



AWAKEN

**A TIBETAN BUDDHIST JOURNEY
TOWARD ENLIGHTENMENT**

Tsherin Sherpa (American, b. 1968, Nepal)

LUXATION 1

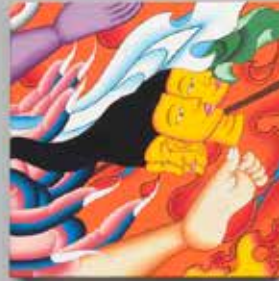
2016

Acrylic on sixteen stretched cotton canvases

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Adolph D. and

Wilkins C. Williams Fund, 2017.195a-p

The fragmented image of the Buddhist deity Vajrabhairava, who is known as conqueror of death, appears chaotic with missing information between the canvases. It may indicate the confusion felt in an unenlightened mind, where only some things can be recognized but the whole picture and its true significance are unclear. This multipanel painting is the artist's response to the devastating earthquake that shook Nepal in 2015. Its title means dislocation or displacement, and it references the cultural dislocation of both the artist and Tibetan Buddhism. The journey plotted by the exhibition leads to a dramatic encounter with this wrathful emanation of wisdom in full view. There we may understand his role in helping to conquer our greatest anxiety—fear of death—and ultimately glimpse reality's true nature.



THE BUDDHA TRIUMPHING OVER MARA

India, probably Bihar; ca. 800–900

Stone

Asian Art Museum of San Francisco

The Avery Brundage Collection, B61S7+

This stone relief shows the Buddha seated under a tree, known as the bodhi tree or the tree of enlightenment, deep in contemplation. With his right hand touching the ground he calls the earth to witness his triumph over the demon Mara, who is often described as the inner forces of illusion and ignorance that prevent the true understanding of reality.

The awakening of the Buddha is said to have happened as three consecutive visions—all of his previous births; the process of beings dying and being reborn according to the qualities of their actions (karma) on a cosmic scale; and the cause of this cycle of birth, death, and rebirth as a dependent arising. He realized the way to break out of this cycle.

The inscription within the halo reads:

*The Buddha has explained the cause of all things
that arise from a cause. He, the great monk, has also
explained their cessation.*



WHEEL OF EXISTENCE

Tibet; early 20th century

Pigments on cloth

Rubin Museum of Art

C2004.21.1 (HAR 65356)

This diagram summarizes the Buddha's enlightening vision under the bodhi tree. It explains the cyclical process of life, death, and rebirth (samsara). The Lord of Death, Yama, grips a wheel driven by three animals representing the mental poisons—attachment (rooster), anger (snake), and ignorance (pig)—at its hub.

In the next circle from the center, people move upward to higher states of consciousness (light) and downward to afflicted states (dark). Their actions, polluted by the poisons, propel them in a continuous cycle of rebirth in the six realms of existence, depicted in the large segments around the two inner circles. These are the realms of gods and demi-gods (top left), humans (top right), animals (lower left), hungry ghosts (lower right), and hells (bottom). The wheel's outer rim is the symbolic chain of causality that binds this closed circle with no clear way out.

When the Buddha comprehended its structure and dynamics of this cycle, he was also able to discern the pathway out of it that others can learn and follow. This is why the Buddha appears both outside the wheel, at the upper right, and within it, pointing the way out by teaching the Dharma.



ELDERS (ARHATS) AJITA, KALIKA, VANAVASIN, VAJRIPUTRA, AND BHADRA

Tibet; 18th century

Pigments on cloth

Rubin Museum of Art

Gift of the Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation

F1998.10.3 (HAR 640)

Arhats are persons who liberated themselves from the cycle of existence, including the original disciples of the Buddha whom he taught after his awakening, when he turned the Wheel of the Dharma. Their monastic practice, study, and moral code represent the path of early Buddhism. They are usually depicted as monks with specific attributes that help identify them. In this painting at the center is the Elder Ajita. Four other elders and attendants surround him. At the upper right is Kalika, at the upper left is Vanavasin, at the lower left is Vajriputra, and at the lower right is Bhadra.

These conventions for depicting elders are said to have come to Tibet from China. Tibetan sets of paintings often depict sixteen or eighteen arhats wearing Chinese style monks' robes. This painting was probably part of a series of similarly composed five paintings.



