.8 cm)
Rubin Museum of Art
C2006.66.243 (HAR 318)

Known to Tibetans as *Naro Khajodma*, or "Naropa's Flying Dakini," this form of Vajrayogini was given by Naropa to the Pamtingpa brothers of Nepal and brought to Tibet by the early Sakya School teachers. It later became a major practice in the Dalai Lama's Gelukpa School. This painting is a Sakya piece, as indicated by the Sakya lineage lamas sitting in the upper corners of the canvas.

Vajrayogini is from the female cycle of tantras, known as the *Dakini Tantras*. She is shown standing and naked, for her enlightenment has no obscurations. She drinks the blood of great bliss from a human skull cup and gazes off into the distance at Kechari, the legendary "Pure Land of Dakinis," a somewhat sexier Tantric paradise than its sutra counterparts.

(C) SHAMBHALA: PURE LAND OF THE KALACHAKRA PROPHECIES

The third and most exotic of all the Tantric Pure Lands is probably Shambhala, the special buddhafield associated with the *Kalachakra Tantra*, or the "Wheel of Time." This tantra is also an important source of Buddhist prophecy.

The Russian painter Nicholas Roerich (1874–1947) first popularized the idea of Shambhala in the West when his book *Shambhala* (published in New York by Frederick Stokes in 1930) attracted considerable international attention. Similarly, the Shambhala paintings that he created in Mongolia during his visits there further heightened international interest.

Three years later, James Hilton's *Lost Horizons* (Macmillan, London, 1933) took the Shambhala theme to a new level of popular fantasy. Hilton's alluring images of Shangri-La, a lost kingdom somewhat inspired by the Shambhala myths, took the world by storm.

The Buddhist legacy of Shambhala is no less fabulous than the literary portraits drawn by either of these

Figure 48
Nicholas Roerich
Command of Rigden Djapo, ca. 1927
Tempera on canvas
35.25 x 56.25 in. (89.5 x 143 cm)
Private Collection, USA

The Russian explorer, mystic, Theosophist, and artist Nicholas Roerich fell in love with the Altai Mountains of northwestern Mongolia, and in this painting depicts a Shambhala portal. A Shambhala knowledge holder sits in the entrance way, as various mystical lamas walk toward him and the entrance.

Figure 49
The Buddha Teaching Kalachakra, the source of the Shambhala doctrines, while seated inside the Rice Heap Stupa
Tibet; 19th century
Pigment on cloth
28.875 x 21.75 in. (73.3 x 55.2 cm)
Rubin Museum of Art
C2006.66.510 (HAR 978)

two writers. The story begins with a tale from the life of Buddha himself. Buddha was engaged in expounding the *Prajna Paramita Sutra* on Vulture's Peak in North India when he perceived an opportunity to radically transform the world of man by means of the esoteric doctrine Kalachakra. Without moving from his seat on Vulture's Peak, he sent forth an emanation of himself, which flew to South India and spoke the *Kalachakra Tantra* to a group of highly developed disciples. This double appearance is no problem for Tantric Buddhists, for a great master can appear in many places simultaneously.

To add a bit of flair to the legend, it is said that the listeners were no ordinary disciples. They themselves had flown by magical powers from the mystical land of Shambhala far to the north. King Suchandra was the principal patron of the teaching, but with him he had brought ninety-six of his ministers, as well as numerous other great and illustrious beings. All had flown by the powers of mind.

Nor was the place ordinary. The group assembled at the center of a solid structure known as Dhanyakataka (Rice Heap Stupa). Buddha delivered his Kalachakra sermon, while the entire assembly sat inside of that solid structure.

The history of the manner in which the lineage was passed down over the succeeding centuries continues with no less of an exotic edge. After receiving the transmission from the Buddha, King Suchandra and his entire entourage flew back to his kingdom of Shambhala, where Suchandra built a great three-dimensional mandala of Kalachakra in the center of his capital city, Kalapa. The entire country became dedicated to the practice of the Kalachakra yogas, filling the world with enlightened beings.

Tradition states that the Shambhala teaching was delivered in this extraordinary manner in India, but then left the country immediately afterward and did not return for more than a thousand years. During this long period, it was maintained exclusively within the precincts of Shambhala. It did not come back to India for more than a thousand years, until an Indian *mahasiddha* traveled to Shambhala via the Silk Road and carried it back to its homeland. It instantly became a hit and within a century was carried into Tibet.

The Kalachakra doctrines quickly became popular with Tibetans, and the lineage spread to all schools of Tibetan Buddhism. The kingdom of Shambhala assumed the stature of a Pure Land, adding to the aura of the tradition. The present Dalai Lama, for example, has given public initiations into the Kalachakra mandala on more than a dozen occasions, often to hundreds of thousands of devotees. Penor Rinpoche, the head of the Nyingma School, and Sakya Trizin, head of the Sakya sect, have also given the initiation on many occasions, though usually for smaller gatherings.

Where is Shambhala located? Numerous Tibetan masters, including the Third Panchen Lama, wrote a *Lam Yig* (road guide) describing how to get there.[20] Their writings, however, are cryptic and ambiguous.

At the 1985 Kalachakra initiation in Switzerland, the Dalai Lama commented,

Although those with special affiliation may actually be able to go there [Shambhala] through their karmic connection, nevertheless it is not a physical place that we can actually find. We can only say that it is a Pure Land, a Pure Land in the human realm. And unless one has the merit and the actual karmic association, one cannot actually arrive there.

Figure 50
A Map of Shambhala
Tibet; 19th century
Pigment on cloth
23.5 x 15.5 in. 59.7 x 39.4 cm)
Rubin Museum of Art
F1997.38.2 (HAR 563)

In this painting a king of Shambhala sits at the center of Kalapa, a mystical city surrounded by snow mountains. The temple of Kalachakra stands immediately in front of him, wrapped in the fire of wisdom. The ninety-six principalities surround him, in which various aspects of the *Kalachakra Tantra* are preserved.

Lama Tsongkhapa (1357–1419), founder of the Yellow School of Tibetan Buddhism, sits at the top center, flanked by his two chief disciples. Below, heroes from Shambhala charge out to assist in defeating the forces of evil, in a prophesied battle that will result in a golden era of one thousand years of peace on earth.

Numerous prayers for rebirth in Shambhala exist in Tibetan, and most lamas are familiar with at least one of them. Edwin Birnbaum included several in his study of the Shambhala myths, *The Way to Shambhala*,[21] which includes a reading of the Third Panchen Lama's road guide, as well as oral comments, interpretations, and reflections by contemporary lamas living in the refugee community of India.

The esoteric nature of the Kalachakra history added to, rather than detracted from, the popularity of the system in Tibet. Lama Tsongkhapa (1357–1419), who was the founder of the Yellow School of Tibetan Buddhism and the guru to the First Dalai Lama, wrote on the subject, as did the First Dalai Lama himself. One of the four great deeds of the Seventh Dalai Lama is said to be his work in collecting and reviving the threads of the legacy. Most Panchen Lamas have given teachings and initiations on the subject and have also written meditational manuals and liturgies associated with the tradition.

The online *Wikipedia Dictionary*, in its discussion of Shambhala, states:[22]

Madame Blavatsky, who claimed to be in contact with a Great White Lodge of Himalayan Adepts, mentions Shambhala in several places, without giving it especially great emphasis. (The Mahatmas, we are told, are also active around Shigatse and Luxor.) Blavatsky's Shambhala, like the headquarters of the Great White Lodge, is a physical location on our earth, albeit one which can only be penetrated by a worthy aspirant.

Later esoteric writers like Alice Bailey (of the Arcane School) and the Agni Yoga of Nicholas and Helena Roerich do emphasize Shambhala. Bailey transformed it into a kind of extra-dimensional (or spiritual) reality on the etheric plane. The Roerichs see its existence as both spiritual and physical. . . . The predominant theme is one of light and hope, as evidenced by James Redfield's and Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche's respective books by that name.

A unique feature of the Shambhala legend is its mystical line of rulers, known as the twenty-five *Rigden* (Kalkin kings). These knowledge holders, all masters of the Kalachakra yogas, rule in turn for roughly a century each. We are presently in the age of the twenty-first Rigden. In the time of the twenty-fifth, whose name will be Rudra, the world will erupt into war, with good and evil arrayed on the two sides against each other, their forces almost equal in strength. If the forces of evil prevail, then the world will enter a dark age for one thousand years, with no respite from the misery. However, if the forces of goodness prevail, then a golden age of one thousand years will blossom.

For a time it will seem that the forces of evil have the upper hand. Then suddenly Rudra, the twenty-fifth Kalkin king, will throw open the doors of Shambhala, and the tide will be turned. Goodness will prevail, and a thousand years of peace, freedom, and prosperity will be the reward. This great battle charge is depicted on the bottom of many Shambhala tangkas. (See figure 50.)

Many Central Asians read a daily prayer for rebirth in Shambhala. As mentioned above, the liturgy by the Third Panchen Lama is very popular with Tibetans. Mongolians and the Chinese prefer the prayer by the Sixth Panchen Lama, composed in the late 1920s when he was living and traveling extensively in the Mongol and Manchu regions. He gave numerous Kalachakra initiations during that period:[23]

Figure 51
Kalachakra and Consort, with Lamas from the Sakya Lineage
Tibet; 17th century
Pigment on cloth
39 x 24.25 in. (99.1 x 61.5 cm)
Rubin Museum of Art
C2006.66.232 (HAR 299)

The top row of lamas in this painting depicts important Indian and Tibetan masters in the Kalachakra transmission. The tangka belongs to the Sakya School, as indicated by the presence of several Sakya lamas in the lineage. The other figures in the painting (along the sides and below) are important deities associated with the Kalachakra mandala.

Of note, Gene Smith, head of the Tibetan Buddhist Resource Center, once informed me that the oldest of the thousands of Tibetan books he has scanned in his center is a copy (in Tibetan translation) of the *Root Kalachakra Tantra*, which was created in 1206, in commemoration of the passing of the great Mongolian emperor Qubilai Khan. Qubilai had been a strong Sakya practitioner.

Homage to the kind spiritual master
Inseparably one with Kalachakra
Who has attained to the state of the empty body, with
The great unchanging bliss possessing all excellencies
In constant embrace with the beautiful dharmadhatu
lover

To the north of India lies the fabulous land of Shambhala
Within the city of Kalapa a jewel at its heart.
There at its center seated on a throne studded in gems,
As though riding a magical flying horse,
Is Rudra Chakri, Wrathful Holder of the Wheel

I call to him, an embodiment of the Three Jewels:
Come forth with your weapon of inconceivable wisdom;
Slay from within me my every delusion
And my habit of grasping at a truly existent self.

Bless me that I may behold you in Shambhala
Wisely guiding your throngs of devotees.
And when the time comes to tame the barbarians,
May you keep me in your inner circle.
Should I die before achieving enlightenment
May I be reborn in Shambhala, in the city of Kalapa,
And have the good fortune to drink the honey
Of the sublime teachings of the Kalkin Masters.

May I take to completion the profound non-dual message
Of the two yogic stags of Tantric practice, as taught in
Guhyasamaja, Yamantake, Heruka Chakrasamvara, and
Kalachakra;
Thus in this very lifetime may I achieve realization of
The clear light and illusory body in perfect union,
Or the empty body conjoined with the unchanging bliss.

The Third Panchen Lama's *Road to Shambhala* suggests that this mythical kingdom is located somewhere in the Mongol regions. Mongols have long believed this to be the case, and see themselves as the real inheritors of the Shambhala legacy.

Several remote valleys in the Altai Mountains are held up as possibilities, as are several places in the Gobi Desert. Moreover, the Mongol Buriatias in Russian similarly lobby for several valleys that they feel fit the description.

Figure 52
Manjushrikirti, Eighth King of Shambhala and the First Kalkin Master
China; 19th century
Embroidered textile (brocade)
28 x 16 in. (71.1 x 40.6 cm)
Rubin Museum of Art
C2006.66.155 (HAR 132)

Eight generations after King Suchandra received the *Kalachakra Tantra* from the Buddha, Manjushrikirti assumed the throne. He is the first of the prophesied twenty-five "Kalkin Masters," and thus plays a special role in world history. In this painting, he is shown teaching to a disciple, while one of his predecessors looks down from above. A simple form of Kalachakra can be seen in the upper-left corner.

This tangka, known as *tsim-tangka*, was created by a combined weaving and embroidery process. It was probably once part of a complete set depicting Shambhala kings and lineage masters.

中華民國浙江杭州都錦生絲織廠織

Figure 53
A Kalkin Master and Consort in Shambhala
Eastern Tibet; 19th century
Pigment on cloth
20.5 x 30.75 in. (52.1 x 78.1 cm)
Collection of Shelley and Donald Rubin
(HAR 694)

This painting, probably once one of a complete set of the Shambhala masters, depicts a Kalkin in Shambhala, his Tantric consort at his side. A red-hat lama floats by in the clouds above. The tangka is in the eastern Tibet style, and the lama is probably of either the Karma Kargyu or Jonang Schools.

An inscription in gold gives his name as Chak Mar, or "Red Handed." However, this name is not found in the standard list of Shambhala masters, although both the sixth and twenty-fifth do have the "Chak" as part of their names.

In his right hand, he holds an axe for severing the heads of the great enemies: delusion and ego-grasping. In his left, he holds the severed head of Brahma, the Hindu creator-god; this symbolizes that he has achieved the enlightenment wisdom which brings freedom from all worldly craving and limitations.

His consort holds a *vajra*, symbol of Tantric bliss and also of the five Tantric wisdoms.

A Few More Buddhafields, Just for Fun

As the Buddha might have put it:

O Ananda, if for every grain of sand on the banks of the River Ganges one were to have as many grains of sand as there are grains of sand on the River Ganges, and if one were to repeat this process of multiplication by as many grains of sand as there are on the River Ganges, still, O Ananda, one would not come to a large enough number to equal the number of buddhafields that exist on even one grain of sand on the banks of the River Ganges.

Figure 54
Medicine Buddha
Tibet; 15th century
86.36 x 62.23 (34 x 24.5 in)
Ground mineral pigment on cotton
Rubin Museum of Art
C2006.66.7 (HAR 125)

In this painting the Medicine Buddha sits on a teaching throne. His right hand shows the mudra of supreme generosity, the stem of a medicinal plant held with the tips of his fingers. He wears the robes of a Buddhist monk, and holds the traditional monk alms bowl.

The Sun Bodhisattva (Suryabhaskara), reddish orange in color, stands below to his right, holding the stem of a lotus on which rests the sun. The Moon Bodhisattva (Chandrabhaskara), white in color, stands below and to the Medicine Buddha's left, holding the stem of a lotus that supports the moon. These two bodhisattvas represent the healing power of the sun and moon, while the Medicine Buddha teaches how to utilize these for healing purposes. The medicinal plant in the Buddha's hand also symbolizes how to utilize all herbs and minerals on the planet. The Buddha's left hand rests in his lap in the posture of meditation, representing how he also utilizes meditation and yoga for healing and healthy living.

The female Buddha Prajnaparamita, whose name means "Perfection of Wisdom," sits above the Sun Bodhisattva. She often is placed at the center of the Medicine Buddha mandala in mandalas portraying the Medicine Buddha tradition, because wisdom is basis of all healing, and the source of ultimate healing. Buddha Shakyamuni, flanked by two bodhisattvas, sits above the Moon Bodhisattva.

The background of the tangka is filled with buddhas, bodhisattvas and other divine beings who are associated in one way or another with the Medicine Buddha mandala.

Anyway, there are a lot of them.

In their art, literature, and spiritual lives, Tibetans mostly celebrate the Pure Lands we visited in this book's earlier chapters: Tushita; the various Sukhavatis; and the three Tantric Pure Lands of Akanistha, Khechari, and Shambhala.

There are, however, a number of others that receive peripheral attention.

One of the most important of these is Bendurya (Lapis Lazuli), the Pure Land of Bhaishajyaguru. Tibetans refer to this Buddha as Sangyey Menlha ("Buddha Medicine Guru"). He has commonly become known in Western circles as "The Medicine Buddha."

The Buddha speaks to Manjushri of Bhaishajyaguru's Pure Abode in *The Medicine Buddha Sutra*:[1]

East of this world, past countless buddhalands more numerous than the grains of sands in ten Ganges River banks, there exists a world called Pure Lapis Lazuli. The buddha of that land is called the Medicine Buddha Lapis Lazuli Radiance Tathagata Arhat, the perfectly enlightened, perfect in mind and deed, well gone, knower of the world, unsurpassed being, tamer of passions, teacher of men and gods, the Buddha World Honored.

Manjushri, when this World Honored One was treading the bodhisattva path he solemnly made twelve great vows to grant sentient beings whatever they desired.

Having spoken these words, the Buddha then goes on to list and describe the twelve vows, and provide both a detailed description of the Bendurya Pure Land, as well as the means of achieving rebirth there.

Bhaishajyaguru is one of the three most important buddha forms in Chinese Buddhism. Most Chinese temples have a chapel dedicated to a trinity featuring him. Here Shakyamuni is seated in the center, with Amitabha to his right, and the Medicine Buddha to Shakyamuni's left. Many Chinese people aspire to rebirth in Bhaishajyaguru's Pure Land.

