

# Tibet and India

Buddhist Traditions and Transformations



THE METROPOLITAN  
MUSEUM OF ART  
BULLETIN  
WINTER 2014





WHAT IF  
DO REVOLUTIONS  
MEAN HIGHER  
OIL PRICES?  
I'VE ALREADY

I WAS TOLD  
WHAT'S THE POINT  
OF LEARNING TIBETAN  
WHEN NO ONE IS  
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# Tibet and India

Buddhist Traditions and Transformations

Kurt Behrendt



THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK

This publication is issued in conjunction with the exhibition “Tibet and India: Buddhist Traditions and Transformations,” on view at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, from February 8 through June 8, 2014.

This publication is made possible through the generosity of the Lila Acheson Wallace Fund for The Metropolitan Museum of Art, established by the cofounder of *Reader's Digest*.

*The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, Winter 2014

Volume LXXI, Number 3

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*The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* (ISSN 0026-1521) is published quarterly by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1000 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10028-0198. Periodicals postage paid at New York NY and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Membership Department, *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, 1000 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10028-0198. Four weeks' notice required for change of address. The *Bulletin* is provided as a benefit to Museum members and is available by subscription. Subscriptions \$30.00 a year. Back issues available on microfilm from National Archive Publishing Company, 300 N. Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106. Volumes I–XXXVII (1905–42) available as a clothbound reprint set or as individual yearly volumes from Ayer Company Publishers, suite B-213, 400 Bedford Street, Manchester, NH 03101, or from the Metropolitan Museum, 66–26 Metropolitan Avenue, Middle Village, NY 11381-0001.

Publisher and Editor in Chief: Mark Polizzotti

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Designer: Laura Lindgren

Front cover: Detail of *Twelve-Armed Chakrasamvara and His Consort, Vajravahni*, India (West Bengal) or Bangladesh, ca. 12th century (see fig. 41)

Back cover: Detail of *Buddha Amitayus Attended by Bodhisattvas*, Tibet, 11th or early 12th century (see fig. 26)

Inside front and back covers: Details of Gonkar Gyatso (born Lhasa, 1961), *Dissected Buddha*, 2013 (see fig. 44)

Map on p. 5 (fig. 2) by Anandaroop Roy

Typeset in Poliphilus and Magma

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Printed and bound in the United States of America

The Metropolitan Museum of Art

1000 Fifth Avenue

New York, NY 10028

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#### *Author's Acknowledgments*

Many people helped make this *Bulletin* and the exhibition that it accompanies a reality. In the Department of Asian Art, I thank in particular Maxwell K. Hearn, Douglas Dillon Chairman, and John Guy, Florence and Herbert Irving Curator of the Arts of South and Southeast Asia, as well as the many other colleagues who provided invaluable advice and assistance, including Alison Clark, Denise Patry Leidy, Jennifer Perry, Jill Wickenheisser, and Hwai-ling Yeh-Lewis. I am also deeply grateful to Abhishek Amar, Deepak Anand, Pamela T. Barr, Allison E. Bosch, Pia Brancaccio, Sally Brand, Robert L. Brown, Bijoy Kumar Choudhary, Robert D. DeCaroli, Phyllis Granoff, Amy Hitchcock, Daniel Kershaw, Thomas Laird, Oi-Cheong Lee, Donald Lopez, Christian Luczanits, Robert Mintz, Norie Morimoto, Nick Morrissey, Rachel Mustalish, Christopher A. Noey, Pratapaditya Pal, Katy Paul, Himanshu Prabha Ray, Faith Rogers, Fabio Rossi, Urmila Sant, Pravin Srivastava, Karen Stamm, Donna Strahan, Jane S. Tai, Dale Tucker, Jennifer Van Dalsen, and Karen Zhou. Finally, I would like to express my special thanks to the lenders and donors who made the exhibition possible and to our two contributing artists, Gonkar Gyatso and Tenzing Rigdol.



## Director's Note

As Buddhism spread out from north India, the place of its origin in the sixth century BC, the core ideas of this great religious tradition were often expressed through images. This *Bulletin* and the exhibition it accompanies, “Tibet and India: Buddhist Traditions and Transformations,” focus on Indian and Tibetan Buddhist art of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, a period that witnessed both the end of the rich north Indian Buddhist tradition and the beginning of popular Buddhist practice in Tibet. At this critical juncture in Buddhist history, a number of Tibetan monks traveled down out of the Himalayas to study at the famed monasteries of north India, where many also set about translating the vast corpus of Buddhist texts. As they visited these centers of scholarship and the pilgrimage sites associated with the Buddha’s life, the monks encountered refined works of art—from complex stone carvings to delicately illustrated palm-leaf manuscripts—made by workshops that had been active for more than 1,400 years. These profound works of religious art and the Tibetan images that followed them help shed light on how the Tibetans received and transformed the north Indian image-making tradition.

The Metropolitan Museum has long recognized the central role of art in the dissemination of Buddhism. Two of the foundational Buddhist sculptures in the collection are tenth- to eleventh-century figures of seated Buddhas from the great north Indian monastic university of Nalanda. In many ways these sculptures, which the Museum acquired in 1920, marked the beginning of our efforts to assemble a collection of Buddhist art, today among the most comprehensive in the world. The Buddhas from Nalanda can be directly compared to an eleventh- or twelfth-century Buddha from Tibet—acquired in 2012 through the generous support of Oscar L. Tang, Anthony W. and Lulu C. Wang, and Annette de la Renta—that is arguably one of the greatest masterpieces of its time, a testament to the Museum’s continuing commitment to present this artistic tradition at the very highest level.

The Buddhist art of north India and Tibet was the subject of recent field research by Kurt Behrendt, assistant curator in the Department of Asian Art, who is the author of this *Bulletin* and the organizer of the exhibition. “Tibet and India: Buddhist Traditions and Transformations,” on view at the Museum from February 8 to June 8, brings together works from the Metropolitan’s collection, important loans from private collections, and two major contemporary pieces, one a gift to the Museum and the other a promised gift. The inclusion here of these works, by the contemporary artists Gonkar Gyatso and Tenzing Rigdol, forces us to consider the very idea of how Buddhist imagery functions and the place of the individual artist within this ancient, venerable tradition. Both explore ways of expressing long-standing but subtle Buddhist ideas to new audiences, an encounter, one might argue, that is roughly analogous to the development of a “new” Tibetan imagery nearly a thousand years ago.

For their generous support of the exhibition and for making these and other notable acquisitions possible, we extend our heartfelt thanks to Andrew Cohen, Margaret Scott and David Teplitzky, Steven M. Kossak, John and Berthe Ford, and Michael McCormick.

Thomas P. Campbell  
*Director, The Metropolitan Museum of Art*







*“Now I shall relate the manner in which . . . [Atisha]  
spread the Doctrine of the Mahayanistic Path in Tibet.”*

—The Blue Annals<sup>1</sup>

In AD 1042 a north Indian Buddhist monk named Atisha traveled across the Himalayas to Tibet at the invitation of the western Tibetan king, Yeshe ‘Od. The Tibetans, like all Buddhist communities, were striving to purify their understanding of Buddhism and thereby establish correct religious practice. As part of this effort, teachers from north India—the historical birthplace of Buddhism in the sixth century BC—were invited to Tibet (fig. 1), and Tibetan monks in turn traveled to north India to study at the region’s famed monasteries and universities (fig. 2). Atisha is one of many monks who participated in this migration of Buddhist ideology—part of what has been called the Second Diffusion of Buddhism in Tibet following its original dissemination several centuries earlier—but because of his leading role in helping to restore Buddhism in Tibet, it is his life and actions that are emphasized in the Tibetan histories and provide the basis for much of our understanding of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition.

1. Mountains south of the road to Gyantse, Tibet

2. Major Buddhist sites of north India and Tibet







3. *Portrait of Atisha*. Tibet, early to mid-12th century. Opaque watercolor and gold on cloth; image, 19½ × 14 in. (49.5 × 35.4 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Gift of The Kronos Collections, 1993 (1993.479)

According to most later Tibetan sources, Atisha was born in AD 982 and was initiated as a monk at Bodhgaya, the temple complex in the north Indian state of Bihar on the site where the historical Buddha, Shakyamuni, reached enlightenment. He then studied at the monastic complex of Nalanda and eventually became abbot of the vast Vikramashila monastery. These important sites associated with the Buddha's life have been excavated, and the large quantities of sculpture recovered from them help shed light on Atisha's likely understanding of the Indian Buddhist tradition he brought to Tibet. Such visual evidence also allows us to approach this crucial ideological exchange from a



historical, north Indian perspective rather than through the traditional account of Atisha's actions as presented in the Tibetan histories. Indeed, the varied works of art created in both north India and Tibet at this time—in addition to sculpture, we have paintings on cloth, illuminated texts, and manuscript covers—help guide us toward a better understanding of this key moment, which marks both the end of Buddhism in north India and the beginning of popular Buddhist practice in Tibet.

Because Atisha and other monks of the period brought north Indian Buddhist ideas and images to the attention of the people of Tibet at the very moment when the Tibetans were attempting to purify their Buddhist practice and thus restore “correct” and “authentic” teachings, they forever changed the Tibetan religious landscape. By the time Atisha left for Tibet, in the eleventh century, Buddhism was more than 1,500 years old and had been in Tibet for hundreds of years, but as primarily a religion of the Tibetan royal court and of the elite.<sup>2</sup> In order to reach the common person, and to help standardize Tibetan devotional practices, Atisha would have turned to the religious thinking then current at the Buddhist centers of Bihar where he had been trained, namely, the sophisticated and well-defined Mahayana tradition, which recognizes the actions and teachings of the historical Buddha as well as the veneration of cosmic or celestial Buddhas residing in “pure lands,” or heavens.

Complicating this picture were the ideas, rituals, and imagery associated with Vajrayana Buddhism, with its complex pantheon of deities and expedited path to enlightenment. Texts and images attest to the emergence of Vajrayana Buddhism in about the eighth century, but the Vajrayana tradition has much earlier roots. The esoteric practices of Vajrayana Buddhism draw on concepts outlined in texts known as tantras, from which we derive the term “Tantric” that is often used to describe them. For Atisha, the Mahayana canon provided the ideological framework underlying how he understood and venerated Buddhist images. It is important to note, however, that by the time he was in charge of the Vikramashila monastery, Atisha would also have been responsible for performing Tantric rituals for the benefit of the king and the state, a key development that led to dynastic support for Buddhism in north India.<sup>3</sup> In Atisha's day, Vajrayana Buddhism was more established in the extreme east of the Indian subcontinent, at centers in modern Bangladesh and the Indian states of West Bengal and Odisha, while Mahayana was more significant in the central part of north India at the sites associated with the Buddha's life. When all of these ideas reached Tibet, Mahayana teachings, especially as mapped out in texts such as the *Prajnaparamita Sutra* (see fig. 20), provided the foundation for Vajrayana practices, and it was Mahayana Buddhism that was the more significant tradition in eleventh- and twelfth-century Tibet. But Buddhist devotional practice was evolving rapidly at this time, and by the thirteenth century the Tantric tradition came to dominate Tibetan Buddhism. The works of religious art made during this fluid, transitional period illustrate how Tibetans received some of these complex concepts and recontextualized the north Indian image-making tradition.

### **Atisha and the Buddhist Traditions of North India**

The earliest known portrait of Atisha appears in a Tibetan *tangka* (painting on cloth) made in the early to mid-twelfth century, several generations after his death in 1054 (fig. 3).<sup>4</sup> Atisha wears the yellow hat of a *pandita*, signifying a learned degree conferred by the Vikramashila monastery, and his left hand grasps a long, thin book, probably a





4. *Seated Teaching Buddha*. India (Bihar, Nalanda), Pala period, 12th century. Schist; H. without base, 24¼ in. (61.6 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Rogers Fund, 1920 (20.43)

5. *Seated Buddha Reaching Enlightenment*. Central Tibet, 11th–12th century. Brass with color pigments; 15½ × 10¾ × 8¾ in. (39.4 × 26.5 × 21.9 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Purchase, Lila Acheson Wallace, Oscar L. Tang, Anthony W. and Lulu C. Wang and Annette de la Renta Gifts, 2012 (2012.458)

north Indian palm-leaf manuscript (for example, fig. 20). His right hand is in a gesture of teaching (*vitarka mudra*), indicating that he is a fully realized monk who can interpret and transmit the deep meanings of the north Indian Sanskrit Buddhist texts.

During the eleventh and twelfth centuries, in the period leading up to the destruction of the great north Indian Buddhist centers at the beginning of the thirteenth century, many of the Buddhist texts of north India were rapidly being translated into Tibetan. Buddhism had been in decline in India as a result of intense competition from Hinduism, but it was brought to an abrupt end in the place of its origin following the Ghurid conquest of north India (1192–1206) and by subsequent invasions from other competing armies.<sup>5</sup> That Atisha lived at the twilight of Buddhism in north India might explain in part why he chose to travel to Tibet.

Atisha and monks like him were important to Tibet because Buddhist ideology, it is believed, can be properly understood and transmitted only by one who has attained mastery under the guidance of a teacher. Atisha himself belonged to an unbroken line of student-teacher relationships that came out of the north Indian monastic universities and in theory went back to the monks who heard the original

teachings of the Buddha at his first sermon, at Sarnath. Those teachings are collectively referred to as the dharma, meaning “way” or “path.” The two monks shown in the upper corners of the portrait are then probably Atisha’s own teachers, visually legitimizing his claim to correct knowledge. Atisha is also presented as a Tibetan lama (religious teacher or guru) sitting on an elaborate jeweled throne, and his head is framed by a halo, an iconography that signals enlightenment and is often seen in images of the Buddha himself. The idealized portrait thus succinctly conveys Atisha’s significance as an illustrious transmitter of the Buddhist teachings to Tibet, notably one with foundations in the great Buddhist institutions of north India and, ultimately, in the enlightenment of the historical Buddha.

