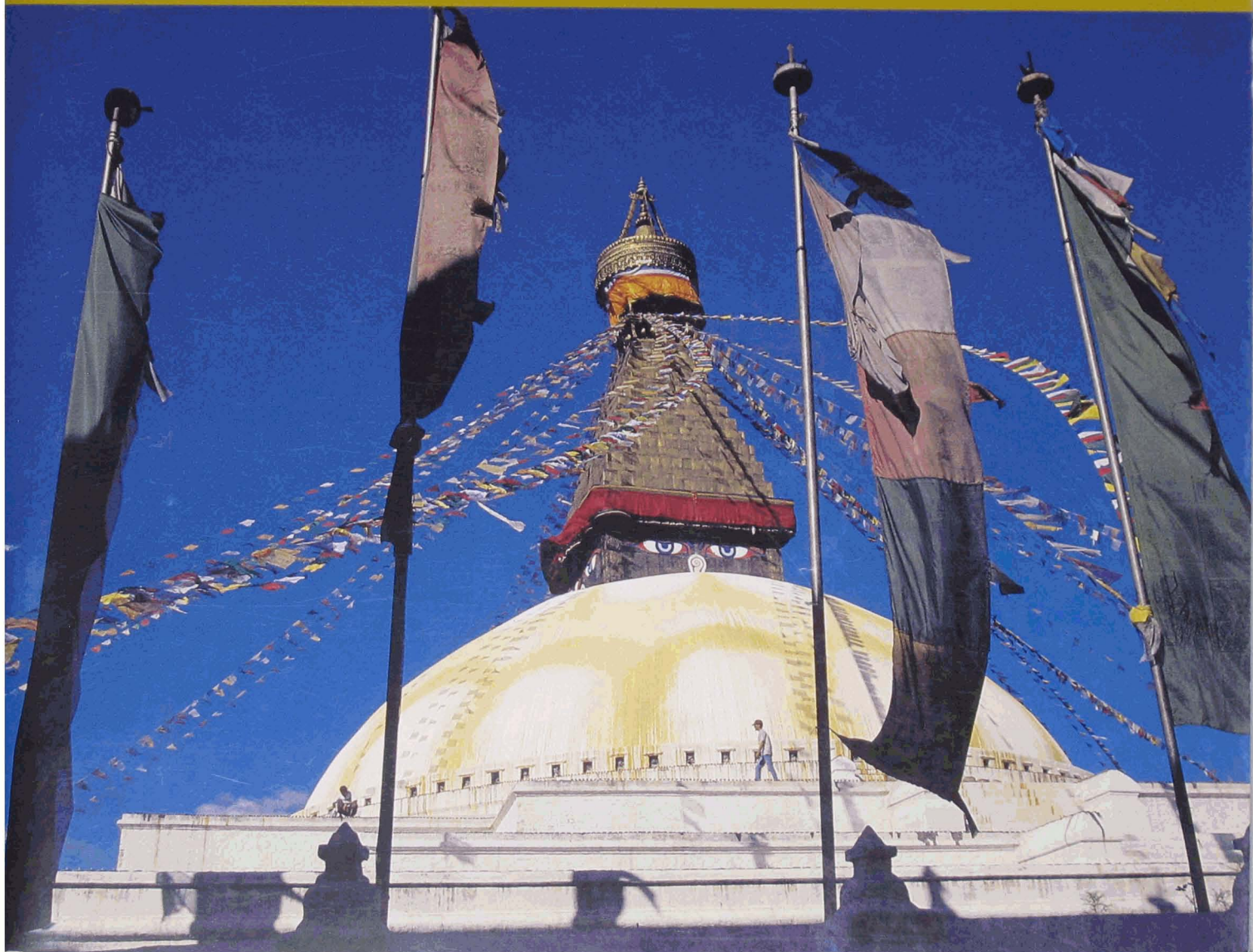
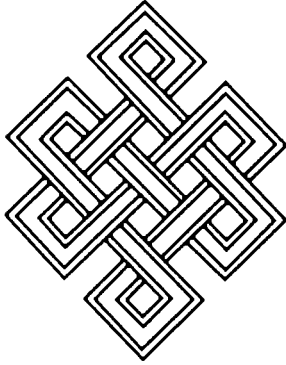


Buddhist Art and Ritual from Nepal and Tibet

Barbara Matilsky





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*Ackland Art Museum
The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*



Monks constructing a sand mandala.

photo: A. Pierce Bounds

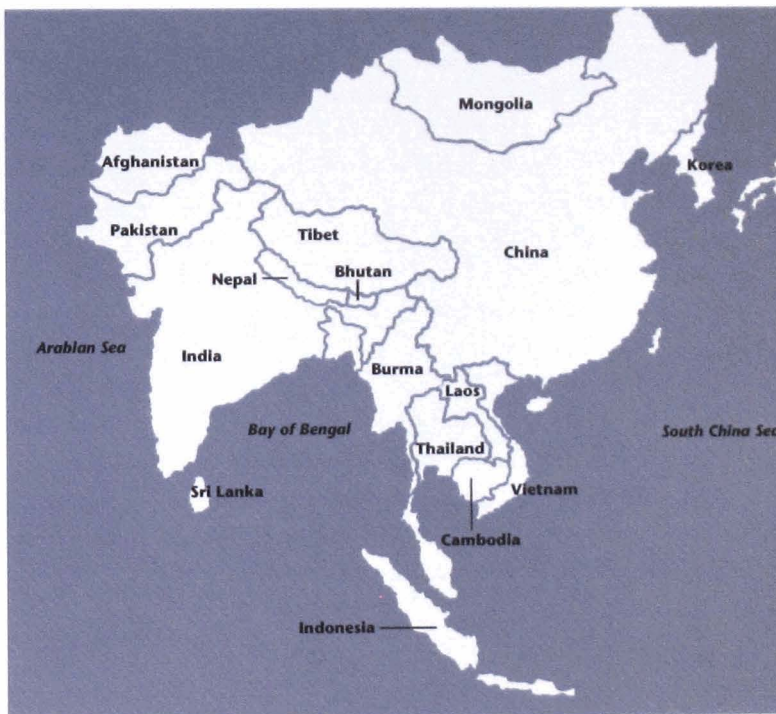
Introduction

This catalogue accompanies the exhibition *Buddhist Art and Ritual from Nepal and Tibet*, which highlights the way art functions in a traditional Buddhist altar. It conveys the integration of art and ritual that is fundamental to understanding the meanings of these objects as part of living cultural traditions. As a context-oriented approach to the presentation of art, it complements the chronological and stylistic display of painting and sculpture in our Asian gallery.

For this two-year exhibition, the Ackland Art Museum at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill borrowed twenty paintings, sculptures and other sacred objects from museums with significant collections of Himalayan art—the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Newark Museum and the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University. Ackland curators selected the works of art and Venerable Tenzin Gephel, from the Namgyal Monastery in Ithaca, New York, was invited to place them in their appropriate setting. The altar functioned for daily worship during the construction of a Medicine Buddha sand mandala in the gallery from February 25–March 21, 2001.

The works of art in this altar belong to the *Vajrayana* path of Buddhist teaching, which is also known as Tantric Buddhism. Flourishing in Nepal and Tibet, this approach to the practice of Buddhism catalyzed the creation of mandalas and other unique works of art. Tantric Buddhism provided disciplines and rituals—interweaving meditation, visualization and art—for estab-

lishing harmony within and unity among all living things. *Buddhist Art and Ritual from Nepal and Tibet* examines the context in which scroll paintings, called *tangkas* (*paubhas* in Nepali), and sculptures were created and used by devotees on route to spiritual transformation. Ultimate enlightenment, achieved through the cultivation of wisdom and compassion, is a culminating goal represented in art by the merging of male and female deities. In order to suggest the wide dissemination and varied interpretation of Buddhist philosophy and art in Asia, illustrations of works of art from the Ackland's permanent collection are included in this catalogue.



Art and the Evolution of the Buddha's Teachings

During the course of its 2,500-year history, Buddhism evolved to meet the needs of peoples from diverse cultures in Asia, and beginning in the nineteenth century, in Europe and North America. While the basic philosophy has endured, its practices and methods of achieving the goal of enlightenment have been adapted and revitalized through the centuries.

The Buddha (566–486 B.C.E.) traveled and preached for forty-five years and his followers orally transmitted his teachings. A few hundred years after the Buddha's death, a council was called to record his sermons, which were later translated into the ancient classical languages of Pali and Sanskrit.