This Pure Land, however, is not so important for Tibetans in general. They take more of an interest in the meditations and yoga associated with the Medicine Buddha tradition as a Tantric practice. For them he is more relevant as a Tantric deity form, to be used in meditation and mantra practice for personal healing and enlightenment. As the Karma Kargyu master Khenchen Trangu Rinpoche puts it:[2]

In most religious traditions, the deities of that tradition, when they are related to or imagined, are imagined in front of one. Then, visualizing the deity or deities as being present in front of one, one prays to them, and by doing so hopefully one receives their blessing, which benefits one in some way. In the Vajrayana tradition, however, we regard the blessing and the power and the qualities of the deities as being innate, as being within one's own mind.

It is through regarding oneself as the deity that defects are gradually eradicated and qualities gradually revealed. The primary technique of visualization is to visualize ourselves as the deity, because the potential to transcend one's problems is innate rather than external to us.

The primary technique in the meditation consists of imagining yourself to be the Medicine Buddha, conceiving of yourself as the Medicine Buddha. By replacing the thought of yourself as yourself with the thought of yourself as the Medicine Buddha, you gradually counteract and remove the fixation on your personal self. And as that fixation is removed, the power of the seventh consciousness is reduced. And as it is reduced, the klesha are gradually weakened, which causes you to experience greater and greater well-being in both body and mind.

Lama Tubten Zopa speaks of the Medicine Buddha as follows in his booklet, *Advice for Daily Practice*:[3]

Lord Buddha told his attendant Ananda that even animals who hear the Medicine Buddha mantra will never be reborn in the lower realms. The highly attained Kyabjey Choden Rinpoche, who completed the entire path to enlightenment, said recently that if you recite the Medicine Buddha mantra at the time of death you will be reborn in the Pure Land. Therefore, it is to be recited not only for healing but also to benefit people and animals all the time, whether they are living or dying.

If you recite the Medicine Buddha mantra every day, you will purify your negative karma and this will help you to never be reborn in the lower realms. . . . If you cannot bear even the present suffering of the human realm—which is blissful joy compared to that of the lower realms—how will you be able to bear the intense suffering of the lower realms, which is unimaginably unbearable, lasts for an incredible length of time and a billion times worse than all the human sufferings put together.

Since reciting the Medicine Buddha mantra saves you from all these sufferings it is much more precious than skies of gold, diamonds, wish-fulfilling jewels and zillions and zillions of dollars. Material wealth counts for nothing because it cannot purify negative karma. Even if you possessed that much wealth, simply reciting or even hearing the Medicine Buddha mantra just once would be far more precious because it would leave an imprint of the entire path to enlightenment on your mind, help you gain realizations of the path, eradicate all your gross and subtle defilements, and cause you to achieve enlightenment.

Tibetans like to recite the mantras associated with the Medicine Buddha when eating food, in order to transform the food into medicine. They also recite it over any medicine that they eat, blowing mantra energy into the medicine as an enhancer. They especially like to use the mantra when they eat meat, believing that it assists the dead animal to achieve rebirth in the Medicine Buddha's Pure Land.

Tibetan doctors look to the Medicine Buddha tradition not so much for meditation and rebirth in a Pure Land but rather as a guide to the healing arts that they practice. They study the *Medicine Buddha Tantra* rather than the devotional sutra. Here the Medicine Buddha mandala is described in terms that serve as a map to illness and health. Herbs and minerals can be found in the various quarters of the mandala, as well as hot springs and other healing phenomena.

The Medicine Buddha mandala, as a whole, outlines everything a doctor needs to know in order to access the "healing Pure Land" aspect of the earth, with cures for all 404 types of diseases. Medical students begin with a study of the *Root Medicine Tantra*, which describes the mandala of the healing earth, and then go on to study the *Explanatory Tantra*, *Subsequent Tantra*, and *Oral Transmission Tantra*. These four collectively

are known as *The Four Medicine Tantras.* Aspiring medical practitioners study them for seven years, and then undertake a five-year internship while reviewing the study in detail. Thus, twelve years is required for the standard training.

Another important buddhafield mentioned in Buddhist literature and often depicted in tangka paintings is Abhirati, the Pure Land of Akshobya. Akshobya literally means "the unmoving," and he appears in various contexts. One is as head of the five *tathagata* families.

Akshobya somewhat resembles the Medicine Buddha. He is blue in color, and his Abhirati Pure Land also lies in the east, just as that of the Medicine Buddha.

However, a *vajra* stands upright in his left hand, whereas the Medicine Buddha usually holds an alms bowl filled with healing substances. Moreover, Akshobya's right hand is in the earth-touching mudra, whereas that of the Medicine Buddha is in the mudra of supreme generosity (while holding the stem of a medicinal plant).

Tibetans seem to have paid more attention to this Pure Land in ancient times. It is, for example, mentioned in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* as one of the main Pure Land destinations.

These days, Tibetans pay less attention to Akshobya and his Pure Land, and instead tend to use the practice for eliminating catastrophes and establishing peace and harmony. In late 2001, for example, the Dalai Lama had the monks of Drepung Loseling create sand mandalas of Akshobya in the Smithsonian's Freer Gallery of Art & Arthur M. Salckler Gallery, in Washington, D.C., and in the Museum of the American Indian, in New York, as a response to the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center there. On the one hand, the sand mandalas were used for healing the wounds and encouraging safe conditions for the future; on the other hand, thay were intended to cool the anger and contribute to a peaceful response.

One final Pure Land worthy of mention is Padma Sambhava's "Copper-Colored Mountain." This Pure Land deserves to be given its own entry simply because it is so popular in the Old Schools of Tibetan Buddhism.

Following pages:

Figure 55
Medicine Buddha Mandala
Central Tibet; 19th century
Pigment on cloth
26 x 19 in. (66 x 48.3 cm)
Rubin Museum of Art
C2006.66.420 (HAR 868)

This mandala symbolizes the Medicine Buddha's Pure Land, but it also serves as a map to both Tantric meditation and Tibetan healing arts.

Lama Tsongkhapa and two disciples adorn the canvas at the top, and three medical guardians adorn the base of the canvas.

Figure 56
Vajra Akshobhya Mandala
Tibet; 18th century
Pigment on cloth
19 x 15 in. (48.3 x 38.1 cm)
Rubin Museum of Art
F1997.31.11 (HAR 467)

This mandala, symbol of Akshobya's Pure Land, is also a map to Tantric meditation. The Bengali master Atisha, who came to Tibet in 1042 and established the Kadam School, sits at the lower left. The lama at the lower right is unidentified. He is probably a disciple of Atisha associated with the Akshobya lineage of transmission.

In chapter four we saw Padma Sambhava in Uddiyana; Uddiyana had two main associations with Padma. Firstly, it was the name of the kingdom where he was born, which at the time was considered one of the twenty-four *dakini* power places associated with Chakrasamvara, Vajarayogini, and the Dakini Land of Khechari. Secondly, Uddiyana is a name of one of the five Amitabha-related Pure Lands in the Sukhavati category.

The Copper-Colored Mountain, however, is different altogether. After Padma Sambhava left Tibet, he traveled to Sri Lanka, where he tamed the malevolent spirits who were obstructing the enlightenment legacy. He took up residence on a sacred mountain called Copper-Colored Mountain.

Later, by means of his prayers, meditations, and Tantric powers, the mountain became a magnet by which all of his enlightenment energies were collected and then projected to form a Pure Land of the same name.

I wrote a Nyingma lama friend and scholar, Dr. Martin Boord of Oxford University, for his opinion on the Copper-Colored Mountain. Another lama friend had suggested that this Pure Land was a suburb of Khechari, the Land of the Dakinis.

Martin wrote back:

Suburb of Khechari? Oh no! Actually, when we analyze the literature, it seems clear that Zangdokpalri is just Palri [Sri Parvata], the holy mountain in Lanka [once known as the island of copper on account of its rich mineral deposits]. There, Guru Rinpoche takes on the ten-headed form of Ravana, king of the raksasa demons who inhabit that island to the southwest of India [Jambudvipa]. It is shaped (as you can see on any map) like a yak's tail whisk and is called Nga-yab-can *[Camara]. A great deal of the geography and mythology is derived from early accounts of Sri Lanka (Ramayana and Lankavatara Sutra), embellished over the years by the tales of flying lamas who visited the palace of Lotus Light [Guru Rinpoche's home] in their mystic visions. Eventually, of course, all connection with an earthly island was lost and we are left only with the mysteries of a Pure Land located somewhere in the imagination or realm of the sambhogakaya.*

Many Nyingma prayers exist for achieving rebirth in this celestial realm. A treasure text from Jigmey Lingpa has Padma Sambhava proclaiming:[4]

If you place faith in and revere me with no discrimination,
I will remain inseparably above your head.
I, Padma, shall take care of you until the advent of Buddha Maitreya,
And you will be reborn in the Copper-Colored Mountain Pure Land.

Figure 57
Padma Sambhava's Copper Mountain Pure Land
Tibet; 19th century
Pigment on cloth
35.5 x 23 in. (90.2 x 58.4 cm)
Rubin Museum of Art
F1997.8.2 (HAR 111)

Padma Sambhava is shown here in his celestial palace, surrounded by the twenty-five adepts of Chimpu—the twenty-five chief disciples who made the twelve-year retreat with him on Mount Chimpu (near Samyey Monastery in Tibet) and achieved enlightenment. They now all live on Copper Mountain in celestial ecstasy, sending out emanations to benefit the world.

Tushita Revisited

In chapter three we encountered the Tushita Pure Land as the source of the 1,000 Universal Teachers of our auspicious aeon. Tushita is the sphere of emanation from which Buddha Shakyamuni orchestrated the theater of his incarnation, his enlightenment, his teaching activities and, finally, his passing away.

This role of Tushita as the home base for the 1,000 Universal Teachers makes it special among the buddha-fields, and Buddhist art around the world celebrates it as such. Scenes from Buddha Shakyamuni's tenure there, the passing of his crown to Maitreya, and then his enactment of prophesied deeds on earth, have been favorite subjects for Buddhist painters and sculptures throughout the centuries.

In India the Buddha's relationship with Tushita was greatly celebrated in both art and literature. Tibetan artists and writers continued this enthusiasm, but gradually developed an even greater enthusiasm for the Maitreya connection, and for the fulfillment of the prophecies concerning him. Tibetans also began to look more to the remaining 995 masters who are prophesied to take up residence in Tushita and await their turn to incarnate as Universal Teachers in order to bring about great benefits to this world. They especially began to look toward which of their own lamas would be reborn among those 995 prophesied masters.

Robert Thurman has termed this transformation in the Tushita perspective "The Ganden Renaissance." As Tibetophiles will know, "Ganden" is the Tibetan term for the Tushita Pure Land, as well as the name of the monastery built by Tsongkhapa in the year 1409. This renaissance swept across Central Asia from the fourteenth century onward, inspiring a quantum leap forward in Tibetan art, culture, and spirituality.[1]

A principal cause of the Ganden Renaissance came from an unexpected quarter. The early surge of Buddhist art that occurred in the seventh and eighth centuries had come to a grinding halt in 842, when King Ralpachen was assassinated by his brother Lang Darma. King Lang Darma persecuted Buddhism with a passion equaling, if not exceeding, the passion that his predecessors had shown for building it. Only three monks escaped the cultural purge. They fled east to the Kokonor (Tsongkha) region of northeastern Amdo, where they built a temple. Lang Darma sent assassins in search of them, and they fled even farther north, first to Mongolia and then to the Buriyat region of present-day eastern Russia. Lang Darma himself was then murdered, and the assassins abandoned their task and returned home.

Figure 58
Maitreya in Tushita, Surrounded by the Thirty-Five Buddhas of Purification
Central Tibet; 16th century
Pigment on cloth
27.5 x 21.5 in. (69.9 x 54.6)
Rubin Museum of Art
F1998.3.7 (HAR 611)

In this painting, Buddha Maitreya sits flanked by the Indian master Atisha to his right and Tsongkhapa to his left. The former traveled from Bengal to Tibet in 1042 and established the Kadampa School. His lineages became a major cornerstone in the eclectic Gelukpa School, created by Tsongkhapa 350 years later. In fact, Atisha is often held up as the major inspiration for all the new schools that emerged in eleventh-century Tibet.

Atisha and Tsongkhapa are often shown seated in Tushita with Maitreya as they are in this painting, for they are key players in the master plan of the 1,000 Universal Teachers from Tushita. After passing away, while their mindstreams dissolved into infinite *dharmakaya*, they sent emanations to Tushita to assist Maitreya and the 1,000 prophesied Universal Teachers in their auspicious works.

The thirty-five Buddhas of Purification fill much of the remaining canvas. These buddhas manifested miraculously as frescoes on the Dzingchi Jhampa Temple, when Tsongkhapa restored the temple in the late fourteenth century. The restoration of this temple aroused a wave of enlightenment energy that ushered in what Professor Robert Thurman terms "The Ganden Renaissance."

The four guardian kings protect the four directions, indicating they, too, assist Maitreya in his work.

Back in Tsongkha of Kokonor, each of the three monks planted a tree and made a solemn oath to return to Central Tibet and rebuild the monkhood. This indeed came to pass. The group returned to Lhasa and began ordaining new monks into the tradition. The Tibetan monastic tradition today owes its existence to these three devoted masters, known in Tibetan as Khepa Sum ("Three Wise Men").

The very first temple to be rebuilt after the destruction caused by King Lang Darma was dedicated to Maitreya Buddha. Located up the valley from Olkha Cholung, it was named Dzingchi Jhampa ("Maitreya of the Outer Lake").[2]

The dramatic circumstances of the destruction and havoc brought down by King Lang Darma played strongly on the Tibetan mind. More than two centuries of work had been laid to waste in a matter of a few short years. But the outcome was positive, and the Dzingchi Jhampa Temple instantly became a symbol throughout Central Asia of the resilient and enduring quality of the enlightenment tradition.

In another sense, the temple signified a transition from past to future. And Buddha Maitreya was the future.

Prior to this event, the most popular images of Maitreya usually depicted him as a bodhisattva seated in the posture of royal repose, his feet half-crossed, one in meditation and the other slightly outstretched in the heroic gesture, his right hand resting casually over his knee, and his left propped behind his body in the manner of a backrest. The bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara was frequently depicted in a similar posture, and even today this leg position is often seen in depictions of the female Buddha Arya Tara.

In marked contrast, the image in Dzingchi Jhampa Temple showed him very differently; he is seated on a high throne in the form of a buddha as opposed to a bodhisattva, with both feet firmly on the ground, as though he were about to rise from his seat and walk onto the pages of human history. Both of his hands are in the teaching posture, signifying his prophesied role as the fifth universal teacher in the list of 1,000.

For the Tibetan people, the symbolism was dramatic. The Tushita time clock had rolled over, and the world had entered a new era. Maitreya was no longer merely one of the eight great bodhisattvas. This was a full frontal Buddha Maitreya, with all engines in overdrive.

Because of its remote location, the Dzingchi Jhampa Temple never became a large institution on a national level. It nonetheless captured the Tibetan mystical imagination, signaling the opening of a new chapter in the story of Tibetan spiritual and artistic history, an omen indicating that a new era would soon be ushered in. With this humble Maitreya statue as its mascot, Tibetan culture would once again begin to surge forward in new and higher directions.

The Dzingchi Jhampa Temple experienced its ups and downs over the centuries to follow and by the late fourteenth century had fallen into disrepair. At that time a young lama by the name of Tsongkhapa passed through the region with a dozen disciples in his entourage. The group stopped at the famous Dzingchi Jhampa Temple and were shocked to discover that it had become so run down. Although at the time the monks were engaged in the austere discipline of living by begging, they took up residence in the Dzingchi Jhampa and began work on its restoration, collecting materials and funds by appealing to pilgrims and travelers. This labor of love took almost two years, but by the end of their work, Dzingchi Jhampa had been restored to its original beauty. It is said that many of the frescoes on the walls were not painted by human hand, but that they self-manifested through the blessings of Buddha Maitreya himself.[3]

Tsongkhapa's work in restoring this important little temple is traditionally listed as one of his *kha trin chenpo zhi* (four great kindnesses to the world or four most beneficial deeds). At face value, this seems somewhat strange, for dozens of his other accomplishments would appear to be much more dramatic and important.

The "kindness" came not from the artistic or cultural side, but from the mystical. By restoring the Dzingchi Jhampa, Tsongkhapa had restored the surge of enlightenment energy that originated from Tushita and swept across Central Asia three centuries earlier, but which had begun to wane. The restoration of the temple brought the wave of Maitreya's enlightenment energy back to its full force.