According to the traditional histories, Buddhism first came to Tibet with the Nepalese and Chinese wives of King Songtsen Gampo (r. 629–49) of the Yarlung dynasty. Later, in the eighth century, a great Tantric practitioner named Padmasambhava (Guru Rinpoche in Tibet) is said to have come from Udayana (the Swat Valley, in modern Pakistan) and rid Tibet of demons using Tantric practices. This first wave of Buddhism fell into decline with the fall of the Yarlung dynasty in 842, ushering in a long and poorly understood period of political disruption and, in certain places, religious persecution. These earliest traditions formed the basis for the Nyingma, or “old” school, of Tibetan Buddhism, which was augmented by the second wave brought by Atisha and other monks that had greater appeal for the average lay worshipper.

By the eleventh century Buddhism had already spread across and beyond India into Southeast, Central, and East Asia. And while its fundamental tenets were unchanged,







devotional practices had shifted away from the earliest traditions, which emphasized veneration of the Buddha's physical remains, or relics (central to Nikaya or Hinayana Buddhism), to image-based worship undertaken in temples that invoked bodhisattvas and other enlightened beings: the core of Mahayana practice. Many of the north Indian Buddhist centers in Bihar that Atisha would have known still contained early relic stupas: dome-shaped, solid constructions (some of which survive today) empowered by the physical remains of the Buddha. The temples that supplanted them at the heart of Buddhist practice contained enormous representations of the Buddha and other Buddhist deities, and by Atisha's day it was these images that had become the primary focus of devotions performed by monks and the lay public alike. Not surprisingly, the Buddha's image eventually became an ideological symbol, one that was used in various ways by the different Buddhist schools and orders.

A twelfth-century seated Buddha from the great monastic university complex of Nalanda (fig. 4) illustrates different aspects of this shift to image-based worship. The Buddha is shown holding his hands in the wheel-turning teaching gesture (*dharmachakra mudra*), referencing his first sermon at Sarnath, when he revealed the Buddhist dharma and taught his original five followers the path to enlightenment. In most other ways, however, the image has been stripped of any narrative suggestion. Instead, it emphasizes the Buddha's perfect physical form, believed to be a reflection or product of his meritorious actions (karma) performed over countless lifetimes. He sits on a lotus, conveying ideas of purity and perhaps suggesting his residence in a cosmic realm, and his head is encircled by a flaming halo, the remains of which can be seen above his shoulders. Drawing on the iconography of kingship in Indian art, he sits on a throne bracketed by *vyalas*, mythical hybrid creatures that here have the upper bodies of lions and the hooved legs of goats. The Buddha's body was understood to be ideally proportioned and to exhibit thirty-two major and eighty minor *lakshanas*, or marks, seen only on one either destined to be a great world leader (*chakravartin*) or capable of reaching Buddhahood. Just a few of these characteristics are represented in the statue, the most prominent being the wheels on the Buddha's palms and the soles of his feet, his elongated earlobes, and his *ushnisha*, or extra brain associated with his enlightenment, indicated by the bump on the top of his head covered in curls of hair.

Only a handful of Tibetan images of the Buddha survive from the eleventh to the early thirteenth century. One of the most sublimely beautiful is a brass sculpture of the Buddha touching the earth at the moment of his enlightenment (fig. 5). The Tibetan artist sensitively rendered an approachable figure, yet the form of the sculpture draws directly from the more formal precedents established at Buddhist centers in north India, evident in motifs such as the flared robe below the Buddha's left arm, the folds under his crossed ankles, and the sharp lines of his eyebrows. The high *ushnisha* is common to both the north Indian and Tibetan traditions, but in the Tibetan example emphasis is placed on the flames of enlightened knowledge that emerge from the top.

The correspondence of the Tibetan Buddha to the seated Buddha from Nalanda is not surprising given that images from the Bihar region, where the Buddha had lived, were traditionally believed to be accurate likenesses. Moreover, depictions of the body of the Buddha following his final rebirth were meant to transcend mundane appearances, and thus he is always shown as an ageless figure, with skeletal structures, tendons, veins, and other corporeal aspects deemphasized or omitted entirely. This



kind of sculptural image was designed to allow the devotee a means of seeing the perfect form of the Buddha and thereby visualize and intuitively understand Buddhist ideology and knowledge. His ideal body was also seen as an expression of highly advanced yogic practice and of his ability as a meditator, one whose control of mind was expressed as perfect control of body. The Tibetan sculptor stressed all of these aspects; the Buddha's full chest, for example, suggests the breath (*prana*) associated with meditation, while the careful articulation of his hands and feet underscores his flawlessness. Seeing the perfected form of the Buddha, it was believed, would be equivalent to apprehending the dharma itself and hence would provide the devotee with immediate access to enlightenment.

These sculptures, and indeed all images of the Buddha from both Tibet and north India, reflect an attempt to make inexpressible aspects of the Buddha's teachings visually apparent to the devotee. The most common way of doing so, as seen in the Tibetan figure, was to represent the Buddha at the moment of his enlightenment, with his right hand reaching down to touch the earth, bearing witness to the past actions that brought him to this point of ultimate realization. This gesture, called the *bhumisparsha mudra*, marks the culmination of his refined and meritorious religious acts, including those in countless past lives. The same gesture is seen in a tenth- or eleventh-century sculpture from Nalanda (fig. 6), which likewise shows the Buddha in a yogic posture, deep in meditation. Most likely his halo (now broken) was originally surmounted by branches, a reference to the Bodhi tree, under which he reached enlightenment at Bodhgaya.

Upon his enlightenment the Buddha was able to realize the Four Noble Truths—the heart of Buddhist thought—and they were the subject of his first sermon. These essential tenets state that life is suffering; that suffering is caused by desire and attachment; that attachment leads to an ongoing cycle of rebirth (*samsara*), which one can break free of only by letting go of desire and the resulting attachment; and that to do so one must follow the Buddhist dharma. We know that the Nalanda image conveyed this meaning because inscribed on the lotus throne is a passage, often referred to as the *ye dharma* verse, recounting these core Buddhist ideas, translated here as:

Of all dispositions proceeding from a cause  
 The Tathagata [Buddha] has explained the cause  
 And he has explained their cessation also  
 This is the doctrine of the great Shramana [the great ascetic or meditator: the Buddha].<sup>6</sup>



6. *Seated Buddha Reaching Enlightenment, Flanked by Avalokiteshvara and Maitreya.* India (Bihar, Nalanda), Pala period, late 10th–11th century. Schist; H. 26¼ in. (66.7 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Rogers Fund, 1920 (20.58.16)





7. Mahabodhi Temple, Bihar, India

Thus, although the sculpture shows the Buddha specifically at the point of reaching enlightenment, it carries broader meanings associated with the body of his teachings.

To either side of the Buddha stand bodhisattvas (enlightened beings), who serve to aggrandize him and act as intercessors for the devotee. To the Buddha's proper right is Avalokiteshvara, bodhisattva of compassion, identifiable by the flower in his left hand, and whose headdress contains the tiny figure of the celestial Buddha Amitabha. Avalokiteshvara was particularly important because he helped devotees on their path to salvation but also could be invoked in times of need or danger. As an emanation of Amitabha, he presides over our current era. The bodhisattva to the Buddha's left can be identified as the future Buddha Maitreya based on the small, somewhat damaged stupa in his headdress. It was believed that in the distant future Maitreya would be born as the next Buddha and that his life would unfold like those of the Buddhas before him, culminating with his reaching enlightenment at Bodhgaya and once again spreading the Buddhist teachings. Until that time, Maitreya waits in a celestial heaven and is

available to the disciple through devotion to his image. Together, the triad of Shakyamuni (the historical Buddha), Avalokiteshvara, and Maitreya refers to the enlightenment of the Buddha in the past, present, and future.

On the base of the sculpture is a small goddess, Vasudhara, who personifies the earth. She holds a pot out of which stalks of wheat emerge. Associated with agricultural abundance, Vasudhara would have been an important figure for the lay community, helping to ensure prosperity.<sup>7</sup> Beside her is a kneeling man, likely the patron who paid for the relief, with his hands in a gesture of veneration (*anjali mudra*). Vasudhara's presence on the sculpture can be related to the enlightenment narrative because, as a manifestation of the earth, she witnessed the Buddha's actions in past lives. At the very moment of his enlightenment, when the Buddha reaches down to touch the earth, it is this goddess who recalls his meritorious past actions and clears the way to transcendence.

### The Buddhist Pilgrimage Sites of North India

Many Buddhist texts say that Bodhgaya is the only place where it is possible for a Buddha to reach enlightenment, and thus it is associated not only with Shakyamuni, the historical Buddha, but also with all the Buddhas who preceded him in other, past ages. In this sense the Bodhi tree came to represent the cosmic axis of the universe, and Bodhgaya became the most important pilgrimage site for the Buddhist world. According to *The Blue Annals*—a history of Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism compiled between 1392 and 1481—Atisha was ordained a monk at Bodhgaya at the place of the *vajrasana*, the throne upon which the Buddha reached enlightenment.<sup>8</sup> Conceptually, this adamantine throne sits beneath the Bodhi tree, at the center of the universe, and supported the Buddha's enlightenment.<sup>9</sup>





Having been ordained at Bodhgaya gave Atisha great legitimacy in the eyes of the Tibetans, whose histories tell of many other monks, including Atisha's most significant contemporary, the renowned Tibetan translator Rinchen Zangpo (958–1051), traveling down out of the Himalayas to make a pilgrimage there.<sup>10</sup> At the time of Atisha's ordination the site of Bodhgaya was no longer focused on the Bodhi tree and was instead dominated by the towering Mahabodhi temple, surrounded by a multitude of relic stupas and image halls (fig. 7). Although the main temple has undergone numerous restorations throughout its history—notably a major refurbishment by the Burmese in the fourteenth century and rather aggressive conservation in the nineteenth century by the British under the direction of Sir Alexander Cunningham (1814–1893), first director of the Archaeological Survey of India—numerous accounts by Buddhist pilgrims and travelers give us a good idea of how the temple looked in earlier times and of the site's changing significance.<sup>11</sup> In addition, replica models of the Mahabodhi temple that were made for pilgrims and date to different periods in the temple's history have been found in north India, Tibet, Myanmar (Burma), and Nepal. Outside India these small representations of the temple must have been quite important in that they were associated with the place of the Buddha's enlightenment.

A model of the Mahabodhi temple that likely dates to the twelfth century (the crenellated molding over the second-story shrine suggests that it postdates the late eleventh-century renovations of the Burmese king Kyansittha) provides a fairly clear picture of the temple's appearance in Atisha's day (fig. 8). A narrow colonnaded porch on the ground floor provided access to the now-empty image chamber. As in Hindu and Jain temples of the period, the main devotional image would have been placed directly below the tower. Bracketing the main entrance are bodhisattvas and *dvarapalas* (door guardians). While we cannot be sure of the specific form of the main devotional image in the Mahabodhi temple, almost certainly it was iconographically related to the Buddha's enlightenment. Supporting that idea is the model's surface imagery: repeating registers of barrel-vaulted *chaitya* arches containing a multitude of enlightened Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and celestial

8. Model of Mahabodhi Temple. India (Bihar), Pala period, 12th century. Stone;  $5\frac{3}{4} \times 2\frac{1}{4} \times 3\frac{1}{4}$  in. (13.7 × 5.7 × 8.1 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Gift of John and Fausta Eskenazi, 2006 (2006.218)

9. Sir Charles D'Oyly (British, 1781–1845). *Mahabodhi Temple at Bodhgaya*, dated 1824. Pen and ink;  $10\frac{1}{4} \times 14\frac{1}{8}$  in. (26 × 36 cm). British Library, London





10. *Votive Plaque with a Seated Buddha*. India (Bihar, possibly Bodhgaya or Nalanda), Pala period, ca. 9th–10th century. Terracotta; 6¼ × 4½ in. (16 × 11.5 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Gift of The Kronos Collections, 1982 (1982.462.6)



11. *Votive Plaque (Tsa-Tsa) with a Stupa (Chorten)*. Tibet, 10th–11th century. Sun-dried clay; 4⅞ × 2⅝ × 1⅜ in. (10.5 × 6.7 × 3.5 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Purchase, Rogers Fund, by exchange, 2011 (2011.43)

beings that populated the pure lands, the heavens described at length in a variety of Mahayana texts. Interestingly, the rendering of the model emphasizes the temple itself, not the Bodhi tree,<sup>12</sup> which is shown on the second story, behind the tower, growing out of a box set in the terrace, a placement repeated in many other models of this type. British accounts from 1811–12 and a drawing made a little more than a decade later (fig. 9) confirm that at that time the Bodhi tree was still healthy and in this position.<sup>13</sup> Not long after those accounts were written a cutting from the tree must have been planted immediately behind the temple, where it still grows today.