PAGES FROM *THE PERFECTION OF WISDOM (PRAJNAPARAMITA) SUTRA* MANUSCRIPT

Manjushri (upper left), **Avalokiteshvara** (upper right),
Vajrapani (lower left), and **Vaishravana** (lower right)

Tibet; late 13th century

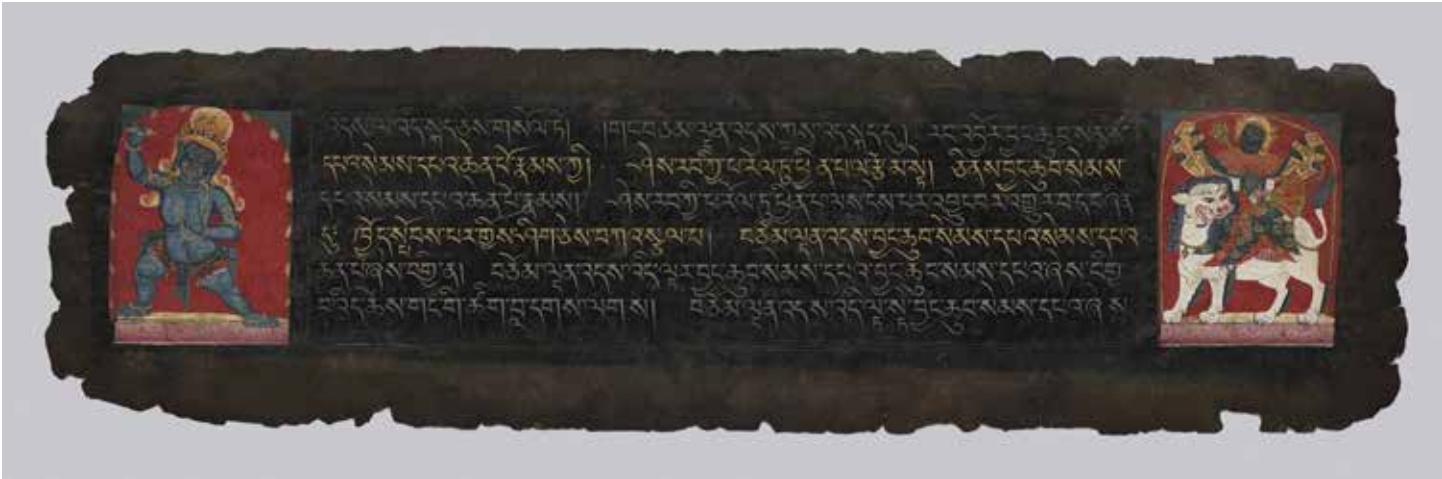
Gold and silver inks and pigments on paper

Rubin Museum of Art

C2006.66.669 (HAR 700123); C2006.66.64 (HAR 700115)

The Buddha's teachings as oral recitations were written down in texts known as sutras and envisioned in images. At the time of their writing, the sutras represented the latest developments in Buddhist philosophy and practice. As one of the earliest and most important, *The Perfection of Wisdom Sutra* presents the means to comprehend and perfect the essential Buddhist wisdom—that the self is a construct—and develops concepts that later became known as the Greater Vehicle, or Mahayana movement.

With the intention to generate merit—an investment of positive karma to ensure a good present and future lives—wealthy patrons commissioned artists and scribes to create decorated manuscripts as the physical containers of the Buddha's words and objects of devotion. It is believed that reciting the sutra purifies the space wherever it is heard, generates positive karmic links with the teachings in the minds of all gathered, and brings well-being and prosperity.



MAHASIDDHA KANHA

Central Tibet; 16th century

Copper alloy

Rubin Museum of Art

C2003.23.4 (HAR 90822)

Reaching a full awakening and realizing one's enlightened potential could require innumerable lifetimes. Innovative practices known as tantras that emerged during the fifth to seventh century in India presented teachings that promised a swifter process. Those who perfected these teachings were called mahasiddhas. These mostly lay practitioners lived outside of monastic institutions, and their unorthodox practices often transgressed conventional social norms.

Kanha, the Black One, is one of the eighty-four Indian mahasiddhas and thought to have lived in India around the eighth century. He was originally a Hindu yogi, but after becoming the disciple of the mahasiddha Virupa, who is depicted in a painting nearby, he became one of the main sources of teaching for a lineage foundational to the Sakya tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. This solid-cast sculpture is one from a set of portraits of the teachers in that lineage.



