

From the Sacred Realm

Treasures of Tibetan Art from The Newark Museum

With contributions by

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Image as Presence

by Janet Gyatso

In the Tibetan religious context, a work of art that is a Buddhist image (*kudra*) is not merely a symbolic representation of an ultimate Buddhist truth. Nor is it simply an icon, a rendering of the ideal form of a member of the Buddhist pantheon. It is both of those things but, to the extent that it embodies the form of the Buddha or deity, the image also conveys the presence of that Buddha in its own right.

The canonical sources for the various forms of the Buddha interpret stance, body color, facial expression, hairstyle, number and positions of limbs, clothing, ornaments and accoutrements as manifestations of certain principles of enlightenment. In some ways these elements function as mediating symbols, referring to the ultimately formless, indeterminate nature of the enlightenment experience itself. The sword in the hand of Manjushri shows his severance of emotional attachment, Vajrayogini's three eyes indicate her omniscient vision of past, present and future; the green hue of Tara's skin color expresses her wisdom-as-efficacious-action. There are also measurement grids for the bodily proportions appropriate to each genre of Buddhist deity. However, the referential function of these iconographic prescriptives is secondary. Ultimately, what is being referred to, or symbolized, is the ground of enlightenment, and that is not something which exists prior to, or independent of, its concrete appearance in the world. In accordance with the tenets of Mahayana Buddhism, *nirvana* is never separate from the vow to appear in the world to benefit all beings. In this important sense, Tibetan Buddhist aesthetics of form, color and design are based in enlightenment—the shape of the Buddha's body *is* the act of Buddhahood. The image, partaking in and enacting the proportions, colors and attitudes of an aspect of *nirvana*, becomes an instantiation of that aspect itself. The very perception of those attributes is thought to remind, or put the viewer in mind, of his or her own inherent enlightenment. Thus is the image always more than a substitute for the presence of the Buddha or deity; it radiates its own presence, which for the religious perceiver is the same as that of the Buddha.

The canons for the Buddha/deity's iconography are used primarily for performing visualization meditation (*sadhana*). The key concept here is that the practitioner is not ultimately different from the Buddha. It is only through deluded thinking that such a duality is conceived. Visualization is seen as a technique to reinvoked the presence of the "actual" Buddha (*jnanasattva*) in the practitioner's own body and experience (*samayasattva*). In this sense, the practitioner's body is analogous to the material statue or painting: it becomes a support, or receptacle, for embodiment (*kuten*) in which the living experience of enlightenment is activated.

Thus does the monk or lay aspirant imagine that he or she has become the Buddha—physically, verbally or mentally. Moreover, the entire world is visualized as being the Pure Land, the realm of the Buddha, and all of its contents as expressions of that Buddha. When the practitioner of *sadhana* meets with an image of the Buddha in the real world, it serves specifically as a reminder of one's endeavor to identify the mundane world with that of the Buddha. For this practice, the painting or statue serves as a model and aid in the development of the ability to visualize. Gazing at the image is recommended as a way of improving the clarity of the mental image produced during the meditation period.

Although the sacred presence of a Buddhist image is already accomplished merely by the fulfillment of iconographic requirements, presence is further invoked in a variety of ritual settings. The spirit of a painting or statue is especially important for initiation ceremonies (*abbisheka*, Tibetan: *wang*) in which students are formally introduced to the Buddha/deity and its *sadhana*. The appropriate image, in a prominent position on the altar, is the focus of the rite. During the initiation, the actual Buddha/deity is invited to enter the image and reside there throughout the ceremony. The lama visualizes the image as the real Avalokiteshvara, or Tara, or Amitabha, and at several points explicitly asks the students to share this imaginative projection. This ritualized visualizing of presence then valorizes the disciple's ceremonial meeting with the Buddha/deity-as-physical-image.

A similar sort of invocation is performed regularly for the images of the central Buddhas and protective deities of a monastery or sect. In monastic institutions it is the responsibility of the monks to propitiate these deities daily. Music, offerings and prayers of praise ensure the continued presence and blessings of the deity in the institution.