In addition to small sculptures such as the Mahabodhi temple model, pilgrims and learned monks like Atisha often acquired other types of images when they visited the sites associated with the Buddha, no doubt to give form to these special places of power. Among the most common were small, low-fired or sun-dried plaques stamped with a mold. An example from about the ninth or tenth century (fig. 10) shows the Buddha, with his hands in the teaching gesture (*dharmachakra mudra*), seated in a towering structure that looks very much like the Mahabodhi temple. A forest of stupas surrounds him. Almost all such plaques have the *ye dharma* verses impressed into the clay, the passage expounding the core Buddhist teachings that is also inscribed on the Buddha from Nalanda (fig. 6). In the period when this plaque was stamped, the verse had become equated with the idea of the dharma body (*dharmakaya*) of the Buddha, meaning that his teachings—the dharma—were considered the Buddha’s “true body.” Together with the image, the verse charged the plaque with the Buddha’s enlightened presence. In the sense that the dharma body in the form of the *ye dharma* verse had come to be seen as the



equivalent of the Buddha's mortal remains, these plaques could function as symbolic relics, and as such they have been found in stupas. Although the idea of representing symbolically the physical relics of the Buddha's body would have been foreign to the early Buddhist communities, over time a distinct conceptual shift had occurred, and certainly outside India this type of relic had great potency and was considered the true dharma body.<sup>14</sup>

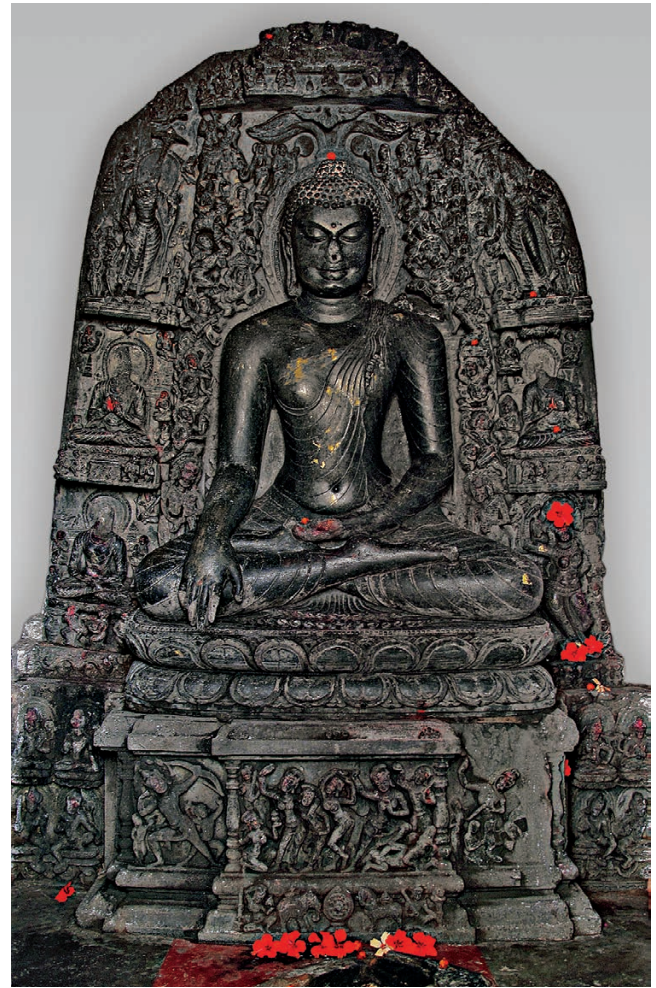
A related tenth- or eleventh-century molded plaque (*tsha-tsa*) from Tibet (fig. 11) depicts a stepped stupa (*chorten* in Tibetan) surmounted by umbrellas and banners; in the background are lines of *ye dharma* verses. The stupa on the plaque appears to have been modeled on one from the western Tibetan site of Tholing, which originally had multiple bases and a low dome. This distinctive configuration can be related to seventh- and eighth-century examples from Afghan sites and to stupas found across north India, such as the massive stepped Lauria Nandangarh stupa in Bihar, which at more than 550 feet in diameter is the largest stupa in South Asia (fig. 12).<sup>15</sup> The base of Lauria Nandangarh is ringed by stacked serrated moldings, like those on the plaque, and has extended platforms facing the cardinal directions, likely supports for enormous image shrines. While we have no historical records attesting to the significance of Lauria Nandangarh, its massive scale and position along a major trade route leading to the Kathmandu Valley in Nepal suggest that it was a site of great importance, and certainly one that Tibetan monks would have encountered on their way into the Buddhist heartland.

For the Indian pilgrim, too, visiting geographically and intrinsically sacred places like Bodhgaya held great inherent significance.<sup>16</sup> Such sites are referred to in the Hindu and Jain traditions as *tirthas*, which literally means "shallow fords in rivers" but more broadly refers to places where the divine and human worlds are in close proximity.<sup>17</sup> A tenth-century stela, possibly from Nalanda (fig. 13), illustrates what are referred to as the eight great events of the Buddha's life, each of which was also associated with a Buddhist pilgrimage center in north India. At center, the Buddha is shown touching the ground at



12. Stupa of Lauria Nandangarh, Bihar, India





13. *Stela with Eight Great Events from the Life of the Buddha*. India (Bihar, possibly Nalanda), Pala period, 10th century. Schist with traces of gilding;  $11\frac{1}{8} \times 7 \times \frac{3}{4}$  in. (28.1 × 17.8 × 1.9 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Gift of Raymond G. and Marsha Vargas Handley, 2009 (2009.541)

14. *Relief with Eight Great Events from the Life of the Buddha*. India (Bihar, near the village of Jagdishpur), ca. 10th–11th century. Schist; H. ca. 12 ft. (3.7 m)

the moment of his enlightenment, and the stylized Bodhi branches above his head place the event at Bodhgaya. On the left, at bottom, the Buddha is miraculously born out of the side of his mother, Maya, as she turns to grasp a branch of a sal tree in the Lumbini gardens; in the middle is the Buddha's first sermon, at Sarnath (his hands are in the wheel-turning *dharmachakra mudra*); and at top, he subdues the rampaging elephant Nalagiri, who had been terrorizing the people of Rajgir. At right, the lower register shows a monkey offering honey to the Buddha at Vaishali, a meritorious act that led to the monkey's rebirth as a human and eventual enlightenment; in the middle, the Buddha performs miracles at Shravasti in order to convert doubting heretical ascetics; and at top, the Buddha descends from Trayastrimsa heaven at Sankasya, where he had gone to teach his mother the dharma (she died soon after his birth). The events on either side are paired in meaningful ways. For example, the story of the monkey, seemingly obscure, is shown opposite the Buddha's final birth, which led to his own enlightenment. The conversion of the ascetics is paired with the sermon at Sarnath, when the Buddha's first followers were converted. And the descent from Trayastrimsa heaven is linked to the subduing of Nalagiri, both events that demonstrate the Buddha's miraculous power following his enlightenment. At top is the Buddha's death, at Kushinagara, which was emphasized because it marked his entry into nirvana and was the ultimate source of the physical relics he left behind in our realm of existence.



The eight great life events and their associated pilgrimage sites are the subject of the largest Buddhist devotional image to survive from this period in north India: a black schist relief that today remains an object of veneration and worship in a small temple in the village of Jagdishpur, near Nalanda (fig. 14). The pilgrimage sites are also the subject of smaller sculptures done in soft brown pyrophyllite, which were popular with foreign pilgrims. The latter were likely manufactured to the east of the main pilgrimage centers, somewhere in West Bengal or Bangladesh.<sup>18</sup> They have been found in the Buddhist center of Pagan, in Myanmar, as well as in the monasteries of Tibet, a clear indication that such easily portable images had meaning for a variety of Buddhist traditions, including those at centers outside India.<sup>19</sup>

Pilgrims visiting the Buddhist holy sites in person traveled between them geographically by moving along a mandala, conceived as a diagram inscribed on the earth by the Buddha, which maps the actions that led to his enlightenment and, ultimately, to nirvana. The devotee could also undertake a metaphorical pilgrimage through meditation on images of the Buddha surrounded by scenes from his life: a cosmic mandala recounting the Buddha's path to enlightenment and referencing the physical geography understood to resonate with his presence, a practice believed to generate great merit and a profitable rebirth. In that sense the image itself became a kind of mandala, offering a diagrammatic means of understanding the Buddhist dharma and thus an expedited path to enlightenment. This was true in both Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism; indeed, the *Astamahasthanacaityastotra*, a Tantric text translated into Chinese in AD 973 by Fa T'ien, a monk from Nalanda, indicates that by this time the eight great life events were a component of Vajrayana practice.<sup>20</sup>

### **Mahayana Celestial Buddhas and the Emergence of Vajrayana Practice**

Among the many foreign monks who made pilgrimages to north India in order to study and translate texts was Yijing, a Chinese monk who left behind a detailed account of his journey. Yijing traveled by sea on a route that took him through the Southeast Asian kingdom of Shrivijaya (in modern Indonesia), an important center for esoteric Buddhism. After first falling ill and being harassed by bandits, Yijing reached north India in AD 673; he lived at Nalanda for more than ten years and is credited with translating some four hundred Buddhist texts. One of his primary interests—and Atisha's—was to establish the correct actions that monks should undertake in daily life, a key Buddhist idea that allowed monks to ritualize actions and thereby avoid the accumulation of karma, both good and bad. Yijing considered all aspects of personal conduct, from how to brush one's teeth to the proper relationship between teacher and student. Of particular interest are Yijing's comments regarding the use of images. He stressed that although the "highest road" is meditation on the Four Noble Truths, as recounted in the *ye dharma* verse, those tenets are often too profound for many adherents, whereas the veneration and ablution of images can be practiced by all. Yijing also tells us that even though the Buddha has entered nirvana, his image exists and should be worshipped as though we are actually in the Buddha's presence. He emphasized that such veneration should include the offering of flowers and incense. Whether made of gold, silver, or copper, Yijing says, sculptures of the Buddha should be "bathed" with an accompaniment of music played by a band of young



women and cleaned with perfumed paste made from ground sandalwood,<sup>21</sup> devotional practices closely related to those of the Hindu and Jain religions of the time.

Bronze sculptures of the Buddha have been recovered from a number of north Indian monasteries, suggesting that they may have been venerated in a manner consistent with Yijing's admonitions. Some are of the same type as a tenth- or eleventh-century crowned Buddha in the Metropolitan Museum's collection (fig. 15).<sup>22</sup> Silver inlay embellishes the Buddha's crown, necklace, eyes, and *urna* (the dot on his forehead sometimes described as an inward-looking eye). Further aggrandizing the figure is the flaming mandorla and the elaborate stepped throne, which was once inlaid with lapis lazuli and rock crystal (vestiges of the inlay survive on the figure, an extreme rarity). Originally additional stones were fitted into sockets in the throne and mandorla and others augmented the necklace, earrings, and crown.

While the earth-touching hand gesture and the branches of the Bodhi tree at the top of the mandorla are clear references to the Buddha's enlightenment, the figure's elaborate jewelry and crown would seem to be at odds with Shakyamuni's renunciation of his royal upbringing, a key biographical event in his path to enlightenment. The trappings of royalty would, however, resonate with images of Buddhas residing in celestial realms, who are often shown in attire befitting a god. One of the first Buddhist figures to be given this iconographic treatment (as early as the second century AD) is the future Buddha Maitreya, who is always depicted as a bejeweled prince residing in heaven and awaiting his final rebirth. The historical Buddha, Shakyamuni, as well as all of the past and future Buddhas were understood to follow an identical path; hence, they would all have resided in a heaven, as did Maitreya, before being born in our realm and then going on to achieve enlightenment under the Bodhi tree at Bodhgaya, preach the dharma at Sarnath, and leave behind bodily relics. This image of the crowned Buddha can thus be understood to represent a Buddha residing in one of the heavens prior to his rebirth in our realm of existence.

For another explanation of the crown iconography we can look to the esoteric Buddhist tradition that was becoming increasingly important. The *Yoga Tantra*, a popular Vajrayana text that emerged at this time, says that at the moment of enlightenment the Buddha Shakyamuni left his physical body and was conducted to the highest heaven in his "mind-made body" (*manomayakaya*). Buddhas of the ten directions then bestowed upon him the five stages of perfect enlightenment, as marked by five "formulas of self-consecration." This complex cosmological sequence of events is described in terms that relate to a coronation, hence the crown iconography. The *Yoga Tantra* then describes how Shakyamuni became the perfected Buddha Vairochana (one of the five Tathagata Buddhas, discussed below), and only after having taught the *Yoga Tantra* to a host of celestial beings on the summit of Mount Meru (the cosmic center of the universe) did he descend to earth and resume his physical body under the Bodhi tree.<sup>23</sup>

Within this esoteric interpretation, the Museum's sculpture could be understood as simultaneously showing the celestial crowned Buddha Vairochana in a heaven and Shakyamuni in his physical, relic-producing form reaching enlightenment at Bodhgaya, a dualism characteristic of Buddhist iconography during this period. There are other explanations for the crown iconography, however, and our understanding of it may be clouded in part because Tantric practices and rituals were shrouded in secrecy, to

15. *Crowned Buddha*. India (Bihar), Pala period, 10th–11th century. Bronze inlaid with silver, lapis lazuli, and rock crystal; H. with halo, 12¾ in. (32.4 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Gift of Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Foundation, 1993 (1993.311a, b)







# IMAGE NOT AVAILABLE

16. *Wall Painting of the Five Tathagata Buddhas, Shalu Monastery, Tibet, after 1306.*  
© Thomas Laird, 2010,  
photography by Thomas Laird and Clint Clemens

give them potency, and also because they were likely unacceptable to a conservative, mainstream Buddhist audience. Indeed, as was typical of much north Indian iconography of this period, the crowned Buddha image was interpreted differently by the various Buddhist communities. A Tibetan audience may have understood the image as a kind of crowned celestial Buddha, following the esoteric interpretation of Mahayana ideology described above, and in fact we know that at the beginning of the fifteenth century the renowned Buddhist teacher Tsongkhapa (1357–1419), in accordance with these ideas, actually placed a crown on the main image in the Jokhang temple in Lhasa, the most sacred statue in Tibet (the Jowo Buddha).<sup>24</sup> In contrast, monks from Sri Lanka, Myanmar, or other parts of Southeast Asia would have understood the same image from a more conservative standpoint as the Buddha Shakyamuni, Maitreya, or a Buddha who resided on earth in the distant past.<sup>25</sup> Such small-scale, portable bronzes gave monks as well as the lay community the freedom to privately interpret and use such images in diverse ways. It is specifically this category of crowned Buddha iconography, for example, that traveled with Atisha and other monks to Tibet in the eleventh century. But the iconographic ambiguity of north India, which allowed for multiple interpretations, seems to have been rejected in Tibet in favor of an exact correspondence to textual descriptions.