Why was this temple so important, and how did it inspire such a colossal transformation of spiritual

Figure 59
Buddha Maitreya
Tibet; 14th century
Brass with copper alloy
10 x 5.75 x 4.25 in. (25.4 x 14.6 x 10.8 cm)
Rubin Museum of Art
C2005.16.33 (HAR 65456)

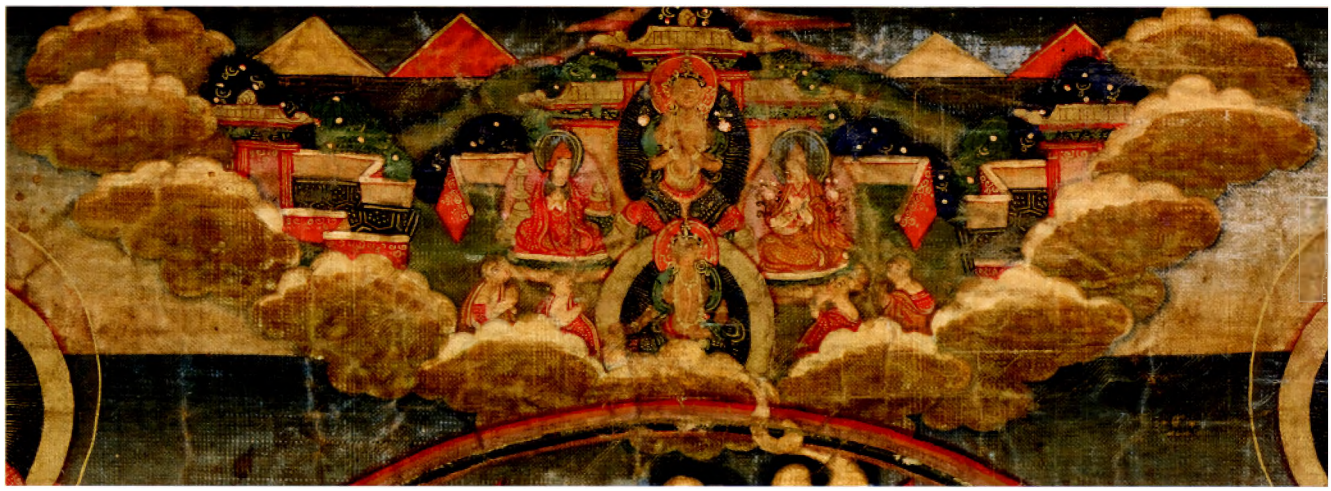


Figure 60
Lama Tsongkapa, detail
Tibet; 18th century
Pigment on cloth
20 x 15 in. (50.8 x 38.1 cm)
Rubin Museum of Art
C2006.66.117 (HAR 57)

This tangka detail shows Maitreya in Tushita, flanked by both Atisha and Tsongkhapa. Another bodhisattva sits below, indicating how all bodhisattvas assist Maitreya in his work to usher in the golden age.

energies? The answer lies in the nature of Tantric Buddhist art. A common Tibetan word for a religious statue or painting is *ten*, which means "receptacle" or "base." Great paintings and statues are not merely physical objects created by the artists involved. They are receptacles for channeling spiritual energy. They become activated and powerful when they are consecrated by great masters, and they are further empowered by the devotion of patrons and pilgrims. An image fashioned in this manner becomes a vessel carrying the actual blessings or energies of the enlightenment forces being portrayed.

In this case the image was Maitreya, and the enlightenment energies being channeled to earth were being conveyed directly from him and from Tushita. Tsongkhapa's restoration of the Dzingchi Jhampa kick-started the Ganden Renaissance, which had temporarily stalled, and set it on the path to highest flowering. From that time to the present day, Tibetan art, culture, and spirituality has flown the banner of excellence without respite.

There is an entire genre of painting in the Tibetan world that depicts Maitreya in Tushita, flanked by the Indian master Atisha and the Tibetan master Tsongkhapa. The former came to Tibet in the mid-eleventh century and taught there until his death. Although he is officially stated as the founder of the Kadampa School, in fact, his work impacted, inspired, and transformed all schools of Tibetan Buddhism. His Lam Rim and Lojong lineages are used as basic foundations by all sects today.

Atisha's connection with Maitreya is emphasized by the manner in which his lineages are described. Traditional texts state that the Buddha originally gave the inner Mahayana teachings in two basic categories: the *shunyata,* or ultimate reality teachings on wisdom, which he entrusted to Manjushri; and the "vast bodhisattva practices" on *bodhichitta* (aspiration to enlightenment) and conventional reality, which he entrusted to Maitreya. Manjushri passed his "wisdom lineage" to the prophesied Nagarjuna in the second century CE, and Maitreya passed his "vast bodhisattva practices" lineage to Asanga in the mid-fourth century. These two lineages were transmitted in separate lines in India for many centuries until they were united by Atisha. Therefore, Atisha came to embody the unification of the Manjushri and Maitreya lineages. He passed these on to various disciples in Tibet, and they spread to all schools.

The Second Dalai Lama speaks of the Manjushri/Maitreya lineages in a poem that he wrote (entitled "Ah Oh La, The Wise They Sing"):[4]

Ah oh la, the wise they sing, ya yi ya yi,
The ultimate nature of spiritual realization
Is the ultimate nature of the light and the void.
Ah oh la, the wise they sing, ya yi ya yi,
It is the union of the light and the void.
Ah oh la, the wise they sing, ya yi ya yi,
The final nature of all that exists
Is voidness empty of self-nature;
Yet all that remains in the world,
Sketches drawn by the conceptual mind,
Still retain a conventional power.
Ah oh la, the wise they sing, ya yi ya yi,
Such is the lineage from Manjushri to Nagarjuna and Aryadeva;
And I, a yogi who follows in their footsteps,
Am delighted to be part of it.
Ah oh la, the wise they sing, ya yi ya yi,
The gentle aspiration to highest enlightenment
Born from love that loves others more than self
Is the very door opening to the Great Way.
Ah oh la, the wise they sing, ya yi ya yi,
The wisdom of voidness held by that love
Is the very essence of the Great Way.
Ah oh la, the wise they sing, ya yi ya yi,
This, practiced as the six perfections,
Is the mighty way of the great bodhisattvas.
Ah oh la, the wise they sing, ya yi ya yi,
Such is the lineage from Maitreya to Asanga,
And I, a yogi who follows in their footsteps,
Am delighted to be part of it.

Tsongkhapa studied with some fifty masters from all of the main schools of Tibetan Buddhism and gathered together the best of all their lineages. He paid special attention to collecting the Atisha transmissions. When he eventually built a monastery to house his many lineages, he named it Ganden which, as we saw earlier, is the Tibetan term for Tushita.

Four years before Tsongkhapa passed away, he met the young Gendun Drubpa, who would become known to history as the First Dalai Lama. The First Dalai Lama had completed his early training in Nartang, a monastery near Shigatsey that was associated with the Kadampa School coming from Atisha, and had come to Central Tibet to meet the great master. The youth instantly identified with Tsongkhapa's eclectic approach to the many Tibetan schools and sects of Tibetan Buddhism and became a disciple.

Many years later he returned to Shigatsey and established Tashi Lhunpo Monastery, which was destined to quickly become one of the half-dozen most important spiritual institutions in Central Asia. He wished to dedicate a chapel to Maitreya. Although Gedun Drubpa was from a poor nomadic family, he had now become one of the most highly respected lamas in southwestern Tibet. He decided to create a Maitreya statue out of pure gold. The King of Gugu requested to be allowed to fund the project, but the First Dalai Lama declined, stating that it would be more appropriate for anyone wanting to build a strong link with Maitreya and Tushita to offer a small piece of their personal jewelry. Hundreds of pounds of gold flowed into Tashi Lhunpo for the project, and the envisioned small golden statue became colossal in size. On the day of the consecration of the chapel, the First Dalai Lama composed a poem to Maitreya:[5]

May the beings who contribute to the creation
Of images of Maitreya, the Buddha of Love,
Experience the Dharma of the Great Way
In the presence of Maitreya himself.

Figure 61
Maitreya and Manjushri in Tushita
Tibet; early 20th century
Pigment on cloth
56 x 35.25 in. (142.2 x 89.5 cm), framed
Rubin Museum of Art
C2002.21.3 (HAR 65114)

Maitreya (love, on the left) and Manjushri (wisdom, on the right) sit together in the Tushita celestial mansion in this painting. Buddha Shakyamuni and his two chief disciples sit on a cloud above them. The Buddha originally entrusted his wisdom lineages to Manjushri and bodhisattva practice lineages to Maitreya. Below, a white Avalokiteshvara (compassion, on the left) and a blue Vajrapani (power, on the right) sit facing each other, with other bodhisattvas off to either side.

On one level, this painting represents the esoteric manner in which the Mahayana lineages were passed from Maitreya and Manjushri to Nagarjuna and Asanga, respectively, as well as the other doctrines passed through Avalokiteshvara and Vajrapani, and so forth. It also represents the manner in which these Buddhist archangels coordinate their activities through Maitreya because of his position as Lord of Tushita.

Historically, the image is born from a vision experienced by one of Lama Tsongkhapa's Nyingmapa gurus, Khenchen Sangdak Lekyi Dorje. After transmitting innumerable Tantric lineages to Tsongkhapa, Khenchen Sangdak Lekyi Dorje had a vision in which he saw Tsongkhapa transform into Manjushri and then travel mystically to Tushita Pure Land, where he met with Maitreya. The two discussed the future of Earth, and what could be done to benefit the enlightenment tradition and the living beings over the millennia to follow. The vision became reproduced as a painting, and over the centuries various versions of it emerged.

The inscription in gold, with numerous misspellings (Tibetan artists were not always persons of letters) states, "The great being Jampel Nyingpo [i.e., Manjushrigharba] in the presence of Jhampa [i.e., Maitreya]." Jampel Nyingpo is here a code name for Tsongkhapa in his secret form as Manjushri.

My lama friend Sherpa Tulku commented that this vision of Khenchen Sangdak Lekyi Dorje became the source for the Ganden Lhagyama tradition of daily meditation, in which Maitreya is visualized in his Tushita Pure Land. Tsongkhapa and his two chief disciples then emanate from his heart and come into the room of the meditator. The tangka that follows illustrates this practice.

As well as being a guru to Tsongkhapa, Khenchen Sangdak Lekyi Dorje was also a disciple. This tradition of two great lamas "exchanging lineages," that is, exchanging roles of guru and disciple, was common in Tibet. My lama friend Tsepak Rigzin informs me that one of the many biographies of Tsongkhapa states that Khenchen's vision culminated in an instruction telling him that he would receive a particular scriptural transmission (*Compendium of Buddhist Trainings*, or the *Lab-du* of Shantideva) directly from Maitreya. At that time, Khenchen was receiving this very transmission from Tsongkhapa. The esoteric meaning was that Tsongkhapa was both an emanation of Manjushri and at the same time "of one nature" with Maitreya.

Figure 62
Tsongkhapa Emanating from the Heart of Maitreya, Lord of Tushita
Tibet; 18th century
Pigment on cloth
18.5 x 13.25 in. (47 x 33.7 cm)
Collection of Shelley and Donald Rubin
(HAR 18)

This painting celebrates the theme known in Tibetan as "Ganden Lha Gyama," which gets its name from the first two words of the first line of the liturgy associated with the practice: Gangen lha-gyal gon-gi tuk-kai-ney ("From the heart of Maitreya, Lord of the hundreds of buddhas in Tushita"). Many Yellow School practitioners read this liturgy and daily practice the guru yoga meditation associated with it.

In the practice, Tsongkhapa and his two chief disciples are visualized as emanating from the heart of Maitreya in Tushita Pure Land and coming directly and immediately into the presence of the meditator. One then recites the mantras and *dharanis*, and imagines absorbing the three qualities of compassion, wisdom, and spiritual power of enlightenment as embodied by the great guru Tsongkhapa.

As we saw in the description of the previous tangka in this chapter, the meditation technique is associated with a vision experienced by Khenchen Sangdak Lekyi Dorje, who was both a guru and a disciple of Tsongkhapa.

At the top center of the canvas we see Maitreya, flanked by both Atisha and Tsongkhapa. They are seated in Tushita Pure Land. Maitreya has his feet on the ground, as though preparing to arise from his throne and descend to earth.

Other paradises can be seen to either side of Tushita. These might be buddhafields manifested by other buddhas from among the 1,000 Universal Teachers of this auspicious aeon, many of whom presently reside in Tushita while they await their turn to fulfill their prophesied roles. Alternatively, they could simply be "suburb buddhafields" associated with Tushita.

Figure 63
Khedrupjey's Vision of Tsongkhapa
Central Tibet; 18th century
Pigment on cloth
16 x 27 in. (40.6 x 68.6 cm)
Collection of Shelley and Donald Rubin
HAR 56

Over the months following Tsongkhapa's passing in 1419, his disciple Khedrupjey experienced five psychic encounters with him. These are recounted in a set of five paintings known as Jey Zigpa Nga Den, or "Five Visions of the Master." This painting is from a set of that nature.

On each of the five occasions, Khedrupjey was meditating when questions of meaning arose in his mind. He felt saddened by the thought that his guru Tsongkhapa had left the world and could no longer be there to clarify any questions that arose in his mind. On each occasion, Tsongkhapa appeared to him in a particular form and spoke with him at length.

Here Tsongkhapa appears on an elephant, symbol of deep and stable meditation, and answers all of Khedupjey's qualms on his meditational practices. A reflection of Tushita Pure Land can be seen in a mirror propped discretely behind Tsongkhapa's shoulder.

When, like a sun rising from behind the mountains,
The Buddha of Love appears at the Diamond Seat,
May the lotus of wisdom be opened,
And the living beings swarm to drink truth's honey.

At that time, may the Buddha of Love
Reach down with his compassionate hand
And prophesy the enlightenment of trainees,
That they may quickly gain illumination.

Until final enlightenment, may living beings dwell
In the vast and profound ways followed
By the buddhas and their offspring the bodhisattvas
Of time past, present, and future.

May all beings hold wisdom's golden handle
And fly the flag of spiritual learning that is
Adorned by discipline, meditation, and insight,
That the banner of truth may everywhere be seen.

May the mystic lore, a source of happiness
And higher being, thrive without hindrance;
May the holders of knowledge live for long,
And may the enlightenment teachings bring
Peace and joy to the world.

Through becoming familiar with the Buddha of Love,
May the living beings gain love's splendor,
That dispels the shadow of evil,
And may they progress toward illumination.

After the First Dalai Lama passed away, a young boy was recognized and enthroned as his reincarnation. He completed his basic training in Tashi Lhunpo but then moved to Central Tibet and entered Drepung Loseling. He, too, quickly achieved national popularity. His greatest deed was his work in empowering Lhamo Latso, the Goddess Lake, and transforming it into a vision-quest site.[6] Chokhor Gyal, the monastery that he built in the valley below the lake, became one of the great artistic achievements of Central Asia.

In particular, he constructed a Maitreya chapel using the same approach as the First Dalai Lama, refusing the offer of an eager single patron, instead requesting that all students contribute one piece of jewelry to the statue. More than two thousand kilograms of gold were offered. His official biography, written in 1530 by a lama named Yangpa Chojey states that Panchen Yeshey Tsemo, the abbot of Tashi Lhupo who had witnessed the consecrations of both the First and Second Dalai Lama's gold Maitreya statues, commented:[7]

During the consecration of the First Dalai Lama's Maitreya image, the skies were constantly filled with rainbows, flowers fell from empty space, and the earth shook several times. I thought I would never again witness anything so overwhelmingly miraculous. However, the magical signs that occurred during the consecration of the gold image at Chokhor Gyal were even more amazing and fabulous.

Yangpa Chojey was present during this construction of the Second Dalai Lama's image. He recounts a dream he had one night during the period of the consecration ceremony. In his dream the gold statue attracted the attention of Maitreya himself, and caused him to emanate hundreds of thousands of beams of light into the world. Each of these acted as a rope by which countless sentient beings could climb up to the Tushita Pure Land. The light beams served not only one generation of disciples but continued to shine and provide the opportunity of liberation for many generations to come throughout the world.

Yangpa Chojey also quotes a verse by the eleventh-century master Jowo Atisha as recorded in *The Book of the Kadam*, which he feels was a prophecy of these two golden Maitreya statues and of their power.

Oh Lama Drom Tonpa, in the future certain of your reincarnations
Will create images forging links with Tushita,
By which wise trainees who follow pure ways
Will easily find the way to Tushita Pure Land.

He goes on to say that Lama Drom Tonpa's reincarnations[8] are the First and Second Dalai Lamas, and that the "images forming links with Tushita" refer to the two gold Maitreya statues. These, he continues, will act as powerhouses by which the prayers of Buddha Maitreya may be fulfilled in the world.

Several other Dalai Lamas have continued this tradition, as did the Panchen Lamas. One of the Maitreya images made by the previous Panchen Lama is the largest bronze in the world today.[9]

The Seventh Dalai Lama was not so much a builder as he was a poet. He once undertook a medita-

tion retreat in Ganden Monastery, which had been built by Tsongkhapa in the year 1409. At the end of the retreat, he wrote a poem in which he played on the idea of Ganden as both a Pure Land and a sacred power place on earth. He uses the informal name of Tsongkhapa, which is Jey Rinpoche (Precious Master):[10]

Above—in actuality pristine awareness
Manifest as a radiant buddha mandala—
Lies the Pure Land of Tushita, the Joyous Abode
Blessed by buddhas past, present, and future.

Mountains of herbs blanketed in sweet aromas,
Flowers blossoming morning, noon, and night,
A forest of leaves with turquoise trees:
Reminders of the physical presence of Jey Rinpoche.