MAHASIDDHA AVADHUTIPA

Eastern Tibet; 17th–18th century

Pigments on cloth

Rubin Museum of Art

Gift of Shelley and Donald Rubin

C2006.66.106 (HAR 41)

According to traditional accounts, the Buddha delivered his discourses on several occasions. His communications were suited to the abilities of different kinds of beings. Some of his instructions, not revealed to humans until after his passing, comprise what is known as esoteric, or tantric teachings. These secret teachings and practices (tantras) had to be perfected by those who first received them. These practitioners, renowned as masters with great accomplishments and known as mahasiddhas, taught the tantras to others, including Tibetan students. Tantric masters were the direct sources of the new knowledge passed from teacher (guru) to disciple, making transmission lineages important avenues through which practices and experiences were gathered and made available to students of tantra.

Mahasiddha Avadhutipa is one of the masters in the lineage traced through mahasiddhas Virupa and Kanha, whose portraits are also shown nearby, and down to Tibetan masters. He is depicted as an ascetic or a yogi resting on a tiger pelt-covered rock in the wilderness.



MAHASIDDHA VIRUPA

Gongkar Chode Monastery, U Province, Central Tibet;
ca. 1659–1671

Pigments on cloth

Rubin Museum of Art

C2004.14.1 (HAR 65340)

Virupa is renowned as the eighth-century Indian master of tantric teachings that were transmitted to Tibet and became the defining instructions for Tibet's Sakya Buddhist tradition. He left a prestigious post as a monastery official to become a wondering yogi who mastered tantric practices and became a mahasiddha. He is known for his seemingly magical abilities to intervene in otherwise ordinary events.

Virupa's gesture—a raised hand with a finger pointing up to the sun—refers to an episode when he was on an epic drinking spree and agreed with the tavern proprietor to settle the bill at sunset. He then used his great meditative powers to stop the sun in its course until after several days without night the local ruler, fearful of a possible drought, paid his tab.