Among the most popular images in Tibet during this period of contact with India were depictions of a group of five crowned Buddhas known as the Tathagatas, four of whom preside over the directional pure lands, or heavens (north, south, east, and west). The fifth, Vairochana, occupies the nodal center. At the Shalu monastery in Tibet, which Atisha visited in 1045,<sup>26</sup> a wall painting associated with a renovation in 1305 orients the five Tathagata Buddhas in a row—Ratnasambhava (south), Akshobhya (east), Vairochana (center), Amitabha (west), and Amoghasiddhi (north)—all of them boldly colored and iconographically varied (fig. 16). The worshipper's goal was to be reborn in one of these pure lands and thereby gain direct access to the living, enlightened Buddha, who would teach a pure and uncorrupted form of the dharma. The Mahayana ideology of the five Tathagatas went on to have great significance in the Vajrayana Yogacharya tradition, which follows the teachings outlined in the *Yoga Tantra* and became especially important in Tibet in the twelfth century. Many of the esoteric deities in that tradition are understood to be emanations of one of the Tathagata Buddhas.



Representations of the five Tathagata Buddhas are less easily identified amid the fluid iconography of north Indian art, but some of the crowned Buddhas from the region (possibly even fig. 15) must have had this meaning. In India the five Tathagatas appear most often as subsidiary deities above a devotional image of a bodhisattva (including Tara, a female bodhisattva, discussed in greater detail below),<sup>27</sup> an iconography that aligns with the idea of such deities being emanations of the Tathagatas. Their veneration was possibly fairly widespread, which would explain why so many stupas from Bihar are embellished with Buddhas facing the cardinal directions. This small schist stupa (fig. 17), for example, would have been placed near one of the massive stupas containing the cremated remains of the Buddha—the physical stuff of his enlightenment<sup>28</sup>—and likely held the remains of a monk who wished even after death to be close to the Buddha’s relics.<sup>29</sup> It originally would have sat on a tall, stepped base and been surmounted by stacked umbrellas, signifying the heavens.<sup>30</sup> Small stupas like this one display an amazing diversity of iconographic patterns; the most common, seen here, incorporates four small niches that face the cardinal directions and contain images of Buddhas, typical of such stupas in Bihar. The hands of the Buddhas are in a variety of *mudras*; one touches the earth, indicating enlightenment, while on the opposite side a Buddha is shown meditating with his alms bowl in his lap, an iconography linked to the end of the forty-nine-day fast that preceded his enlightenment. The other two clasp their hands in the preaching *mudra* associated with the Buddha’s first sermon. In Indian art, when the Tathagatas appear above a bodhisattva or Tara (or perhaps on one of these votive stupas) their specific iconography was not codified; it seems that being organized in the four cardinal directions or as part of a group of five was enough to distinguish them. In contrast, Tibetan wall paintings such as those at Shalu follow a fixed pattern in which each Buddha has a specific color and hand gesture, in accordance with textual descriptions.



### The Great Buddhist Monasteries of North India: Vikramashila and Nalanda

To the east of the major monastic and pilgrimage centers of Bihar, near the modern village of Antichak, are the remains of a massive temple with shrines facing the cardinal directions (fig. 18).<sup>31</sup> Enclosing the temple, which was excavated in the 1960s, is the largest Buddhist monastery in South Asia, which scholars today agree is probably the *mahavihara* (“great monastery”) of Vikramashila, described in many Tibetan sources.<sup>32</sup> Before going to Tibet, Atisha was the head, or *upadhyaya*,<sup>33</sup> of Vikramashila, a center that many Tibetans visited and whose standing in the Buddhist world was rivaled only by that of Bodhgaya and Nalanda. The monastery is laid out as an enormous square (1,080 feet on each side) with residential cells running along the inner edges of the enclosure. A monk living in one of those cells would have faced the central, mountainlike temple, which was crowned with a massive tower and must have looked much like the Mahabodhi temple. The date of the site can be fixed only generally, but it seems to have been founded by the end of the eighth century, was thriving in the tenth and eleventh centuries, and was destroyed at the beginning of the thirteenth century following the Ghurid conquest.<sup>34</sup>

17. Votive Stupa with Four Images of the Buddha. India (Bihar), 10th–11th century. Schist; H. 8½ in. (21.6 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Gift of Paul Mallon, 1920 (20.70)



The exterior wall appears to have been fortified—it is studded at regular intervals with the foundations of round and square towers—and the only point of access was a single gateway facing north. In 1234 the Tibetan monk Dharmasvamin arrived in north India and wrote about the devastated state of the major Buddhist centers. According to Dharmasvamin’s account, Bodhgaya was deserted and Vikramashila was almost totally destroyed, although it had still been active when his uncle Chang dGra-bcom traveled to India at the end of the thirteenth century. Dharmasvamin stayed for two years at Nalanda, living among the last vestiges of its monastic population, before returning to Tibet.<sup>35</sup>

When Vikramashila was excavated, two of its huge directional shrines still contained remains of Buddha images.<sup>36</sup> The spatial organization suggests that each shrine housed one of the Tathagatas presiding over the corresponding pure land, while the fifth Tathagata, likely Vairochana, was placed in a now-lost shrine in the upper part of the central tower.<sup>37</sup> (Alternatively, the tower itself could have symbolized the central, presiding Buddha.) The link between Vikramashila and Tibetan monasteries such as Shalu, where the five Tathagatas appear in wall paintings, is compelling; certainly it can be no coincidence that the western Tibetan temple of Tholing, where Atisha initially resided after leaving north India, is organized as a central shrine surrounded by four subsidiary shrines facing the cardinal directions. Tibetan sources speak of Vikramashila as an important monastic university that conferred the prestigious title of *pandita*, which we know was bestowed on Atisha. By the late eleventh century it housed some 160 *panditas* along with a thousand monks.<sup>38</sup> Later Tibetan sources list the names of many Tantric teachers at Vikramashila and emphasize the importance of Vajrayana practices there,<sup>39</sup> probably a factor of its location far to the east of the main Buddhist pilgrimage centers. At those sites, sculptures of Tantric deities are often relegated to supporting roles (such as protectors and attendants), suggesting the dominance of more conservative Mahayana practices.<sup>40</sup> At centers even farther east than Vikramashila—such as Paharpur, in Bangladesh, or Ratnagiri, in Odisha—the opposite holds true: the sculpture tends to be more esoteric in emphasis, and Tantric rituals were undoubtedly a vital aspect of these Buddhist communities. The distinction between Mahayana and Vajrayana practices, but also their coexistence at places such as Vikramashila,

18. Central Four-part Temple  
in the Vikramashila Monastery,  
Bihar, India



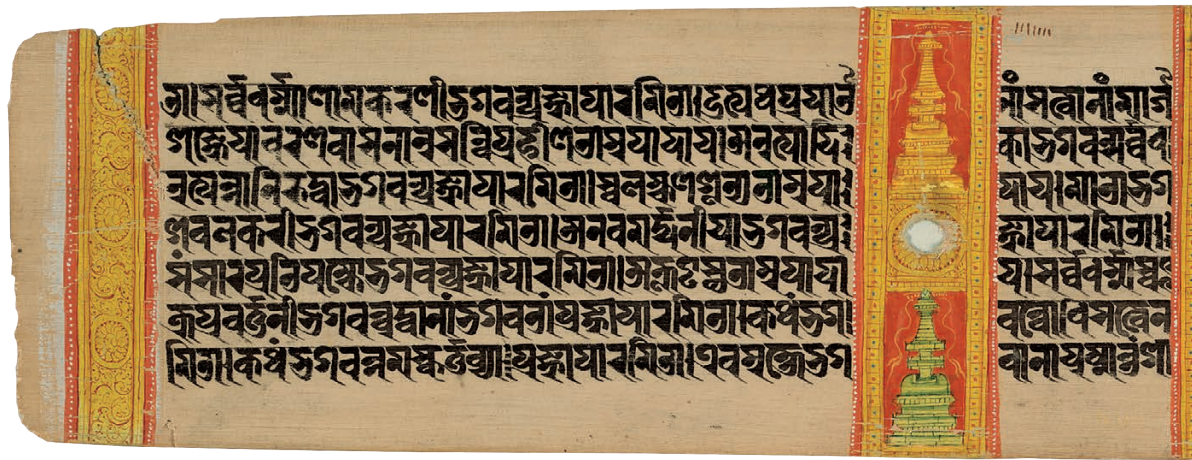


is apparent in the writings of the later Tibetan monk Taranatha (b. 1575), whose *History of Buddhism in India* (1608) tells of a Pala-period king, Canaka, who established Buddhist devotional centers linked to key texts: eight for the *Prajnaparamita* (a text encompassing the Mahayana canon), four for the *Guhyasamaja* (a Tantric text known to Atisha), and one for Hevajra and Chakrasamvara, powerful esoteric protective deities who had associated Tantric texts. Considering both Taranatha's account and the uneven distribution of esoteric sculptures among the various Buddhist centers of north India, what becomes clear is that esoteric Buddhism emerged out of the fabric of the larger Mahayana tradition.

The monastic university of Nalanda (fig. 19), where Atisha studied and, according to Taranatha, composed a literary text,<sup>41</sup> was the best-known and most prestigious center of learning in north India. Renowned for its intellectual rigor, Nalanda attracted learned and ambitious monks from across South and Southeast Asia as well as a great many Tibetans. Monks versed in all aspects of the South Asian textual traditions and schools of logic resided at the monastery, and its library, the Shilabhadra (Treasury of Good Law), was famous throughout the Buddhist world. One of the earliest and most informative accounts of Nalanda was compiled by the Chinese monk Xuanzang, who left China for north India in 629 with the goal of translating Buddhist texts and then returning home with the translations. On his journey, which followed well-established trade routes through Central Asia, Afghanistan, Gandhara, and Kashmir, and from there into the Ganges basin of north India, Xuanzang recounts seeing powerful relics, miraculous images, and a number of Buddhist communities, whose monasteries and practices he describes. Like Atisha, Xuanzang took up residence in Nalanda, where he received instruction in Mahayana doctrine and had access to a diverse body of texts, some of which later became important to the Vajrayana Buddhist communities of Tibet. He noted that ten thousand dignified and grave monks resided at Nalanda and that the revenue of a hundred villages supported the monastery. The lay community also contributed rice, butter, and milk so that the monks were abundantly supplied and need not beg for food. The excavated site of Nalanda, with its seven towering image temples and ten vast, multistoried monasteries, certainly supports Xuanzang's account of a well-funded institution.

19. Nalanda Monastery, Bihar, India





Students seeking admission to Nalanda had to answer questions posed to them by a gatekeeper, who permitted entrance only to those familiar with both old and new Buddhist texts. Xuanzang describes eight halls in which students attended lectures and engaged in discussion<sup>42</sup> on such subjects as logic, the Vedas (foundational texts for the Hindu tradition), Mahayana Buddhism, and the Buddhist doctrines associated with the earlier Hinayana or Nikaya schools, suggesting that Nalanda's monastic population must have included scholars from various Buddhist traditions. Judging from Xuanzang's observations of the other places he visited, such ideologically diverse monastic communities were common in north India at this time. The two Buddha images from Nalanda (figs. 4, 6) would thus have resonated with the devotees at Nalanda regardless of whether they adhered to the early Nikaya traditions, Mahayana Buddhism, or a mixture of Mahayana ideology and Vajrayana ritual practice.

### Illustrated Manuscripts of North India and Tibet

A vast array of Mahayana and Vajrayana texts in the form of illustrated manuscripts was available for study at Nalanda. Surviving copies of these manuscripts offer a window into the changing Buddhist practices of north India. This folio depicting Avalokiteshvara (fig. 20) is one of at least fourteen pictures of Buddhist deities that originally embellished the now-dispersed pages of an early twelfth-century palm-leaf manuscript of the *Ashtasahasrika Prajnaparamita* (Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Verses). Executed by an artist of great skill, they are among the finest palm-leaf manuscript illustrations to survive from the Indian subcontinent.

The *Ashtasahasrika Prajnaparamita* was meant to contain the totality of Mahayana doctrine, which explains in part why far more copies of it were produced at this time than of any other Buddhist text. This is true in Tibet as well, where a significant number of north Indian palm-leaf texts (and many Tibetan translations of them done on paper) survive in extant monastic libraries. The great merit generated by commissioning a manuscript of the *Ashtasahasrika Prajnaparamita* also helps us to understand why so many were made.<sup>43</sup> Exquisite (and expensive) illuminations were particularly desirable, not only for the greater merit they accrued to the patron commissioning them but also because the beauty of the presentation was equated with the refined and enlightened content of the text. The placement of the deities illustrated does not directly correspond to the text;





rather, it seems that they functioned to protect and make the manuscript auspicious. One wonders, then, if this often-reproduced text was actually read for its content or—seeing as it contained the totality of Mahayana ideology and thus was suitable as an object to be venerated—whether it functioned almost like an image or, better yet, a relic of the Buddhist dharma.