A Buddhist aims to acknowledge the self, not as a permanent, partless entity, but rather as an aggregation of constituents, evolving and adapting to new environments, and capable of becoming enlightened. The Buddha offered teachings and a role model for people to discover this truth (Dharma) for themselves. Recognizing the varying needs and capabilities of individuals in their quest for understanding, the Buddha consequently laid the foundation for several paths or vehicles that offered enlightenment or nirvana. Nirvana means "blowing out" or extinguishing the flames of passion and ignorance, a process that leads to liberation from suffering and perpetual rebirth. Although the methods of each path differ, their goal is ultimately the same.

The works of art emerging from these different paths assume various forms and styles. They are, nonetheless, linked in spirit as all artworks are alive with the essence of

enlightenment, represented by symbols or images of the Buddha, and later a multitude of related deities. Commissioning a work of art for home or monastery plays an important role in all paths of Buddhist practice. Through this process, the devotee garners merit that helps pave the way towards his or her enlightenment.

Historically, the Buddhist path that first emerged during the fifth through second centuries B.C.E. was called Theravada. Founded in India, Theravada Buddhism spread to Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Burma. It was largely practiced communally, confined to the monasteries and the surrounding lay communities that provided sustenance to the monks through donations of food. Within a rigorous, intellectual atmosphere, monks dedicate themselves to study, contemplation, practice and the preservation of the Dharma for future followers.

Theravada means "teachings of the elders," indicating that the followers of this path consider theirs to be the original Buddhist tradition. In the Theravada Vehicle, the Buddha is the only spiritual figure represented in works of art. Free-standing figures of the Buddha and relief sculptures with scenes from his life are often portrayed in a classical style that developed in northern India during the Gupta Dynasty (fourth to sixth century C.E.), when both Brahmanical and Buddhist art flourished. The Gupta style of elegant, flowing volumes and beautiful proportions influenced later cultures and generations, including the Pala Dynasty (750–1200 C.E.) of eastern India, where Tantric art emerged as a fully evolved style.

Buddha Calling the Earth to Witness

Burmese, ca. 13th century, Andagun stone (prophyllite),
6'2 x 4'5 x 1'5 in., Auckland Art Museum, Auckland Fund,
97.14.1, photo: Jerry Blow

Born Prince Siddhartha in what is now Nepal, in 566 B.C.E., Buddha Sakyamuni, "sage of the Sakya tribe," abandoned family and wealth to seek the meanings of life and death. After six years of meditation, he discovered the truth (Dharma). This sculpture portrays the Buddha (literally "awakened one"), meditating under a sacred pipal tree (sometimes called Bodhi, meaning enlightenment) and calling the Earth to witness his moment of supreme insight. Also portrayed are scenes from the Buddha's life, including his first sermon and death at the age of eighty.

In his first sermon, the Buddha noted that the world's pain and suffering were caused by negative passions and emotions. He also spoke of specific remedies needed to establish harmony within this state of darkness and outlined an eight-fold path based on right conduct, meditation and wisdom. Recognizing the realities of daily life, the Buddha advocated a lifestyle based on moderation that he called "The Middle Way."

This sculpture may have been created in Burma during the Pagan Dynasty (1044–1287 C.E.), when Buddhist thought and art achieved a masterful synthesis. It may have been carried by pilgrims or symbolically refer to sacred pilgrimage sites associated with the Buddha. Emerging from the Theravada Buddhist path, this sculpture reflects the refined style of the Indian Pala Dynasty. Interpretations of the Buddha's personal history are a distinguishing aspect of art from the Theravada tradition.



Around the first century B.C.E. in India, Buddhism was revitalized through changing methods and beliefs that appealed to a growing population. In addition to the meditative and altruistic practices already established, the Mahayana Buddhist path incorporated the concept of deity worship in the form of Bodhisattvas. Bodhisattvas are advanced practitioners who have generated compassion for others. They possess *bodhicitta*, the altruistic intention to become enlightened for the sake of benefiting others. The compassionate Bodhisattva motivation is said to be vast, thus this path is sometimes called the Great Vehicle.

With the introduction of these deities, works of art were no longer limited to portraying the Buddha. Now a burgeoning number of Bodhisattvas, added to the canon of Buddhist scriptures, assumed their own distinctive qualities and attributes in sculpture and painting. Bodhisattvas, often associated with Cosmic or Primordial Buddhas corresponding to celestial territories, are usually elegantly attired in royal dress. Although they assumed different names after their assimilation into other countries and cultures, their embodiment of compassion remained the same.

Vajrayana Buddhism evolved from Mahayana Buddhism and an earlier mystic tantric tradition, becoming fully established by the seventh century C.E., first in India and later in Nepal, Tibet, China and Japan. Sharing similar goals to Mahayana, *Vajrayana* encompasses a different body of practices and rituals to achieve a faster route to enlightenment. In the earlier paths of Buddhism, countless eons and rebirths must pass before one can reach a perfected state of awareness. By contrast, adherents of the *Vajrayana* tradition can potentially attain a state of complete, perfect enlightenment in one lifetime. The motivation for the quick path is purely altruistic—to help others and end suffering sooner.

The word *Vajrayana* literally means “Thunderbolt Vehicle” as well as “Diamond Vehicle,” symbolic of both the speed and power of the journey. Art of the *Vajrayana* path, often referred to as Tantric art, is elaborate in style with complex symbolism. Characterized by brilliant colors in both painting and sculpture, the art is used to liberate consciousness through rituals, meditation and visualization. The depiction of deities in both fierce and peaceful manifestations is a distinguishing feature of Tantric art.

Head of Guanyin

Northern Chinese, 12th–15th century, gilded and painted cast iron, 15 1/4 x 8 1/2 in., Ackland Art Museum, Ackland Fund, 88.29, photo: Jerry Blow

Buddhism entered south China in the second century C.E. through central Asian trade routes. Guanyin quickly became one of the most popular deities in this region. This head of Guanyin, the Chinese Buddhist equivalent of Avalokitesvara, literally means “Regarder of the Cries (of the World).” Devotion to Guanyin emerged during the third through sixth centuries C.E., a time of social and political instability in China. With the Song Dynasty (960–1279 C.E.), Guanyin was transformed and worshiped as a female Bodhisattva. Her identity continued to evolve when Guanyin, as the Bestower of Sons, assumed paramount importance for women, in particular.

In this sculpture, Guanyin’s crown bears the image of Amitabha, the Primordial or Cosmic Buddha of the West, who gained a popular following in China. Guanyin is believed to ferry departed souls to Amitabha’s Western Paradise where they are peacefully reborn. This head once belonged to a life-sized standing or seated sculpture. Magnificently gilded in gold with a jewel, now missing, for the all-knowing third eye, it was probably exhibited in a sumptuously decorated temple suggestive of a perfected, pure-land universe.





Eleven-headed, Thousand-armed Avalokitesvara

*Tibetan, early 17th century, gouache on cotton,
29 x 20¹/₁₆ in., Ackland Art Museum, Gift of
Ruth and Sherman Lee, 99.13.4, photo: Jerry
Blow*

The multiplication of heads and limbs on Bodhisattvas is a distinguishing aspect of Tantric Buddhist art. With an eye at the center of each hand, the thousand arms in this tangka painting symbolize the Bodhisattva's limitless potential for compassionate outreach and his powerful ability to see and help all beings achieve enlightenment. Avalokitesvara's multiple heads also represent his extraordinary vision, corresponding to the four cardinal directions and the midpoints between, as well as the center, zenith and nadir. His heads are also believed to symbolize the stages of enlightenment. This eleven-headed, thousand-armed representation is one of the most powerful forms of Avalokitesvara, called Chenrezi in Tibetan.

Tantric Art in Nepal and Tibet

Tantricism refers to a mystical tradition based on a belief in the powerful energies of the universe that permeate and unify all things. Aspects of tantricism are believed to extend as far back as the Indus Valley civilization over five thousand years ago. Its methods and practices of achieving enlightenment are based on yoga ("union"), meditation, complex rituals and symbolic works of art. Originally, hermits called Tantrikas practiced it in India outside the organized faith traditions. Tantricism became systematized around 300 C.E. and infiltrated both *Vajrayana* Buddhist teaching and Brahmanical traditions.*

Sacred texts, called tantras, contain the means to gain enlightenment during one's lifetime. They instruct devotees in specific rituals, meditations and visualizations towards understanding particular aspects of deities. These tantras were kept secret, passed on from master to pupil through elaborate initiation ceremonies. Art is an essential component of tantricism. *Tangkas*, mandalas and sculptures of deities accompany rituals to help achieve insight into the essence of unity. In *Vajrayana* Buddhism, one meditates on oneself as similar in aspect to the deity.