In many ways the very history of the image is a factor in its vivification: in what rituals the image has been employed, what monasteries have kept it, and especially what lamas have been in contact with it. The effects of having the visualized presence of the Buddha projected onto the image are cumulative. This begins with the very first ritual involving the image, the consecration ceremony, which is performed immediately after its construction. The image is animated for religious use by a lama, who imagines and projects the spirit of the actual Buddha/deity onto the work of art. Symbolic of this animation is the inscription of the mantric syllables *Om ab hum* on the backs of paintings, just at the spots where the corresponding psychic centers (chakra) of the deities depicted on the other side occur. For statues, this is further enacted physically by the depositing of sacred relics, *mantras* and texts inside the statue's body. In particular, relics imbue the statue with their own presence as physical traces of another embodiment of *nirvana*. A "soul pole" (*sog sbring*) is also implanted inside statues, providing a central psychosomatic channel. Thus, in the case of statues, not only is its outer form that of the Buddha, but its inner, hidden contents physically repeat the pattern of Buddhahood. Later, the fact that the image was consecrated in these ways is kept in mind by the religious viewer, and this knowledge enhances and enriches his or her perception of the image.

When the image comes to be involved in rituals, and is the object of meditative concentration by accomplished practitioners, its religious value increases in the eyes of the community. And when an image is said actually to have come

to life—to have spoken to a meditator or to have performed some action (of which there are many stories in Tibet)—it is seen as having a powerfully numinous presence.

There is, further, the factor of the painting or statue's physical being as such. The spiritual presence of a religious image is enhanced by the material out of which it is made. Precious substances, for Tibetans, are concrete analogies of spiritual value (just as despised substances are synonymous with what is repellent in the world). It is for this reason that statues are encrusted with jewels, and paint pigments mixed with crushed gems and rare medicines. Rosary beads are made from seeds, bones or stones that are chosen to correspond to the type of visualization practice for which the beads will be used. Similarly, the power of the symbolic form of a ritual thunderbolt (*vajra*) or dagger (*kila*) becomes that much more real and awesome when it is made of the treasured meteorite metal (*namchag*). Again, votive images are thought to commemorate the deceased that much more effectively when their material includes the cremation ashes.

Because, for these reasons, the religious work of art embodies sacred presence, it possesses for Tibetans the ability to "grant blessings" (*chinlap*). This is disseminated in a variety of ways: most physically, it occurs in the contact between the devotee's body (usually at the top of the head) and the image. The meeting of bodies is seen as a concrete instantiation of a shared moment in time and space, an intersection of history. There is also the idea that physical contact transmits a spiritual value. The transmission of the blessing can be effected by the lama, who touches the aspirant's head with the image, or by the aspirant alone, who can simply lift the image to his or her own head.

Physical contact with an image is particularly significant during the initiation ritual. Here, the lama's placing of the image on the head of the student becomes a symbolic enactment of the student's right to meditatively assume the form of the Buddha, a right which is granted just in that moment of ritual touching. The contact has other meanings as well. It symbolizes the student's link with the lineage of practitioners who have meditated on that same Buddha in the past. It also signifies the student's awe and respect for the Buddha, if for no other reason than because the contact occurs with the student physically subordinate to the image. Again, when a lama places the weighty *vajra* on the head of the aspirant, exerting a gentle pressure, it reminds the student, by analogy, of the gravity of the *tantric* vows taken during the initiation and of the heavy consequences if those vows are broken.

Not only does the image physically grant blessings to a person, it also imparts an auspicious cast to its environment. The presence of a holy image renders its immediate surroundings a sacred space. On the large scale, the placement of images and their temples in the landscape relates to ancient ideas about the spiritual nature of Tibet's geography. Some myths conceive of the topography as a dismembered demon. In an important story connected to the establishment of Buddhism in Tibet, primitive Tibet-as-supine-demoness was subdued by the erection of temples, and images at key points on the demoness's body; those structures functioned to pin down the country-demoness, civilizing her by means of the new Buddhist presence.

The long-range perspective of sacred topography might also explain the construction of colossal Buddhist statues, often of the future Buddha Maitreya,

at various spots in Tibet. Such monuments mark the country as a realm of Buddhism, and function both to herald the coming enlightenment, and to gather and focus meditative attention. The powerful effect of a Buddhist image on its location continued to be a prime motivation for the building of such structures in Tibet. One of the principal projects of the fifteenth-century saint-engineer Tangtong Gyalpo was the erection of *stupas* and temples at key points (*metza*) in Tibet, in order to tame unruly forces.

The presence of a particularly holy image makes its site the focus of pilgrimage. The Jowo Rinpoche image in the Jokhang is an outstanding example; pilgrims prostrate their way there from hundreds of miles away. The climax of their journey will often be a trance experience in the image's presence. In Tibetan biographical literature, there are numerous stories of adepts who have received messages from the Jowo and other images.