Although the great libraries at Nalanda, Vikramashila, and other centers of Buddhist scholarship in India were destroyed, many of the original Sanskrit texts were taken to Tibet. In fact, the Buddhist palm-leaf manuscripts of north India still exist today only because they were removed from the wet monsoon climate of the Ganges basin, in which they would have deteriorated over time, and taken by monks to Tibet, whose cold, dry climate helped preserve them. The monastic libraries of Tibet housed numerous examples of palm-leaf manuscripts, crucial references for Tibetan artists seeking to make copies of them. The earliest Tibetan manuscripts, accordingly, are fairly long and narrow, like their palm-leaf prototypes, and their wood protective covers are relatively thin, following the north Indian format. Almost immediately, however, the Tibetans enlarged their books and made them more rectangular, a natural consequence of having to use paper instead of palm leaves, which were unavailable.<sup>44</sup>

These late eleventh- or twelfth-century covers in the emerging Tibetan style (fig. 21) are clearly related to the north Indian manuscript tradition but are more formal and iconographically complex, typical of Tibetan examples. One reason for this is that Tibetan iconography, as noted above, closely follows textual sources, whereas in India oral traditions or artistic conventions encouraged a less standardized approach. The inner surface of the upper cover (fig. 21, top) shows some of the most important Buddhist deities to emerge from the Mahayana tradition: at center is the Buddha at the moment of his enlightenment; to his right are the bodhisattvas Manjushri and Vajrapani; and to his left sit Shadakshari Lokeshvara and Tara. Together these deities represent enlightenment, compassion, correct method and practice, and protection from worldly harm. The lower cover (fig. 21, bottom), in stark contrast, illustrates a group of fierce protective deities flanking a central bodhisattva: Achala and Marichi to the bodhisattva's right, and Mahapratisara and Mahakala to his left. Although all these protector deities from the esoteric Vajrayana tradition appear in north Indian sculptures and manuscript illustrations, they are never grouped in a set like this. Considering that they figure prominently in esoteric texts and individually as protector

20. Folio from a Manuscript of the Ashtasahasrika Prajnaparamita (*Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Verses*). India (West Bengal) or Bangladesh, Pala period, early 12th century. Opaque watercolor on palm leaf; page, 2¼ × 16½ in. (7 × 41.8 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Purchase, Lila Acheson Wallace Gift, 2001 (2001.445j)



21. *Pair of Manuscript Covers with Five Deities Each*. Tibet, late 11th or 12th century. Distemper and gold on wood;  $4\frac{1}{4} \times 22 \times \frac{1}{4}$  in. (10.8 × 55.9 × 0.6 cm). The Kronos Collections

deities in illustrated palm-leaf manuscripts, perhaps we can understand this type of grouping as something that in Tibet emerged out of the textual tradition. Similar sets of protective deities can be found along the bottoms of *tangkas* (for example, figs. 29, 30), suggesting that the figures created and protected the sacred space of the image or text. Following this line of argument, the many protective deities found throughout the *Ashtasahasrika Prajnaparamita* palm-leaf manuscripts likely served a protective function.

The painted inner surfaces of another pair of Tibetan manuscript covers (fig. 22) juxtapose Buddhist deities with teachers. In the upper cover, the compassionate bodhisattva Shadakshari Lokeshvara is flanked by Maitreya to his right and Avalokiteshvara to his left. At the center of the other cover is a monk, likely Atisha, who wears the hat of a *pandita* and is flanked by two other monks. Because all three figures have halos, as in the portrait of Atisha (fig. 3), we can assume that they had the status of enlightened beings. The presence of Atisha on the other cover probably relates to the Indian origins of the enclosed manuscript, attesting to the unbroken transmission of knowledge from teacher to pupil that is so central to Tibetan Buddhist practice. The juxtaposition of the monks with enlightened bodhisattvas also illustrates the Tibetan tradition in which great teachers gained status approaching that of a bodhisattva. In India, small figures of monks sometimes appear on the bases of images as patrons or devotees (see figs. 38, 40), but monks were never accorded a status rivaling that of celestial beings. The gods were seen to inhabit a realm very distant from that of humans, and in fact the only human accorded such status was the founder of Buddhism, Shakyamuni, which gave him tremendous charismatic appeal.

### Contacts with the Hindu Tradition

For a mid-eleventh-century theologian like Atisha, the foundation of Buddhist ideology was the Mahayana canon. But Atisha's biographers speak of his knowledge of the *Guhyasamaja Tantra*,<sup>45</sup> one of the oldest and most important of the esoteric Tantric texts, which addresses mandalic structures and a variety of protective deities. Most





22. *Pair of Manuscript Covers with Three Bodhisattvas and Three Hierarchs*. Tibet, ca. 12th century. Distemper and gold on wood; 4 $\frac{1}{8}$  × 14 $\frac{1}{8}$  in. (10.5 × 35.9 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Gift of The Kronos Collections, 1995 (1995.569.4a, b)

eleventh-century Tibetan imagery nonetheless relates to Mahayana ideology, not to the more esoteric practices that became increasingly important in Tibet by the thirteenth century. This juxtaposition of mainstream Mahayana Buddhism with Vajrayana and Tantric ritual can be traced in part to a Buddhist interpretation of ideas coming out of the Hindu and Jain traditions.

While there is early evidence of interaction and shared tradition among the major South Asian religions, it is only with the codification of Vajrayana practices in the form of texts that we can begin to understand the Tantric Buddhist tradition (as distinct from Tantric Hinduism or Jainism). Many esoteric Buddhist texts emerged and became popular during the Pala-Sena period (8th–12th century), a time of relative stability when the Buddhist communities of north India were competing with Hindu Brahmanical groups for patronage and support. The Vajrayana practices that developed during this period often reflect an attempt to relate the Buddhist dharma through the veneration of ordered sets of deities, who were propitiated through Tantric ceremonies in the great monasteries. These esoteric rituals and ceremonies, led by learned monks and sometimes intended to protect the kingdom from danger,<sup>46</sup> generally involved the recitation of mantras, fire sacrifices (*homa*), visualizations of the deity in question, and probably the use of mandalas, in which the central deity was venerated together with a retinue of divine emanations.<sup>47</sup> It should be noted that Buddhism flourished in north India, but only at the major pilgrimage sites and within the great monasteries. Most of north India was Hindu, and the lion's share of dynastic patronage during the Pala-Sena period went to the foundation of temples devoted to Vishnu and, to a lesser degree, Shiva.

One of the most prominent deities in the Museum's copy of the *Ashtasahasrika Prajnaparamita* manuscript is Avalokiteshvara (fig. 23), whose exquisite rendering exhibits a host of links to the Shaiva (associated with Shiva) tradition. Perhaps most striking is the fact that he has been given six arms, a characteristic that marks him as a deity beyond our mundane realm of experience.<sup>48</sup> His hair falls in the matted locks of an





23–24. Six-Armed Avalokiteshvara Expounding the Dharma (left) and Shadakshari Lokeshvara (right): Details of a Folio from a Manuscript of the Ashtasahasrika Prajnaparamita (*Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Verses*). India (West Bengal) or Bangladesh, Pala period, early 12th century. Opaque watercolor on palm leaf; each image,  $2\frac{3}{4} \times 1\frac{1}{8}$  in. (7 × 4.9 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Purchase, Lila Acheson Wallace Gift, 2001 (2001.445j, a)

ascetic, and his upper right hand holds a *mala*, or set of prayer beads, both characteristics of Shiva. His upper left hand grasps a book, and behind it blooms a lotus flower. Avalokiteshvara as a holder of the lotus (*padmapani*) is associated with some of the earliest images of him found in the Swat Valley and Kashmir, dating to the sixth or seventh century, in which he typically sits like a Hindu god, with one leg pendant, as he does in this illumination. A key difference between Avalokiteshvara and Shiva is that Avalokiteshvara does not have weapons, in accordance with his compassionate nature. His central hands exhibit the teaching gesture (*dharmachakra mudra*), while his open, lower right hand displays the boon-giving *varada mudra*, through which he dispenses divine favors. Like Shiva he is an ascetic who draws power from meditation undertaken in the wilderness, hence the foliage in the background, while the lotus seat and the surrounding architecture are intended to aggrandize Avalokiteshvara and mark him as a celestial being.

The illuminations in the manuscript also include various manifestations of Avalokiteshvara, such as the four-armed Shadakshari Lokeshvara (fig. 24). In this form Avalokiteshvara is understood to personify the mantra *om mani padme hum* (“jewel of the lotus”), which became central to the esoteric traditions of India and Tibet. The mantra first appears in the *Karandavyuha Sutra*, a fifth-century Kashmiri text that explains how Avalokiteshvara can manifest in different forms (*ishvaras*), including that of Shiva.<sup>49</sup> In turn, some images of Shiva produced at this time exhibit the same kind of iconographic fluidity. A twelfth-century carving from Bangladesh or West Bengal (fig. 25), for example, depicts Shiva with six arms sitting on a lotus throne, and with his legs crossed in a yogic posture. His central hands rest in his lap in the gesture of meditation (*dhyana mudra*). He holds a *mala* in his lower right hand, an ascetic’s water flask in his left, and his upper right hand likely held a trident: overall, an extremely rare iconographic configuration that visually relates the powerful Hindu ascetic deity to images of Avalokiteshvara.



This esoteric form of Shiva was associated with the popular Hindu *Mrityunjaya* mantra,<sup>50</sup> in which the devotee appeals to the *Mrityunjaya* form of the god in order to defeat death (by overcoming a disease, for example) and thereby break free from the cycle of rebirth to reach *moksha*, or liberation. The same concept also became popular in the Vajrayana Buddhist tradition, namely, that through Tantric practice one could overcome death and reincarnation. One of the largest early Tibetan *tangkas* (fig. 26) represents the Buddha Amitayus, a deity who is conceptually similar to the *Mrityunjaya* form of Shiva. Understood as an aspect of the Tathagata Buddha Amitabha, Amitayus provides the devotee health and long life and in this way helps one to escape from the cycle of rebirth. He sits in meditation holding a *kalasha* (vase) filled with *amrita* (nectar of immortality), emphasizing his role as a Buddha of limitless life and pristine awareness.<sup>51</sup> These ideas



25. Seated Six-Armed Shiva as Conqueror of Death (*Mrityunjaya*). Bangladesh or India (West Bengal), Pala period, 12th century. Schist; 39 × 18½ in. (99.1 × 47 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Gift of Florence and Herbert Irving, in memory of Alice Boney, 1991 (1991.421)

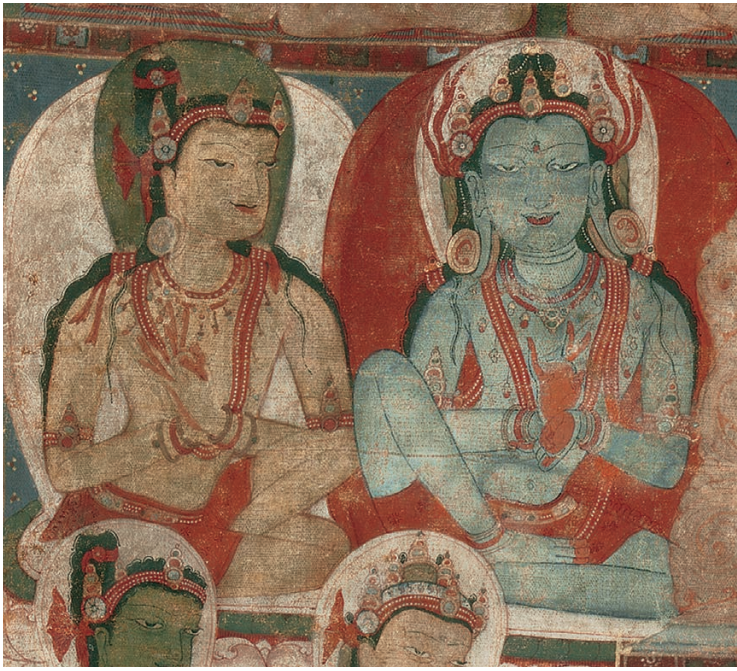
became particularly important in Tibet, where they were embodied by ferocious protector deities such as Yamantaka, who destroys Yama (death) and in this way offers the devotee an escape from the cycle of rebirth.

The painting presents Amitayus somewhat dramatically as a massive, introspective figure sitting in a perfect state of meditation. He wears a jeweled crown with fluttering ribbons, and his many necklaces, bracelets, and luxurious textiles emphasize his radiant yellow body, which sparkles in the light. (The shimmering surface particles, which look almost like mica, were not part of the original composition; they appeared over time as arsenic crystals formed from the orpiment pigments used for the bold yellow coloring of the body.)<sup>52</sup> The many smaller celestial beings painted in green, blue, and yellow that fill the upper part of the *tangka* (fig. 27) contribute to Amitayus's sense of monumentality. Standing



26. *Buddha Amitayus Attended by Bodhisattvas*. Tibet, 11th or early 12th century. Mineral and organic pigments on cloth; overall, 54½ × 41¾ in. (138.4 × 106.1 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Rogers Fund, 1989 (1989.284)





to either side of the main figure are the bodhisattvas Avalokiteshvara, in white, and probably Maitreya, in yellow. This configuration—with rows of celestial beings encircling the central figure—emerged in the eleventh century as the primary means of visually representing the celestial realms, or pure lands, and must have appealed greatly to its Tibetan audience, as it continued well into the thirteenth century. A similar grouping can be seen in a pair of early images of the Tathagata Buddhas, discussed below.