Although tantricism spread to other regions in Asia, nowhere has its influence been more pervasive than in Nepal and Tibet, where it continues to energize and shape the spiritual and cultural landscape. As a result, Himalayan art and architecture have evolved in unique directions and in relative isolation. Art and spirituality are wedded to life, nourished by daily worship. In the cities of the Kathmandu Valley, men, women and children bring offerings to tantric deities—both Brahmanical and Bud-

dhist—enshrined in public squares. In Tibet, monks and nuns dedicate themselves to spiritual practices, which include the creation of artworks intrinsic to rituals. Until the 1950s, thousands of monasteries, housing murals, life-size sculptures and ritual objects, flourished in Tibet.

Over the centuries, the interactions between Nepal and Tibet enabled both the arts and Buddhist teachings to thrive. Nepal, bounded by forests in the south and the Himalayan Mountains to the north, served as a refuge for Buddhist devotees during times of social and political unrest. Indian Buddhists made their way there during the Muslim invasions of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, while Tibetans, at various points in their history, also found a haven for Buddhist practice in the Kathmandu Valley. Consequently, Buddhism was revitalized in Nepal after its appearance in the valley around the second century C.E.

In Nepal, a place where both Brahmanical traditions and Buddhism coexist, many of the most important works of art were, and continue to be, created by Newars, the indigenous peoples of the Kathmandu Valley. Under the Malla kings (1200–1768 C.E.), Newari craftsman created magnificent palaces, temples, sculptures and *paubhas*, inspired by the elegant, sensual styles of India's earlier Gupta and Pala dynasties.

The reputation and skill of Newari artists resulted in commissions to execute mural and *tangka* paintings for Tibetan monasteries beginning in the thirteenth century. The Nepali style spread to China during the Yuan Dynasty (1260–1368 C.E.) with the Newari artist and monk, Aniko (or Anige). Living in Tibet, Aniko headed a delegation of eighty artists to the Mongol Imperial court of Khubilai Khan (1260–1294 C.E.), which converted to *Vajrayana* Buddhism and constructed temples and monasteries with magnificent works of art. By the seventeenth

*Brahmanical traditions refer to a complex of rituals and philosophical ideas in South Asia that later became grouped under the colonial term "Hinduism."

century, a large community of Newari artists had settled in Tibet to satisfy the demand for paintings and sculptures necessary for Buddhist practice. The Nepali style of art was also disseminated by Tibetan traders, carrying wool and salt to markets in Kathmandu, who brought back works of art to their native land.

A distinct Tibetan style emerged in the fifteenth century that reflected its foundation in Indo-Nepali art as well as its interactions with China and other central Asian cultures. The assimilation of Chinese landscape and figure styles were important developments in the history of Tibetan art. By the seventeenth century, Tibetan art had achieved a refined balance between naturalism and abstraction, reality and metaphysical nuance, rich colors

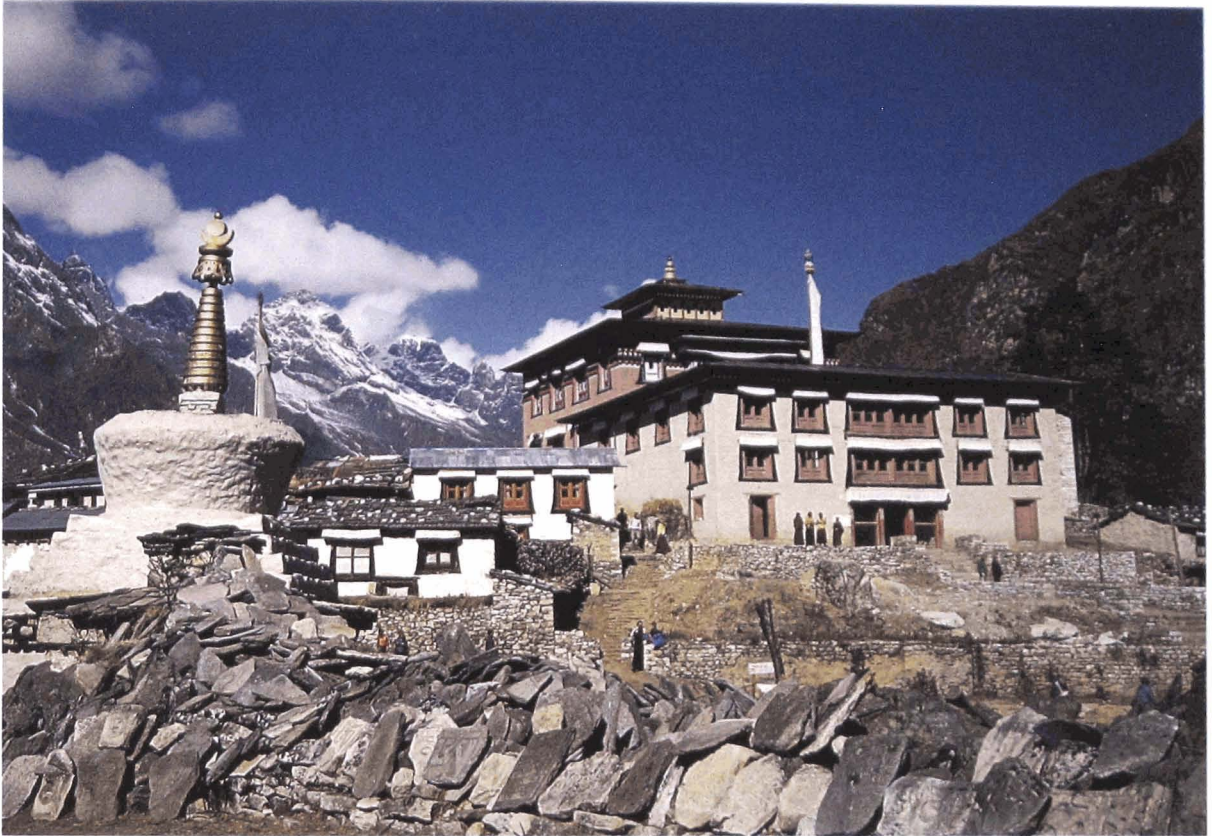
and detailed lines. The “new Menri painting” style emerged as a national and international school, influencing the direction of art in China and Mongolia.

The spiritual and cultural exchange between Nepal and Tibet moved in both directions. The influx of traders and monks from Tibet helped Kathmandu Valley maintain its connections to the Buddhist faith during a time of increasing spiritual and cultural dominance of Brahmanical traditions. In Kathmandu, home to one of the world’s largest Tibetan communities, Tibetan devotees commissioned artworks and established Buddhist monasteries that to this day attract both Nepali and Tibetan men and women who seek enlightenment.



Interior view of doorway, Tengboche Monastery, Nepal

photo: Barbara Matisky



Exterior view of Tengboche Monastery, Nepal

First constructed 1916, photo: Barbara Matilsky

The Monastery at Tengboche, close to the border of Tibet and Nepal, is secluded in the Himalayan Mountains near the base of Sagarmatha (Mount Everest). This area is inhabited by the Sherpa peoples, recognized for their mountaineering skills, who emigrated from Tibet beginning in the sixteenth century. The monastery became known internationally through mountain climbers during their expeditions to Mount Everest. There are currently twenty fully ordained monks and thirty novices who live communally, supported by the surrounding community. Each day they pray and chant together in the early morning and evening hours surrounded by works of art – multicolored silk

parasols, mural paintings on ceilings, walls and columns and sculptures of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas. The richness of imagery, saturation of colors and abstract designs envelops the viewer in a spiritually symbolic universe that contrast with the stark but majestic beauty of the landscape beyond.

The Buddha instituted the concept of the Buddhist monastery. Called the Sangha, these educational communities were among the world's first universities, founded to practice, preserve and disseminate Buddhist teachings by copying scriptures and later creating paintings and mandalas used in meditation and rituals.



Tibetan Buddhist altar at the Ackland Art Museum

photo: Jerry Blow

Although Buddha is not considered a god, he is revered as a perfected being and worshiped as the personification of enlightenment. One does not reach awareness by asking for the Buddha's help, but rather assimilating the ideals of the master teacher into practice. It was the Buddha's own belief that individuals must reach understanding for themselves.

According to *Vajrayana* teachings, each person is a potential Buddha. Once the mind is liberated from ego-centric thoughts and actions are dedicated towards helping others, the clear light that exists within shines forth as enlightenment. Art and worship combine as ritual to achieve this state of being.