Monasteries or villages possessing an important image will take great care in its protection and maintenance; its loss or damage would be thought to have grave consequences for the welfare of the local inhabitants, as if the very life force of the area were threatened. Usually the monastic community or a lay lama is responsible for such an image's physical upkeep. On special occasions, they will also display the image in processions or make it accessible to the public.

On a smaller scale, installing Buddhist art in a room or building is thought to affect that place in a similarly positive manner. A sacred image is often the first thing to be placed in a new house, even before personal belongings. By keeping the image there, the ongoing presence of that deity is maintained in the home. The effect, in the *tantric* imagination, is that the entire house becomes the abode of the deity.

The conviction that a deep interaction occurs between images and their surroundings is reflected in the Tibetan predilection to construct structures to enclose images. Clearly, this is not only to protect the art work; statues and holy objects sometimes have a surprising number of multiple cases and wrappings that far exceed the practical need for shielding or padding. Rather, there is the widespread conviction that images require a seat, a domicile. When possible, statues will have a metal box (*ga'u*) in which they can be kept. For larger images, the temple or shrine room in its totality is the image's seat. In addition, small structures may be built on the roof of a house or monastery to contain images of the protector of that building (*gonkhang*). Other "houses" on rooflines are just solid shapes that simply provide a symbolic structure for the presence of the protector (*tenkhang*).

The image inside the house will be installed on an altar, located in a protected and physically high spot in the building, preferably on the top floor. The altar table itself is usually a complex structure of various levels, which allows the images to be placed on the upper levels. On the lower levels are arranged offerings and the symbolic seven cups of water. The water cups are filled every day and emptied the same evening. Other offerings, such as flowers, candles and incense, are common. Personal effects or significant objects may also be put near the image, in order to attract the image's blessing.

Behavior towards an image is the same as it would be if the living Buddha or deity were present. A large part of the protocol concerns bodily position, directionality, and the hierarchy of bodily parts. Profound significance is

attached to the parallel that is thought to obtain between top and bottom in the physical sense, and high and low in the sense of spiritual value. An example of this attitude is the widely observed rule that only a person's head or hand should be pointed towards an image; never the feet. When approaching the image, devotees convey deference by assuming a slightly bent posture, with the palms of the hands held together near the middle of the chest, in the symbolic gesture of reverence. The more elaborate bodily expression of respect is the full prostration, practiced upon entering a temple or altar room, or at the beginning of a meditation or ritual session. Three prostrations are standard, but Tibetans will also perform them for protracted periods as a means of purification. The common sight of Tibetans prostrating themselves on wooden boards outside the Jokhang Temple, even to this day in Lhasa, is an instance of this practice.

The devotee can draw near to the image after prostrations, for the purpose of "receiving the image's blessings", as well as to see and appreciate the work of art at close range. Again, the deferential posture is assumed while approaching. One may seek physical contact by bowing the head and touching the top of one's crown to the lower portion of the image, or to the edge of the table where the image is displayed. When remaining in the artwork's presence, the religious Tibetan sits cross-legged on a level that is below that of the object. In a less structured situation than a ritual or sermon, but one that nevertheless puts the devotee in prolonged proximity to the image, there is further protocol. Smoking, arguing, or any sort of action deemed negative in Buddhism, are considered inappropriate in the image's presence.

The same expression of respect through physical positioning is observed when moving a religious art object. The image is always held head up. It is carried by a part of the bearer's body that is auspicious—in the hands, or perched on the head or shoulder, but never under the arm. If it falls, it is immediately picked up and touched to the carrier's head.

When images are borne in procession, the bearers will sometimes be seen to have a cloth or mask covering the mouth. This is to prevent the impure breath of the bearer from intruding into the pure atmosphere radiated by the image. Such a procession is usually preceded by incense carriers, who prepare the air through which the image will pass with auspicious scents. More elaborate parades are accompanied by music, thought to please the Buddha deity. Special vehicles carry the holy presence, and umbrellas and other standards add further pomp and awesome splendor, announcing the approach of a living Buddhist truth: the same measures that are taken when a living lama passes in procession. An image is packed with much care when it is to be transported for a long distance. In addition to wrapping and protecting the object, efforts are made to ensure that the image will remain head up while in transit. The container holding the object is never set on the ground, but rather is placed in a position of honor, upon its own seat or a high shelf in the vehicle.