SAKYA LINEAGE

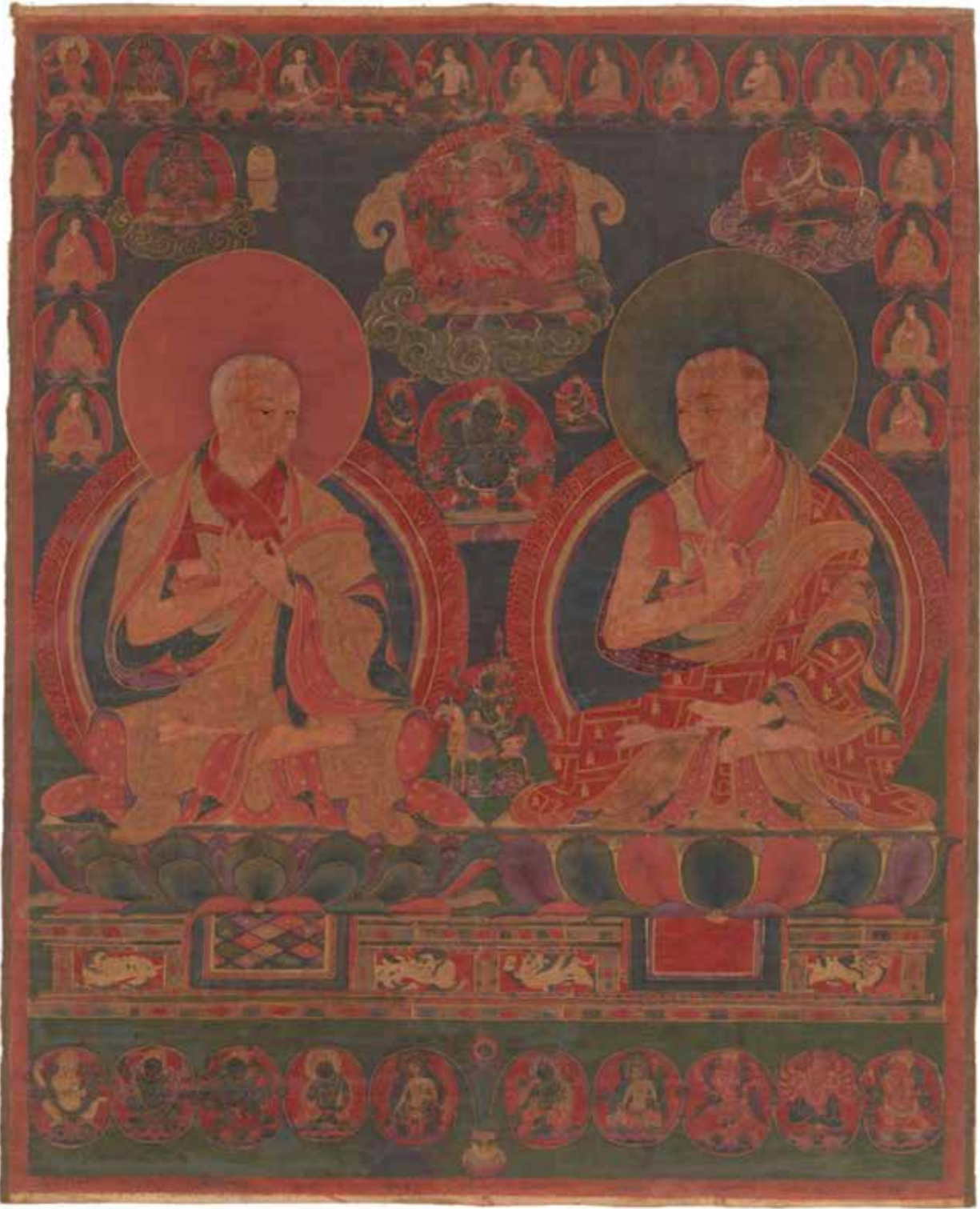
Central Tibet; 16th century

Opaque watercolor on cloth

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

Nasli and Alice Heeramanek Collection, Gift of Paul Mellon,
68.8.118

The teachings of Virupa, known as the Path and Fruit or Path and Result, became the foundational instructions within the Sakya tradition. The Sakya lineage is a visionary line in its inception. Its patriarch, Sachen Kunga Nyingpo, received the teachings through a series of visions. Once Sachen founded the Sakya monastery, however, a new, strictly historical line of succession took shape, with the teachings dependent on their uninterrupted transmission from a teaching master (lama) to pupil. This picture features two human links in that lineage's chain of wisdom. The pupil, on the right, is Gorampa Sonam Sengge (1429– 1489), who will assume the role of a teacher and guide in the exhibition section Preparing for the Journey.



GORAMPA SONAM SENGGE, SIXTH ABBOT OF NGOR

Central Tibet; ca. 1600

Opaque watercolor on cloth

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

Berthe and John Ford Collection, Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Fund, 91.514

Gorampa Sonam Sengge led the Sakya Ngor Monastery in the 1480s and was a member of the important teaching lineage of its tradition. This painting comes from a set whose central figures trace that line of teachers. Around Gorampa are his teachers and their teachers before them: the “power lines” through which flow the authenticity and effectiveness of his wisdom. With his hands appropriately in the teaching gesture, Gorampa now offers to share his knowledge with us. Virtually present, his face suffused with wisdom and compassion, he will serve as our spiritual guide through the exhibition’s imagined journey toward awakening.



INITIATION, OR EMPOWERMENT

VAJRACHARYA CROWN

Nepal; 13th–14th century

Gilded copper alloy, gemstones

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Fund, 84.41

RITUAL DIADEM

China; early 15th century

Silk embroidery on cloth

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

Kathleen Boone Samuels Memorial Fund, 89.25



EQUIPMENT

VAJRA AND BELL

Tibet or China; Ming dynasty, ca. second quarter of the 15th century

Copper and gilt copper alloy

Pritzker Collection

These two ritual implements are powerful tools of tantric practitioners. They represent the energy and wisdom of the tantric path that are both necessary for full, complete awakening, as explained in tantras. The vajra is the thunderbolt scepter of indestructible power that literally shatters the ordinary world's conventions. The bell's sound of innate, pure wisdom focuses the mind and opens it to awakened states. Deities often hold these implements as symbols of the tantric path, and practitioners keep them at all times and use them in daily rituals.



INITIATION, OR EMPOWERMENT

DRUM

Tibet; 19th century

Bone, hide, silver, coral, turquoise, fabric

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

Gift of Berthe and John Ford, 91.537

Ritual tools such as a vajra and a bell, a handheld drum, and an ewer are used in a tantric initiation. They empower the aspirant first to truly see the deity, the focus of their practice, and then to contemplate that visualization and the qualities of the deity while performing daily rituals. These tools are made of precious materials and other substances imbued with power, including jewels and human bones.

EWER MADE FROM HUMAN SKULLS

Dolonnor, Inner Mongolia, China; ca. 1800–1911

Copper repoussé, human bone

Asian Art Museum of San Francisco

The Avery Brundage Collection, B60M454



ALLIES

MANJUSHRI

Tibet; 10th century

Copper alloy

Rubin Museum of Art

C2002.29.3 (HAR 65147)

Bodhisattva Manjushri embodies the wisdom of all awakened beings. Although his name translates as Gentle Glory, he bears in his right hand a sword. It is the sword of wisdom, with which he assists aspirants in separating accurate from erroneous views.