Above Amitayus is a row of figures dressed in robes and flat hats who seem to be lay followers; in later periods this position was reserved for figures representing the monastic lineage of important teachers. At lower left are two additional lay followers, likely the donors of the work, while at lower right, seated before a table of offering and consecratory implements, is a monk represented in an almost caricatural style (fig. 28) that recalls the wall paintings of the central Tibetan Drathang monastery.<sup>53</sup> Intrinsic to the power and legitimacy of this image is the *ye dharma* passage inscribed on the back immediately behind the figure of Amitayus—a consecration identical to that on the sculpted Buddha image from Nalanda (fig. 6)—which imbued the painting with an almost reliclike status.

### **Tathagata Buddhas on a Pair of Early Tibetan *Tangkas***

When Atisha left for Tibet, one of the central Mahayana ideas he brought with him and advocated was the veneration of the five Tathagatas in their pure lands, an ideological framework that in India came to be merged with Tantric ideas. After crossing the Himalayas, he stayed first at the western Tibetan site of Tholing, where a temple from this period still exists. The temple has four directional shrines—which, as noted above, probably contained images of the Tathagatas—and is comparable to the main temple at Vikramashila, where Atisha had presided as abbot. Although no sculptures survive in the shrines at Tholing, the iconography of the Tathagatas does appear

27–28. Details of fig. 26, showing two celestial beings (left) and a monk (right)





29. *Amoghasiddhi, Buddha of the Northern Pure Land*. Tibet, late 11th century. Mineral and organic pigments on cloth; 30 $\frac{3}{8}$  × 22 $\frac{1}{2}$  in. (78.4 × 57.2 cm). The Kronos Collections

30. *Ratnasambhava, Buddha of the Southern Pure Land*. Tibet, late 11th century. Mineral and organic pigments on cloth; 30 $\frac{3}{8}$  × 22 $\frac{1}{2}$  in. (78.4 × 57.2 cm). Collection of Michael McCormick

in a handful of early portable *tangkas*, including these late eleventh-century depictions of Amoghasiddhi, Buddha of the northern pure land (fig. 29), and Ratnasambhava, Buddha of the southern pure land (fig. 30). The *tangkas* are from a set that originally would have included all five of the Tathagata Buddhas; presumably, they would have been displayed in a fashion similar to that seen in the wall painting at Shalu monastery (fig. 16).

In the Amoghasiddhi *tangka*, the Buddha sits on a lotus throne and is flanked by bodhisattvas as a host of celestial attendants looks down from above. He can be identified as Amoghasiddhi, the Buddha of unfailing power, based on his green color and his hand gesture, the *abhaya mudra*, suggesting that one should fear not and approach. His





crown and elaborate jewelry befit one who resides in a heaven, characteristics he shares with the crowned Buddhas of north India (see fig. 15). Both the Amoghasiddhi and Ratnasambhava *tangkas* organize the various visual elements in a coherent, interacting structure with a hierarchy of scale relative to importance.<sup>34</sup> The fact that the figures are compressed to the foreground and stacked one above another focuses our attention on the figure of the celestial Buddha, a compositional mode closely related to the relief sculpture of north India, such as the Buddha from Nalanda (fig. 6). Significantly, both *tangkas* lack representations of Tibetan lineage teachers, consecration scenes, and donors, secondary figures that typically appear in Tibetan *tangkas* to mark a sectarian affiliation



(see figs. 26, 34). Their absence is a strong indicator that these works must have been done at the very beginning of the *tangka* tradition, before such practices had been standardized.<sup>55</sup>

### Green Taras, Fierce Goddesses, and Ferocious Protectors

The emanations of Amoghasiddhi, Buddha of the northern pure land, include the female bodhisattva Tara, who appears in a range of specific forms and iconographic variants (fig. 31). She is described as being “of green color,” like Amoghasiddhi, and she “bears the image of Amoghasiddhi on her tiara.”<sup>56</sup> Tara was seen as more accessible than

Amoghasiddhi, providing lay worshippers spiritual access to this enlightened being and, by extension, to an expedited path to the Buddhist dharma and enlightenment. She was one of the most important deities in north India at the time of Atisha’s departure for Tibet. Indeed, Atisha’s biography speaks of his offering prayers to the goddess and of her appearing in his dreams. It was Tara, in fact, who revealed to Atisha that he would be of great service to the living beings of Tibet.<sup>57</sup>

Tara’s popularity in north India is attested by the great numbers of images of her executed in stone and bronze at sites such as Nalanda and Vikramashila. A survey of imagery from the great north Indian monasteries reveals that the only deities represented more often than Tara were the Buddha himself and Avalokiteshvara.<sup>58</sup> In the South Asian Buddhist tradition, goddesses

such as Tara are associated with being animate and alive or, more broadly, with action of any sort. In this regard, even thinking was considered an action, and these types of goddesses came to personify the idea of cognition (goddesses of learning). They were also seen as fierce protectors and associated with the earth and agricultural abundance (such as the figure of Vasudhara in fig. 6). Like Avalokiteshvara, Tara is a bodhisattva of compassion, and in the palm-leaf manuscript illustration she is shown dispensing boons, indicated by her lower hand in the *varada mudra*. Her status as a divine being is confirmed by her radiate halo, lotus base, and the elaborate umbrella held over her head by an attendant. She is also understood to be dripping nectar into the mouth of the hungry ghost, or *preta*, sitting below her, whose belly is swollen from starvation. Tara’s dynamic, twisting posture emphasizes the volumes of her body, a mode of representation that connects her to the more widespread goddess traditions of India that were increasingly important to the Buddhist lay community but also to Hindus and Jains. And while she is a canonic deity of Mahayana Buddhism, the painting employs the visual language of fervent and passionate devotion common to worship in many Indian religions.



31. *Green Tara Dispensing Boons to Ecstatic Devotees: Detail of a Folio from a Manuscript of the Ashtasahasrika Prajnaparamita (Perfection of Wisdom in Eight-Thousand Verses)*. India (West Bengal) or Bangladesh, Pala period, early 12th century. Opaque watercolor on palm leaf; image, 2¾ × 1⅞ in. (7 × 4.9 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Purchase, Lila Acheson Wallace Gift, 2001 (2001.445i)



The monastic population, too, actively venerated Tara, especially as she came to be associated with the intellectual content of the Buddhist canon of texts. In a small Tibetan personal image from about the thirteenth century (fig. 32), Tara is shown seated on a lotus with her hand held in the teaching gesture (*dharmacakra mudra*). Her exact identification is uncertain because the flower stalk to her left could suggest an affiliation with Avalokiteshvara, who typically holds a lotus, but equally could have supported an attribute that would give this Tara a more specific Buddhist identity. If it supported a book, then she would be Prajnaparamita, the personification of the Perfection of Wisdom manuscript (the *Ashtasahasrika Prajnaparamita* discussed above), and as such she would represent the totality of the Mahayana canon and be the very incarnation of wisdom. In other words, the image—like so many religious images from this period—represents an ideological concept in the form of a deity suitable for veneration.

A Tibetan *tangka* from the late twelfth century<sup>59</sup> depicts Green Ashtamahabhaya Tara, a form of the goddess related to her role as protector from the eight great perils outlined in the seventh-century Sanskrit text *Arya Tara Astabhaya*, which Atisha helped translate (fig. 34).<sup>60</sup> She appears eight times in the side registers of the painting, corresponding to each of the perils: lions, snakes, thieves, enslavement, *yakshas* (demons), shipwreck, fire, and rampaging elephants. The perils are also found on this fragment of a shrine relief from Himachal Pradesh, in the foothills of the Himalayas (fig. 33). For the monks, merchants, and lay community these perils were real physical concerns, perhaps explaining why this iconography has been found across the Himalayas and at monastic centers in eastern India. The perils could also have been understood metaphorically, however, as barriers blocking one's path to enlightenment. Framing Tara and the many surrounding subsidiary deities in the *tangka* are yellow, red, and blue prongs meant to evoke the rocky mountains where she is said to reside. The jungle foliage at top is a specific reference to the magical *khadira* (acacia) grove where this form of Tara (Khadiravani Tara) is said to dwell. Khadiravani Tara was the form of the goddess Atisha consulted as his tutelary deity before considering going to Tibet,<sup>61</sup> underscoring her key role as a protector. A monk, likely Atisha, appears at left, immediately above the frame containing Tara; at right is probably Atisha's primary Tibetan disciple, the layman Dromtom, who founded the Reting monastery.<sup>62</sup>

Among early Tibetan *tangkas* this Tara *tangka* is arguably the most closely related to the now-lost Indian tradition of *pata*, or paintings on cloth.<sup>63</sup> Indian Sanskrit texts describe *pata* painting techniques in detail and speak of their religious efficaciousness,<sup>64</sup> so clearly they were an important north Indian art form and would have been a source for the emerging *tangka* tradition of Tibet. According to the Tibetan historian Tsuklak Trhengwa (1504–1566), while in Tibet Atisha commissioned *patas* from the Vikramashila monastery.<sup>65</sup> That Khadiravani Tara was Atisha's tutelary deity might explain in part why she appears as the subject of this *tangka*, which indeed was likely based on a north Indian *pata*. The Tara *tangka* can also be readily compared with north Indian palm-leaf manuscript illustrations,



32. *Seated Tara*. Tibet, ca. 13th century. Bronze with silver inlay; H. 4 $\frac{7}{8}$  in. (12.4 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Samuel Eilenberg Collection, Gift of Samuel Eilenberg, 1987 (1987.142.36)





33. *Fragment of a Shrine Relief Depicting Ashtamahabhaya Tara*. India (Himachal Pradesh), 10th–11th century. Wood; 17¼ × 8¾ × 2½ in. (45.1 × 21.9 × 6.7 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Gift of The Kronos Collections, 1994 (1994.488)



34. *Ashtamahabhaya Tara (Khadiravani Tara)*. Tibet, Reting monastery, late 12th century. Mineral and organic pigments on cloth; 48¼ × 31½ in. (122.6 × 80 cm). Collection of John and Berthe Ford

including this example of a bodhisattva in a mountain grotto (fig. 35; see also fig. 36), as well as with the Green Tara from the *Ashtasahasrika Prajnaparamita* manuscript (see fig. 31). Some scholars have even suggested that the Tara *tangka* may actually be a north Indian *pata*<sup>66</sup> based on the presence of north Indian motifs, the overall treatment of the main figure, and comparisons with sculpture from Bihar and Bangladesh as well as with wall paintings from Pagan.<sup>67</sup> Yet such visual connections are to be expected among images made at this time, and they tell us little about where the Tara *tangka* was actually created. It is tempting to believe, for example, given the painting's close relation to Indian forms and the complexity of its imagery, that it was produced in India, but it employs several iconographic conventions unknown in Indian art, such as the row of Tathagata Buddhas and two bodhisattvas at top or the row of protective, multiarmed male and female deities along the bottom. So while it is unlikely that this is a rare example of a north Indian *pata*, it is conceivable that an Indian artist could have produced it in Tibet for a local patron.<sup>68</sup>

Key to our understanding of the emergence of this type of Buddhist protector figure in north India and Tibet is the increasing emphasis on fierce female deities. This shift was





partly a reaction by Buddhist practitioners to the growing importance of the Hindu goddess tradition, centered on the veneration of the goddess Durga and her ferocious manifestation, Kali, who sweeps away corruption in the form of slain demons. As goddesses are associated with action, they are often venerated precisely because they have the potential to control the material world. One of the illustrations in the *Ashtasahasrika Prajnaparamita* manuscript, for example, shows a four-armed Kurukulla dancing on a corpse inside a flaming mandorla, illustrating this goddess's role as a destroyer of corruption (fig. 36). By reciting Kurukulla's mantra ten thousand times, the Vajrayana Buddhist practitioner was believed to be able to subdue and bewitch men and women; with even more recitations, the goddess would facilitate control over ministers or kings.<sup>69</sup> Like many of the aggressive deities who emerged from the esoteric tradition, Kurukulla is understood to be an emanation of one of the Tathagatas, in this case the calm, celestial Buddha Amitabha, who presides over the western pure land. Such dualistic female-male/aggressive-pacific relationships typify how the emerging Vajrayana pantheon gave visual form to the wide breadth of the Buddhist tradition's ideological discourse and devotional practice.

In the north Indian context, popular forms of the ferocious goddesses first appeared in sacred areas as large stone devotional images, such as this eight-armed Tara (fig. 37) who may be the goddess Mahapratisara, a protector and emanation of the celestial Buddha Ratnasambhava (fig. 30), although we cannot be certain, because Mahapratisara typically has three faces. Like the Buddha from Nalanda (fig. 6), she sits in a yogic posture on a lotus throne supported by lions, but like the Hindu goddess Durga she also holds an array of weapons—including a trident, sword, axe, and *chakra* (a wheel, or war discus)—which in the Buddhist context are associated with the idea of cutting away illusion to clear a path for the devotee to reach enlightenment.<sup>70</sup> The noose in her lower left hand is said to catch ignorant souls, while the *vajra* in her lower right hand (from which Vajrayana Buddhism derives its name) represents the adamantine thunderbolt that cuts through ignorance and delusion. She also holds a palm-leaf manuscript, suggesting that

35. *Bodhisattva in a Mountain Grotto Playing a Stringed Instrument (Vina): Detail of a Folio from a Manuscript of the Pancavimsatisahasrika Prajnaparamita (Perfection of Wisdom in Twenty-Five Thousand Verses)*. India (West Bengal) or Bangladesh, Pala period, late 11th century. Ink and color on palm leaf; 2¼ × 22½ in. (5.7 × 57.2 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Rogers Fund, 1955 (55.121.36.8)

36. *Kurukulla Dancing in Her Mountain Grotto: Detail of a Folio from a Manuscript of the Ashtasahasrika Prajnaparamita (Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Verses)*. India (West Bengal) or Bangladesh, Pala period, early 12th century. Opaque watercolor on palm leaf; image, 2¾ × 1⅞ in. (7 × 4.9 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Purchase, Lila Acheson Wallace Gift, 2001 (2001.445c)



she, like the goddess Prajnaparamita, is a personification or embodiment of the ideological content of the text.