When an image is to be disposed of, this is done with cognizance of its spiritual significance. Paintings, as well as texts or illustrated pages or religious writing, or even doodles of a Buddha figure, are not thrown into a trash can. Rather they are interred in *chortens* or hollow places in images, or are burnt solemnly. If the image was particularly revered, even a small piece of it will be treasured. Damaged metal or clay images will be kept in storerooms, treasuries,

or used to consecrate other statues. The older relics link the new image with the history of the previous, and revive it with the same spiritual presence. This occurred recently in a small village in Eastern Tibet when fragments of a destroyed metal image were saved and used to consecrate the new image.

In general, the treatment of images as though they were actual, living Buddhas or deities is not limited to the credulous or uneducated. On the contrary, the most highly literate Buddhist scholar or accomplished yogin will maintain this reverential attitude. For the religiously sophisticated, this attitude is informed by an understanding of the psychological and aesthetic impact of the viewing of images. It is precisely the theoretical knowledge of *tantric* Buddhism that allows full appreciation of the work of art—a consciously devised tool to evoke intimations of the sacred, and of enlightenment. [J.G.]

Creation of the Image

Once a decision has been made to commission an image, the patron—whether a layperson, monk, yogin or part of a group (such as a family, a village or a monastic society)—must next approach a worthy artist or artists. Religious



Fig. 1
Folio showing a *Mahasiddha* embracing an acolyte, from an artist's sketchbook, Nepal, 18th–19th centuries, ink on paper, H. 7 ⁷/₈ in., W. 7 ¹/₂ in. (20.1 x 19.1 cm) Anonymous gift, 1982 82.235



Fig. 2
Artists working on a large metal image, Dagyab, Eastern Tibet, 1983.

advisers, who will have already helped to select the appropriate form of deity, may continue to consult with the artist or atelier to ensure the correctness of the image and will, in any case, be called in to officiate at the consecration. The artist will have recourse to the patron's or religious advisers' visualization (whether in a new form or from a codified version in the *sadbanas*) in oral or written descriptions. Sketchbooks are also quite common see (see fig. 1). Extant sketchbooks have been found to contain rough sketches and jottings, as well as finished drawings with accurate proportions and measurements. Existing sculptures and paintings can also serve as models.

The most common, smaller Tibetan sculptures are fabricated in metal, either cast or hammered. Larger images, intended for main assembly halls or chapels in monasteries and temples, can be made of hammered metal (fig. 2) but are usually of clay. Outdoor images in the living rock are carved at auspicious locations. Wood and precious materials, such as bone and ivory, are also used.

Tibetan painted *tangkas* are almost always on a cotton cloth support (fig. 3). This follows in the tradition of Indian *patas* (of which there are no documented surviving examples) which were constructed of cotton cloth and used as banners for processions, temple decoration and individual meditation. Silk and linen supports for Tibetan painting are known, but rare. Cotton, as well as silk and linen, is imported, making the quality and size of the cloth dependent on availability. Tibetan artists would have routinely imported Indian or Chinese cloth, depending on geographical proximity.



Fig. 3
The artist Tsering completing a *tangka* at the Norbu Linga, Lhasa, central Tibet, 1937.

Tangkas are traditionally sewn into cloth frames. Early *tangkas* are sewn onto relatively simple straight, or diagonally-shaped, dark blue cotton or silk mounts, usually only at top and bottom. The top and bottom are made rigid with wooden bars or dowels, and a hanging cord is attached to the top bar. Eighteenth- to- twentieth-century *tangkas* are usually sewn to a more complicated type of blue silk brocade mount (representing the “celestial” realm), deep at the top and bottom, with narrow sides and thin red and yellow stripes immediately adjacent to the painting (the “radiant nimbus” of the painting). Rectangular patches of a contrasting pattern or color might be sewn to the center of the bottom and, more rarely, the top blue brocade areas; these are called the “doors” or “windows” into the *tangka*. In addition, a thin, often patterned, silk covering is hung down over the *tangka* as a protection when it is not in use, and this is folded and draped as a decoration when the painting is viewed. Two flat ribbons of silk often hang loosely from the top edge down the sides of the mount, as a final flourish.

Tibetan books are made of paper. Tibetans were in contact with paper-producing civilizations, primarily China, from at least the seventh century, and they translated the small, narrow imported Indian palm-leaf sacred texts onto larger-format paper folios as soon as their own writing system was developed. Tibetans must have been aware of the deep blue *Sutra* scrolls of China, on which richly decorative gold and silver characters and deities were inscribed, when they first created the type of elaborate manuscript seen in color pls. 66 and 106. Such folios, in which gold and silver script on a dark ground is embellished with rectangular vignettes of deities in the manner of Indian palm leaf folios, continued to be made into the twentieth century for fine editions of the *Kanjur*.