The murmur of a river flowing swiftly,
The stirring songs of birds:
The magnificent sound of a Dharma teaching:
Reminders of the gentle voice of Jey Rinpoche.

The blue sky freely hovering,
Clear, white clouds scattered surreally,
The fresh sun casting beams of light everywhere:
Reminders of his wisdom, compassion and power. . . .

Your mind absorbed in bliss and void inseparable,
The flow of life appeared as a rainbow.
One body now sends endless clouds of emanations
To set this world ablaze with joy.

The enthusiasm for Tushita that was initiated by Tsongkhapa eventually caught on with all the different schools of Tibetan Buddhism. These days we see the Dzingchi Jhampa form of Maitreya in monasteries and temples of every school. The image of the Sakya Monastery in Buddhanath in Nepal is especially beautiful.

A curious connection emerged from the cross-fusion of the doctrine of the 1,000 Universal Teachers of this auspicious age, of whom Maitreya will be the fifth, and the doctrine of reincarnation. The Ganden Renaissance found an eager place in the Tibetan tradition of *tulkus* (reincarnate lamas). Over the centuries, the Tibetans developed some three thousand of these reincarnates. The situation was much the same with all of them: a monk or yogi would achieve realization and become famous in his region. Then, after his death, his students would conduct a search for a young child, usually one born a year or so after the death of the predecessor, who could pass tests indicating that he could carry the responsibility of being named as the reincarnation of that master. The child would then be enthroned in the monastery or yogic hermitage of the predecessor and begin training anew, usually under the tutorship of lamas who had been disciples of the predecessor. The search was usually overseen by the highest living lama in the region.

Biographers of the different reincarnates soon transcended the limitations of merely recording who the child had been in previous lives. They began speaking about who he would become in the future. As a result, many of Tibet's reincarnates now have a place far into the future as one of the 1,000 Universal Teachers.

Like Buddha Shakyamuni and Maitreya, they, too, will achieve enlightenment and then take up residence in Tushita as supreme lord, where they will await the time when their number is called. Then they, too, will pass the crown to another, descend to earth, and undergo the theater of the twelve miraculous deeds.

The Karmapa Lama, for example, who is the head of the Karma Kargyu School, is said to have the destiny to become the ninth in the list of the 1,000. Even now he prepares for this great adventure.

Another prophecy states that Lama Tsongkhapa will emanate as the eleventh in the line of the 1,000.

Figure 64
The Eighth Karmapa Lama
Eastern Tibet; 18th century
Pigment on cloth
19.25 x 13 in. (48.9 x 33 cm)
Rubin Museum of Art
C2006.66.457 (HAR 918)

In this painting, eight *dakinis* from the Khechari Pure Lands dance in the Eighth Karmapa's halo. His reincarnation, the Ninth Karmapa, sits below.

According to tradition, Karmapa is prophesied to become the ninth of the 1,000 Universal Teachers of this auspicious aeon.

Powa, Niguma, and *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*

The Western understanding of the Tibetan doctrines concerning death and the afterlife, as well as of rebirth and the Pure Lands, largely comes from the amazing popularity achieved by the *Bardo Todol (The Tibetan Book of the Dead)*. Originally translated by Lama Kazi Dawa-Samdup and edited by Evans-Wentz, the 1927 edition from Oxford University Press quickly became an international success and received renderings into a dozen Western languages.[1]

Half a dozen subsequent translations of this extraordinary Tibetan work have appeared since that time, and the original by Kazi Dawa-Samdup and Evans-Wentz remains in print. Perhaps the most accessible of these alternative renditions is that by Francesca Fremantle and Chogyam Trungpa.[2]

Figure 65
Mandala Used in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*
Tibet; 18th century
Pigment on cloth
28 x 18.25 in. (71.1 x 46.4 cm)
Rubin Museum of Art
F1997.38.1 (HAR 557)

The Tibetan Book of the Dead speaks of how a person can achieve any of the three Buddhist goals, both during life and following the moment of death. The three goals are full enlightenment, liberation, and rebirth in a Pure Land. In addition to these three, an accomplished *yogini* can take conscious rebirth in *samsara*, in order to fulfill the bodhisattva vow in more worldly ways.

This mandala of the 100 peaceful and wrathful deities that symbolize the death and rebirth process is a map to accomplishing those three ways, both in life and in death. The five Tathagata families, with their associated bodhisattvas and consorts, adorn the corners of the canvas. The five wrathful Heruka families are at the center. The six buddhas who work in the six realms of the world can be seen along the sides.

The introductory verses to this famous classic state:

It is said that those of superior capacity,
The great yogis and yoginis,
Should be able to attain liberation during this very lifetime
By relying on the stages of Tantric yoga application.
If they do not succeed in this, then they should apply
The methods of consciousness transference at the time of death.

Even mediocre yogis can gain liberation through this transference.
However, if they do not succeed in the effort,
Then they should turn to a reading of this Bardo Todol, *a text*
For achieving liberation through hearing in the bardo.

In other words, the best Tantric practitioner can achieve enlightenment during his or her very lifetime. The next best should apply the yogas of transference at the time of death.

The Tibetan word for this transference is *powa* (consciousness transference), and includes both transference to the *dharmakaya*, which means the attainment of enlightenment through immersion with the clear light consciousness at the time of death and, for those unable to perform this yoga, the transference directly to rebirth in a Pure Land.

Finally, those who are unable to succeed in the transference yogas by means of personal application and proficiency should rely upon a reading of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*,[3] and either achieve liberation in the *bardo* (the state between death and rebirth), or else find guidance for rebirth in a Pure Land. The early sections of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* therefore concentrate upon teaching the deceased how to achieve liberation in the *bardo*; the later sections teach how to find the path to an auspicious rebirth in a Pure Land.

Concerning this latter method *The Tibetan Book*

of the Dead states, "As for how to choose the place of rebirth, there are two methods. The first is the method for taking rebirth in one of the buddhafields. The second is the method for taking rebirth in the impure world in an ordinary womb in order to continue Dharma study, practice, and work in the human realm."

The Tibetan Book of the Dead is based on a tradition of the mandala of 100 peaceful and wrathful deities (see figure 65). That is to say, the peaceful and wrathful buddhaforms that are experienced in the *bardo* visions that arise during the first two weeks following death are all drawn from this mandala. According to *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, those who daily recite the *sadhana* (method of practice) of this mandala during their lifetime will recognize the *bardo* experiences in terms and forms expressed in the mandala and its inner meanings.

However, this Tantric system and its mandala are but one of many that are practiced by the various sects of Tibetan Buddhism. Every Tantric system has its own methods of using the experiences of dying and the *bardo*.

An important alternate tradition is The Six Yogas of Niguma. Brought to Tibet by the eleventh-century yogi Khyungpo Naljor, it was formulated by the great Indian female mystic Niguma as a synthesis of numerous Buddhist Tantric systems prevalent in eleventh-century India. The Niguma system of *bardo* yoga is a central pillar of the Shangpa Kargyu School (not one of the twelve Kargyu Schools, as the name would suggest, but a separate school altogether). The Shangpa does not exist as a separate school today, but its lineages from Niguma can be found in most of the major schools, having been absorbed and integrated many centuries ago.

The Niguma system uses dream yoga as a platform for experimenting with the *bardo* yogas. This is made possible because of the similarities between the dream body and the *bardo* body. In his commentary to this yoga system the Second Dalai Lama writes,[4] "They (dream and *bardo* bodies) are both made of light, and formed from five purified essences." He then goes on to explain how dream yoga is practiced as an introduction to *bardo* yoga.

Khyungpo Naljor himself said,[5] "The generation stage and completion stage yogas, and in particular dream yoga and clear light yoga, are the means whereby the three *bardo* bodies are purified." The three "*bardo* bodies" that he is referring to are the sense of physicality (or that of having a body) that we experience on three occasions: (1) the *bardo* of the waking state (i.e., the state between waking and sleeping); (2) the *bardo* of dreams (i.e., the state between going to sleep and waking up); and the *bardo* of the afterlife (i.e., the state between death and rebirth).

The idea of the six yogas is that one uses the first three of them—inner fire, illusory body, and clear light—as direct methods for achieving enlightenment during one's life and the attainment of release from the round of compulsive birth, death, and rebirth based on suffering. However, if one does not get all the way to that destination, then one uses the auxiliary methods for achieving an auspicious rebirth. Two of the auxiliary methods are *bardo* yoga and *powa*. The sixth, or dream yoga, is connected with both the illusory body yoga and the *bardo* yoga, and so it can be viewed either as an "enlightenment in this lifetime yoga" or a yoga for training in the methods to be applied at the time of death for achieving enlightenment, liberation, or high rebirth at that time.

The Six Yogas of Naropa provides an approach to the death and *bardo* experiences that is somewhat similar to that of The Six Yogas of Niguma. Brought to Tibet by Marpa Lotsawa in the eleventh century, The Six Yogas of Naropa became the basis of all twelve Kargyupa sub-sects.[6] This system also does not rely upon the mandala of 100 peaceful and wrathful deities, nor upon the associated *Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Instead it relies upon "three root yogas" for achieving enlightenment in this lifetime; and, if this effort does not take the practitioner all the way, then "three branch yogas" can be applied at the time of death. Again, one of the six is *powa*.

In both the Niguma and Naropa systems the body is prepared for *powa* when the person is still strong. The practitioner usually undertakes a meditation retreat of several weeks or months, until signs of success become manifest. The method opens the auspicious death channel, which is the crown aperture at the top of the head.

In his Niguma commentary the Second Dalai Lama writes:[7]

One should make the observations for the signs of death and, when they occur, should apply the longevity methods. When these do not work and the signs of death are not turned away, the time has come to apply the actual transference yogas.

He goes on to say:

It is best to apply the training techniques before becoming too weak with illness. Once severe illness has set in, one will not be able to master the trainings, no matter how strong one's wish may be.

The Niguma system speaks of how the Tantric yogas for the *powa* application are applied by means of a *kundalini* application, forcing the subtle energies up and down the central energy channel running through the *chakras*, from the main *chakra* at the sexual center up to the crown *chakra* in the upper regions of the brain. Energy is forced up and down this channel, using physical exercises and power breathing, until a blister appears on the crown of the head.

In old Tibet the stem of a particular herb would then be inserted into this blister, so as to keep it always open. A practitioner would keep the herb protruding out from his or her skull like this for several days after this sign of accomplishment had manifested. One can often see the mark caused by scar tissue on the head of a person who has successfully completed this retreat. The monastic tradition of shaving the head twice monthly renders the scar readily obvious on monks and nuns.

The Second Dalai Lama explains:[8]

By means of the vase breathing technique and energy control application one causes the vital energies that operate in the doors of the senses to be withdrawn, and to be directed into the central channel. This must be accomplished in order to effect the transference competently. One cuts off eight of the nine paths of exit of consciousness, leaving open the golden passage, which is the brahma aperture at the crown of the head. It is through this golden passage that one will effect the transference to rebirth in a Pure Land or as a knowledge holder when the time comes.

He then points out the four main *powa* techniques that were taught in Tibet: transference to the suchness of *dharmakaya*; transference by the guru's blessings; transference of divine great union; and transference method of the unfailing *dakini*.

The Niguma system uses the fourth of these. It gives two options: red and white. The red is symbolized by a red *dakini* flying through the heavens and the white by a white *dakini* offering her *yoni* (vagina) as the path of rebirth. We see both of these in the tangka shown here (see figure 66).

The Second Dalai Lama explains the associated meditation technique:[9]

Begin by performing a guru yoga meditation as explained earlier. Offer strong prayers to be able to accomplish the transference yoga to whatever Pure Land is desired. Sitting in the vajra posture with legs crossed, place the hands on the thighs, and visualize yourself as Chakrasamvara in sexual union with Vajrayogini. The central energy channel runs straight up the center of your body, from a point four finger widths below the navel up to the brahma aperture, the thickness of a wheat straw.

At the base of the channel is the triangular dharmadayo, white outside and red inside, with two of its points toward the kidneys and the third toward the sex organ. Inside the lower aperture of the central channel is one's own mind in the form of a white Sanskrit syllable AH. It seems light and delicate, as though it could be blown away by the slightest breeze. Fix your mind upon it for some time.

Then visualize either the white or the red dakini above your head, her appearance as described in the standard manuals. . . . Offer the following prayer, "O Mother Yogini, please guide me to the Pure Land of Dakinis, the Land of Bliss and Void. Meditation deity Vajrayogini, guide me to the Pure Land of Bliss and Void. Holy guru Vajrayogini, guide me to the Pure Land of Bliss and Void. Female Buddha Vajrayogini, guide me to the dakini's Pure Land of Bliss and Void."

One now draws in the subtle prana energies from above and below, and presses them into the syllable AH, while pressing with muscles of the abdomen and pelvic floor into the AH. One fixes the mind upon the AH in this way while directing the energies and applying the vase breathing technique.

Lights in the form of hooks emanate down from Vajrayogini's heart, visualized above one's head. They strike against the syllable AH and pull upward on it. Simultaneously make the precise yogic movement with the lower spine as directed. This causes the lower energies to move upward. Intone the mantric syllable HIK. Visualize that the AH syllable enters the central channel and shoots upward to the brahma aperture. Then bring the prana energies down again, and visualize that the AH comes back down to its former resting place at the base of the channel. Repeat this process as many times as possible.

At the conclusion of the session, a stream of nectars flows forth from Vajrayogini's heart, descending down her body and exiting by her lotus aperture, entering one's brahma aperture and dissolving into the AH. One continues with the vase breathing technique throughout the application. It is well known that overly practicing the powa yoga can shorten one's lifespan, so engaging the vase technique in connection with the flowing of the nectars in this way is applied as a method of prolonging lifespan.

The sign of progress is that a blister will form on the crown of the head. The brahma aperture site will become itchy, and a drop of pus and blood will form there.

In this way the Second Dalai Lama briefly describes the meditation and yoga technique for the *powa* training as taught in the Niguma system. After the blister forms,

Figure 66
Powa Yogas of the Shangpa Kargyu Tradition
Mongolia, date unknown
Pigment on cloth
16.75 x 12.25 in. (42.5 x 31.1 cm)
Rubin Museum of Art
C2003.50.11 (HAR 1090)

Chakrasamvara stands in sexual union with Vajrayogini at the center of the painting. The four *dakinis* of the mandala dance below. This is the Tilbu Lha Nga form of Chakrasamvara, or "Ghantapada's Five Dakini Mandala."

Buddha Vajradhara sits at the upper center, with the white and red *dakinis* in circles of light to either side of him. These two *dakinis* are used for the "white and red *powa*" techniques, two methods of consciousness transference to a Pure Land that are popular in the Shangpa Kargyu tradition.

the death channel has been cleared, and it becomes easy to die consciously and to leave the body by this most auspicious aperture when the actual time of death arrives.

The practice during life is done as described above. At the time of death, one engages in "the actual application," which means the real transference from this world to the next. Consciousness is here pulled up to the central channel, to the *brahma* aperture (as before). But now it is held here, and is not brought back down. Instead, it is projected out of the body via the *brahma* aperture, where the blister had formed many years earlier by means of yogic training. Consciousness then enters into Yogini by means of her sexual passage. If one is doing the practice in connection with the Red Yogini, one's consciousness travels to her heart, and if with the White Yogini it comes into her womb.

The Yogini then flies away to a Pure Land, taking one's consciousness with her. One is then reborn there. Alternatively, one can make the determination to remain inside of the Yogini until an appropriate time comes for rebirth in the ordinary world as a Tantric adept in order to continue one's practice and work for the benefit of the world.

The Tibetan tradition places great emphasis upon dying consciously. This is true in both sutra and tantra approaches. No Buddhist would hope to die unconsciously in his or her sleep, nor in a drugged stupor, no matter how painless this would be.

To the contrary, the aspiration is to die sitting up in meditation, or if one is too old or too weak from illness to accomplish this, then one should attempt to pass away while lying on one's side in the lion posture, which is the position in which the Buddha passed away in his old age (see figure 16).

The Tibetan Book of the Dead states:[10]

If the yogi wants to attempt powa, *or consciousness transference, then he should observe the signs of the death process as they arise, and look at them as clearly as watching them manifest in a mirror. Then when the signs of the final stage of death have arisen, he should recollect and apply the* powa *method of release. If this transference method is successful, then there is no need for a reading of the* Bardo Todol *text.*

However, if the powa *technique does not work, then the ritualist should sit near the body and clearly chant the* Bardo Todol.

Most Tibetan manuals on rebirth management suggest that if one should happen to meet with death before enlightenment is achieved, then one should attempt to either sit in meditation or assume the reclining lion posture. One should then observe the outer and inner signs of death as they arise. Traditional texts explain these as follows: the earth energies dissolve into the water energies, and one loses power over one's limbs; water energies dissolve into air, and the heartbeat slows drastically; air dissolves into fire, and the breath stops flowing; air dissolves into fire, and the body starts to lose temperature. Fire then dissolves into space, which in this case is mind, and four types of radiances are experienced, leading up to and culminating in the fourth, which is the clear light of the moment of death.