ALLIES

SHADAKSHARI AVALOKITESHVARA

Tibet or Nepal; 16th–17th century

Gilded silver, gilded copper alloy

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

Berthe and John Ford Collection, Gift of the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation, 91.532

Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara is Tibetan Buddhism's skillful liberator. His name translates roughly as the Lord Who Looks Down with Compassion, and his mantra, *om mani padme hum*, is thought to cleanse the reciter from the sufferings of existence. The distinctive Shadakshari (Six Syllables) form of Avalokiteshvara is named for that mantra.



ALLIES

BODHISATTVA VAJRAPANI

Greater Swat; 7th century
Copper alloy with silver inlays
Rubin Museum of Art
Gift of Shelley and Donald Rubin
C2013.8.2

Bodhisattva Vajrapani personifies Buddhism's great power. That energy is apparent in the tool he holds in his right hand by which he activates the Buddhist teachings. Vajrapani is, literally, the Holder of the Vajra, the thunderbolt scepter that is the symbol of tantric Buddhism's lightning-fast, powerful techniques for attaining enlightenment.



MAP

MANDALA OF VAJRABHAIRAVA

Nepal; ca. 1700–1800

Gilded metal, semiprecious stones

Asian Art Museum of San Francisco

Gift of Raymond G. and Milla L. Handley, B86M19

This sculptural mandala is a slightly simplified version of the painting that serves as our map. It reminds us that the painting is merely a two-dimensional representation of a three-dimensional, multilevel space through which we visualize ourselves moving. The sculpture includes the painting's flame circle, funereal grounds, and ring of lotus petals, here inlaid with turquoise. On the lotus's foundation is the square palace whose bottom gateway—depicted as if falling outward from the square walls—we now prepare to enter.



MAP

MANDALA OF VAJRABHAIRAVA

Ngor Monastery, Tibet; 1650–1750

Pigments on cotton

Asian Art Museum of San Francisco

The Avery Brundage Collection, B63D5

This painting depicts the celestial palace of a deity and its environs in a pictorial convention resembling a floor plan, or a map. The deity is Vajrabhairava, wisdom's wrathful emanation, situated at the core of the mandala, his manifested world. His entourage occupies the quadrants around him, each differently colored and representing a specific quality or power of the central figure.

The style of this mesmerizing mandala is associated with the Sakya order's monastic and artistic centers in southcentral Tibet. The aesthetic arguably reached its height at Ngor Monastery, where this mandala was created and where Gorampa Sonam Sengge served as abbot.

Characteristic of this style, the background is composed of intricate scrolling patterns, and comparatively thick black outlining causes minute imagery to stand out, as if in relief. The overall pictorial expression is one of precise, crystalline clarity, especially appropriate to the visionary universes of mandalas.



FLAMING TRIDENT

Tibet, 18th century

Iron, silver, gilded copper

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

Gift of Zimmerman Family Collection in honor of Joe Dye on the occasion of VMFA's 75th Anniversary, 2010.84

This striking ritual implement's toothy, grinning skull rattles when the scepter is handled. Its most intriguing aspect, though, is the form of the skull's reverse side. Visibly phallic, it is a reminder that sex and death are inextricably conjoined. Sex defeats death through reproduction, which in turn ensures death's eventual triumph. As this object so simply illustrates, one is the flipside of the other.



YAMA DHARMARAJA

Tibet; 18th century

Pigments on cloth

Rubin Museum of Art

Gift of Shelley and Donald Rubin

C2006.66.409 (HAR 855)

Yama Dharmaraja is one of several terrifying forms Bodhisattva Manjushri assumed to defeat the Lord of Death. He is black or dark blue in color, fiercely animated, and wields a skull-headed cudgel and a coiled lasso. Wearing a crown of skulls and a garland of freshly severed heads, he is surrounded by flames and stands astride a buffalo and human corpse.

This black ground painting evokes the macabre setting in which Yama Dharmaraja resides: a corpse-strewn funereal ground. Around him are four wrathful figures from his entourage, each haloed by flames, dancing wildly on a body and clutching a gore-laden skull cup. In the foreground, an offering of organs associated with the five senses brims from a skull bowl. Sitting in a small eddy of tranquility above this visual torrent is Bodhisattva Manjushri, whose manifestation as the terrifying Yama Dharmaraja is the means for defeating death.