Some of the most important religious works in Tibet were commissioned by major patrons, such as royal families or monastic officials, as part of elaborate projects which involved the erection and decoration of an entire building. In this case, a large team of architects, sculptors, painters and artisans, working together with religious advisers, would be involved and the project could take several years. Biographies of important lamas or political figures and monastic histories relate the background of these grand schemes. Most of the portable sculpture and painting now outside Tibet, however, is of more modest size and intention and may have involved one patron, a religious adviser and an artist. The latter might be a monk but a professional layman is more usual. In any case, certain spiritual preparations are necessary before embarking on the work. Scriptures might be read, offerings made and the workplace and tools blessed by a lama. It is important also for a harmonious relationship to exist between artist, patron and religious adviser. The artist might be subject to certain abstinences (from meat, alcohol, onion or garlic) while creating an image. If the subject of the commission is a *tantric* deity, there are additional precautions, and the artist should be initiated into the appropriate mandala of the deity. Certain sacred ingredients may be required, such as earth or water from a holy site, relics of a lama, or pieces of precious materials such as gold, coral or herbs. If the image is to be made of clay, these ingredients are mixed into the clay; if metal, they are mixed with paint and applied to the inside of the statue after fabrication. Lay artists in Tibet are generally born into the profession, into families of image-makers where they might be raised as apprentices until they

gain master status. It is not unknown, however, for an outsider of talent and ambition to join a family as an apprentice.

Blessing and “empowering” ritual objects and icons is a Buddhist tradition of long standing, seen in one form or another in all countries where the religion is practiced. Gold, silver, precious and semi-precious stones, coins and manuscripts are typical consecration items from early *stupas*. Filling images, as well as *stupas*, has been practiced in Tibet for centuries. The interiors of hollow-cast and hammered metal and clay sculptures are completely filled with consecration items. Hollow recesses are left (usually in the upper backs) in solid-cast metal sculptures and stone, wood, bone and ivory images for consecrations.

The consecration ceremony is performed to empower and honor completed paintings, in the same way as for sculpture. Sacred writings are inscribed, and special invocations made by the officiating monks. The hand and fingerprints or personal seals of holy teachers or officials may be imprinted on the back, and prayers are offered to the deity represented in the painting.

Iconography

The deities depicted in Tibetan art typically conform to iconographic formulae developed over the long history of Buddhism. The pantheon is thus extremely large and varied.

One of the most common ways of classifying the wide variety of Buddha images is the three modes of embodiment, the three *kaya*. *Dharmakaya* is the ultimate state of enlightenment: *Dharma* literally means “law” or “truth”; *kaya* literally means “body”. *Dharmakaya* is described as unlimited, unborn, unlocalized and formless, but it is sometimes represented as an unadorned Buddha. This is especially prevalent in Nyingmapa *tangkas* such as color pl. 126. The *Nirmanakaya* (“Body of Emanation”) is the form assumed for human perception. The historic Buddha Shakyamuni is considered to be a *Nirmanakaya*, whose role is to allow the omniscience of *Dharmakaya* to appear directly in our world, in a human body, subject to birth and to death. The reason for the great veneration accorded to a living lama is that he, in his physical body, is also representing *Nirmanakaya*. *Nirmanakaya* in Tibetan is *tulku*: “reincarnated lama”. Hence, the practice of portraying the religious masters in sculpture and painting developed in Tibet where the *Nirmanakaya* concept not only refers to the historic Buddhas, but is also embodied in a multitude of living or historic religious masters. When the Buddha principle is manifest at the intermediary level, between the mundane human perspective and that of the ultimate abstract truth, it assumes the aspect called *Sambhogakaya* (“Body of Enjoyment”). The *Sambhogakaya* may appear in diverse forms as Buddhas, Bodhisattvas or *yidams* (meditational deities), all representing various aspects of the character, qualities, attributes and powers of enlightenment. Avalokiteshvara, for instance, whether having one head and two arms or eleven heads and one thousand arms, is the *Sambhogakaya* manifestation of compassion and altruism. Peaceful or wrathful protective deities are often described as *Sambhogakaya*.

The images, *tangkas* and manuscripts described in this chapter are arranged in order of historic Buddhas and masters, guardians, *yidams*, Bodhisattvas and Buddhas.