Objects on the Altar

Fourth Tier (left to right):

Chorten

Central Tibet, late 14th–early 15th century (see page 18)

Buddha Sakyamuni, Kham, Tibet, 19th century

Gilt copper, height: 17¼ in.

Collection of *The Newark Museum*, Gift of Dr. A. L. Shelton, 1920

(20.454)

Vajracchedika Prajnaparamita sutra, Tibet

Wood, paper, leather, 2¼ x 9¾ x 3¼ in.

Collection of *The Newark Museum*, Purchase 1988 Thomas L. Raymond Bequest Fund and Mrs. C. Suydam Cutting Bequest Fund

(88.288)

Third Tier (left to right):

A Sakyapa Abbot, Sakyapa Monastery, Central Tibet

16th century

Gilt bronze repousse with paint, 5½ x 4½ x 1¼ in.

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Gift of Dr. and Mrs. P. Pal in memory of Christian Humann

M 81.183.2

Dorje, Tibet, c. 1900

Copper alloy, 5¼ in. length x 1¾ in. diameter

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Francis Eric Bloy Bequest, AC1994.116.6

Bell, Tibet

Brass with steel tongue, height: 7½ in. (3¼ in diameter)

Collection of *The Newark Museum*, Gift of Dr. A. L. Shelton, 1920

(20.398)

Ngawang Losang Gyatso, the Great Fifth Dalai Lama

Central Regions, Tibet, late 17th century (see page 15)

Chakrasamvara and Vajravarahi

Nepal, late 14th–early 15th century (see page 29)

The Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara

Nepal, 15th century (see page 25)

Second Tier (left to right):

Water vessel, Tibet

Metal, fabric, feathers, height: 11 in. (7 in. diameter)

Collection of *The Newark Museum*, Gift of Dr. Wesley Halpert and Mrs. Carolyn Halpert, 1990

(90.2974-c)

Amulet box with figure of Amitayus

Derge, Northeast Tibet (see page 24)

The Goddess Tara

Nepal, 12th century (see page 27)

Penden Lhamo (Shri Devi)

Tibeto-Chinese, late 17th to early 18th century (see page 31)

Mahakala

Central Tibet, 17th century (see page 32)

Prayer wheel, Tibet, 19th century

Brass and wood, length: 11 in. (diameter: 3¼ in.)

Collection of *The Newark Museum*, Gift of Mrs. E. N. and Mr. A. M. Crane, 1911

(11.658)

First Tier (left to right):

Set of offering bowls, Tibet

Brass, height: 2½ in. (5¼ in. diameter)

Collection of *The Newark Museum*, Gift of Dr. A. L. Shelton, 1920

(20.368)

Butter lamp, Tibet

Brass, height: 5¼ in. (4½ in. diameter)

Collection of *The Newark Museum*, Gift of Mrs. E. N. and Mr. A. M. Crane, 1911

(11.670)

Most Buddhist homes, monasteries and temples have an altar, in some form, dedicated for worship. The altar houses an image of the Buddha, and often other deities as well—in sculpture, painting, and more recently, photographs and print reproductions. Works of art are considered alive with the essence of the deity after their ritual consecration.

The altar creates a sacred space and atmosphere conducive to meditation and transformation. Traditionally, an altar contains reference to the Buddha's perfected speech, body and mind, symbolized by a scripture (sutra), a statue of the Buddha Sakyamuni and a stupa (see page 18) respectively. The devotee aspires to the ideals embodied in these forms in order find inner wisdom and help other human beings to see their inner light.

Other sculptures are placed in proximity to this central grouping, beginning with the lamas with long spiritual lineages, such as the Fifth Dalai Lama. Next in order are the *yidams*, guiding or archetype deities of an individual, family or monastery. Figures that protect the Buddhist faith, called *Dharmapalas*, are arranged nearby.

Ngawang Losang Gyatso, the Great Fifth Dalai Lama

Central Regions, Tibet, late 17th century, gilt bronze, 7½ x 7 x 5½ in. Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts. Gift of N. L. Horch to the Riverside Museum Collection, 1971.267, photo: Jerry Blow

Tibetan art is unique for the large number of representations of lamas (teachers) represented in both painting and sculpture. Some lamas are considered emanations of Bodhisattvas and thus an extended lineage can be traced through the centuries. The line of Dalai Lamas is linked to the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara. The Fifth Dalai Lama (1617–1682 C.E.), who consolidated both political and spiritual power to lead a unified Tibetan nation, ushered in a golden age of Tibetan art. He commissioned the Potala in Lhasa, a magnificent architectural complex that functioned as fort, temple, university, monastery and the residence of the Dalai Lamas (illustrated on back cover).

This sculpture of the Dalai Lama is considered one of the finest depictions of this important historical figure. Artistically, it represents the height of Tibetan art, showing an exquisite equilibrium between naturalism and abstraction. In a gesture of discernment, the Dalai Lama appears calm, poised and dignified. His idealized head is set off by a voluminous mound of drapery, elegantly and abstractly incised with foliage and lotus flowers. This effect heightens the stature of the figure, which is shown with a ceremonial dagger called a phurba—used in tantric rituals—at his waist. In front, along the base, is a double dorje, referring to the swift and powerful path of the Vajrayana teaching.



Only a Buddha has extinguished all faults and gained all attainments. Therefore, one should mentally go for refuge to a Buddha, praise him with speech, and respect him physically. One should enter the teachings of such a being.

—His Holiness Tenzin Gyatso, The Fourteenth

Dalai Lama, *Tantra in Tibet*, p. 30

Each morning, offerings that appeal to the senses—sound, smell, taste, touch and sight—are given to the deities who reside at the altar. Flowers, butter lamps or candles, incense and a small portion of every meal are usually placed here. Traditionally, seven bowls of water are also offered, representing the seven aspects of prayer—offering, confessing, prostrating, celebrating the positive qualities of all beings, asking the Buddhas to remain in this world, requesting their guidance for all people, and dedicating the merits obtained from the offering process. Butter lamps, providing light and symbolizing wisdom, are interspersed among the offering bowls. During important ceremonies, hundreds of butter lamps are lit in a dramatic show of offerings in monasteries and around stupas.

The act of offering consciously focuses the mind on the Buddha's teachings. It is a means to purify thoughts and actions. During the process of offering food and water, the devotee visualizes the end of hunger and thirst. By sprinkling water on the objects with a twig or kusha grass, they are blessed by the deities. The mantra, *Om Ah Hum*, the seed syllables of the Buddha's body, speech and mind, is recited.

In addition to fostering the practice of giving, which is necessary for ultimate enlightenment, the offering ritual earns merit, helping to ensure a good rebirth in the next life. If the merit obtained is, in turn, offered up to the elimination of human sufferings and world peace, the positive action multiplies.

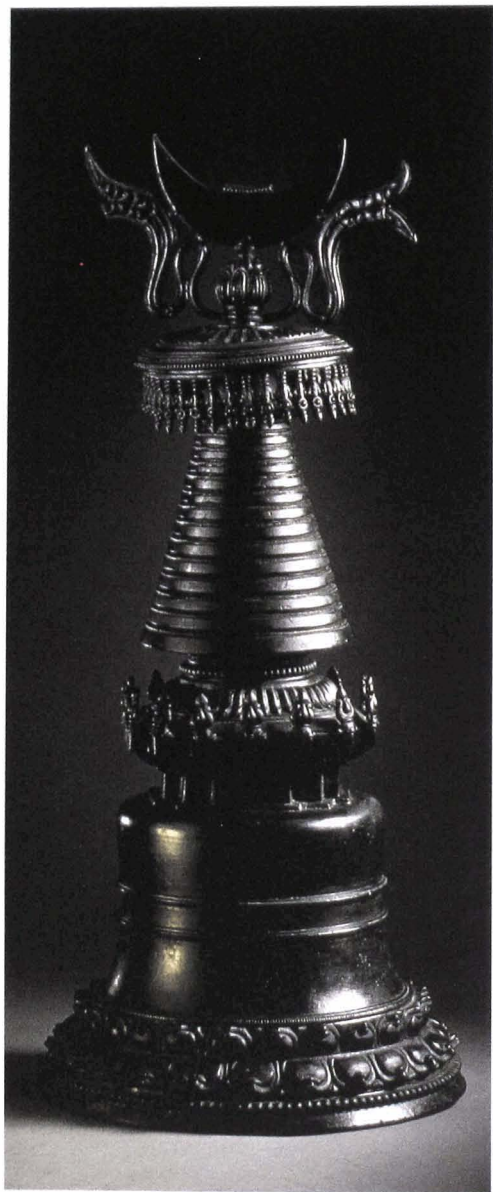
At the end of the day, the offerings are mindfully recycled. Water from bowls is given to flowers and plants while food is fed to birds and other animals. People can eat the fruits and sweets, which may remain at the altar for longer periods of time.