Simultaneous to the four elemental energy dissolutions described above, and the manifestation of their outer signs, one experiences according inner signs. They arise as states of consciousness traditionally described by the metaphors of a miragelike appearance, a wisp of smoke, flickering fireflies, and shimmering butterlamp light, respectively. Then the subtle male energies of the mind dissolve, and one experiences a white moonlike flash. The female energies of the mind dissolve, and the mind experiences a red sunsetlike flash. Male and female energies of mind collapse together, and one swoons into complete darkness. Consciousness prepares to leave the body, and the primordial clear light mind arises.

The best practitioner can then achieve enlightenment by linking to and blending with this clear light *dharmakaya*. The intermediate will be able to enter the *bardo* consciously and apply the Tantric yogas in the *bardo* in such a manner as to use the *bardo* body as a semblance of a *sambhogakaya* body, thus reversing the process and returning to the clear light, where enlightenment is achieved. A reading of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* can help to facilitate this transition.

Finally, the practitioner who lacks the confidence to attempt either of these approaches can apply *powa* at this time. As is said in the above passage, no *bardo* is then experienced. Consequently there is then no pur-

pose in commissioning a reading of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. One by-passes the *bardo* altogether and takes immediate rebirth in a Pure Land.

Powa is taught within the larger context of Tantric Buddhism, which is a branch of the Mahayana. Consequently the emphasis is on the bodhisattva precept to always be of greatest benefit to others. This means using one's natural lifespan to its fullest limits. The issue arises, because from the time one completes the *powa* training, one has the power to project consciousness out of one's body directly to a Pure Land, thereby ending one's life prematurely.

Most *powa* manuals speak of this issue, and point out that making a premature transference is equivalent to suicide, and therefore is a contradiction of the bodhisattva vow. One should only apply *powa* as "actual application" when the full signs of the death have naturally manifested. Tsongkhapa quotes the Buddha on the point:[11]

Perform transference when the time comes.
To do so earlier is to assassinate a deity. . . .
Therefore the wise make effort to accomplish skill
In recognizing the signs of death as they occur.

He goes on to explain that the accomplished practitioner will develop skills in reading signs of death. When they occur, he or she will first attempt the yogas for life extension and for turning away untimely death. Only if these do not work is *powa* an option. Then when the actual moment of death arrives, he or she observes the energy dissolutions as mentioned above, and makes the transference after the heart and breath have stopped.

The First Dalai Lama wrote a rather charming little work on the threefold practice of observing for the signs of death, the life-extension yogas that can be used to turn back the signs of death, and, if these yogas fail, then the methods of engaging the *powa* techniques. He states:[12]

Various methods for preparing the mind for death have been taught in both the sutra and tantra paths. To list but a few of the Sutrayana methods, there is one called "Transference by means of the Instruction of the Thatness of Being," which is a vipassana technique that observes the profound shunyata nature of the moment of death. Then there is the lojong (mind-training) method of meditating on the conventional bodhichitta of love and compassion at the time of death, of which there are many variations or lineages. Then there is the famous lineage uniting both Sutra and Tantra from the lineage known as "Instruction on the Three Essential Moments," which is based on the instruction "Abandon all attachments, and offer your body as a gift to all sentient beings. Unite with the seed of light and transfer to the Tushita Pure Land."

As for the exclusively Vajrayana methods, there are too many of these to list here. To name but a few: The Transference to the Three Kayas; the Avalokiteshvara Transference Instruction; the transference methods from the dakini tantras (i.e., the Chakrasamvara Tantra, *the* Vajradaka Tantra, *the* Vajrayogini Tantra, *the* Hevajra Tantra, *the* Samputa Tantra, *etc); the exclusive* Lamdrey *methods (i.e., "Path and Fruit" a special name for the packaging of the Tantric tradition in the Sakya School); transference by means of the four Tantric initiations, such as transforming appearances by means of the vase initiation, etc; Transference by means of Mantric Syllables; and Transference by means of the Orb of Light. One should train in whichever of these is most appropriate with one's own abilities, background, karmic propensities, and subconscious inclinations, as determined in consultation with one's guru. Become proficient in the practice when strong and healthy. Then when death occurs you will be able to easily engage the method and make the transference.*

As mentioned above by the First Dalai Lama, the *powa* methods are diverse, and there are many from which to choose. Most Tibetans use one of the Vajrayana techniques, and the methods from the *dakini* tantras is probably the most widespread. All of these methods are based on the principles outlined by the Second Dalai Lama in his discussion of the Niguma lineage.

Going back to *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, a passage states:

It is best if the person has the ability to effect the transference of consciousness just when the breath stops. However, if there is no confidence that this can be done, then the ritualist should begin reading the instruction when signs of imminent death arise, reciting repeatedly as follows into the ear of the dying person.

Figure 67
Padma Sambhava and the Transference to Sukhavati
Tibet; 19th century
Pigment on cloth
26.5 x 19.5 in. (67.3 x 49.5 cm)
Rubin Museum of Art
C2006.66.440 (HAR 897)

This dramatic painting of Padma Sambhava expresses the importance of controlled death as an important key to controlled rebirth. The theme is illustrated by the vignette along the left of the painting, in which we see a yogi passing away while seated in meditation. A ritualist sits beside him, reading *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* aloud in order to assist him.

Dying consciously while seated upright in meditation is the ideal Buddhist death. The dying person controls and follows the dissolution of the elements as the death process sets in, and when the clear light of death arises, he holds to it.

Although the outer signs of death are complete, the body will not decay nor enter a *rigor mortis* state for as long as the meditator remains focused in the clear light of death. Great yogis often sit in this state, known in Tibetan as *tukdam*, for days or even months. Those who have not attained enlightenment during their lifetime can achieve it at this time.

Beings who have not achieved enlightenment can also leave the body in a controlled manner, and direct their consciousness to an appropriate rebirth in a Pure Land. This is represented in the painting by the image of Buddha Amitabha standing above the house of the dying person. Alternatively, one can attempt to direct the flow of the *bardo*, or after-death experience, in such a way that one achieves a rebirth in the human realm as a Tantric practitioner.

Other scenes at the upper section of the painting depict additional optional departure routes and their according Pure Lands. The top center, for example, is probably the Akanistha Pure Land of Mahavairochana, which is described in the *Avatamsaka Sutra*. Buddhas and other emanations come and go on rainbows, as they work from there to bring benefit to the world.

In other words, *powa* can be accomplished not only by personal application but also by means of the assistance of a skilled ritualist.

The Tibetan Book of the Dead describes how the ritualist should proceed. He should begin by saying to the dying person:

O child of noble character, whose name is Such-and-Such, the time has come to choose a path. The breath has ceased, and the clear light of death is about to become manifest. This is known as the "first bardo, *the clear light experience."*

Previously your teacher had induced a clear light mind experience within you. Recollect this clear light mind now: empty like space, the final void nature of all things, radiant emptiness without inner center or outer boundary. When this clear light consciousness arises, recognize and retain it, and rest within that sphere. Listen as I read this pointing out to you.

The text then goes on to explain that when the breath stops, the ritualist should move the position of the body into the lion posture, placing it on its right side with the right ring finger pressed against the right nostril, just as is done in the training in the yogas of sleep and dream. Simultaneously he should press on the two energy pathway points associated with sleep. This will encourage the subtle energies to remain in the central channel *avadhuti* and will also encourage the consciousness to eventually leave the body by the crown aperture.

It continues:

The actual reminder is then given, for this is the time that all beings experience the first bardo, *called the "dharmata of clear light," and the "irreversible experience of dharmakaya mind." How long this state (of clear light dharmakaya mind) will continue in a given individual will vary in dependence upon conditions such as the positive or negative quality of the vessel, the pace at which the energy dissolutions occurred, the level of Tantric training the person achieved during his or her lifetime, the quality of the person's shamata power (meditative concentration), and the condition of the subtle energy pathways.*

During this period, the pointing out should be repeatedly read. The sign (that the clear light experience has ended and consciousness has left the body) is that a drop of yellowish liquid will be released from the aperture of the sexual organ. In general it is said that this clear light mind manifests for only a few finger snaps of time in someone who is pressed by strongly negative karma, whereas it can continue for a very long time in more highly evolved people.

Naturally it is best if the dying person is able to apply the yoga himself, without any assistance. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* points out that this will not always be possible, and if this is the case, then a guru, a *vajra* brother, or someone with whom the deceased had a close spiritual relationship should sit to the side, observe the signs of the dissolution of the subtle elemental energies, and point them out, saying:

Pay attention. It seems that now the earth energies are dissolving into the water energies. You are losing the ability to move your limbs. Observe the inner signs.

Now the water energies are dissolving into the fire energies. Your heartbeat is growing faint. Observe the inner signs.

Now the fire energies are dissolving into the air energies. Your bodily temperature is dropping. Observe the inner signs.

Now the air energies are dissolving into the mind energies. Your breath is ceasing. Observe the inner signs.

In this way, the ritualist points out the outer signs and prompts the dying person to remain aware of the inner ones. He continues:

Pay heed, one of noble character. The time of your death has come. Keep your mind clear and alert. Pay heed. As you enter the death state, meditate on love, compassion and the enlightenment aspiration. Generate the thought, "For the benefit of all living beings I will achieve peerless enlightenment."

In particular, generate the strong resolve that for the benefit of all beings you will recognize the clear light of death as the dharmakaya, and will accomplish the siddhi of mahamudra enlightenment in order to be of benefit to all living beings.

Moreover, resolve that if buddhahood is not gained when the clear light arises and you must enter the bardo, *then*

you will recognize the bardo *as the* bardo *(and not be drawn into the illusory experiences and appearances). Resolve to transform that* bardo *body into a buddha form with realization of mahamudra integration, and then manifest countless forms to benefit those to be trained, bringing benefit to living beings as vast in number as the measure of space.*

These words should be read clearly and gently, with lips close to the ear of the dying person.

Pay heed, Oh child of noble character who is called Such-and-Such. Listen well. The pure clear light of the dharmata is now arising. Please recognize it. Oh child of noble character, this pristine state of consciousness that you now experience has no limiting factors such as parts, isolates, or color. It is in nature the pure void itself. It is the dharmata in the nature of the All Good Female Buddha Samanthabadri, the emptiness nature of your own mind. But it is not an emptiness that is a mere nothingness; rather, it is the unobstructed radiance of your own mind in the nature of the All Good Male Buddha Samantabhadra.

It is the void that is the non-inherent nature of your own mind, inseparable from and non-dual with the primordial radiance of that same mind. Thus, it is a Buddha's indivisible dharmakaya.

Rest within this great sphere of light that is the non-duality of the radiance and void nature of your own spirit, and become a radiant Amitabha Buddha beyond birth and death.

The Tibetan Book of the Dead points out that this initial stage of the death experience is the ideal time to apply the *powa* methods for transference. Here the transference to clear light *dharmakaya* was described in brief by the ritualist. If the dying person succeeds in it, then enlightenment is instantly achieved.

Alternatively, any of the other *powa* methods could be applied at this time. However, if the clear light *dharmakaya* transference is attempted but fails, then the person enters the *bardo*, and there is no turning back. He or she must then apply the *bardo* yogas from within that environment.

Again, these *bardo* yogas are taught in detail in Tantric systems such as the Six Yogas of Niguma and the Six Yogas of Naropa. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* teaches them as a reading or liturgy, to be spoken near the body of the deceased. Because the *bardo* body is very supple and pliable, it easily can be transformed from one state into another. Hence liberation or even enlightenment is possible at any moment. Moreover, rebirth in a Pure Land can also be attempted. Most Tantric manuals recommend the former because of the great potential of the *bardo* state and suggest leaving the attempt for rebirth in a Pure Land for late in the experience, to be engaged only if and when the attempts at liberation and enlightenment have failed.

The Tibetan Book of the Dead follows this same approach. The *powa* techniques applied at the time of death were unsuccessful, and so the deceased has entered the *bardo*. There again the deceased did not gain success either through personal effort of the *bardo* yogas, nor from the point-out instructions given by the ritualist in his chanting. It is now a late stage of the *bardo* evolution. The karmic forces sustaining the *bardo* body are waning, the soul of the deceased has grown weary from its wandering, and he or she is beginning to seek a suitable place of rebirth.

The Tibetan Book of the Dead speaks of two methods for choosing a place of rebirth. One is for taking rebirth in a pure buddhafield, the other for taking rebirth in the impure world in an ordinary womb in order to continue dharma study, practice, and work in the human realm.

The ritualist instructs the deceased to generate the thought:

How unfortunate I am. While countless others have achieved full buddhahood, or at least become aryas or arhats, I continue to wander lifetime upon lifetime since beginninglessness in the muddy swamps of samsara. I am exhausted with samsara, and want no more of it. No more will I be reborn in the ordinary world. Instead I will rely upon Buddha Amitabha, who vowed to bring all beings who call upon him to Sukhavati, the Pure Realm of Joy. No more birth from wombs or eggs for me! Instead I will take rebirth inside a lotus in Sukhavati right now.

The text states that by fixing this thought clearly in one's mind and holding firmly to it, one will instantly

take rebirth in Sukhavati, Amitabha's pure paradise in the west.

It also states that there are numerous other buddhafields into which one can take rebirth and mentions Maitreya Buddha's Pure Land of Tushita, as well as many others, recommending that the deceased be encouraged to recollect and aspire to whatever Pure Land was his or her ideal during life.

The Seventh Dalai Lama once wrote a beautiful little poem entitled "Meditation on the Ways of Impermanence." In it, he embodies in a simple and down-to-earth manner many of the ideas expressed in the art and literature of life, death, and the Buddhist paradises.[15]

To my lama, who is my refuge and spiritual father,
The recollection of whom dispels all sadness,
I turn for spiritual inspiration;
Bless my mind with your transforming powers,
That the thought of death may never evade me,
That I may practice the holy Dharma perfectly.

On the golden mountains far in the distance,
Rings of mist hang like belts on the meadows.
Now seemingly solid, so soon they dissolve.
My mind turns to thoughts of my death.

In spring, the season of warmth and growth,
The stalks of the crops were turquoise green.
Now, autumn's end, the fields lie naked and parched.
My mind turns to thoughts of my death.

On each branch of the trees in my garden
Hang clusters of fruit, swelling and ripe.
In the end, not one piece will remain.
My mind turns to thoughts of my death.

From behind the peaks of Mount Potala
The sun rose like an umbrella in the sky.
Now it has gone, fallen behind the western ranges.
My mind turns to thoughts of my death.

They die old, they die young, day upon day.
I am asked to throw their souls to a Pure Land
Or to prophesy their conditions of rebirth.
My mind turns to thoughts of my death.

Gray clouds cover the sky, obscuring it;
The first drops of rain are about to fall,
To be scattered everywhere by the dark, red wind.
My mind turns to thoughts of my death.

In the belly of the vast plateau below me,
The campfires of visiting traders glow like stars;
But tomorrow they depart, leaving only refuse.
My mind turns to thoughts of my death.

Warm summer days, the earth thronging with life;
The minds of the people are lost in gaiety.
Suddenly the cold winter wind crashes them down,
My mind turns to thoughts of my death.

High above, turquoise dragons roared in harmony;
Around me, cuckoo birds chattered sweetly.
But times have changed; where are they now?
My mind turns to thoughts of my death.

Dharma, the precious teachings of the Awakened Ones,
Is a medicine supreme, curing all the mind's ills.
These days many saints of old look down from Pure Lands.
My mind turns to thoughts of my death.

Hard it is to leave the mother who carried us,
And hard to part from relatives and friends;
Yet as the years pass, our links with them corrode.
My mind turns to thoughts of my death.

A young man, with teeth for the future,
With plans for months and years ahead, died,
Leaving but scant traces. Where is he now? Gone!
My mind turns to thoughts of my death.

Buddha attained the glorious, immortal vajra-body,
Yet he still enacted a death scene.
This body of flesh, blood and bone, covered in skin,
Like a bubble of water, is bound to perish.

From very birth a child sees his parents age,
Sees them each day come closer to the grave.
How can you say to me, "But I am still young?"
I warn you there is no hope of hiding from death.

Spirits were high with expectations this morning
As the men discussed subduing enemies and protecting the land.
Now, with night's coming, birds and dogs chew their corpses.
Who believed that they themselves would die today?

Look and ask among the people of your land
For anyone even a hundred years old.
You will be lucky to find even one!
Do you not think your own death certain?

If you look closely at and contemplate deeply
The people and things that appear around you,
You can see that all are in constant flux.
Everything becomes the teacher of impermanence.

I remember this body when it was a child,
And as it gradually took the form of a youth.
Now its every limb is twisted and worn.
It is my own body, yet it delights not even my own eyes.

The mind itself is impermanent, constantly oscillating
Between feelings of pleasure, pain and indifference,
The fruits of positive, negative and neutral karmas.

Look where you will, at yourself or others,
Life passes like a flash of lightning.
When Yama's agents surround you, intent on murder,
What do you think will happen to you?

Relatives, friends, wealth and property
Shine with splendor in the eyes of worldly people;
Thus, they bind themselves in shackles of attachment.
This pathos; how will it end?

Body lying flat on a last bed;
Voice whispering a few last words;
Mind watching a final memory glide past:
When will that drama come for you?