By the time Atisha had become the head of the Vikramashila monastery, male ferocious protectors, too, had started to appear occasionally in the public Buddhist sanctuaries of north India, including Mahakala, subject of this eleventh- or twelfth-century devotional icon (fig. 38). Mahakala's terrible nature was actually reassuring to the faithful, as he destroyed evil and corruption and was understood as a fierce manifestation of the compassionate bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara. According to north Indian texts, Mahakala will eat raw anyone who "hates his preceptor [teacher], is adversely disposed to the Three Jewels [the Buddha, the monastic community, and the dharma], and destroys many animals."<sup>71</sup> In devotional practice, Mahakala was propitiated so that he would destroy the enemies of Buddhism and protect teachers of the faith. Mahakala's upper hands hold a sword and a vajra-topped staff called a *khatvanga*, which here resembles a trident. His lower left hand grasps a skull cup, understood to contain blood, and his broken right hand probably held a flaying knife or chopper, all weapons associated with the destruction of one's own ignorance and ego in the pursuit of liberation.

Mahakala's role greatly expanded in Tibet, where his protection of monasteries and the dharma was particularly emphasized. The north Indian devotional icon of him was likely situated near the entrance to a shrine so that Mahakala could guard the sacred enclosure much like a door guardian (*dvarapala*), a role he often assumed in Tibet and Nepal. Like the *yakshas* of earlier periods—demons who were sometimes converted to help protect Buddhists from ghosts and malevolent forces<sup>72</sup>—Mahakala is shown with a potbelly and is adorned with skulls and snakes. His flaming halo and the flamelike treatment of his hair

37. *Tara, Probably Mahapratishara, the Buddhist Protectress.* India (Bihar), Pala period, 10th century. Schist; 22¾ × 15 × 7 in. (57.8 × 38.1 × 17.8 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Purchase, Florence and Herbert Irving Gift, 1991 (1991.108)

38. *Four-Armed Mahakala.* India (Bihar), Pala period, 11th–12th century. Schist; 23 × 11¾ × 4½ in. (58.4 × 29.8 × 11.4 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Samuel Eilenberg Collection, Gift of Samuel Eilenberg, in memory of Anthony Gardner, 1996 (1996.465)



can be directly related to the iconography of the fierce goddesses described above. Mahakala's very name is linked to his nature as a deity: *maha* means "great" and *kala* can mean "time," and when combined they refer to his role as the eternal devourer of all things. *Kala* can also mean "black" or "darkness," hence his characterization as the Great Black One, a deity whose violent, destructive nature defines the painted images of him that later became widely popular in Tibet and Nepal.

Mahakala's dramatic clearing away of defilements is readily associated with Tantric Vajrayana practices, but his role as a protector of the dharma is also in perfect accord with the Mahayana tradition. The Tibetan historian Taranatha tells of how the great Mahayana Buddhist scholar Nagarjuna of Nalanda established 108 Mahayana centers and a corresponding 108 temples and placed in each of them an image of Mahakala. At Bodhgaya, according to Taranatha, he even had Mahakala images installed on two pillars behind the Bodhi tree in an effort to protect it.<sup>73</sup> In spite of these accounts, only a handful of stone images of Mahakala have been found in north Indian Buddhist sacred areas, and very few Tibetan Mahakala images from the eleventh and twelfth centuries are known,<sup>74</sup> suggesting that devotion to him was just beginning to take hold when the Buddhist community of north India collapsed. The Tibetan examples that do exist correspond closely to north Indian reliefs, such as this twelfth-century carving (fig. 39). The work's small size suggests that it functioned as a personal devotional image, as it would have made little visual impact in a large public space. In later centuries, in contrast, images of Mahakala were not only extremely widespread, they often assumed massive proportions, typically in the form of wall paintings, signaling the great relevance that this protector came to have in the Tibetan context.

### Tantric Imagery of India, Nepal, and Tibet

By the eleventh century, images of Vajrayana devotional deities began to appear in greater numbers in Bengal and Bangladesh, where Tantric practices held greatest sway. This multiarmed representation of Manjuvajra, an esoteric manifestation of the bodhisattva Manjushri, is a true masterpiece of India's late Buddhist tradition (fig. 40). The artist managed to present Manjuvajra sensitively while at the same time integrating all the complex iconography so essential to devotional visualization. He is shown sitting in a temple, conveyed by the tower that surmounts the lobed arch above his head. To the left and right of the main tower, in the upper part of the relief, are stupas marking the four cardinal directions and the boundaries of Manjuvajra's mandala, each of which contains a manifestation of him. Below his lotus throne and set within foliage are the auspicious deities Jambhala and Hariti, who bring wealth and protect against illness. The *Nishpanna Yogavali* (Garland of Perfection Yoga), a Vajrayana text written in the eleventh or twelfth century, provides a precise description of Manjuvajra through which the devotee was meant to visualize him and thereby potentially gain wisdom,



39. *Four-Armed Mahakala*. Tibet, 12th century. Stone with polychrome; 4½ × 3⅞ in. (11.3 × 9.1 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Promised Gift of Florence and Herbert Irving (L.1994.6.3)







retentive memory, intelligence, and eloquence: the very skills required to understand and master complex texts such as the *Nishpanna Yogavali*. The text says he holds a sword, bow, arrows, and a blue lotus, an iconography that corresponds closely to that of the sculpted image.<sup>75</sup> Manjuvajra is also described as having three faces and embracing his consort, Prajna, whose presence is implied in the sculpture by the crossed arms. The *Nishpanna Yogavali* draws parallels between numerous aspects of Manjuvajra's physical appearance and important Vajrayana concepts; his three heads, for example, relate to the three great mantra families, the three clear visions, and the three ways of escape, while his six arms convey the six supranormal cognitions and the six remembrances. Interestingly, even this fully articulated Vajrayana conception of Manjuvajra maintains a basic relationship to the Mahayana tradition, for the text, in addition to describing Manjuvajra's mandala, notes that it is surrounded by four of the five Tathagata Buddhas.<sup>76</sup>

That Vikramashila, the renowned center of Mahayana scholarship where Atisha was abbot—and where the text of the *Nishpanna Yogavali* was written—was also a place of Tantric practice is a recurring theme in Taranatha's *History of Buddhism in India*. In one instance he describes how a monk named Riripa “made big offerings to Chakrasamvara,” a powerful Buddhist protective deity, when Vikramashila was attacked, thereby repelling the invading army and killing its chief and many soldiers.<sup>77</sup> Vajrayana rituals were undoubtedly understood to have tangible value for solving problems in this world, and through supplications to a deity like Chakrasamvara they could be put to pragmatic effect. Many travelers, for instance, seeking protection from the perils of the journey between north India and Tibet, brought along small portable images of powerful deities such as this delicately carved image of Chakrasamvara and his consort, Vajravarahi (fig. 41).<sup>78</sup> The twelve-armed Chakrasamvara, who was especially popular in Bengal and Bangladesh, can be directly compared to images of Shiva,<sup>79</sup> attesting to the ideological exchange and competition between Hinduism and Buddhism at the time. Numerous esoteric deities from north India made their way to Tibet in the form of small bronzes, and many more closely resembling the north Indian prototypes were cast in Tibet. Perhaps the Tibetans wanted to ensure a safe return over the Himalayas, or maybe such images simply appealed to a Tibetan audience interested in Tantric aspects of north Indian Buddhism. It is important to remember that the north Indian Buddhist community, unlike the Tibetans at the time, would have had ready access to the Hindu tradition and its vast array of fierce destroyers of demons (Shiva, Durga, and Kali are the most obvious examples). In this sense a Buddhist protective deity such as Chakrasamvara may have been more significant outside India, perhaps one reason that such figures appear with greater frequency in Tibet and Nepal than they do in India proper.

40. *Manjuvajra*. Bangladesh or India (West Bengal), Pala period, 11th century. Schist; 50¾ × 23¾ × 9½ in. (128.9 × 60.3 × 24.1 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Bequest of Cora Timken Burnett, 1956 (57.51.6)



41. *Twelve-Armed Chakrasamvara and His Consort, Vajravarahi*. India (West Bengal) or Bangladesh, ca. 12th century. Schist; H. 5 in. (12.7 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Perry J. Lewis, 1988 (1988.392)





42. *Chakrasamvara Mandala*.  
Nepal, ca. 1100. Distemper  
on cloth; image, 26½ × 19¾ in.  
(67.3 × 50.2 cm). The Metropolitan  
Museum of Art, New York; Rogers  
Fund, 1995 (1995.233)

Attesting to Nepal's place in this complex exchange of influence is a *tangka* depicting Chakrasamvara in sexual embrace with Vajravahri. In marked contrast to the portable sculpture of the subject from India, the painting—one of the earliest large-scale *tangkas* to survive from Nepal—contextualizes the deities within an intricate mandala: a six-petal lotus framed by a square, palatial structure with gateways in the four directions (fig. 42). The palace is set within circles bounded by *vajras* and flames. Along the edges are the eight great cremation grounds, emblematic of the various realms of existence, where *siddhas* (ascetic Buddhist practitioners) meditate under trees; below are five forms of the compassionate goddess Tara. Presenting Chakrasamvara and Vajravahri in such a ritual diagram accords



with the text of the *Chakrasamvara Tantra*, a Vajrayana text that originated on the plains of north India. But painted mandalas from the region are not known or simply do not survive. Only outside India proper do we find artists presenting this type of complex Buddhist ideology in these remarkable and portable visual formats.

### **Tibetan Buddhist Forms and Twenty-First-Century Ideas**

Today a rapidly evolving contemporary art movement has emerged both in Tibet and across the world in conjunction with the Tibetan diaspora, offering a wide range of perspectives on Buddhism and modern Buddhist practice.<sup>80</sup> Two contemporary Tibetan artists, Tenzing Rigdol and Gonkar Gyatso, both address Buddhist themes, but their intended audiences are global in scope, and their works are primarily vehicles of artistic expression and vision rather than objects of devotion. Nonetheless, merely presenting a Buddha or bodhisattva in a work of art charges it with a certain meaning, regardless of artistic intent. Buddhist ideas, traditional texts, and the current monastic tradition ground these images historically in a religious context even if a contemporary viewer might not read them as “Buddhist art.” Ironically, the imagery coming out of India in the eleventh century was likely perceived by its new Tibetan audience in a roughly similar way: as unfamiliar but somehow conveying subtle truths of profound spiritual significance.

Buddhist imagery typically derives its strength and legitimacy from long-established canons of iconography and meaning. These contemporary works, in contrast, are unique in form and consequently open to new interpretations. As they engage with some of the same complexities inherent in the works of religious art made in north India and Tibet nearly a thousand years ago, they raise challenging issues not only of Tibetan cultural identity and tradition, but also of how a new Buddhist iconography can engage the multifaceted and global world of contemporary art.

Tenzing Rigdol’s figure of Avalokiteshvara (fig. 43) stands within a radiant mandorla, burning with the light of his enlightenment or nonexistence, while his eleven heads comment on many realms of knowledge and simultaneous realization. His central hands are held in *anjali mudra*, the gesture of veneration; in this way the figure makes direct reference to Shadakshari Lokeshvara (see fig. 24) and by extension to the Dalai Lama, understood to be an incarnation of this form of Avalokiteshvara. Because the deity’s face has been omitted, the viewer is denied any direct or emotionally charged devotional contact with him, as eye contact is seen as the primary means of accessing the divine in this manner. By omitting the eyes, Tenzing has effectively taken the image out of a devotional context, forcing the viewer to consider it as an independent work of art: the creation of an individual.

Tenzing was raised in Kathmandu, where his parents moved as refugees from Tibet. His highly structured presentation of Avalokiteshvara reflects his study of the traditional Tibetan arts of *tangka* and sand painting at the Shekar Chorten monastery in Nepal. He also studied at the University of Colorado, Denver, earning a BA in art history and a BFA in painting. His artistic approach and vision have thus been shaped not only by Buddhist concepts but also by Western critical theory, art history, performance art, and poetry. If, in this work, Tenzing seems to be reinventing or breaking with Buddhist tradition, we can assume that he does so intentionally and with full knowledge of those traditions.