Altar at the Urgyen Dongak Choiling Monastery, Kathmandu

video still: Jyoti Duwadi

During full moon celebrations, people in the surrounding community bring offerings of bread, fruits and other food items to the monastery altar. Here a monk tends the altar which also contains butter lamps and sculptures.



The stupa (*chorten* in Tibetan), in both its architectural and sculptural forms, is unique to Buddhist art. Worshipped as a symbol of the Dharma, it was originally conceived as a hemispherical, earthen mound to house the cremated remains of the Buddha. Many stupas commemorating great spiritual leaders and teachers have been constructed since the Buddha's death. Erecting a stupa generates merit and anyone may fund its construction.

As an ancient symbol of the Buddhist faith, the stupa alludes to the enlightened Buddha mind. It also references the sacred Mount Meru, the mythical Himalayan peak demarcating the center of the earthly realm and thrusting into the heavens. At four cardinal direction points along the base of the stupa are shrines for deities and entrances, providing access to a higher elevation and penetration into the sacred space.

The stupa's structure, believed to correspond to the five elements—earth, water, fire, air and ether—is visually divided into a base, mound and pyramidal steeple, which are, in turn, segmented. The steeple, containing thirteen steps crowned by victory banners, symbolizes the stages of enlightenment. Stupas, as emblematic of the Buddha's mind, were also created on a small, sculptural scale to commemorate and enshrine the remains or relics of spiritual leaders. Often conceived as portable sacred objects, their shape and style vary according to Tibet's monastic orders.

Chorten

Central Tibet, late 14th–early 15th century, copper alloy with black pigment, 24 in. high x 11 in. diameter, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Purchased with Harry and Yvonne Lenart Funds, AC 1992.58.1

As an ancient symbol of Buddhism, these small reliquary stupas (chorten in Tibetan) assume many different forms and sizes. This one corresponds to the architectural stupa, showing base, dome and steeple. At its pinnacle are symbols of the moon, sun (missing here) and sacred flame that symbolize eternal wisdom. This style was favored by the Kadampa monastic order of Tibet.



Baudghanath, Kathmandu

photo: Barbara Matilsky

Baudghanath is one of the most glorious stupas ever constructed. Here, Buddhist pilgrims from around the world circumambulate clockwise the perimeter of the building, which is surrounded by over a hundred prayer wheels. People recite mantras (syllables intoned to protect the mind) while spinning the gears, setting prayers for enlightenment in motion. Colored prayer flags, attached from the base to the crown of the stupa, depend on the fluttering winds to launch messages of peace into the atmosphere. Devotees can also walk around the stupa at a higher elevation, which contains 108 niches for carved stone deities.

This stupa, 300 feet in diameter and over three stories high, has been the center of Tibetan culture in Kathmandu since earliest times. Tibetans have financed renovations to the structure and built monasteries in its vicinity. The stupa is believed to hold the remains of a Buddha who lived prior to the historical Buddha. The mysterious eyes, painted on all four sides of the steeple, may be those of the all-seeing primordial Buddha. In an honoring celebration, the stupa is annually whitewashed and painted with garlands of saffron water. (See cover image.)



Ritual at the Ugyen Dongak Choiling Monastery, Kathmandu

video still: Jyoti Diwadi

The vajra or dorje in Tibetan (meaning thunderbolt) is both a ritual object and primary symbol of Tantric or Vajrayana Buddhism. It is held in the hand and used by monks in rituals and ceremonies in conjunction with the bell (ghanta). Personifying the male element, the vajra represents compassion and the

bell, the female counterpart, embodies wisdom (the realization of emptiness). Together, they symbolize the union of wisdom and compassion and the end of duality. The sound of the reverberating bell awakens the mind and the slowly fading tone suggests impermanence.



Detail of hands showing vajra and bell from the tangka painting of Chakrasamvara and Vajravahni

[See page 28 for full view.]

Central Tibet, 15th century, colors and gold on cotton, 52¹/₄ x 27¹/₄ in., Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts. Gift of N. L. Horch to the Riverside Museum Collection, 1971.106, photo: Jerry Blow

At the Altar The Prayer Wheel

Prayer wheels function to set a mantra—symbolic, vibrating syllables whose sounds energize the divine spirit—in motion. Mantras are embossed on the metal wheel and also written on paper or skin and sealed within the cylinder. Each turn of a prayer wheel is comparable to reciting the mantra. Prayer wheels assume many forms and sizes—from small, metal or wood, hand-held wheels to large cylindrical drums, brightly painted and housed in

semi-enclosed structures, propelled by the force of the human body. In the Himalayan Mountains, prayer wheels powered by the water of torrential rivers are common. In early Buddhism, the wheel became a symbol of the Dharma or teaching. The term “Turning of the Wheel” refers to the first sermon preached by the Buddha in Sarnath, India, and other teachings.



Prayer Wheel Powered by Water in the Himalayan Mountains

photo: Barbara Matitsky

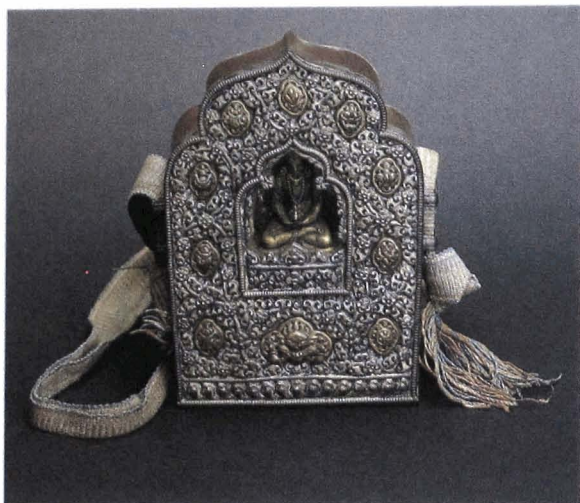


Man with Prayer Wheel

video still: Jyoti Dhwani

During a full moon ceremony at the Urgyen Dongak Choeling Monastery, Kathmandu, a man joins monks in prayer. Sitting alone and off to the side, he turns his prayer wheel to the rhythmic and mesmerizing sounds of chanting. Portable prayer wheels are embossed with a mantra, syllables intoned to protect the mind, especially against misfortune. It is believed that a particu-

lar combination of sounds invokes a specific deity and positive state of being. This repoussé, brass prayer wheel with wood handle is marked with: O Mani Padmi Om ("Hail, the jewel in the Lotus") – a reference to ultimate enlightenment through the union of wisdom and compassion), the mantra of Avalokitesvara.



Amulet box with figure of Amitayus

Derge, northeast Tibet, silver with brass, 5¼ x 4¼ x 2¼ in. Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts, Gift of N. L. Horch to the Riverside Museum Collection, 1971.295, photo: Jerry Blow

This gau (portable shrine) contains the image of an individual's guiding deity, which is attached to a belt and carried on long journeys. When at home, the gau is placed on the altar. Amitayus (also called Amitabha), the Primordial or Cosmic Buddha of the West, is enshrined with permanent offerings in the form of the eight Buddhist emblems of good luck. The elaborate, interconnecting metalwork design on the outside contrasts with the more classical representation of the deity.

The guiding deity (*yidam* in Tibetan), whose spirit is embodied in a work of art, is a focal point in the practice of *Vajrayana* Buddhism. A lama (teacher) selects and introduces the student to his or her *yidam*, who is also evoked by an accompanying mantra. Together the deity and mantra safeguard the individual from internal, psychological disorders and external, physical dangers. As an aid to visual meditation, a process necessary to reach the goal of enlightenment, the guiding deity is always nearby, placed in an altar or carried in a *gau* (portable shrine) or *tangka* painting.

Art, in the form of the *yidam*, plays a transformative role in deity yoga, an important practice that distinguishes *Vajrayana* from the other Buddhist paths. While engaging in deity yoga, the devotee meditates and visualizes himself as one with the *yidam*, thereby directing body, speech and mind towards the goal of greater wisdom and compassion. The qualities represented by guiding deities are dormant in each person's mind. Deity yoga and its accompanying work of art enable these qualities to emerge.