If you create nothing but negative karma,
You will stand naked of instincts to benefit the hereafter.
Where will you go after death?
The mere thought of it makes you flinch.

Therefore I myself and beings like me
Should leave behind meaningless ways
And entrust ourselves to the gurus, yidams and dakinis,
Begging them to prepare us for death's road.

In order to die well, with the joy and confidence
Of being within the white rays of spiritual awareness,
It is essential to begin readying yourself now.
Familiarize yourself with the profound sutras and tantras.

By this song may those like me,
Irreligious people little better than savages,
Be caught in the flames of renunciation.
May they evolve in spirit
And may they attain to liberation.

PART THREE

Endmatters

A Great Pure Land Prayer Festival in the Land of Snows

PARADISE FOUND

HEATHER STODDARD

We rose in the chill of an October night on the frayed red rim of the Tibetan plateau not far from the great Machu River. It was 4 a.m. and pitch dark. The drivers were still snoring in the reception hall, laid out in rows on carpeted benches, wrapped warmly in their down bedding rolls. Packing everything but a wood fire stove into a whole fleet of vehicles, we drove off at top speed along the new tarmacked highways of Tibet, headlong and blind through alternating rain and blizzard, snow driving horizontally across the bonnets of our cars. Much of the time only the central median of the road was visible in the bright glare of the lights—heady precipices on one side and rolling pasturelands or craggy rocks vaguely looming on the other. Driving for fourteen hours in a seeming broad curve, we crossed five passes between 4,300 and 4,800 meters high and traversed 1,000 kilometers. Thirty years ago we would have been traveling on horseback, and it would have taken three weeks.

Our driver, a tall, shy man of fifty-five, wore a thin polyester Chinese suit. Sitting beside him in the front seat, I had plenty of opportunity for close observation. Clearly he was much more of an ascetic than any of the rosy, well-padded nuns who were our traveling companions, though he professed not the slightest interest in "religion" of any kind. Taking neither food nor water, just four cigarettes and two five-minute breaks on the way, he was utterly chillproof and good natured, chuckling in deep rich tones at the nuns' jokes and telling us long-winded stories of his thirty-five years as a driver in Communist-occupied Tibet. At last we stopped for a few hours sleep in a new concrete strip of a township, in a Tibetan-style hotel, where toilets, washing facilities, and breakfast had yet to be thought of.

At dawn the ridge behind the town was white with snow. A pale sun beamed for an instant over the brow of the hill then disappeared again into thick banks of cloud. A little farther along, the road veered abruptly to the left, into a broad river valley where large herds of yak and sheep grazed on brown stubble. New monasteries could be seen here and there rising behind hilly outcrops. The next stop was a bustling market town somewhere between Central Tibet, Kham, and Amdo. Everyone had arrived safely, even one band of nuns in the back of a pick-up van, protected against the driving snow only by a sheet of plastic and the warmth of their own tightly packed bodies. The teacher—our kind and generous host—treated the entire company to a fine vegetarian meal and then beamed at his entourage in obvious satisfaction. Swiftly removing his false teeth, he gave them a good lick before sticking them back in, just in time to hold out a large plump hand to greet members of the festival reception committee. A bridge was down and they had come to guide us over an impossible switchback dirt track. This time it took two hours to cover less than forty kilometers to our destination. Again the road veered to the left, into a high green valley. A small nunnery came into sight, its white cells scattered neatly up the grassy shoulder of the headland. Our drivers drew to a halt, one by one, each nosing up behind the vehicle in front, as the nuns jumped out and prostrated three times in the direction of their sisters. We were

Chortens, photograph H. Stoddard, 2005
Preceding pages: Hermitage in Amdo, photograph H. Stoddard, 2005

entering the sacred zone of the Great Pure Land "Monlam" Prayer of the Land of Snows, the special paradise of the Bodhisattvas of Wisdom and Compassion. A host of deities was invited to join in a vast virtual feast of mental imagery "Clouds of Offerings," while one thousand voices would sing their praises nonstop and at top speed for seven days.

Monlam Chenmo, or just Monlam, means "Great Prayer," and refers to the festival of that name founded by the Tibetan master, Tsongkhapa in 1409. Launched traditionally on the third day after New Year, it lasted for about three weeks, with twenty to thirty thousand monks gathering together in and around the Jokhang Temple, in the heart of the old city of Lhasa. They recited prayers from dawn to dusk in honor of the Buddha Shakyamuni and his teachings, and especially to commemorate his defeat of the six Hindu "heretical" masters in debate and in magical display. This Monlam continued almost uninterruptedly for five and a half centuries until the Communist Chinese banned it at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, as part of the campaign against the "Four Olds". After that it was held only once in Lhasa, in 1988. However, in recent years a new style "Monlam of the Land of Snows" has taken shape and is being held at different times of the year, each time in a different location.

Right in the center of the mouth of the valley rose a triumphant archway of billowing multicolored silk. Nothing could be seen beyond but green rolling hills rising into a high blue sky dotted with tufts of white cloud, with prayer flags lining the dirt track pointing ever upward into empty space. A few burnished young blades—wearing dark sunglasses and red turbans or felt cowboy hats, their thick black locks flowing behind in the wind—bumped past on motorbikes. Their sweethearts clung tightly on behind, wearing the elegant headgear of the region, broad brocade disks surrounded by a ruffle of soft white lambs wool, perched at a pretty angle on top of their heads. Only the slivers of dark eyes could be seen, for their faces were tightly bound against the wind. Multicolored plastic tassels streamed from the handlebars, cutting the wind as the new iron steeds swerved to and fro, making their way up and over the uncertain pathway.

Prostrations and ablutions complete, the five dozen or so of our company—dressed in maroon and white robes, many with shaven heads, others with a meter or more of plaited hair bound in a topknot—piled back into the vehicles for the last haul. Exhilaration was in the air. On the south side of the valley, the sun shone brightly on a distant hilltop, turning it to pure gold. The sky was deep blue and the grass bright green. As we rose along the dirt track, a mass of white summer tents suddenly came into view. Spreading over the valley floor, they announced the long-awaited vision. We caught our breath. The main temple faced south toward the sun, and above its gleaming golden roofs a brilliant cascade of rippling rainbow light hovered in space. As we got nearer, swathes of colored silk banners became visible, forming a huge, dazzling triangle above the temple, rising to an apex on the crest of the hill. Hundreds of maroon-robed figures moved to and fro around the temple, while lower down bands of nomads, dressed in their finest silk and sheepskin *chubas* (Tibetan robes), walked at a leisurely pace between the white tents, some ambling up toward the large ceremonial tent from where the teachings of the Lord Buddha boomed through large loudspeakers. A dense mass of lay folk dressed in dark robes sat on the ground outside, leaning in devotion toward the teacher seated on a throne under the marquee, while children ran to and fro beneath the long taut tent ropes adorned with bright red bristling yak hair pompoms. Yak, horses, motorbikes, taxis, and Toyotas (the local transport system) were parked in between the road and the camp. A dozen or so large black dogs, the size of one-year-old calves, roamed in bands, chafing at each other and playing like children. Layers of plastic bags vomiting garbage were stacked up haphazardly, each day piled higher, gradually reached up to the roadway immediately in front of the monastery.

It was not long before we were all given sleeping quarters on the floor of the school house and in three bedrooms in the new hospital. Thick down quilts lined with silk were kindly provided for a lucky few. A nip of winter was in the air, and we would have to rise well before dawn each morning to walk half a kilometer by moonlight across the potholed turf in single file, climbing the steps up to the side door into the main temple. Nuns are allowed to enter only from the side. We sat in rows on the carpeted mats, I, a lay woman, at one extremity by the heavy wooden door. Everyone imme-

diately settled into chanting the well-known prayers, waiting patiently for thick, buttery barley porridge to be served from large metal buckets, with hot salt tea dished out by monks and nuns moving quietly up and down between the ails. Almost one thousand people filled the new concrete temple, chanting in a fast intense rhythm the liturgy that forms the basis of the Great Monlam Prayer. From dawn to dusk every day for a week, the entire assembly chanted and rechanted at maximum speed the sixty-four pages of sacred text, till all ordinary mental cogitation ceased.

Leaning against each other, back to back, for warmth when the doors gaped open for a minute and the chill wind gusted in or when the spinal column sorely needed a rest, we joked and exchanged pleasantries, each gazing into the face of the other in shy yet quizzical surprise. We all come from the same world, and yet our faces are so different. The nuns behind were deep red apple-cheeked nomad girls from the highlands, with large handsome bronzed features and thick, bristling cropped hair. They ate the buttery porridge, cabbage soup, and *tsampa* (roasted barley flour, the staple of Tibetan diets) with relish, while our paler-skinned, fine-featured, bread-eating nuns from the periphery survived the whole week on simple rations brought from their hermitage—dry chunks of home-baked bread and freely offered boiled black tea.

Little by little, after sunrise, the nomad families would enter and settle quietly down on the mud floor by the doors. Impervious to the chill wind they listened and gazed in wonder at the splendor of the temple and at the mass of their red-robed daughters and sons and brothers and sisters who had given up the world in the quest for enlightenment *or* to avoid looking after the herds. This was a brief encounter, for the monks and nuns were forbidden to stray into the camp below. The barrier between the world of *samsara* (the cycle of existence) and the realm of *nirvana* (the state beyond all suffering) was unspoken and invisible though somewhat permeable, but it left its indelible imprint on the mind.

Encouraged to wander by the lama, I walked down one day amid the white tents and right up to the marquee to get a glimpse of the teacher of the day. The gay laughter of young nomad women, the proud and handsome swagger of their men, the gentle tousling of children, and the intense piety of all, old and young, their splendid raiment, the freedom and cheerful hardiness of their demeanor made my heart quiver with delight. Yet, I clearly belonged to the middling space above, to the red-robed ones, to the band of would-be scholars who search for truth in the midst of ignorance, plain stupidity, and iniquity, to the students of the human condition. Would I rejoin the ranks of those erring joyfully or troubled, unthinkingly or calculatingly, on the muddy path of gain, fame, and fortune? Was I somewhere halfway in between? That thought crossed my mind as I headed thankfully up the hill toward the concrete temple. Wood is so beautiful, warm, and plentiful, had remarked the lama thinking back to his own sumptuous constructions. To each his own paradise.

We entered the dark temple lit only by butter lamps, kicked off our shoes and settled down in the long carpeted rows, wrapping our robes more tightly around our bodies. Already prayers to the God of Wealth filled the air. I felt sick. The Buddha's disciples (the ordained monks and nuns) have by definition renounced the world, giving up material wealth of any kind. According to the Vinaya rules that govern their lives, they should not touch coinage of any kind, and yet in the Mahayana or "Great Vehicle" tradition that spread through Central and East Asia, the temples and monastic communities became immensely rich over the last two millennia. In Tibet, it was the same thing. There were huge monasteries with populations of hundreds and even thousands of inmates that were run like small cities. A special class of monks devoted their time to commerce in the name of the community. But during such a "Great Prayer" Pure Land Festival, was it appropriate to start off the day talking about money? A whole array of possible explanations ran through my mind. It was not the first time. Was this ostentatious verbal display a calculated exposure of inequality? A deliberate reenactment of a familiar, well-established social hierarchy? A consolidation of reputation? An instantaneous recuperation of the up-and-coming nouveaux riche? Was it simply a good way of declaring in public the precise income of the *sangha* (the community of the Buddha's disciples), thus avoiding misuse of funding? A means to encourage others to follow the generous example?

The litany of thanks to the donors, their names, and the large and small fortunes they had offered were recited *before* praise to the protector deities, *before* the rosary of names sung in glory to the enlightened Bodhisattva of Wisdom, *before* the evocation chanted to the great Bodhisattva of Compassion. The donors belong to the world of *samsara*, forming an integral part of Buddhist society since the days of Shakyamuni. Without their presence and their offerings the *sangha* would not exist. The peace and freedom to study and practice in the protected environment of the monastery, even for the poorest and humblest of nuns, depends upon the generosity of donors. Without their support, a practitioner can barely go forward on the path, detached from the worries of this material world. Thus, even in the simple offering of soup and tea for the Great Monlam Prayer, *samsara* and the path to nirvana are inextricably intertwined. Each depends upon the other, each lovingly accepting the attributed roles, each working within the system for the benefit of the many. Action is multifaceted and relies not on the outer image, the outer show, but on the intrinsic intention, the motivation that guides the actor, the voluntary agent, the Bodhisattva, along the path until such a time as he or she reaches the point of effortless, spontaneous enlightened action—free from self-binding *karma* (the law of cause and effect), deploying natural unstoppable "compassion" for all living beings within the "emptiness" of the total interdependence of all phenomena, the essential interface of *samsara* and *nirvana*.

Three or four Chinese Buddhists, well protected against the chill air in thick down jackets, edged in each morning and made themselves comfortable against the side wall of the temple. It was clear that they would be taking part, on the last day, in the ceremonial offering of thanks to the main donors of the Prayer. They spoke little and kept to themselves, all the while smiling gently and knowingly at everyone.

Appropriately the preliminary public recitation of the gifts of large and small amounts of Peoples' Money (Renminbi, Chinese currency, literally means "People's Money") received as donations for the Great Monlam Prayer, was followed each day by mantras and invocations dedicated to the fat-bellied God of Wealth, Jambhala. Extracted from the teachings of Lord Atisha, praises were sung, too, to the Eight Great Bodhisattvas—the Buddha's "close sons"; the Eight Auspicious Symbols (*tashi tagyay*); the Eight Offering Goddesses; and the Eight Protectors of Space, thus placing the whole of our assembly within a vast and auspicious worldly *mandala* (sacred space) of abundance and good fortune.

A note in small print followed these texts in the prayer book. It explained that their recitation on waking allows one to accomplish all that is planned for the day; their recitation at night before sleeping, allows one to "see" good dreams; recite them before entering the battle field, and victory will be yours; recite them before undertaking any action, and one's intentions will flourish; recite them continuously, and long life, wealth, fame, good fortune, happiness, and all one desires will be assured, all negative actions will be purified, and all high and good aspirations will be accomplished. The note ended, "These are the Words of the Excellent Victorious One, the Buddha."

The next invocation had sections in both Tibetan and Sanskrit. Recited by one thousand vigorous voices, it produced a vast mental display of "Cloud Offerings" for the five senses—music, food, fine clothing, and so on—at the same time pulling the whole assembly into the wake of the great and small "worldly deities," in order to obtain their protection, to be "earnestly" taken care of in this life, and after death, to be reborn in the Paradise of Great Bliss, the Realm of Sukhavati. Thus, through prayer or simply by mental recall, all the special qualities would be instantaneously obtained and realized, without the necessity of going through the deliberate process of "actuating" the physical objects required for the ritual. On the one hand the buddhas and their entourages were invited to join in a great feast of the senses. On the other the assembly asked them to remain in order to cherish all living beings, employing their magical power for as long as any of the disciples continued to make offerings to them. In this way the assembly recalled the essential contract of Mahayana Buddhism, according to which the buddhas and bodhisattvas will uphold and put into action their vow to help and guide all living beings until the very last one gains Enlightenment. Thus, spontaneously, the distinguished guests had no alternative but to remain in the presence of the *sangha* and enjoy the feast of "Cloud Offerings" for a whole week and, indeed, for as

long as anyone continued to invite them to come down and take part. This engagement in itself transformed the whole temple into a realm of Paradise. This irresistible reminder to the buddhas and bodhisattvas was followed by a reenactment of the "generation of *bodhicitta*," the aspiration to attain Enlightenment, made by our entire assembly, again for the sake of all living beings. An especially "blessed request", for the bestowal of supranormal powers (*siddhi*), was then addressed directly to the supramundane Buddha, the "Body of Ultimate Truth," in its "Discriminating Wisdom" or "Bliss-and-Emptiness" form. This particular aspect of the Buddha mind is said to dwell in another paradise, the "Palace of Blazing Great Bliss."

Thus, within each prayer session, we moved back and forth through Kriyatantra- and Charyatantra-type evocations of the Wordly Gods of Wealth, and offerings to the buddhas and divine beings, into a Mahayana, or Great Vehicle, Paradise, and from there into a Vajrayana state of "Bliss-and-Emptiness." At the same time we were adhering to the practice of the Nyingma, or Ancient Translation School of Tibetan Buddhism, known as "Lama, Yidam, and Khandro." They symbolize the three channels of the subtle body and are considered to be additional to the three main refuges of Buddhism, the teacher Shakyamuni, his teachings, and his community, i.e., Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha.

To top it all, since most of the participants knew the prayers by heart, the incessant "mind-less" recitation during the week no doubt allowed many of them to enter a state *beyond* thought. Would they have got a glimpse of the Dharmakaya or Rigpa, the Primordial Wisdom Mind? Those who had proper training might well have remained unwaveringly in that state all week, and indeed, the most advanced would be in that state —the ultimate goal of the practice of Dzogchen, the Great Perfection—in all circumstances and at all times. Thus, pondering the potential "big-bang" expansion of the mental universe of each individual present, and the fact that each prayer session would be repeated fifteen times a day by a thousand people—when all is said and done—it is surely no exaggeration to affirm that the Tibetan tradition maintains and uses all the different stages and levels of Buddhist practice.