Tsherin Sherpa (American, b. 1968, Nepal)

PROTECTOR

2013

Gold leaf, acrylic and ink on canvas

Promised Gift of Shelley and Donald Rubin Collection

C2013.213

The journey toward awakening is an unfolding process of recognition, the gradual discernment of patterns within the disorder of everyday experience. By analogy, this painting's swirl of vibrant colors will soon take shape. Although distorted, it is a form of an enlightened being similar to the one we will encounter at the core of the mandala. As is apparent in the painting, we still cannot quite see the deity but for a clearly indicated center and a sense of direction. We are at this point in between, poised to encounter the world we aspire to understand.



FLAYING KNIFE-CHOPPER

Tibet; 15th century

Iron, clay

The Newark Museum

Purchase 1954, 54.350

SKULL CUP

Dolonnor, Inner Mongolia, China; ca. 1850

Human skull, copper

Asian Art Museum of San Francisco

The Avery Brundage Collection, B60M6.a-.c

The skull cup and the flaying knife-chopper are often paired in a wrathful deity's opposing hands, and practitioners use them in rituals aimed to dismantle their ego. The blade of the knife is curved to match the skull's cavity. Like a mortar and pestle, these ritual tools are used to reduce all the sense-based constituents of ordinary experience to their ultimate, empty nature. This physical and mental process purifies the wielder from negativities and any false conceptions of an independent, substantial self.



SIX-ARMED MAHAKALA

Tibet; 15th century

Pigments on cloth

Rubin Museum of Art

C2002.34.4 (HAR 65165)

This fearsome Mahakala, or the Great Black One, manifests the emotion that a mother might have to protect her child from danger. Surrounded by flames of pristine awareness he holds his usual attributes—a curved knife and skull cup, human skull garland and trident, hand drum and lasso—and tramples obstacles represented by the prone figure of an elephant-headed god. This is a form of the peaceful deity of compassion Avalokiteshvara; deities often have varied forms in order to express different characteristics and abilities.



VAJRABHAIRAVA AND VAJRAVETALI

Central Tibet; mid-15th century

Opaque watercolor and gold on cloth

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

Zimmerman Family Collection, Robert A. and Ruth W. Fisher Fund
and Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Fund, 2010.85

As if to signal an ecstasy hidden behind the horrors of death, Vajrabhairava, who was blue-black at the center of our mandala, is here transformed into the radiant gold of realization. The gleaming bodies of the deity and his consort are a reminder that Vajrabhairava is Manjushri's mirror, simultaneously revealing Death to himself and incorporating us into that vision. This luminous painting is a mandala in a different, figural format rather than the cosmic bird's-eye view type. The meditation deities at its center are surrounded by multiarmed figures very similar to the guardians of our mandala map. Additional deities, including Yama Dharmaraja, and a teaching lineage surround the configuration.



GUHYASAMAJA AND SPARSHAVAJRA

Beijing, China; Ming dynasty, ca. 1400–1500

Gilded bronze

Asian Art Museum of San Francisco

The Avery Brundage Collection, B64B23

Guhyasamaja means Secret Union, indicating the joining of apparent opposites, including male and female like these figures, as well as the wisdom and techniques that lead to Vajrayana Buddhism's swift awakening. Both figures have six hands, and the implements they originally held were matched, each associated with one of the Five Cosmic Buddhas. Accordingly, this life-sized sculpted pair constitutes an embodied mandala.

Created in China during the period of the Ming dynasty, this image was likely made either as a gift to an important Tibetan lama or for use in a Vajrayana temple in China.



GUHYASAMAJA AND SPARSHAVAJRA

Western Tibet; late 15th century

Opaque watercolor, gold, and ink on cotton

Michael and Beata McCormick Collection

Many of the intricate details of this stunning painting closely match a seventeenth-century description of the deity symbolic of nonduality, Guhyasamaja, or Secret Union, embracing his counterpart:

The main face is blue with a mixed expression of fierceness and desire. The canine teeth are pointed and clenched. . . . All three faces are adorned with very beautiful eyebrows. . . . He is wearing various heavenly garments bright like Indra's rainbow.

The text also describes the implements Guhyasamaja and his consort hold that reveal them as the personification of the Five Cosmic Buddhas: the vajra and bell of Akshobhya in the central hands, the wheel of Vairochana and lotus of Amitabha in their right hands, the gem of Ratnasambhava and sword of Amoghasiddhi in their left hands.