Bodhisattvas are "heroes of enlightenment," who have attained the compassionate motivation to become enlightened for others. They are divine mediators on behalf of humans to the Buddhas. Because of their psychological closeness to ordinary beings, they are usually worshiped more intimately than the historical or Primordial Buddhas. Appearing early in the Mahayana sutras and closely associated with this path, Bodhisattvas are usually portrayed wearing regal dress and jewelry with crowns bearing an image of one of the Primordial Buddhas to identify their cosmic lineage.

Avalokitesvara, the most popular Bodhisattva, is worshiped throughout the Buddhist world. He is first mentioned in the Mahayana Buddhist *Lotus Sutra*, which explains his flower attribute. Although he goes by many names—Chenrezi in Tibet, Lokeshvara in Nepal, Kannon in Japan, Guanyin in China, he is universally loved for his benevolence towards all human beings. As the guiding deity of the Gelukpa monastic order, the Dalai Lama is considered to be an emanation of this Bodhisattva.

The Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara

Nepal, 15th century, stone, 15½ x 7¼ x 3 inches. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Purchased with Harry and Yvonne Lenart Funds, M. 82.40

This sculpture shows Avalokitesvara with his hands in the symbolic gesture of bestowing charity and granting wishes. Its graceful silhouette indicates the influence of the Pala style of Indian art. Holding a lotus flower in his hand, he references the Lotus Sutra where the Bodhisattva is first mentioned. For this reason, Avalokitesvara is also called Padmapani, lotus-bearer. This work most likely adorned the exterior of a temple or village shrine.



Tara, whose name means “one who saves,” is among the most popular Bodhisattvas of compassion. Worshipped by both Hindus and Buddhists alike, she may ultimately derive from an indigenous Mother Nature cult figure symbolizing the creative principle of life. She is considered the Mother of the Buddhas—past, present and future. Tara’s many emanations help humanity to overcome emotional difficulties that also correspond to physical dangers—pride/lions, delusions/wild elephants, hatred/forest fires, envy/snakes, robbers/fanaticism, greed/prisons, lust/floods.

According to popular legend, Tara was born out of a lotus that germinated from the tears of Avalokitesvara as he lamented the world’s sufferings. The peaceful White Tara sprung from the tear in one eye and the more dynamic Green Tara came from a tear in the other. Tara is often represented holding a lotus flower, symbolizing her miraculous birth. The initiate meditates upon an image of Tara according to the instructions contained in the *Tara Tantra* that embodies the knowledge to reach perfected wisdom.

According to Buddhist teachings, a woman must be reborn as a man in order to reach Buddhahood. With the influence of Tantricism, celebrating feminine energies as the universal source of life, Tara emerged as the only female Bodhisattva in her own right. Although referred to in sutras as Bodhisattvas, both Tara and Avalokitesvara are also worshipped in Tibet as fully enlightened Buddhas.

The Goddess Tara

Nepal, 12th century, copper alloy with gilt, pigment and semi precious stones, 7½ x 3¼ x 1¼ in., Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Gift of Doris and Ed Wiener, M. 72.108.8, photo: Jerry Blow

In her role as a saviouress, Tara is shown with one hand facing out, offering peace, longevity, and good wishes. Her elegant form, emphasized by the sinuous S-curve of her stance, is characteristic of Nepali art. Holding a lotus flower that refers to her birth, she resembles Brahmanical goddesses like Parvati, the female counterpart to Lord Shiva. It is often difficult to identify Nepali goddesses as either Buddhist or Brahmanical, because Newari artists were responsible for the creation of images for both spiritual traditions. The figure originally stood on a lotus-shaped base.



In Buddhist teachings and practice, the female deity emanates wisdom, defined as the realization of selflessness, the ultimate nature of reality. Complimenting and expanding upon this quality, the male deity embodies compassion, reaching out to all beings in their quest for nirvana. The union of the two symbolizes the enlightened mind where opposites merge and freedom from suffering ensues. Buddhists meditate on images such as Chakrasamvara and Vajravahni, represented in sculptures, *tangka* paintings and mandalas, in order to visualize and experience a transcendent state of being. Many different deities are represented in this posture, called *yab-yum* or “mother-father” union, but Chakrasamvara (a form of the *yidam* deity Samvara), is among the most popular.

Through the tantra devoted to Samvara (meaning Supreme Bliss), the Ultimate Yoga Tantra, one can find enlightenment in a single lifetime. The image of sexual union is used here in conjunction with meditation and deity yoga in order to eliminate desire and catalyze a mental state of total emptiness and bliss. Within this realm, opposing forces—life and death, dark and light, male and female, good and evil—become one single energy source. These images of *yab-yum* were viewed only by a very few of the most advanced initiates.



Chakrasamvara and Vajravahni

(See page 21 for description.)

This tangka of Chakrasamvara and Vajravahni shows the Buddha in his manifestation as the guiding deity Samvara entwined with his consort. With four faces and twelve arms, he holds attributes that aid Buddhist practice—the vajra scepter, wisdom bell, damaru drum—and destroy obstacles to enlightenment—axe, trident, thunderbolt, skull cup, lasso, magic staff, severed head of god Brahma. Samvara stretches out a flayed elephant skin behind him, symbolizing the end of delusions and ignorance. His garland of fifty-two severed heads is emblematic of the dozens of emotional barriers to enlightenment. Although a Buddhist deity, Samvara shares a number of features with Shiva, the Brahmanical deity.



Chakrasamvara and Vajravahni

Nepal, late 17th century, copper, with gilt and semiprecious stones. W. 41.5 cm.

Los Angeles County Museum of Art

The Patricia and Phillip Young Collection, M. 1975.11.1

Dharmapalas literally means “protectors of the Dharma,” referring to the deities who defend Buddhist teachings. With fierce expressions, they are represented in both sculptures and *tangka* paintings wearing garlands of skulls, trampling enemies and holding implements intended to cut down evil transgressors. The faces and hair of sculptures are often painted orange-red, a color associated with blood and anger. The flames surrounding the head heighten the destructive potential of the deity and often symbolize the cremation grounds.

On a more personal level, *Dharmapalas* also symbolize the triumph over the demons within the psyche—anger, hatred and violence—that account for humanity’s negative impulses. These works of art conjure the self-centered ego whose passions and desires obscure sensitivity and compassion towards other beings. By meditating upon images of these deities, the dark forces and ignorance within can be directly confronted and no longer feared, clearing the way for transformation and positive energies.

Penden Lhamo (Shri Devi)

Tibeto-Chinese, late 17th–early 18th century, gilt bronze with pigment, 7½ x 7¼ x 3 in. Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts, Gift of N. L. Horch to the Riverside Museum Collection, 1971.267, photo: Jerry Blow

Penden Lhamo is the only female deity represented among the eight defenders of the Buddhist faith, called Dharmapalas. She rides a mule across the Himalayan Mountains bathed in a sea of blood strewn with human heads and limbs. Lhamo is conceptually related to the Brahmanical goddess Kali or Durga who also destroy demons. Her origin has been traced to an indigenous goddess of the ancient Bon religion of Tibet. Holding a trident and scull cup filled with demon blood, Lhamo sits on the flayed skin of her own son, whom she murdered after her husband, the King of Sri Lanka, refused to renounce human sacrifice. Representing the destructive forces of the Great Mother who clears the way for spiritual regeneration, she stands in sharp contrast to the peaceful Tara. Conceptually, these fierce and peaceful deities represent the unity and totality of life, signaling the end to dualities that divide the phenomenal world. Lhamo often appears with Mahakala and is sometimes considered his consort. She is the premiere protective deity of the nation of Tibet.

This work of art is believed to be one of the finest sculptural representations of Lhamo. Although small in scale, the sculpture is monumentally impressive. Alive with movement and intense psychic energy, Lhamo is perched to spring into defensive action. This frightening portrait bristles with incredible details—fanged teeth, forked tongue, bulging eyes and a tiara and necklace festooned with skulls—designed to jolt the viewer into confronting the dark forces latent within the psyche. Probably made in China, this sculpture demonstrates the international influence of Tibetan art and iconography in the seventeenth century.