A note following in the prayer book observed that any human being who recites the latter prayer addressed to the Dharmakaya would naturally accomplish all that he or she desires and that the prayer could also be written on a red flag and hoisted on high or "realized" by turning it on wheels of fire or wind.

The next two prayers formed the main substantial verbal offering of the "Great Prayer of the Land of Snows." First of all came the "Recitation of the Pure Names of Noble Manjushri" (Sanskrit, *Arya-Manjushri-nama-samghiti*) and second the "King of Prayers on Noble Excellent Action" (Sanskrit, the *Bhadracaryapranidhana* Prayer), both well known and beloved throughout Buddhist Asia and dedicated to the Bodhisattva of Wisdom.

In conclusion, and in keeping with the lay of the land—we were in the neighborhood of the great nonsectarian masters of the nineteenth century—the "Melody of the True Rishi, An Extended Prayer of the Nonsectarian Teachings of the Buddha" was recited, though its open vision was slightly tempered in the last prayer, when the special allegiance of our host monastery was recalled. The memory of several of the great "non-sectarian" or Rimey masters, such as Dza Patrul Rinpoche and Ju Mipham Gyatso, who spent part of their lives in the region, was clear, though Mipham maintained a more distinctly Nyingma point of view. His "Prayer for the Spread of the Teachings of the Early Transmission" concluded the galloping recitation.

Then it began over again, seemingly faster each time. Certain passages would be repeated two or three times, while others were transferred to different parts of the liturgy just when you were not expecting it—one of the tricks of Tibetan Buddhist practice, jolting you back to attention and making sure that no one is nodding off to sleep!

The main object of the Great Prayer appears to be the creation of an intense concentration of verbal, mental, and physical energy through the gathering of as great a number of individuals as possible, all turned toward a common goal, that of entering through vibrant repetition, a thousand times a day, the realms beyond cogitation.

To get back to our corner of Paradise. We were blessed at different moments each day by monks who came round to touch the foreheads of each and everyone present with ritual objects that were part and parcel of the ceremonies being enacted beyond our view,

by the abbot and the officiating priests, who milled around his throne. At one point a monk came scattering precious saffron water from a silver basin. Instead of landing in my hand or on my head, it splashed in elegant fashion right across the pages of my open prayer book. I was the only one in the neighborhood to receive the golden shower of blessings in this way. Already my status was somewhat apart, the lama had given me a fine dark red woolen *chuba* lined with blue silk and an orange crochet sash belt like theirs. The nuns looked upon me with certain respect. However, it took me a couple of days to realize that my prayer book had become an object of covetous desire. It mysteriously disappeared only to be replaced by a neat spotless copy clearly belonging to one of my closest and dearest neighbors! We kept a common bag for prayer books, bread, and torches and of course it was just a question of confusion. No one had seen that saffron splash at all. Only then did the magical import of the ritual act instill itself in my mind. Was this a golden reflection of the Paradise we were collectively creating beyond space and time, through deliberate and effortless acts of body, speech, and mind? Yet, all the while not being quite rid of our powerful passions and mistaken perspectives on the phenomenal world: ignorance, desire, anger, pride, and jealousy! At first I felt a little annoyed and then just laughed and laughed.

Suddenly it was announced that our group would have the good fortune of receiving an initiation and special teachings from an elderly lama who lived in permanent retreat in the monastery. We had caught glimpses of the younger abbot and his powerful pock-marked administrator dressed in deep yellow silk, the one with eyes of fire. Indeed, they had treated our whole company to a sumptuous feast on the first day. Now, on the evening of the last day, it was time to meet the revered hermit and receive his blessings. All notions of time had slipped over the green rolling hills and as dusk gathered, we stood clustering and twittering like swallows below the temple.

The large two-storey structure was built of horizontal tree trunks, like a log cabin, and was almost blind to the outside. Like all Tibetan houses the ground floor was reserved for storage, firewood, and domestic animals, with access through a single well-defended wooden door. A steep staircase climbed up to the first floor, where a balcony surrounding the inner courtyard gave access to rooms and apartments on all sides. Like the main temple, the building faced south to capture the sun, but now it was dark, and the place was lit only by feeble lamplight glimmering through small latticed windows. From time to time one of the windows would abruptly shoot open as someone peered out, but there was no way of seeing, from outside, who the observer was. Extreme weather, marauding bandits, and armies as well as the necessary protection afforded to a religious retreat had nurtured the plain and modest architecture over the centuries. Yet once inside, the brightly painted walls, cupboards, and doors, the large well-kept wood-burning stove and thickly carpeted benches all around the walls of the main living space gave a cozy, pleasant, almost urbane feeling to the place.

We shuffled around the balcony to the door at the very end and took off our shoes. The room was not very big, and forty nuns had to squeeze to get in, crouching, packed together, trying not to encroach too much on the space at his feet. Though his face and body were wizened and skinny, his white hair stood up on end like an energetic toothbrush. Though his voice was husky to a whisper, his eyes were as deep as space and twinkled like stars. His broad smile encompassed all who were in his presence, and, while the thick accent suspended all verbal comprehension, it was not the words that mattered. We felt we were in the presence of an enlightened being. For a brief moment we became a part of immeasurable Paradise.

NOTES

How the Pure Lands Are All around Us

1. These verses are from a short text known by heart to almost all Tiberan monks of all schools. Known in Tiberan as the *Zangcho Monlam* (*Prayer of Sublime Ways*), it is part of a very large group of sutras known in Sanskrit as the *Avatamsaka*. I translated the *Zangcho Monlam* from the Tiberan version together with the commentary of the second-century Indian master Nagarjuna in the mid-1980s (although I have never published them). These verses are taken from that rendition.

Thomas Cleary has made a wonderful translation from the Chinese of the complete *Avatamsaka*, which he entitled *The Flower Ornament Scripture* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1993).

2. Numerous Tiberan accounts of Khyunpo Naljor exist, including Khyunpo Naljor's own autobiography. The Second Dalai Lama also wrote a brief account of Naljor's life, which he uses in his introduction to the yoga system coming to Tibet through this illustrious yogi.

3. The Thirteenth Dalai Lama's *Collected Works* contains this passage, taken in note form on the occasion when the Great Thirteenth was traveling back from China, and he gave a series of Nyingmapa initiations.

4. Longchen Rabjam, *The Practice of Dzogchen*, intro., trans., and annot. Tulku Thundup, ed. Harold Talbott (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 1989), 256.

5. The eleventh-century master Gampopa quotes this passage in the Wisdom chapter of his *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation*, trans. Herbert Guenther (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), 203.

6. *The Flower Ornament Scripture*, trans. Thomas Cleary (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1993), 451–452.

7. Nagarjuna uses these and numerous other metaphors in his *Madhyamaka-karika-shastra* in order to point out the manner in which things are completely void or empty of the primary characteristics that we attribute to them.

8. This famous metaphor comes from Chandrakirti's *Madhyamaka-avatara* (*A Guide to a Centered View*), in which he clarifies the difficult points of Nagarjuna's *Madhyamaka-karika* (*Verses on the Centered View*). Various English language translations of both of these works are available.

9. This verse is similarly taken from the Seventh Dalai Lama's *Meditations to Transform the Mind*, author's translation (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 1983).

10. Also from the Seventh's *Meditations to Transform the Mind*, author's translation (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 1983).

11. The First Dalai Lama's *Rinchen Trengwa* (*Rosary of Gems*) takes Nagarjuna's somewhat ambiguous verse work and rewrites it in flat prose. Although not pretty to read, it serves the purpose of rendering the meaning of Nagarjuna's text.

12. See note 11, in this chapter.

13. Again, this is from his *Meditations to Transform the Mind*.

14. The Fifth Dalai Lama concludes each chapter of his treatise on meditation entitled *Jampel Zhallung* (*Instructions from the Wisdom Bodhisattvas*) with a few verses condensing the meaning of what he has said in the chapter being concluded. I translate these verses from the conclusion of his chapter on *prajna paramita* ("The Perfection of Wisdom").

15. Gampopa, the main disciple of the great eleventh-century mystic Milarepa, is regarded as the forefather of all twelve Dvakpo Kargyu subsects. Herbert Guenther's 1959 translation of his *Lam Rim Tar Gyen* was the first Western treatment of the foundational Tibetan Buddhist contemplative tradition.

16. This and the following three quotes in this text are from Gampopa in his *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation*, trans. Herbert Guenther (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959).

17. Longchen Rabjam, *The Practice of Dzogchen*, intro., trans., and annot. Tulku Thundup, ed. Harold Talbott (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 1989), 326.

21. Georgios Halkias discusses the history of the Pure Land movements in his excellent dissertation, *Transferring to the Land of Bliss: Among Texts and Practices of Sukhavati in Tibet*, which was presented for his doctorate degree at the University of Oxford, Wolfson College, Trinity, 2006. I am deeply indebted to George for sending me a copy of his dissertation for use in my work for this exhibition and writing this catalogue.

22. Although much could be said on these three, in general, the idea is that the Hinayana is the foundational path of the higher trainings in self-discipline, meditation by wisdom, through which inner stability and freedom are established. The Mahayana is the bodhisattva path of the six perfections that expand the three higher trainings and carry the stability and freedom generated by the Hinayana practices to a universal level. Finally, the Vajrayana is the diamond path that embellishes and enhances the first two of the three *yanas* and brings quick and easy enlightenment in a single lifetime.

The World and Beyond

1. The disciple in particular is mentioned in the colophon to the poem as "the Queen of Kyisho." Presumably this was the wife of the Pakmo Drukpa patriarch, who at the time was a major player in Central Tibetan political life. His wife seems to have been a very devout Buddhist and a strong patron of the Second Dalai Lama.

2. *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation*, trans. Herbert Guenther (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), 56.

3. Shantideva's dates are uncertain, although they generally are stated as the eighth century. His *Bodhisattva-charya-avatara* is a most popular teaching manual with Tibetan lamas of all schools, and dozens of Tibetan commentaries to it have been written over the centuries. Its popularity continues today, with many lamas

using it as a teaching tool. The Dalai Lama has given week-long public discourses on it on many occasions, sometimes to crowds numbering in the hundreds of thousands.

4. This verse, here somewhat paraphrased, appears in the sutra called *The Udanavarga* (*Collected Sayings of the Buddha*).

5. Nagarjuna is held in such respect by all Tibetan schools that he is often termed "The Father of the Middle Way." All schools study his *Verses on the Middle View*, and it occupies two to five years in the curriculum of most large monasteries even today.

6. This is one of two "Alphabetical Poems" composed by the Second Dalai Lama and included in his collection of mystical songs. The second of the two opens with an even more playful verse:
A wise man like me makes tea his pleasure,
Beverage of nectar the color of saffron,
Camphor its only rival in taste.
Drink tea, the choice of the wise.
Everyone wishing to be wise like me
Forever successful in meditation philosophy:
Gorge yourself now on that most delightful of nectars;
Have many cups now, and become a mahasiddha like me.

7. A painting of "Buddha's Descent" is included in the earlier-published *The Flying Mystics of Tibetan Buddhism* (Chicago: Serindia Publications and New York: Rubin Museum of Art, 2006).

Tushita Pure Land and the Theater of the One Thousand Buddhas

1. In particular, many details of his life can be gleaned from the type of *vinaya* literature known in Tibetan as *Dulwai Langboom* (or "Sources of the Vinaya"). The First Dalai Lama wrote a very extensive treatise of this nature, almost a thousand pages in length.

2. Several translations of the *Lalitavistara Sutra* exist in English. One of the most accessible is *The Voice of the Buddha*, trans. Gwendolyn Bays (Essex: Wisdom Books, 1993).

3. See note 2, in this chapter.

4. These verses are from the introductory section of the epic poem by the First Dalai Lama on the life of the Buddha. The complete poem is chanted at the annual Monlam Chenmo Festival, which in old Tibet lasted for the first two weeks of the auspicious fourth Tibetan month (usually May on the Western calendar). In Lhasa this festival was attended by well over 20,000 monks. I included a translation of the entire poem in my *Selected Works of the Dalai Lama I: Bridging the Sutras and Tantras* (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 1981).

5. *Bodhichitta* in Sanskrit. The term refers to the aspiration to enlightenment based on love, compassion, and the inner sense of universal responsibility. It is the acquisition of this inner perspective that transforms an ordinary being into a bodhisattva, or awakening hero.

6. Approximately 150 works in the Tibetan *Tengyur* (*Collection of Indian Translations*) are attributed to the second-century Indian master Nagarjuna. His *Buddha-charita-stotra* is one of the shorter ones, being merely a couple of dozen verses in length.

7. See note 6, in this chapter.

8. See note 1, in this chapter.

9. See note 1, in this chapter.

Padma Sambhava and the Five Pure Lands of Bliss

1. From *A Selection of Favorite Nyingmapa Prayers* (Tib. *rNying-ma-pai-zhal-'don-gtses-btus*), published in Tibetan in Kokonor, Amdo. The publication does not give a date.

2. *Dharmakaya*, source of the other two, and which can only be directly perceived by other buddhas; *sambhoghakaya*, which manifests on etheric levels and can only be directly perceived by *aryas*; and the *nirmanakaya*, which manifests in the ordinary world for the benefit and training of ordinary beings of good karma.

3. This work is also found in *A Selection of Favorite Nyingmapa Prayers*.

4. Although Padma Sambhava was no longer a monk when he came to Tibet in the mid-eighth century, he nonetheless constructed Tibet's first official monastery. A century earlier King Songtsen Gampo had built 108 temples across the country, and these had monks in them; but they did not qualify as monasteries because they did not satisfy two basic conditions: having a quorum of five fully ordained monks or nuns in residence; and standing at a distance of at least three earshots from the nearest human habitat.

5. The Dalai Lama has quoted this verse several times. Once he mentioned it to me in a private issue and commented that it was one of the factors that threw off the dating system of some Tibetan historians. We North Americans, of course, think that it refers to America. Of note, the present Dalai Lama first visited India in 1956, the year celebrated internationally as the 2,500th anniversary of Buddha's passing. Americans also like the prophecy attributed to Padma Sambhava: "When the iron bird flies and horses run on wheels, the Dharma will go to the land of the Red Man." Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche first introduced this prophecy to Americans. Most Tibetans had not heard of it prior to this.

6. "So-called" because not all scholars agree that Bon was pre-Buddhist. The great British scholar David Snellgrove points out that Bon could easily be a pre-Songtsen Gampo form of Buddhism brought in from the Buddhist areas of eastern Persia.

7. Richard C. Foltz's *Religions of the Silk Road* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1999) makes for an interesting read on the possible cross fertilization that took place as spiritual ideas moved back and forth across the Silk Road.

8. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press and Kyoto: Higashi Hongani Shinshu Orani-ha, 1996. This study is based on the extant Sanskrit editions, with reference to the Chinese translations.

9. The first English translation was probably that of Max Muller, done a century ago and published in his famous *Wisdom of the East* series. It is available online at http://web.mit.edu/stclair/www/larger.html.

10. Jerome Ducor, ed., *Pure Land Buddhism WWW Virtual Library: The Internet Guide to Pure Land (Jingtu, Jodo, Shinshu) Online Resources*, http://www.pitaka.ch/vlpl.htm#presentation.

11. Georgios Halkias, 32. See note 21 in the chapter titled *How the Pure Lands Are All around Us.*

12. The prayer by the First Karma Chakmey Lama, whose personal name was Raga Asye, is one of the most famous Amitabha liturgies. He achieved enlightenment during a twelve-year meditation retreat, and went on to write seventy-seven volumes of texts, with over a thousand individual titles contained in these many volumes. The translation as quoted here is made by Lama Lhundrup of the Karmapa Translation Committee at Kundrol Ling in France. It is available online at The Pure Land WWW Virtual Library.

13. John C. Huntington, Robert A. F. Thurman, and Dina Bangdel, *The Circle of Bliss, Buddhist Meditational Art* (Chicago: Serindia Publications, 2004), 82. Presumably the verse is from the *Mahavairochana Tantra*, although neither the tangka nor the authors of *A Circle of Bliss* confirm this.

14. Half a dozen translations of this sutra are available on the web. I have formulated this reading from a blend of them, although I mainly rely on Charles Patton's version.

15. The article is edited from a series of lectures of Tulka Tenga gave in 1986 to the *sadhana* and prayer by the renowned seventeenth-century Karma Kargyu master Karma Chakmey. The link to the article is: http://www.quietmountain.org/links/teachings/amitabha/amitabha.htm.

16. Ian A. Baker did a wonderful study of this little temple in his *The Dalai Lama's Secret Temple: Tantric Wall Paintings from Tibet*, with photographs by Thomas Laird (London: Thames and Hudson, 2000).

The Tantric Pure Lands

1. This passage by the Seventh Dalai Lama is taken from the concluding verses of a poem of instruction on Tantric practice that the Seventh Dalai Lama composed for his Khalka Mongolian disciple and principal spiritual heir, the illustrious Changkya Rolpai Dorje, who was the Third Chankya Tulku.