STANDING CROWNED BUDDHA WITH FOUR SCENES OF HIS LIFE

Southern Magadha region, Bihar, India; ca. 1050–1100

Basalt

Asian Art Museum of San Francisco

The Avery Brundage Collection, B65S11

The historical Buddha stands before us, fully enlightened, yet he wears the jewels and crown of his earlier princely life. The figure's seeming androgyny similarly signals that this is an image of the awakened state, unbounded by dualities. It is, at once, the Buddha and all buddhas.

As you stand before this figure, recall that your mind has the capacity to encompass object and subject simultaneously. The image is both the object of our contemplation and, if seen from the right perspective, a likeness of its beholder's buddha-nature. Look for your reflection in it, and it in you.



GAUTAMA BUDDHA

India, Kashmir (present-day India or Pakistan); 9th century

Copper alloy with copper, silver, and niello inlays

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

Nasli and Alice Heeramanek Collection, Gift of Paul Mellon,
68.8.43

Seated cross-legged on a lotus, the Buddha is recognizable by his physical marks: a protuberance on top of his head (*ushnisha*), a whorl of hair between his brows (*urna*), and long earlobes stretched by heavy earrings from his renounced princely life. He holds his hands in a gesture of teaching, the *dharmachakra mudra*. This visual clue denotes an act of instruction and originally signified the Buddha's first discourse when he symbolically turned the wheel of the Dharma, or his teachings. One of the fingers of his left hand, which holds the end of his robe, extends to touch the joined thumb and forefinger of the right, connecting the hands and forming an approximation of a wheel.



PADMASAMBHAVA

Central Tibet; 18th century

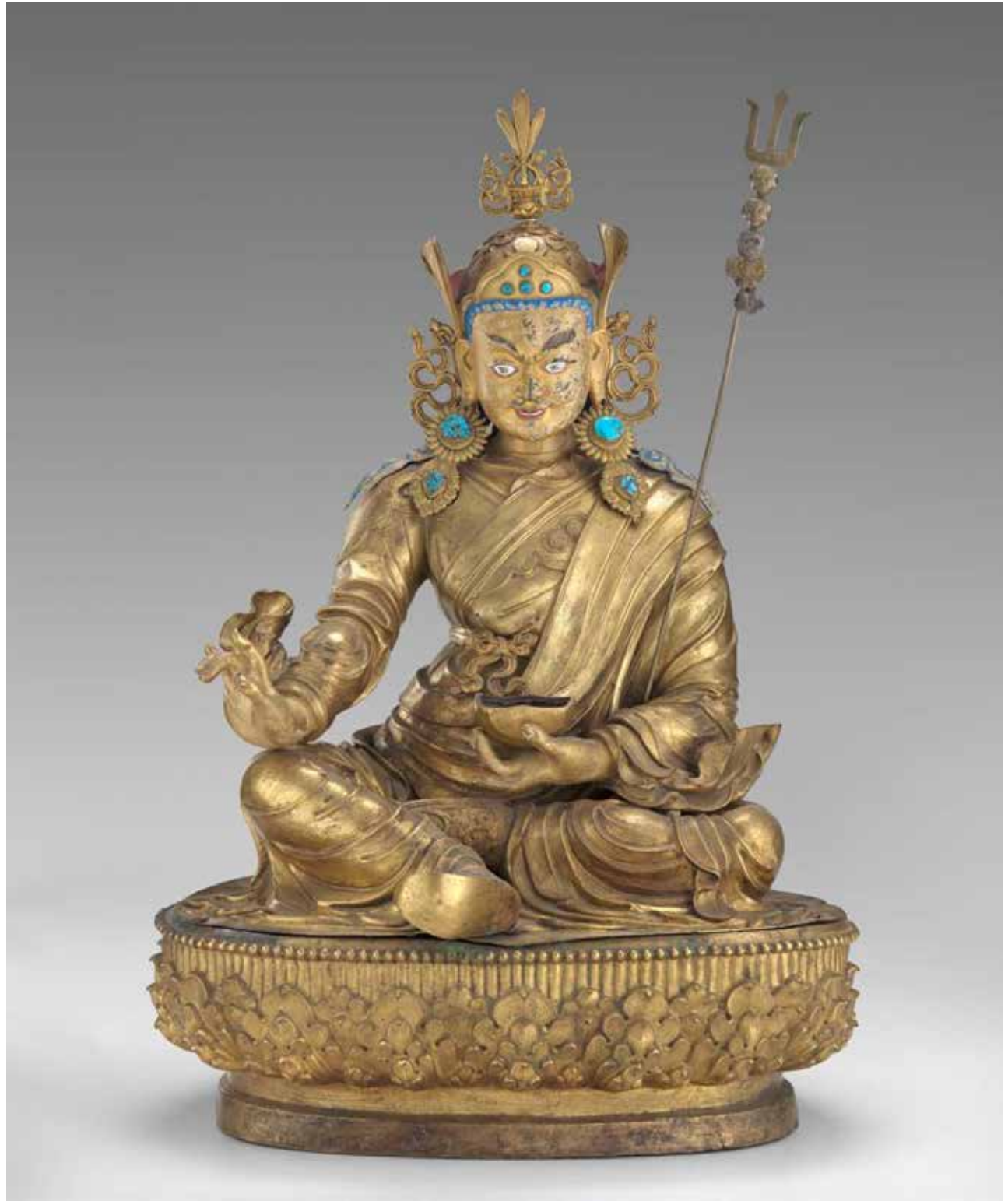
Copper alloy, gemstones, and traces of paint