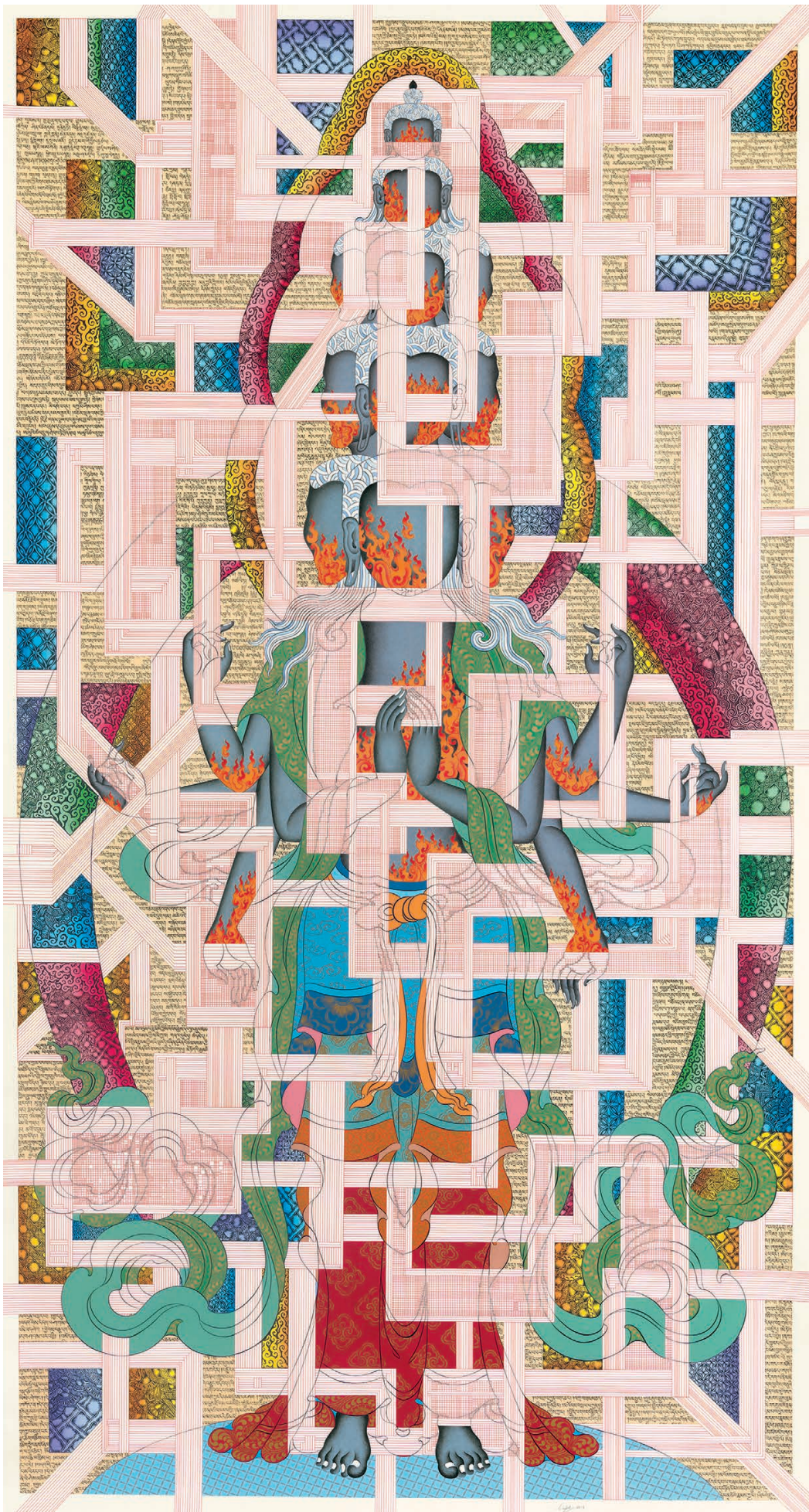
Since the seventeenth century this type of deity has typically been shown in Tibetan paintings amid blue-green mountains, a mode of representation that comes out of the Chinese landscape tradition. Teachers from the great monastic institutions would be depicted at the top, and fierce deities along the bottom would protect the sacred space of the composition (see figs. 29, 30). Tenzing has fractured that traditional space and recontextualized Avalokiteshvara's place within it. His linear architecture creates zones filled with text and areas of vibrantly colored patterns. This aspect of Tenzing's work is imbued with significant personal meaning, for his father's family had a small ink factory in Tibet that made and sold power inks (inks suitable for use in religious texts) to the monasteries. The text he illustrates here is the *Sung-dhue*, a collection of mantras popular across the Tibetan Buddhist tradition that address devotional practice and an intellectual understanding of the dharma. In that regard, the text could be compared to the *ye dharma* passage used to charge devotional objects with the presence of the Buddha's dharma (see figs. 10, 11).

When asked about the grid of lines that unifies the figure and the faceted background space, Tenzing explains that he is trying to reveal the compassionate, human quality of Tibetan Buddhism through traditional means by showing the proportional structures that are part of the preparatory drawing for all *tangka* paintings but usually hidden beneath the finished paint layer. In Tenzing's case, this canon of proportionality is based on the work of the fifteenth-century teacher Menla Dhondrup and serves to ensure that the image is devotionally correct. The linear structure also derives from Tenzing's designs for carpets, made when he worked as a youth in his family's business in Nepal. The grid of a carpetlike weave pervades the painting, delimiting zones in a bold, essential way that seems to reference Malevich or perhaps Mondrian. Underlying the image's potency is Tenzing's personal iconography, which playfully relates to that of the established Buddhist tradition, in particular the transformed and abstracted human figure of Avalokiteshvara, without being either literal or reductive. The painting's charged layers of meaning can thus be openly interpreted by diverse audiences. More difficult to assess is the inherent beauty of the work as a whole: the subtle preciousness that all Buddhist art strives to achieve as a means of evoking the undefinable aspects of transcendence.

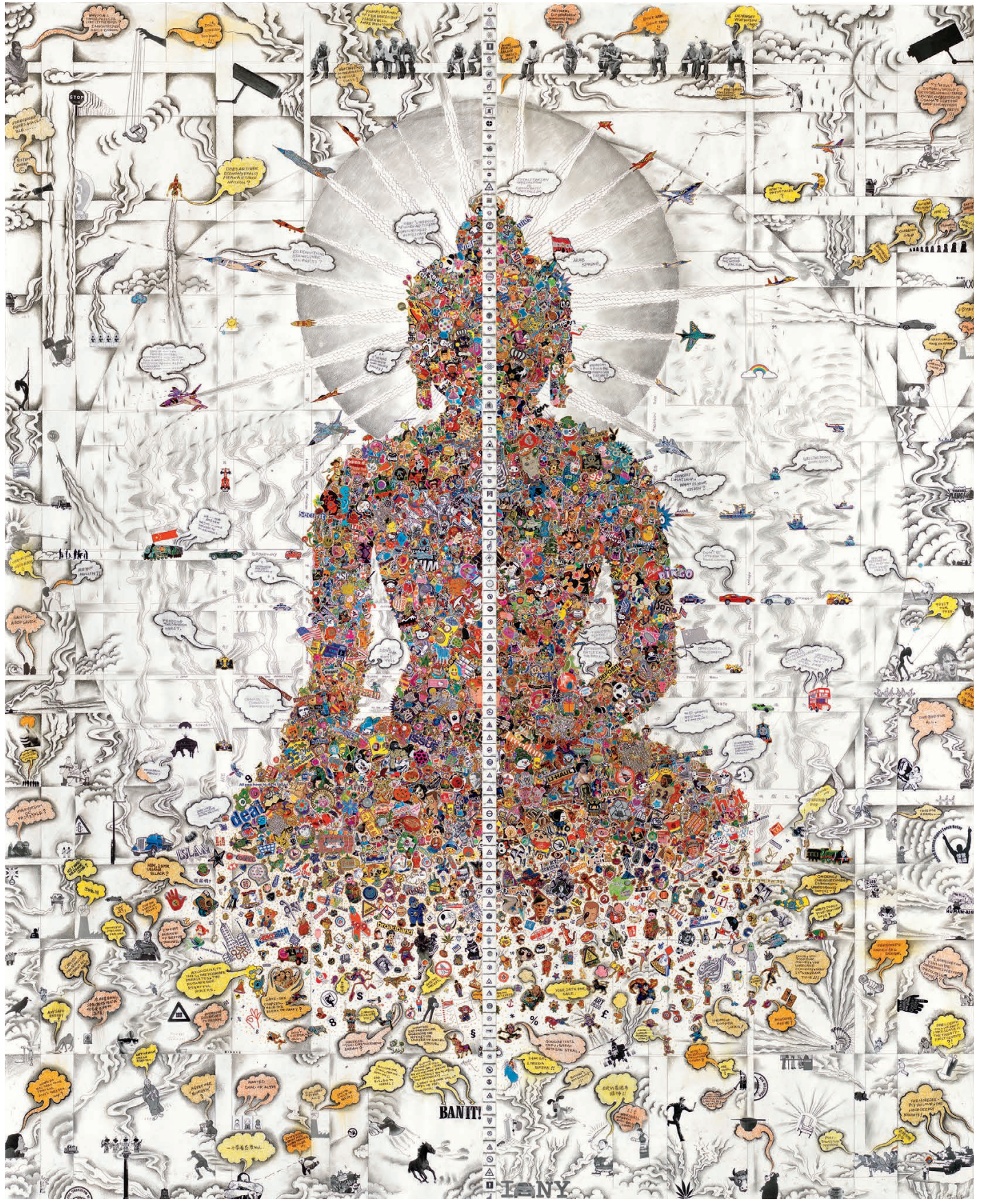
Gonkar Gyatso's massive collage *Dissected Buddha* (fig. 44) could not be more different from Tenzing's Avalokiteshvara in terms of conception and facture, but he, too, tempts the modern viewer by at first showing us what we might expect from a "Buddhist" image: in this case the Buddha reaching down to touch the earth at the moment of his enlightenment, following long-established models (see figs. 5, 6). The grid of streets into which the Buddha is set quickly transmogrifies, however, into an architectural framework teeming with airplanes, rockets, and other vehicles traveling out from and across his halo. The Buddha's body, meanwhile, dissolves into a cacophony of stickers and blurbs, many of them irreverent comments on the state of the world. From a purely Buddhist standpoint, the figures surrounding the Buddha could reference the attack of Mara, the ruler of the realm of illusion and the endless cycle of rebirth, who at the moment of enlightenment sent his army to stop the Buddha by tempting him with material desires, lust, and passions, all of which ultimately took the form of violence. In this climactic moment, the Buddha touched the earth, recalling his many past meritorious actions, thereby vanquishing Mara's army and attaining enlightenment.

43. Tenzing Rigdol (born Kathmandu, 1982). *Pin drop silence*, 2013. Ink, pencil, acrylic, and pastel on paper; 91 $\frac{1}{8}$  × 49 $\frac{1}{8}$  in. (232.7 × 124.8 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Gift of Andrew Cohen, in honor of Tenzing Rigdol and Fabio Rossi, 2013 (2013.627)











One could also argue that *Dissected Buddha* addresses how technology and mass-produced pop culture impair our ability to apprehend the Buddha's enlightened form. This perspective offers a frame for understanding the fractured collage that makes up the Buddha's figure, with its candy-colored stickers<sup>81</sup> and visually appealing cartoon characters, consumer goods, and sinister political figures. The bright, textually dense mass touches upon many diverse, easily dissected aspects of everyday life, including the ubiquitous mass marketing heaped upon us by the Internet. In the end, we may appreciate this imagery in part because it entertains us and delivers the same products and ideas that drive today's global society. The mass defies comprehension, but one is seductively drawn in all the same and rewarded with a rich tapestry of familiar forms, including a collage of whimsical texts and captions questioning the political status quo. The swarm of minutiae demands (and deserves) the viewer's careful attention, but in the process it rapidly distracts from the whole. This is the key to Gonkar's genius: making us experience losing sight of the Buddha amid the irrelevant but glittering fragments of mass-produced consumer media.

The specific content of *Dissected Buddha* relates directly to Gonkar's life and development as an artist. Born in Tibet and raised in Lhasa, Gonkar was first exposed to art as a teenager when he worked as an official guide in the state Tibet Museum. This led to an opportunity to study traditional ink painting at the Central University for Nationalities in Beijing, where he experienced the Beijing art scene just before its transformative explosion in the 1990s. By 1992 Gonkar had moved to Dharamsala, India, where he took up the study of *tangka* painting, and from there he moved to London, earning an MA at the Chelsea College of Art and Design and establishing a gallery for Tibetan artists (he also worked for a few years in New York). He now divides his time among Beijing, Pittsburgh, London, and Lhasa. Thus, although Gonkar addresses issues relevant to Tibet, his outlook is culturally and linguistically complex and truly international, a topic he addressed in an early series of photographs that show him in various guises (from a nineteenth-century *tangka* painter to a London punk) asking the viewer, "Which of these versions of myself fits your stereotype best?"<sup>82</sup> With respect to the image of the Buddha, a central motif of Gonkar's work for the past twenty years, the artist questions its meaning as a symbol of enlightenment in the twenty-first century. "An artist should be free to use the form of the Buddha like a canvas," he says. "Just because it is in the shape of the Buddha does not make it the Buddha."<sup>83</sup> And while this kind of statement could be construed as a threat to tradition, it is philosophically grounded in the long-standing idea that the image of the Buddha is nothing more than a mental projection, without inherent reality. As Gonkar puts it, "When is the Buddha not the Buddha?"

Tenzing's and Gonkar's visually dissimilar works address the essential Buddhist teaching that the past no longer exists and that the only time worth considering is the present. The past, according to this belief, is no more than a fiction based on imperfect memories, shaped by one's ego, and subject to our delusional hopes for the future: a projection of time that cannot exist. From this perspective, all of the works presented here, even those from the eleventh century, become "contemporary" the instant a new global audience confronts them. The compelling idea that they can be understood afresh only in the present moment is a very Buddhist one indeed.

44. Gonkar Gyatso (born Lhasa, 1961). *Dissected Buddha*, 2013. Collage, stickers, pencil and colored pencil, and acrylic on paper; 110¼ × 90½ in. (280 × 229.9 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Promised Gift of Margaret Scott and David Teplitzky

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CRITICAL CAPITALISM



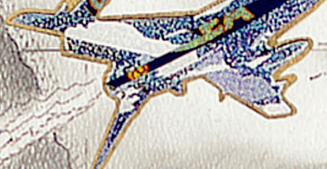
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