2. The Kern translation, first published in 1884 in Max Muller's *Wisdom of the East* series, is now available on the web, as are numerous other renditions. Kern's remains very readable. It can be found at http://www.sacred-texts.com/bud/lotus/index.htm.

3. The Seventh Dalai Lama. See note 9 in the chapter titled *How the Pure Lands Are All around Us.*

4. Author's translation. This is the second entry in the Second Dalai Lama's *Nyamgur* (*Songs of Spiritual Realization*).

5. The First Dalai Lama. See note 4 in the chapter titled *Tushita Pure Land and the Theater of the One Thousand Buddhas.*

6. This passage occurs in Chapter Eight of the *Lankavatara Sutra*, as listed on the website http://www.sacred-texts.com/bud/bb/bb15.htm.

7. "The Attaining of Buddhahood," an article from a teaching given by Lopon Tenzin Namdak, Devon retreat, May 1991, translated and edited by Vajranatha. This article is posted on the web: http://www.surajamrita.com/bon/buddhahood.html.

8. Tsongkhapa wrote two texts on the Six Yogas of Naropa. This quote is from his *Migrim* (*Stages in the Practice*) and not his *Tri Yig* (*Treatise*).

9. See note 8. in this chapter.

10. Translated and edited by Gyurme Dorje with Mathew Kapstein (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1991) 122.

11. Ibid., 447–448.

12. The Old School refers to the monasteries and hermitages relying on translations made prior to the eleventh century, the bulk of the translation work having been done between the mid-seventh and mid- ninth centuries. The New Schools start in the early eleventh century, when the Tibetans started to travel again to India en mass, and retranslate the tantric texts then in vogue.

Many of the Old School translations were made from Tantric scriptures that were popular in Indian regions to the west of Tibet, whereas the new schools looked more to central and eastern India.

13. Dujom Tulku's *The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism* mentions Akanistha as a place accessible at will to tenth level bodhisattvas.

14. *Dzogchen Lama Zhallung*, trans. Padmakara Translation Group (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1998).

15. Keith Dowman discusses the Tantric idea of power sites as incorporated by the Tibetans in his *The Sacred Life of Tibet* (London: Thorsons, 1997).

16. Miranda Shaw's *Passionate Enlightenment* (Princeton University Press, 1994) is a great read, with many wonderful *dakini* references.

17. Many Buddhist place names are borrowed from Buddhist mystical literature. Uddiyana is one of these. It was the old name for the Swatt Valley in present-day Pakistan, where Padma Sambhava was born. There was another Uddiyana as a place name located in present-day Orissa of eastern India. Both borrowed their names from a more ancient mythology that spoke of a Pure Land of Uddiyana that is one of the five Sukhavatis.

18. (London: Tharpa Publications, 1991) 22–24.

19. Jerome Edou, *Machik Labdron and the Foundations of Chod* (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 1996) 165–169.

20. His dates were 1738–1780.

21. (New York: J. P. Tarcher, 1989).

22. Website: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shambhala

23. This is the author's own translation of the Sixth Panchen's text.

A Few More Buddhafields, Just for Fun

1. "Sutra of the Medicine Buddha," translated and annotated under the guidance of Dharma Master Hsuan Jung by Minh Thanh and P. D. Leigh (North Hills, CA: Buddha Dharma Education Association, International Buddhist Monastic Institute, 2001) 18–19.

2. The passages are from an oral teaching given by Rinpoche, available at http://www.dharma-haven.org/thrangu-medicine-buddha.htm.

3. Website: http://www.lamayeshe.com/lamazopa/daily_prac.shtml.

4. Edited from the version on the Zambala website, http://www.suite101.com/discussion.cfm/buddhism/64797.

Tushita Revisted

1. As so often happens, a large number of great beings inspired this renaissance. One was Tsongkhapa, the master from the Kokonor region of Amdo who came to Central Tibet and studied under many of the most illustrious masters of his day, fusing together all of the strongest lineages from the Sarma (New Schools), and then housing them in his newly established Ganden ("Tushita" Monastery). Another was Longchen Rabjampa, the genius who gathered up the diverse threads of the doctrines of all the old lineages in Tibet extant at the time and fused them into a coherent whole. Longchenpa is really the founder of the Nyingma School as we know it today. There was no "Old School" before him, just a hodge-podge of pre-eleventh- century lineages. The great Buton Rinchen Druppa, working a generation earlier, had done much the same for the Sakya School. The list is long and impressive.

2. The exact meaning of Dzingchi seems unclear. Perhaps it is simply an old place name for the valley in which the temple was originally built. I asked my old friend and world-renowned Tibetan lexiconographer Tsepak Rigzin to look into the matter. He informed me that "Dzing" simply means pond, whereas "chi" could mean central, outer, or even lower. He felt it probably was a place name from King Songtsen Gampo's time (early seventh century), given in reference to the location of the valley in context to Olkha Cholung.

3. See figure 58. The frescoes under discussion were those of the Thirty-five Buddhas of Purification. Tsongkhapa famously offered 100,000 full-body prostrations to each of these thirty-five during his five-year retreat in Olkha Cholung. During this time, he fasted, eating only a handful of juniper berries each day.

4. From Tsongkhapa's collection of mystical songs and poems. Author's translation.

5. This poem is known by heart to many Tibetan monks, because it became incorporated into the Monlam Chenmo (Great Prayer Festival), a sacred music festival created by Tsongkhapa in 1410. It became an annual fifteen-day event celebrated in most monasteries throughout Central Asia. It was held on a grand scale at the Jokhang in Lhasa, with more than 20,000 monks attending. Although created by Tsongkhapa, founder of the Gelukpa School, it was quickly adopted by all schools. I included a translation of it in *Selected Works of the Dalai Lama I* (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 1981).

6. Western literature today often refers to this lake simply as "The Oracle Lake."

7. Yeshe Tsemo had been an important disciple of the First Dalai Lama. He later became abbot of Tashi Lhunpo for a term. His first-hand accounts of the creations of these two great works of art are important sources of knowledge in Tibetan art history. Unfortunately both were stolen and destroyed by the Chinese Communists in the 1960s.

8. Lama Drom was the lay disciple of Atisha. It was Drom who formulated Atisha's lineages into what became known as the Kadam School. The First Dalai Lama was informally thought of as being his reincarnation. This passage from the Second's biographer, written in 1530, makes this obvious.

9. This is the Panchen who died in 1989 under suspicious circumstances. He has two reincarnations.

10. See note 9 in the chapter titled *How the Pure Lands Are All around Us.*

Powa, Niguma, and *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*

1. Lama Kazi Dawa-Samdup was a school teacher with a good command of the English language and a deep desire to make Tibetan literature available to an international audience. Evans-Wentz happened to meet him while traveling in the Darjeeling and Sikkim regions of India, and the two became friends. The lama translated, and the traveler translated. Dawa-Samdup died a few years later, and Evans-Wentz inherited his translations. Evans-Wentz published them in four volumes, all with Oxford University Press: *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*; *Tibetan Yoga and Secret Doctrines*; *The Tibetan Book of the Great Liberation*; and *The Life of Milarepa.* These were the first authentic translations of Tibetan classics to appear in English. They remain relevant reading today, three quarters of a century later.

2. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, trans. and annot. Francesca Fremantle and Chogyam Trungpa (Boulder and Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1975).

3. In the Nyingma tradition a ritualist will generally chant this book aloud beside the corpse of the deceased once a day for a number of days, with each reading taking three or four hours. The corpse then will usually either be cremated or will be cut into pieces and offered to the birds. It is not unusual to have the ritualist continue doing one reading a day until forty-nine readings have been completed.

4. The Second Dalai Lama's father was the head of the Shangpa Kargyu lineages in Tsang, and as a result the young lama received training in these traditions from a very young age. He wrote two texts on the Six Yogas of Niguma, as well as numerous treatises on other Shangpa practices.

5. The Second Dalai Lama gives this quote in his *Tri Yig*, or longer commentary. The idea of purifying the physical body during these three states means understanding the illusory nature of all objects of the five senses, and thereby freeing the mind from the bondage of the duality grasping syndrome.

6. The first English translation of a text on these Six Yogas appeared in the Kazi Dawa-Samdup and Evan-Wentz book *Tibetan Yogas and Secret Doctrines* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1935). They translated the brief commentary by the great sixteenth-century Drukpa Kargyu master Pema Karpo.

7. This is also from the Second Dalai Lama's *Tri Yig*. Author's translation.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

10. Author's translation. Gene Smith of www.tbrc.org kindly sent me a scanned Tibetan version of the text from his private collection.

11. The Second Dalai Lama quotes this passage in his *Tri Yig* on the Six Yogas of Naropa, stating the source as *The Vajradaka Tantra*. Tsongkhapa also wrote a text which is popularly known as *Powa Chenmo* (*Great Treatise on Consciousness Transference*). Readers fluent in Tiberan can refer to it for more detail on the *powa* traditions of Tibetan Buddhism.

12. From the First Dalai Lama's commentary to the lineages descending from the eleventh-century Indo-Nepali female mystic Siddharani, known in Tiberan as Drubpai Galmo. Author's translation.

13. From the Seventh Dalai Lama's *Nyam Gur* (*Songs of Realization*). Author's translation.

Glossary

abhidharma: Buddhist philosophy as written form; literature.

arya: sainthood; devoted, dear, favorable; a term of high respect; may be used for a Buddhist teacher or accomplished practitioner.

bardo: literally means "between," and here refers to the state between death and rebirth. *The Bardo Todol*, or *Tibetan Book of Liberation by Hearing While in the Bardo*, has become widely known in various Western translations as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. That text refers to six different *bardo* experiences, or "in-betweens": the *bardo* of the waking state between arising in the morning and going to sleep at night, as experienced between the moment of birth and the moment of death; the *bardo* of the sleep-dream state, which occurs between going to sleep and waking up; the *bardo* of deep meditation, which occurs between the moments of leaving ordinary consciousness when meditating and then later re-entering ordinary mind at the end of the meditation session; and three that are associated with the death state.

bodhichitta: the aspiration to enlightenment based on great compassion, love, and the inner sense of universal responsibility; the inner perspective that transforms an ordinary being into a *bodhisattva*.

bodhisattva: an aspirant to enlightenment who chooses to remain in the cycles of *samsara* to benefit all sentient beings.

brahma aperture: the energy center or chakra above the crown of the head, at the top of the body's central channel (*avadhuti*).

buddhafield: see Pure Land.

buddhaworld: see Pure Land.

chakra: wheel or disk; may refer to the wheel of the dharma, the teachings of the Buddha, or the body's energy centers.

dakinis: female spirits, *yoginis* (female yoga practitioners), witches, and deities; in esoteric Buddhism they are often teachers, appearing in human or visionary form.

dharmakaya: one of the *trikaya*; formless aspect of enlightenment; transcendental body; the idea of the *dharma* not yet made manifest. In a transmittable form; it gives rise to the other two *kayas* (bodies).

dharmata: essential nature of Buddhist reality.

karma: the law of cause and effect.

klesha: root delusion or mental affliction; three *kleshas*: ignorance, attachment, and aversion.

mahasiddha: great spiritual adept.

Mahayana: see vehicles.

mandala: cosmic diagram; sacred space.

mudra: the language of hand gesture.

nirmanakaya: one of the *trikaya*; phenomenal body, the Buddha made fully manifest for the purpose of passing along teachings, benefiting all sentient beings.

nirvana: the state beyond all suffering; the ultimate goal of the Buddhist path in which *samsara* is transcended.

rupadhatu: form realm, as opposed to the formless realm (*arupadhatu*).

paramitas: perfections.

parinirvana: final extinction; the final death of Buddha Shakyamuni, which released him from the cycles of rebirth.

powa: consciousness transference.

prana: breath power.

Pure Land (Sanskrit, *Buddhaksetra*; Tibetan, *sangyey zhing kham*): a buddha realm or higher paradise conducive to enlightenment practice. In contrast to ordinary worldly realms, Pure Lands are free from *karma*, delusion, and suffering.

sadhana: method of practice.

samboghakaya: one of the *trikaya*; bliss body, partially manifested, visible only to bodhisattvas and enlightened beings.

samsara: the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth.

shunyata: emptiness, voidness, nonduality; the ultimate nature of reality according to Buddhist teachings.

siddhi: power; spiritual or mundane accomplishment.

sutra: Indian Buddhist literature.

tathagata: an epithet for buddhas.

tantra: "continuum," a genre of Hindu and Buddhist literature featuring teachings associated with Tantric Hinduism and Buddhism.

Theravada: see vehicles.

trikaya: the three bodies of the Buddha.

> *dharmakaya*: formless aspect of enlightenment; transcendental body; the idea of the *dharma* not yet made manifest. In a transmittable form; it gives rise to the other two *kayas*.
>
> *sambogbakaya*: bliss body, partially manifested, visible only to bodhisattvas and enlightened beings.
>
> *nirmanakaya*: phenomenal body, the Buddha made fully manifest for the purpose of passing along teachings, benefiting all sentient beings.

Tushita Pure Land: the realm in which Buddha Shakyamuni is said to have originated and returned; the most important Buddha realm.

vajra: ritual implement of power for Tibetan Buddhists; may be translated as "thunderbolt" or "diamond scepter;" a ritual object with curved prongs at each end (the number varies), and a symbol of the enlightened mind. Tantric, or esoteric, Buddhism is also called the *vajra* vehicle, *Vajrayana*.

vajrayana: see vehicles.

Vajra firmament: Buddhist *abhidharma* states that our universe rests upon an immutable and indestructible base. The universe itself rises and falls with the passage of aeons, suffering destructions and then re-emerging once more. Vasubhandu's *abhidharma* treatise, known as *Treasury of Abhidharma* or *Abhidharmakosha*, written in the fourth century, states that the universe repeatedly circles through four stages: nothingness, emergence, the stage that is capable of sustaining life, and the stage of disintegration, after which it returns to the stage of nothingness. It does this twenty times in a small aeon. All of this happens on and within the *vajra* firmament.

Vehicles (*yanas*) of Buddhism:

> *Theravada*: original, monastic Buddhism; the foundational path.
>
> *Mahayana*: the Universal vehicle, the second development of Buddhism, an expansion of the stability and freedom generated by the Theravada practices; incorporates the bodhisattva path of the six perfections.
>
> *Vajrayana*: the *vajra* vehicle: Tantric, Esoteric Buddhism; an expedited path where
>
> enlightenment may be achieved in a single lifetime; incorporates visualization and meditation practices.

yanas: teachings or vehicles.

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Buddha in Paradise

A Celebration in Himalayan Art

GLENN H. MULLIN

The human mind has reached continuously over millennia for visions of realms beyond suffering—without death, pain, longing, or ignorance. In many cultures, terms used to describe such places share the root meaning of "paradise," a "walled garden," and corresponding notions of protection, delight, and contentment. This publication lays out in sculptures and paintings the concept of "paradise" in Tibetan Buddhism, understood through different approaches and teachings, the most radical of which confronts us with the realization that paradise is all around us if we are able to perceive it.

The journey begins with a look at Yama, the Lord of Death, who holds all existence in his mouth, high and low, and devours all living things, subjecting them, without pity, to impermanence and change. In this world view, even the paradises of sensual pleasure, of purified form, and even formlessness, belong to this "Wheel of Becoming" that ties one to eventual death and rebirth, and the suffering this brings. There are, however, in the Buddhist framework, places beyond material form and duality, "buddhafields" or "Pure Lands," where conditions for spiritual realization are ripe, and various buddhas preside together with compassionate beings who seek the enlightenment of all others. The author takes the viewer through the imagery of various "Pure Lands" including the "Tushita Pure Land and the Theater of the 1,000 Buddhas," as well as "The Five Pure Lands of Bliss."

Different schools of Buddhism emphasize different aspects of "paradise," and Mullin devotes a section to the tantric visions of infinite "buddhafields" right at hand, "as numerous as all the atoms in the world, and wherein each of these buddhafields is filled with uncountable buddhas" and ordinary "experience is dissolved into infinite awareness." Poetry and writings by Buddhist masters, including texts that guide the passage from death to rebirth, are provided to accompany the visual communications of these ideas in paintings, textiles, and sculpture.

The Tibetologist Glenn H. Mullin was born on June 22, 1949, in Quebec, Canada, and lived in the Indian Himalayas between 1972 and 1984, where he studied philosophy, literature, meditation, yoga, and the enlightenment culture under thirty-five of the great living masters from the four schools of Tibetan Buddhism. After returning to North America in 1984, Mullin founded The Mystical Arts of Tibet. This association, under his direction, facilitated music and dance tours of Tibetan monks in North America. The first such tours to reach the West, they also included demonstrations of mandala paintings. In accordance with their primary purpose, these cultural exchanges contributed . . . "mystically to world peace and planetary healing."

Mullin is the author of more than twenty-five books on Tibetan Buddhism. Many of these focus on the lives and works of the early Dalai Lamas. He has also worked as a field specialist on three Tibet-related films and five television documentaries and has co-produced five audio recordings of Tibetan sacred music. In 2002 his book *The Fourteen Dalai Lamas* was nominated for the prestigious NAPRA award for best book, and in 2004 his book *Female Buddhas* won a Best Book Award from *Foreword Magazine*.

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