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

Berthe and John Ford Collection, Gift of the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation, 91.530a-b

One of the most legendary tantric masters, Padmasambhava combined the ideals of the Buddha and the guru for Tibetans. Believed to be active in the late eighth century, presaging later tantric masters, he is known by the affectionate title the Precious Guru (Guru Rinpoche). He is said to have helped the Tibetan emperor Tri Songdetsen (742–ca. 800) establish Tantric Buddhism in Tibet, tame indigenous deities, and teach many students, ensuring the continuous flourishing of Buddhism in Tibet.

Padmasambhava usually wears a lotus hat and a king's robe under a monk's shawl. A staff with three heads in the nook of his left shoulder, a skull cup in his left hand, and a now-lost thunderbolt scepter (vajra) in his right hand signify his mastery of Buddhist teachings and his illustrious identity as a prince, scholar, and tantric master (siddha).



ALLIES

GREEN TARA AND ATTENDANTS

Central Tibet; 14th century or later

Silver, copper alloy, copper, gold, gilded copper, gilded silver

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

Adolph D. and Wilkins C. Williams Fund, 84.74

Green Tara compassionately intervenes in the lives of ordinary beings, working for their benefit and enlightenment. This active role is expressed physically in her imagery. As if just about to rise from her seat and enter our space, she extends her left foot onto a small lotus that bridges her ideal realm of awakened beings and our own mundane world.

This sculpture shows Tara in multiple forms. The large image is Green Tara; directly below her, much smaller, is White Tara. Both hold their hands in gestures of charity and teaching. The bodhisattvas Avalokiteshvara and Maitreya sit on either side, and serpent deities bearing offerings climb the elaborate organic pedestal that may conceal a third image of the goddess.



SIX-ARMED MAHAKALA

Mongolia; 18th century

Gilt copper alloy with semi-precious stones

Rubin Museum of Art

C2006.70.1a-f (HAR 65729)

Mahakala assumes dozens of different forms, but one of the most recognizable and similar to the guardians within the mandala's palace is Six-Armed Mahakala. Intensely frightening, he stands in a warrior pose, has a glowering visage with gnashing fangs, and is adorned with a crown of skulls. In his two primary hands, he pulverizes our egos in a skull cup with his flaying knife or chopper. His distinctive attribute is the string of human skulls in his upper-right hand. Other attributes are a trident, a hand drum (damaru), and a noose. One of Mahakala's primary roles is to overcome obstacles to awakening, represented in this sculpture by his trampling the elephant-headed god Ganapati, who here represents these obstacles.



VAJRABHAIRAVA

Sino-Tibetan; 15th century or later

Polychromed wood

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation and Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Fund, 93.13a-oo

This monumental wooden sculpture embodies the victory over death expressed in the wrathful deity's epithet, Slayer of Yama (Yamantaka). The true identity of this figure is revealed by his uppermost head, whose peaceful expression is that of the deity embodying wisdom, Manjushri. As explained in texts on meditative practices focused on this deity, there was a time when the Lord of Death, Yama, was rampaging and causing unimaginable suffering. Manjushri decided to tame this god and end the suffering. He confronted Yama, transforming himself into a mirror image of the Lord of Death, with all of his terrifying powers, and thus forced Yama to encounter himself. Yama swore to serve the cause of this wisdom by reminding all beings of impermanence and the interconnected nature of all things that have a cause. Wisdom overcomes death by making us face reality and ourselves.