Mahakala

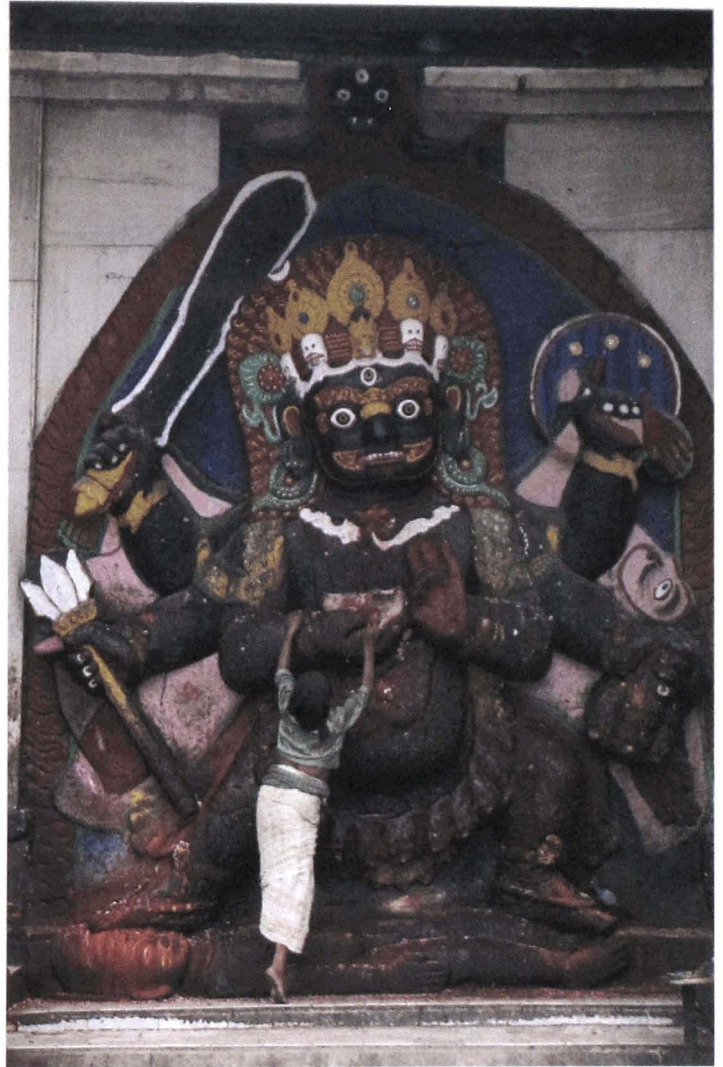
Sakyapa Monastery, Central Tibet, 17th century, copper with traces of gilt and paint, 4 1/4 x 3 x 1 1/4 in., Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Gift of Dale Crawford, M. 79.184

Mahakala, "The Great Black One," is a popular protector of the faith in both Nepal and Tibet. Holding a chopper and a skull cup, he stands ready to dice up his enemies (obstacles to enlightenment) and swallow their blood. A ring of fire that symbolizes the earthly realm, particularly the cremation grounds, surrounds him. Like Penden Lhamo, he has a third eye, giving him the power to see the ultimate reality of nonduality. Rising from a corpse or ghost, with knees bent, Mahakala assumes this posture as the Lord of the Tent in Tibet. Penden Lhamo is sometimes shown as his consort. In addition to his function as a Dharmapala, he may also be a personal yidam or guiding deity. The initiation rites associated with Mahakala are extremely complex and only open to those advanced enough in the practice of Vajrayana Buddhism to handle his fierce aspects.

Black Bhairava (Bhairab)

Darbar Square, Kathmandu, 17th century, height: 13 ft., photo: Barbara Matitsky

In Nepal, Buddhism and Brahmanical traditions coexist and their intersecting beliefs and deities sometimes make it difficult to distinguish between the two, as seen here. Mahakala evolved from the Brahmanical god Bhairava, the fierce manifestation of the supreme Lord Shiva, who destroys forces of evil. The symbolism and visual representation of Bhairava and Mahakala are practically identical. Buddhists and Hindus worship both deities who fuse conceptually as the chief protector of Kathmandu Valley. Here, a woman gives an offering to the deity.





Bishamonten

Japan, ca. 1300, painted wood, metal and crystal.
26 3/8 x 10 1/2 x 5 1/2 in., Auckland Art Museum, The
William A. Whitaker Foundation Art Fund, 00.1.
Purchased in memory of Chancellor Michael K.
Hooker, photo: Jerry Blow

Buddhist teachings entered Japan beginning in the sixth century C.E. This sculpture of Bishamonten was made during the Kamakura period (1185–1333 C.E.), a golden age of Buddhist culture in Japan. As the guardian deity or king of the north, Bishamonten functions in a similar way to the Dharmapala figures in Nepal and Tibet. He is usually shown holding a stupa, symbol of the Buddhist faith, and a lance, which is missing here. As the chief of the deities who stand guard at the four cardinal directions of the universe, Bishamonten, dressed in armor, is also considered the protector of warriors and the state. He vanquishes a frightening demon with crystal eyes. The flaming halo above his head corresponds to the ring of fire found in Himalayan Dharmapala deities. Energized by swirling draperies and fiery demeanor, this representation of Bishamonten looks alive, a powerful force for both protection and transformation. He is also often considered a wealth granting deity.



Monks from the Tse Chen Shedup Ling Sakya Monastery in Kathmandu making a sand mandala for world peace and the protection of the environment

photo: Barbara Matilsky

Mandalas, created by Buddhist monks and nuns, are part of secret initiation ceremonies. These elaborate rituals, accompanied by art, costumed dancers, music and chanting, grant the initiate the privilege to study and practice the teachings of a tantra. There are hundreds of tantras, each embodying and invoking a deity, which can be represented in a sand mandala or tangka painting. These works of art are guides to both visualizing the deity in body and mind and learning the complex teach-

ings of the tantra. When constructing the mandalas, the monks perceive themselves within the deity's domain. Composed of millions of grains of dyed sand, each particle personifies goodness. The mandala is believed to have a positive effect on all who see it. After the completion of rituals, the monks dismantle the mandala and deposit the particles in a body of water. This process symbolizes the transience of life and the ideal of nonattachment to the material world.

Sketch for a Medicine Buddha sand mandala

Constructed at the Ackland Art Museum, February 25–March 21, 2001.

The Buddha is often considered the Great Physician, diagnosing the suffering that plagues the human mind. The Dharma—through teachings and scriptures—offers the remedy for purifying the mind and ending suffering. The Sangha, a monastery or spiritual community, functions as a nurse by administering the remedy. The Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha are thus known as the Three Jewels of Buddhism.

For over 2,500 years, the Buddha's teachings have offered a multifold path towards the integration of the self on emotional, spiritual and intellectual levels. At the same time, Buddhism offers a guide for more evolved relationships with others based on love and altruism. In this regard, it is a deeply psychological set of beliefs and practices, interweaving art, ritual, meditation and visualization techniques for establishing harmony. Art provides both an important vehicle and transcendent vision—through symbolic imagery and intense color—to attain enlightenment.

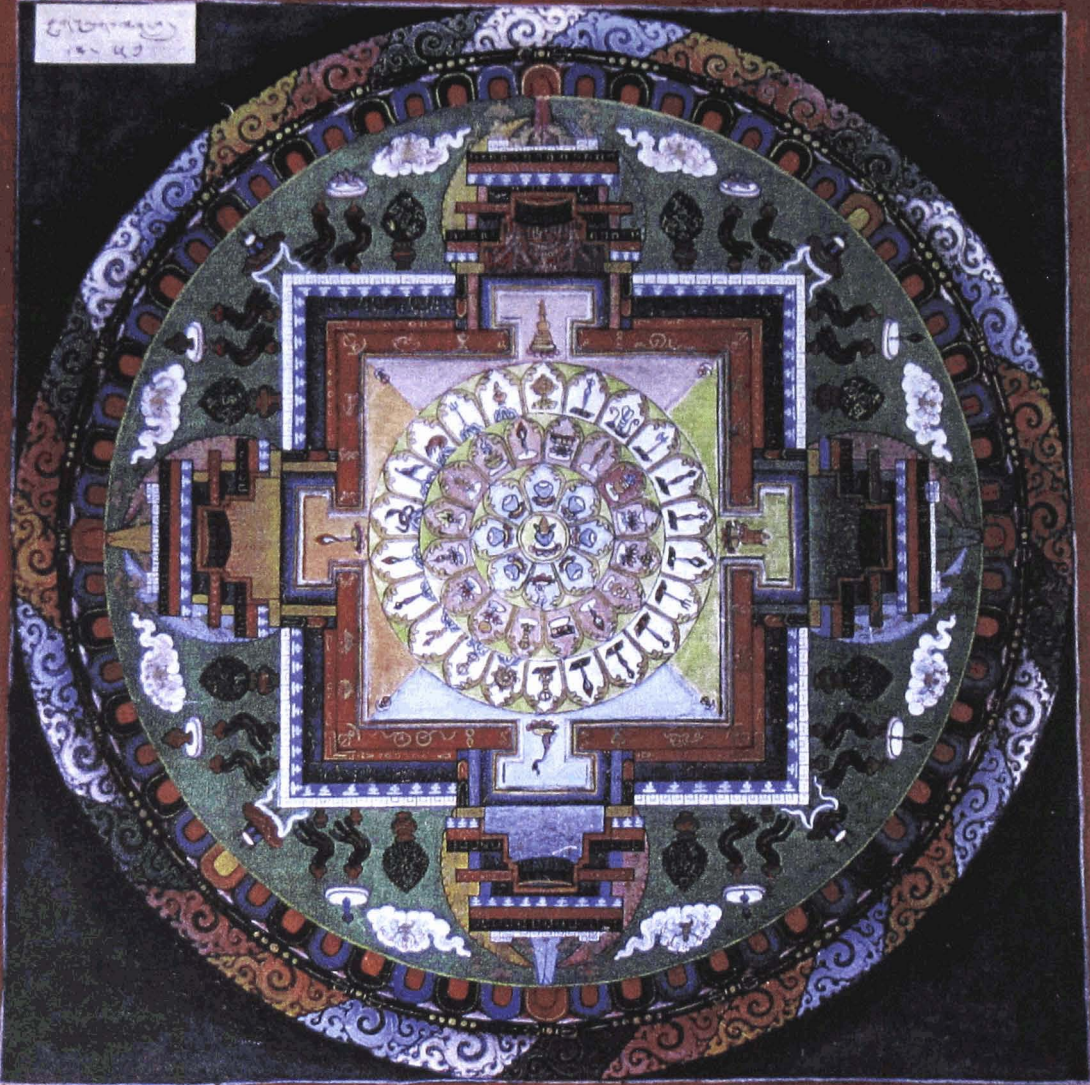
Mandalas, sacred compositions created in sand or in paint, are symbols of the pure, perfected universe, providing a visual framework for establishing feelings of peace, well-being and wholeness. Mandala compositions, organized around a symmetrical design, based on squares with

in circles, center the devotee by fostering stability and unity. The psychological dissolution of boundaries, contradictions and dichotomies melt away as the beholder absorbs the work of art.

The mandala is a visualization of a particular deity in his or her paradise palace. Its two-dimensional plan resembles a sacred stupa. As a cosmic diagram of Buddhism, it establishes a meditative pattern for achieving enlightenment. Although mandala-making appears in many diverse cultures, Tibetan Buddhists have advanced this art form into a highly developed and specialized genre.

Although mandalas are constructed to accompany secret Tantric initiations, His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama invited the public for the first time, in 1988, to observe the making of a Kalachakra mandala as a cultural offering at the American Museum of Natural History, New York City. Since that time, he has personally given or authorized many Kalachakra mandalas, the most elaborate and complex design, around the world. His passionate belief in the transformative power of Tantric Buddhist art to foster wisdom, compassion and world peace is an inspiration to contemporary culture and imagination at the dawn of the twenty-first century.

शिवसंज्ञा
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The following people welcomed Ray and me into their museums, sharing their expertise while showing us ob-

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The Ackland Art Museum was privileged to have two monks from the Namgyal Monastery in Ithaca, New York, construct a Medicine Buddha sand mandala in our gallery. I would like to thank the Namgyal Monastery Institute of Buddhist Studies, and Venerable Tenzin Deshek, Venerable Tenzin Gephel, Venerable Tenzin Thutop and Venerable Tenzin Yignyen for their spiritual inspiration.

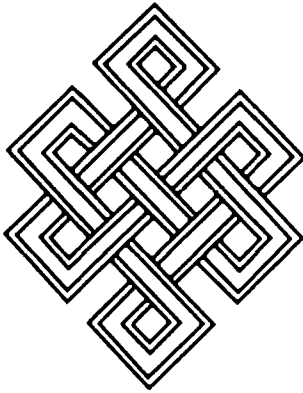
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Barbara Matilsky
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Ackland Art Museum, UNC-CH
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Endless Knot

The Endless Knot is a popular emblem in Nepal and Tibet. Considered auspicious, it symbolizes the interconnectedness of all things. The twining form expresses both movement and balance, personifying the harmony between opposites. Without beginning or end points, the Endless Knot also signifies the unlimited knowledge of the Buddha.

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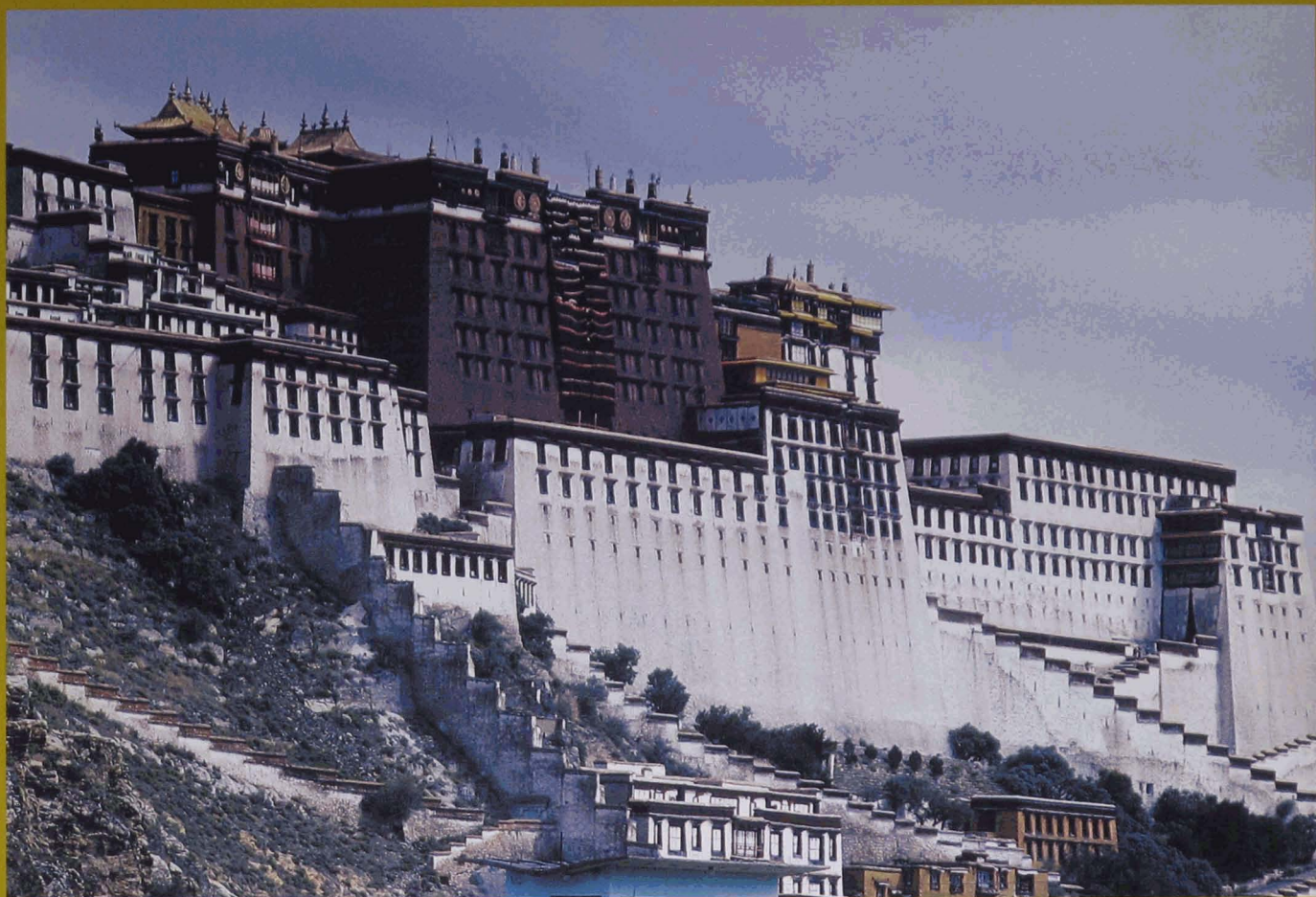
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Front cover: *Bauddha, Kathmandu, Nepal*
Photo: Barbara Matilsky

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Potala, Lhasa, Tibet

Photo: Susan Simone

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